



LOOKING FOR MARY WEBB PART TWO

A SINGLE VIOLET:

THE LOST DIARIES OF MARY WEBB

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Mary Webb (born Gladys Mary Meredith) wrote novels, essays and poems in the early twentieth century that explored folklore and the sacred qualities of nature. Although Webb did not receive the attention she strived for in her lifetime, she received posthumous success during the countryside revival of the 1930s. However, her fame as a writer was a phoenix that rose up and burned itself out relatively quickly.

Stanley Baldwin, then Prime Minister of England, was delivering the keynote address at the 138th anniversary dinner of the Royal Literary Fund on 25th April, 1928. Learning of Webb's early death, Baldwin gave special mention to her in his speech. He praised Webb's last completed novel, *Precious Bane*, as a 'book of absolutely first-class quality', and recounted conversations he'd had with John Buchan and James Barrie in which they agreed that Mary Webb was 'one of the best living writers of England today, but nobody buys her books'. *The Times* reported on Baldwin's oration in detail in its April 27th edition.

The following day (April 28th, 1928) *The Times* ran Webb's obituary, commenting that although 'Webb's early works were neglected by the public; she was probably at her death on the verge of making a great reputation'. This came five months after she had died in obscurity at the age of forty-six, leaving her sixth book unfinished.

While the literary and academic worlds did not take kindly to being told what to read by the Prime Minister, the reading public readily embraced her work. *The Evening Standard* published a biographical review of Webb on 8th June 1928, and the following day, the paper began a serialisation of Webb's first novel, *The Golden Arrow*, which ran until August 1928. Webb's books became bestsellers almost overnight.

When publisher Jonathan Cape got wind of Baldwin's planned literary fund dinner speech, Cape pre-emptively bought the copyright to Webb's earlier novels from three other publishers. To meet the demand for books by Mary Webb, Cape rushed out a seven-volume collected edition of her works. Famous men of the day who had personally known Mary Webb wrote the introduction to each volume. They became bestsellers, and Cape (ever the canny businessman) was quick to ensure they stayed that way throughout the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s, in the process, making wealthy men of himself and Webb's widower, Henry Bertram Law Webb. This was the height of the countryside revival. The reading public, nostalgic for the English countryside, spent their leisure time taking day trips by rail, car and bicycle into the English landscape, and they read Mary Webb voraciously.

Her evocation of nature, her absorption in folklore, her ability to capture character and to weave a good story spoke to the milieu, seeking escape from the global depression and war fatigue. But reading tastes change over time. Although Webb received a second period of attention when she was published by Virago in the 1980s, since then she has largely vanished without trace. Very few of her personal papers survive in the archives. Her husband explained that the papers were burned to heat the house when the couple were too poor to pay for fuel, adding 'they made a splendid fire'.

But suppose she had kept a diary. Many writers do. Perhaps some volumes of it might survive in a dusty attic. Perhaps the dates are on the spines, although there is no name on any of them. 1911, 1912, 1913, 1916,

1923, 1924, 1925, 1926 and 1927. Seven years are missing, perhaps lost somewhere, or maybe never written. Nine years survive, though one is water damaged. The earliest is 1911, when the writer tells us she was thirty years old.

NOTEBOOK ONE – 1911

APRIL 3RD, 1911, MAESBROOK, MEOLE BRACE, SALOP.

The party was last night. It went well enough (if you like that kind of thing). I prefer Miss Sothern's literary evenings with their lively discussions to an evening of gossip and dancing. I always feel rather left out and self-conscious at a party, as if I am there to keep an eye on Muriel and Olive, rather than to enjoy any of the evening myself. With both the Webbs and the McLeods absent, it was a rather lonesome affair. I stood in the corner of the room as plain as a brown lady blackbird, while those with brighter plumage than I enjoyed the dancing. But the girls enjoyed their evening, and Mother managed to last the whole night too, sitting with the other ladies around the tables at the sides of the room, chattering over a glass of punch. Even Mervyn enjoyed tearing about the place with a group of boys for most of the evening, being frowned at by their mothers and told that their behaviour was unseemly for boys their age. After a while they took their high jinks out into the gardens. As we walked back home, the air was cool and breezy, with a sky full of glistening stars and a half moon overhead. Of course, we could have ridden home, but Mother said she was getting one of her headaches and, as it was not far, she would prefer to take the air. I walked on ahead of the others, listening to the stillness of the night around us. Up ahead I could hear the shuffling footsteps of a badger as he disappeared into the undergrowth and the cry of a vixen somewhere on the hills. When we got home, I opened my bedroom window to allow the sounds of the night to lull me to sleep. The wind was up and making the beeches rustle gently. It hushed me to slumber within the space of a heartbeat. If I could spend my whole life outdoors, I would be peaceful, I think.

This morning, everyone was slow in rising, as we were up so late last night. Consequently, we were a subdued party over the breakfast table. I opened the doors onto the garden from the dining room and pulled my small table in front of the doors so I could sit outside and yet still be part of the conversation. The family are so used to my habits now they hardly seem odd. I also think that Mother can cope better with me when she can hear but not see me. I would far rather share my meal with the garden than with the oak panelling of the dining room and the sideboard, varnished so plentifully that it shines with sticky splendour and shows fingerprints beautifully. As a child I was always in horror that I would be told off by mother for the profusion of marks I always seemed to leave behind.

Tomorrow I think I may pack up a picnic of bread and boiled eggs and go on a drive with Bessie, if Ted doesn't mind getting her ready early. Perhaps I will persuade the others to come with me. Olive and Muriel could ride with me in the trap, if Mervyn rides my bicycle. But for today, I am content to lie in my hammock in the garden and watch the bare branches overhead, impatiently waiting for the return of the new green which cannot be far away now. The daffodils and primroses are still covering the garden in a swathe of pure yellow. Crocuses are spreading their purple cheer across the grass, and the birds are already giving good voice despite the slow returning leaves. A song thrush has been at the top of the larch for most of the day, keeping me entertained with its sweet singing. The earth still smells loamy, but the air is warming each day, and there are viridescent spears everywhere – cleavers, nettles, ivy shoots appearing on the forest floor, showing the interconnected web of life that sits just beneath the surface.

MONDAY 10TH

I think I shall be one of those diarists who does not keep faithfully to writing in all the days, although I am not sure if that is what Henry imagined when he gave me this book. I know literary ladies are expected to write their diurnal thoughts faithfully, but Spring is so busily at work outside that I have spent the last few days absorbed in the garden and wanting to watch everything unfolding in its own time, without feeling the need in committing it all to paper. So, here is a summary of the last week or so.

Olive, Mother and Muriel planned a trip to Shrewsbury to go shopping for Easter, since there will inevitable be engagements we must dress for. I really did not want to go, but they insisted, so I went along, and trailed behind them all the way. I was already in trouble as Mother had caught me coming back from the fields that morning with my dress fastened only by a safety pin. I had been in such a hurry to reach my tryst with the sun, and all the buttons took such a long time to do up.

In Shrewsbury, Olive chose a length of cornflower blue satin for a new gown, while Muriel will wear her favourite hand-embroidered red, dressing it up with new trimmings. I took little interest in all of this and then Mother declared me exasperating, but we finally agreed that I will wear what I usually wear as I can then largely go unnoticed. I found somewhere to perch in each of the shops and wait for them, with my nose tucked firmly into Hardy's poems. His poetry is largely overlooked, I feel, and should be more widely read. Perhaps I might suggest this to Miss Sothern one week?

Once we returned home, Olive was determined that I should help her with her dress, since she says my dress making skills are far superior to hers or Mother's. Mother had a headache at this point and was glad for us to be otherwise occupied. We had left things late, but with two long days of me carefully turning the wheel on the sewing machine and concentrating hard, with Olive looking over my shoulder, and Muriel constantly pulling things out of the sewing basket and asking me to show her what they were for, we did eventually get finished in time. I cannot help but still see the girl in Olive, who used to look with curiosity on the bees busily working their way around the flowers in the garden whilst begging me to tell another story, just one more! Invariably, Moo-moo would be clutching at my skirts, while baby Mervyn would lie on a rug on the grass kicking his arms and legs at the sky. Meanwhile, Kenny and Dougie would be hanging upside down from the branches of the oak tree. Once they heard me begin a story, they would climb down and come and sit at my feet to listen. Peaceful times. Sometimes I dream myself into the past – in all the blossomy days with Father standing nearby with his oil paints and easel and painting a scene. The smell of linseed and turpentine will always take me back there. The fire-lit evenings with a bit of sewing. Father winding the clock. At that time, it felt as if it would go on forever. It's only in looking back that we recognise that the world does not stop turning, even for one moment.

Where was I?

MONDAY APRIL 17TH, EASTER MONDAY, MEOLE BRACE.

We have had a stream of visitors for the last few days, so I have been kept busy ensuring that there has been a steady supply of tea and hot cross buns from Sarah and Mabel in the kitchen. Thankfully I have never had

to bake them myself, as I really don't wish to know one end of the kitchen stove from the other. Father and Minoni always felt that it was more important to teach me how to fill my head with the knowledge of books than practical, household things. Mother says that she and Father intended us all to marry well so that we might have housekeeping staff of our own one day. When she says this, her gaze falls on me, and then she looks hurt, as if I have chosen to look this way. Perhaps I should persevere with baking and do more, but frankly I would rather read a good book than get all hot and bothered in the kitchen. The thought of producing a meal makes me feel rather anxious, as if I might be judged as harshly on that as I am my appearance. Sarah makes everything seem effortless, and I often find her singing hymns to herself as she kneads the bread dough or stirs the soup.

Perhaps I should start to wear a wide -brimmed hat around the house as I do when we go out in public and I am unwell. Sometimes Mother brushes my hair away from my face then says, 'what a shame, you used to be a pretty girl.' Part of me silently curls in on itself in response. I try not to hold onto these feelings, as I know I should be a good daughter and love my mother well, but sometimes she makes it so difficult for me to do so. Minoni writes that I should try to be patient with Mother, as she doesn't mean to be unkind, and then I feel like a poor excuse for a daughter as I feel closer to my old governess and think of her as more of a mother figure than my own mama. Father never made me feel any less attractive after my illness. Then, he was a gentler soul.

At the grand old age of thirty I find myself contemplating many things and exploring a new way of living life. Since Father died, so much has changed beyond recognition. The first year after his death I was so enshrouded in my own grief and illness that I could not look beyond the walls of my own misery. When I lost him, I also lost myself. I could tell him anything. Mother and I have never been as close as I was with Father. Perhaps it is because she spent so many years shut in her room and away from the family after her riding accident?

Father, Minoni and I got so used to spending our days together — from running the household, to teaching the younger children and keeping them occupied and away from Mother. Mother did so hate any noise, so we got used to being outdoors, as we were freer there than inside. Once or twice a week, the three of us would take the five children upstairs to see Mother in her room, all in a row like greylag goslings lined up behind mother goose. I always hoped the children would behave properly during our audiences with Mother, and be polite and dressed tidily. Kenneth would try to look so serious, with Douglas standing close by, trying to poke him in the ribs without any of us noticing. Dougie's intent was to trick Kenny into letting out a shout, which would then make him giggle profusely. Moo-moo (who would hate it if I called her that now) was always elsewhere in her mind, never quite present in the room, while Olive was the opposite — so painfully solemn and paying attention to everything, holding on to Mervyn's chubby hand, trying to stop him from toddling away across the room, investigating whatever shining treasure drew his attention at that moment like a magpie.

Perhaps it is the large age gap between me and the other children, or the way I had to step into my Mother's shoes, but I find as we have grown older, that I cannot entrust my deepest thoughts to any of my siblings in the way an older sister ought to. Of course, they are no longer children, but I still don't think of them as being properly grown up, even though Kenneth has gone away to Canada and Douglas is thinking of going to Oxford when he finishes school, just like Father did. If Muriel marries as she intends, soon it may just be Olive, Mother and I left. I lost my dearest confidante when Father died. Once Mother came back from the seclusion of

her bedroom, Minoni was sent away and I mourned her loss almost as much as that of Father. Minoni was 'no longer needed'. I have so few people to talk to. Even Flora McLeod (my dearest friend), is due to go away soon on her 'grand tour', as she likes to call it. I expect that I shall soon be the lone thrush singing on my branch, with no one except the pages of this book to confide in.

There is of course Henry (who I let myself privately think of as 'dear Henry', but never out loud) but I would not wish to presume that he might want to hear all my cares when have known each other less than a year. He was most particular in his instructions when he gave me this pretty notebook. He gave it to me at the literary gathering at the Corner House, along with a note in his cursive scrawl, that said:

'Dear Mary, wishing you many happy solar returns, in the hope that you might be inspired (as other literary ladies are) to write more regularly. The world would benefit from more of your thoughts. Perhaps you might start a diary with a view to one day publishing some of those thoughts? With fond wishes, Henry'.

I blushed when I read it, and Miss Sothern, who was doing a wonderful job of hosting as ever, caught my eye across the room and looked triumphant, and I knew she was congratulating herself.

I hope this diary will give me space to explore my thoughts, confide my sorrows, and explore something new in my writing. I cannot share those feelings with anyone else for now, but who knows in the future? I have written poetry under Father's tutelage for so long, and now I would like to explore other forms. I enjoyed writing the essays while I was ill as it took me out of my body and into nature, and the stories I made up for the children always brought them pleasure. Perhaps one day I might write longer stories as well? Mother has kept a private journal for many years now, but it had never occurred to me until now to do likewise. There is a fashion for ladies to publish their diaries, but I do not think I would ever have the courage to contemplate that. This will be a space that I can dedicate to myself, to allow me to explore this inner landscape, in the way that I explore my beloved purple hills when I hitch up Bessie to my trap and go driving round the lanes, or even take my bicycle out when I feel well enough.

APRIL 20TH

Mother has been particularly irritable with me these past few days, perhaps because we have spent so much time in the house. Mrs. Webb came to visit with Henry and his sister Ethel — but not Dr. Webb, whom they left at home, ill and in bed and being looked after by a hired nurse. When we all talked, Mother made me feel so disappointing, even in front of Henry and his Mother. Several times, she cut me off and dismissed me out of turn. I am clearly just not the daughter she wished for. If I hadn't been held in Father's love for all those years, I might even have imagined myself to be a cuckoo in the nest. I could have quite happily disappeared into the floor, if Henry hadn't come to my rescue. As soon as a gap in the conversation allowed it, he addressed me and started to tell me about a wonderful book he has recently discovered during his research that spoke of herbs and their planetary associations. We then took our conversation out into the garden where I showed him the herb bed I have been replanting, and we spoke about writing.

Henry has been writing a volume on why he thinks we should abandon religion and instead worship the moon. It is rather radical. He says it will be published next year, and he gave me some of the chapters for my comment, since he values my opinion on scholarly matters, particularly pertaining to nature and the written word. His book is to be called, *The Silences of the Moon*, after Homer's description of Troy sitting peacefully under, 'per amica silentia lunae'.

My favourite passage so far:

To step out into moonlight is, after all, to step into the presence of a god; sorrow which has ached for what seemed many ages melts away at the touch of so rich a maturity, so deep an experience; it is as though in the midst of our whimpering we were suddenly confronted by the Mater Dolorosa.

How joyful it is to discover a soul with similar thoughts on matters of God and nature. I gave him the copy of my own essays, but I feel as if they are a paper shade compared to the moon when looked at alongside his. The publisher that Flora and I sent them to said they liked my writing but it would be too difficult to sell the work of an unknown woman. Henry said perhaps he might send my essays to his own editor, to see if he would like them any better, but I don't want to feel that disappointment again so soon. I would rather focus on other things. Henry asked how I was getting on with my diary. He was so pleased when I told him I had made a start. When I said I was writing pages and pages, he asked if one day I might show him, at which point I blushed profusely and had to change the subject.

Douglas came home for the Easter break as planned. Even with the absence of Kenneth and Father, we almost felt whole again as a family. The garden was alive once more with the chatter of many voices, and we spent many hours enjoying each other's company, although the daffodils have turned paper-thin and brown at the edges, already failing. Fleeting in their golden moment. They are now being replaced with wild garlic and bluebells.

The end of the Easter holidays are looming like the Devil's Chair on the horizon, rocky and grey, with a stormy sky above it. I am determined to be with the others for as long as possible and spend less time in the pages of this notebook while my dear brothers are home. When the boys are here, it rather deflects Mother's attention and she appears happier.

MAY 1ST 1911, MAESBROOK, MEOLE BRACE.

A glorious day today for bringing in the May. Olive, Mu and I went on an excursion to the Wrekin. The larches were shrouding all the country between them. The hawthorn is already thick with its strange-scented blossom this year, so that the branches seem weighed down with the heaviness of it. I can't quite tell what it smells of – it is musky, deep, and almost manly in its scent. The Wrekin sits like a beacon, while all around it, the fields stretch out below. It is lower than its cousins, and always feels rather solitary. By the end of the afternoon, one half of it was in shadow, while the other was still bathed in brilliant sunshine.

Coming home, it seemed we drove directly into the most heavenly honey coloured and pale green sunset.

I am reading *The Return of the Native* for the third time. My dearest favourite, second only to *Tess*. He writes the stories that I wish I could write; only my verses would never measure up to his poems. Hardy's deep connection to his corner of the country reveals itself in everything he writes and speaks volumes to me.

MAY 8TH, 1911

Mother and I woke up early to go birds' nesting and shared a rare and peaceful morning together. Just to look in the nests, not to take anything of course. They look out at us with curiosity, not fear, a swallow's nest hydra-headed with young. I love being out when the birds have not yet been awake long enough to get shy and frightened. The day does not yet belong to man. The birds are already vociferous in their calling, but the cottages are still quiet and dark. Only the trail of smoke from the chimneys reveals the hidden lives within. Being alone together allows us space to be without judgement somehow, as if it is the presence of others that reminds Mother of my faults. Perhaps it is the opinions of others that worry her so? We should do this more often to give us a greater understanding of each other. Then we might not clash so often.

Scrambling in the hedgerows becomes an ordeal for one's skirts and is apt to make one's shoes muddy and wet, but the expedition was well worth the effort. Even Mother enjoyed it, though she is usually so careful about her appearance. I felt joyful hearing the cuckoo making its early morning call, and yet, even though it is evening now, there are still two calling.

Yesterday afternoon I called in at Millington Hospital to enquire after Mr. Welsh, as he was so unwell last week when I made my visit. I am always baffled why they call the workhouse a hospital, unless it is to make it more palatable. I also saw Mrs. Boscombe, who is always pleased to have a visitor. The place was dozing in the Sunday afternoon hush, and in the old women's room, all was very quiet. Only a single bee groped clumsily up and down the shut windows, seeking the free air, flowers and the sounding hives. I wanted to throw open the windows, but I didn't want to startle everyone. We sat for a while and commented on how lovely the weather has been this week, as it has allowed Mrs. Boscombe to get out more, and she does enjoy a turn around the grounds. I must remember that for my future visits. If we can't let the outside in, then we must go and seek it.

I have asked Mother if I may go and visit Minoni for a few days, but she did not give me a clear answer. Her mouth tightened a little when I suggested it.

Henry's mother, Mrs. Webb, has been writing letters to me since her visit, newsy and bright. She says that Dr. Webb continues to make slow progress with his health. It must be wearisome for him. I am hopeful this means his recovery will be slow but sure.

JUNE 23RD, 1911

I have been ill for several weeks. The return of my all too familiar foe. When it comes, I can do nothing. I resign myself to letting it take over my body until it is tired of me and moves on. Fighting my illness only makes things worse, but the pain in my head is excruciating. I retreat into my mind and hold myself steady there. I keep myself quiet and small, like a china-blue blackbird's egg within a nest. This time, I didn't even want to write,

although Father and Minoni used to encourage it when they were here. They always said that writing brought me out of myself. When I am laid low with the migraines and vertigo the last thing I want to do is read or write.

In poor weather I am trapped indoors, which can be intolerable, so the weather invariably reflects my mood. If it is fine, I can at least be helped out into the garden to rest among the roses. There, I can focus my energy outwards, watching nature's signs all around me. The love for nature is a furious, burning, physical greed that leaves me in a state of mystical exaltation, and being trapped indoors is such a prison. My only consolation is sometimes a handful of wildflowers gathered by the girls and stuffed into a glass vase beside my bed.

If only there was a way out of the nightmare when the sickness comes. On a good day I try to compose poems in my head, but on a poor day, by the time I have gained the strength to write them down, the words have vanished like the early morning mist across the mere. Even reading holds no shine for me on those days, although Father used to sit by my bedside and read aloud to me, just to try and draw me out from beneath the weight of it.

Henry continues in his attentions of me, when I am well enough for company. He has such a fiery mind and an impish humour, that I find myself wondering if he spends time with me only for his amusement. But I think there is a core of truth here. When I am with Henry, I feel certain of us. It is only when I return to my room that I don other people's expectations of me (or lack thereof) and start to doubt us. I doubt the existence of the person I become when he holds me in his gaze. When I am alone at home in Maesbrook, some days I look in my hand mirror and detest the dull, tired, insignificant person who looks back through my eyes. This is not the same woman who wanders free, happy, and almost beautiful when with Henry. This morning we walked beneath the larches and talked for hours. Mostly of poetry and writing, and the nature of god and the world outside Salopia (for we both insist on calling Shropshire by its old Welsh name, Salop or Salopia). There was an abundance of wildflowers in the meadow – knapweed, betony, cow parsley, buttercups and clover. Butterflies flitted from branch to flower, shy and fleeting. In the garden – lilies, heavy scented roses, and lavender spears. My appearance is so altered; I can't imagine his intentions to be anything but feeling pity on my behalf. I wish I could be lovely for him. But our discussions are fiery and intense, and always seem too short. At least my mind has not been affected – and pursuits of the intellect make me feel on an equal footing. My usual shyness vanishes with Henry, particularly when we speak of books, nature, and of *Silences*. Today, he brought a gift for me — a volume of Christina Rossetti's poems.

'She had Graves' Disease too,' he told me. 'I thought you might find comfort in knowing you are not alone.' He is so thoughtful. I knew I would spend all night engrossed in its pages, learning the poems by heart.

Before I knew it, the afternoon had vanished, and we were back at Maesbrook once more.

JULY 5TH, 1911

I have been reading William James' book, *Varieties of Religious Experience*. It is wonderful, I think. It goes so deeply into things. He must have been a remarkably earnest and broad-minded man. His chapter on Mysticism is exceedingly engaging. He gathers mystics of every creed together and shows how much in sympathy

they really are. Although I know few people (beyond Father) who connect in the way I do, I can at least see what I have in common with people of other faiths. I know I always feel closer to the unseen world in a meadow or a wood than in a church, and having read James I can understand why. While others may feel it in church, a temple or in a Mosque, I find the doorway open in the tiniest violet or in the swaying birch tree. Whatever the method we all reach the same ends.

After lunch I walked to Bomere with Olive and Muriel, and the long grass was noisy with the whirring of the crickets. The mere was busy with pond-skaters dancing across the surface of the water. I sat for a while with my notebook and let the others go on ahead without me, while I stole an hour or three of poetry writing, until I felt worn out with words.

JULY 8TH, 1911, MAESBROOK, SALOP.

Henry's father has passed away. When I heard this news, I went and sat beneath the beeches with my back to their great trunks, soaking up all of their strength. I thought about Mrs. Webb, Henry, Tom, Mary and Ethel, and hope they will find comfort in each other, although they must be feeling terrible now. I know how raw and brittle I felt when Father died. Two years have passed in a heartbeat, and yet I still think of him every day. The utter darkness of that first year was indescribable at the time, like a terrible flood that rushed in and swept everything away, and I have little memory of it. I would try to read but could not absorb the lines. I would try to write, but words would not come. For the first year at least, I was not in my right mind, and my illness kept returning. Maesbrook no longer felt like home; just an assemblage of materials that might crumble at any moment, like an anthill. I must send Mrs. Webb a note to express my sorrow, and yet I do not wish to cause them further suffering. There are times that even the most well-meaning sentiment can only jar.

The willows opposite are lovely. They are beginning to get their silver look, and there are lots of flowers out too. Perhaps I will send some to Mrs. Webb.

Today I have been revisiting my friends the Ancient Greeks, Sophocles in particular. 'Electra' is so bleak, yet a small part of me cannot help but sympathise. Life without a beloved father is one I wouldn't wish on my worst enemy. Poor Henry. If only I could spare him the pain of losing his father.

MONDAY.

I have written a note to Mrs. W, expressing my deep sorrow. I only hope she is pleased to receive it. Today I was well enough to recommence my weekly visit to the people at Millington Hospital, and brought them sweets and fruit. It is so important to try and shine a light for them, since their circumstances are so bleak. Mother never enjoyed making those visits, so I am happy to take this on for her. They are always so pleased to see me, and I can be myself in their company. Today, the gloomy July afternoon seemed to lay an atmosphere of disillusionment over everything. The sky was the same sad grey as workhouse stockings. Forty-nine souls all varied, strange, and wistful. All of those life stories, full of sad and joyous and wild happenings have stopped there. They seem only to be waiting for death to break the final thread. And yet, they are so uncomplaining, despite the fact that each person in there likely holds an image of a home they have lost, or a family now

scattered. Once they were loved as individuals. Now, they are herded down those grim corridors. All I can do is to try to bring a little love back into their lives, to remember each name individually, and each story. To remind them that they do still mean something to someone. I know Mother looks down her long nose at them, feeling that somehow they have brought this on themselves. As if anyone would choose to live in such reduced and difficult circumstances.

JULY 20TH, 1911.

Mrs. W sent me a copy of *The Bookman*. She enclosed a note to say that she thought I might be interested in writing for them. I had thought of writing a review of *Silences* for a literary competition they were running. But I could not do so, not quite liking the idea of writing about a book that is so close to me for the sake of trying for a prize. Perhaps one day I will write for *The Bookman* for writing's sake, and not for prize winning.

A competition always puts me in mind of a rummage sale. Speaking of which, Mother says our other church duty is to attend the sale at the hall tomorrow as a family. She has reminded me that after I made my excuses last time, I promised I would help out at the next church sale. Even though I am not feeling enthused, I have made my bed and cannot escape it again.

Henry has been encouraging my studies to move amongst the classical texts he discusses in *Silences*. I feel as if I have wandered into an unfamiliar town where I don't quite speak the language, yet I do find it fascinating, and it is somewhat akin to the language of nature, which I speak fluently. I am not sure yet whether I will settle here or merely travel on through. An antiquarian copy of Agrippa arrived by post from London. The note inside read 'with love from Henry, always' and I blushed at the thought of that. I am longing to run upstairs and bury myself in its pages, but for now I must attend to more practical and worldly things. Mother is keeping me busy around the house.

JULY 23RD, 1911.

Yesterday I was too worn out to write. Of all the soul-destroying things I have ever come across, rummage sales are the worst. The sordidness of it still oppresses me, not so much because of the things sold, as because of the attitudes of the people. It really brings out the worst in them.

I think that I would rather just give things away and donate the money, instead of selling them for small coins. I shall not easily forget the pushing and scrambling women four deep around my stall, all intent on getting better things than their neighbours. I longed to ask Muriel or Olive to rescue me, but they were too busy looking around at the other stalls to stay with me for longer than a few minutes at a time, and Mother was deep in conversation with Mrs. Bathar. The Church and the State (in person of the Policeman) patronised our church affair. Even that failed to make it tolerable to me.

Apart from ethics, the rummage sale was a tiring affair. I never knew a longer day. We were all worn out after it, what with getting ready and having to leave the house so early, and then clearing away into late in the evening after the event. The hall looked like it had hosted a stampede, which in fact it had.

FRIDAY, MAESBROOK.

Henry and I went for a walk today with Muriel and Ethel. While they were busy in conversation up ahead, Henry held us back and told me that he has intense feelings for me. I blushed so terribly when he said it but, when he took my hand; I certainly did not pull away. I could feel waves of warmth washing through me. But then Mu shouted that we had to return to the house as we were expected. I managed to pull my hand away, just as she was turning around, so I don't think she noticed. Henry laughed then at my blushes, and I couldn't help but smile too.

My correspondence with Henry's mother continues in a sporadic but friendly fashion. Yesterday I sent her a few flowers to welcome her back. Henry keeps me informed of her wellbeing, of course, but it is good to receive news first-hand from her. He was delighted when I told him we correspond. I do so want Henry's mother to like me.

Me with Henry. I am trying this on for size.

AUGUST 4TH, 1911, MEOLE BRACE, SALOP.

Lammas week and the corn stalks stand high, awaiting the harvest.

The story of Henry and I continues, yet we are still secret and hidden. Mostly we go out for walks with the others, and steal time at the literary gatherings while everyone has their attention elsewhere, or when he walks me home. Today when he walked out with the others, he took my hand once we were out of sight of the house and pulled me to him. He kissed me under the oak tree that stands in the middle of the field at the end of the lane. I closed my eyes and felt the streaks of sunlight warm my back through the leaves of the oak and felt myself lifted away for a moment. It feels like I am carried away to faerie when we are together – time loses all sense of its diurnal, measured passage, and there is just Henry and I in the world. But all too soon I came back into my body, and again I was flustered, which Henry found most amusing. This time he kept hold of my hand for what seemed like ages, as the others were far enough ahead of us not to notice.

Although Henry and I have talked briefly of our feelings, enough anyway to know they are there, he has not yet told his mother, as it is so soon. I certainly do not want to interfere, since she is quite formidable, and rather like a cat: friendly for the most part, but I don't doubt the sharpness of her claws when the mood is upon her. I have not spoken to my mother either, and I imagine she will be surprised. I feel like I am on fire, and all aglow inside, yet no one seems to notice it. Mother talks frequently of when Muriel and Olive will be married, and in truth Mu has said she would like to marry James, her beau, next year. But my name does not enter these discussions, as if there is no possibility that I might ever marry.

Mother would probably never imagine that any man might love me, looking the way I do. Of course, my neck can be hidden with scarves, but on the days when my eyes look particularly prominent, then I try not to go out in company. Even in the house I am there like a wraith to torture Mother.

AUGUST 12TH, 1911

I had a very busy mind, thinking about Henry and I, so I took myself off for a walk to clear my thoughts a little. I stumbled across a hole in the ground that had been taken over by a swarm of mining bees. The surface of the earth was marbled and was the shade of honeyed meringue. It looked most curious.

Henry inspires such intense feelings in me. When I am with him, I have dim thoughts of us walking together through forests 'before', and I use inverted commas as I know it was not in this lifetime. I cannot tell if we knew each other in earlier lives, or in other worlds. But it does not concern me to know. All I care for is an intuitive understanding that we have always known each other. I now know that my thirty years on earth has been a holding of breath in expectation of the moment that I met Henry. For now, I dare not tell anyone my feelings. They would mock me. Even my closest friend, Flora McLeod is ignorant of it. In truth I love Henry rapturously, wholly, beyond anything I thought possible, yet I know it might never come to anything, and I would never admit this to anyone living. So for now I will enjoy our hidden kisses and the fire they light inside me, and try not to wish for what I secretly hope for.

In the hedgerows, the blackberries are ripening nicely, but they are still too sharp for eating. Everything is heavy in green.

AUGUST 20TH, 1911

After my sickness and the loss of dear Father, I never dreamed I might find happiness again with a person who is so vibrant, so intelligent, and so warm. When I look in Henry's eyes, I see energy that dwells there which is not of physical origin. His mind has the qualities of flame. Yet when I am alone again, I doubt it. I had thought I should always remain a spinster at home with Mother, while the others married or went away to be educated, so the idea of a fuller life makes me feel like someone has opened a gate to let me walk in the hills under a warming sun. When I return to Maesbrook and my room, a life alone at home as a caretaker to Mother seems like the only end to my story. Then I spend an evening at the Corner House, or lie with Henry in the fields and I come alive again.

I remember how the literary gatherings were a struggle at first, coming so soon after I recovered from my illness, and having to show the disfigured face I had suddenly developed. Kenneth and Mother were keen for me to go, since it was so close to home, and might give me a chance to step back into social circles, especially with a topic I am well suited for. I think Mother was also influenced by the fact they were to include the Cambridge extension lectures, which gave it that edge of prestige she is so fond of. Large groups of people are always so trying for me, particularly strangers I am not acquainted with, but Flora McLeod promised to go with me, and Miss Sothern seemed so kind and welcoming. Although I never felt bold enough to speak in the beginning, I did enjoy listening to the lively discussions, and then gradually I gained confidence.

I've been thinking about the first time I met Henry, the night last year when I had to read my paper aloud. Writing it was easy, but speaking in front of those people, with everyone turning to look at me was the most frightening thing. I had noticed a stranger sitting at the back of the group, a tall, thin young man, with his

shoulders hunched forward, as he peered across the crowd of people. He wore his thick glasses, and when he spoke at the end, he kept taking them off and wiping them on a large red silk handkerchief as he spoke. As he stood to speak to the group, I was immediately captured by the ease of his speech and his vociferous opinions. Lucy Fielding — who was sitting next to me — leaned in and said,

‘He’s a writer, don’t you know,’ as if this made him a sacred being, and all I could say was ‘oh,’ while I tried to remember to close my mouth, since my jaw was open at this point. ‘And,’ she continued, ‘he speaks at least seven languages, and is a marvellous scholar.’ On the inside, a voice was telling me that my beloved had arrived, but there was also something in Lucy’s expression that said she had decided to make him her own. Knowing I could not possibly compete with her, I tried to quiet my thoughts, lest she should see them etched so plainly on my face. I know Lucy is not always kind. A chance to make another person feel the sharpness of inadequacy might be too much of a temptation for her.

Henry had so keenly listened to my paper — I was almost surprised — and more importantly he understood my thoughts. Part way through his comments, he looked directly at me. I was sure his eye gave a twinkle. He paused momentarily before continuing, just long enough to make my heart pound and my stomach tighten. At the end of the evening I tried to flee the room before he could speak to me, but Miss Sothern was determined for us to meet, as she felt we had much in common. She insisted that he walk me back through the lanes to Maesbrook. On the walk home, we cut across the fields and spoke with ease and no awkwardness. He asked me questions about my paper, and I found myself telling him all about Father and our library of books at home. I felt like I had always known Henry. I haven’t felt such a meeting of hearts and minds since Father passed away. It is not only Mother who has always assumed I will remain a spinster since my illness, and yet, for an old maid I seemed to be behaving like a silly girl. But why not? Why should I not look for happiness? However, there is something about the outdoors that always frees me from nervousness.

Mother has always had reservations. ‘He looks like chapel,’ was all she could say after the first time she saw Henry in the village, but then when he came home to tea with his mother, she seemed to be more taken with him. Then I overheard the staff in the kitchen talking about him,

‘That gentleman’s eyes probes your innards,’ said Sarah. ‘If I ever took so much as a button, I wouldn’t dare meet ’em.’

‘Aye,’ returned Mabel, ‘but Miss Gladys seems to have met her fatal. Did you hark at ’em laughing together in the garden? Such a sound, it was.’

These snippets cause me to feel hope and despair all at once. Clearly my feelings are painted plain as day all over my face, but what if I am only imagining Henry’s true intent? Maybe he only wants to be kind. Perhaps I am only imagining the different tone he uses with me. Surely it can’t be true, that while he speaks to everyone else coolly and indifferently, to me he speaks with the caressing command of the Little Wood?

MONDAY, MEOLE BRACE.

On Saturday, Olive, Mu and I had a wonderful outing to Lyth Hill. Father and I used to go together quite frequently, but I have not been back for the longest time. I think that Lyth Hill is by far my favourite place on this earth. The meadows have been cut for hay, so they are strangely silent. I always wonder where all the crickets go. Laid to waste by the scythe, no doubt. All that remains are little islands of blackberry and sloe, surrounded by swirling currents of choppy, cut grass. At one point the sun broke through the heavy cloud and made a run across the field.

We visited Mr. Evans, one of the old-fashioned sort, a Methodist lay preacher and a life-long inhabitant of the hill. We brought elderflower cordial we had made at home, and Mr. Evans drank it off in one go, and said he had 'never tasted the like.' They asked us to share their supper of beans and bacon, as they did in the past. I always enjoy these suppers as they are fearfully luscious, and taste of good fellowship. Muriel was even kind enough to take the bacon off my plate without anyone noticing. We sat in the garden outside the cottage and talked of people we know in common. The early evening air was thick with the smell of night-scented stock, and the soporific droning of the bees. Mrs. Evans keeps four hives behind the cottage. I loved to see the bees in her garden, rolling in and out of the purple foxglove flowers in ecstasy quite late into the evening.

Later, some of the other cottagers gathered to get up a concert for our benefit. I sat with Olive and Mu on either side of me, and it was the most trying ordeal that the muscles of my face ever went through. There were about seven people singing the 'hymn' and about twenty verses, each with a chorus which was delivered with great gusto. Each chorister rendered it sincere and strong. In fact, they sang with volume and earnestness, I expected the entire hill to be awakened from their slumber, both the living and the dead. I had to keep gripping Muriel's arm tightly to stop her from laughing out loud, and instead she stifled her giggles into her handkerchief. By the end we had to pretend that they had moved her to tears.

SEPTEMBER 1ST, 1911, MEOLE BRACE.

The first rays of autumn are here. Red beaded berries adorn the hawthorn trees, and while the trees are still vigorous, the paths are already littered with yellow leaves. The grass is losing its emerald flush and has turned dull. Yesterday was dark, and the rain hung heavy in the air, promising more today. Yet this morning brought with it blue skies, sunshine and warmth.

I spent the whole day in the garden with Agrippa, who continues to surprise and astound me. His work speaks of a whole universe that is apparently lost for most of us, with strange symbols and meanings that pass most people by, and yet I know there are still those who treasure a copy of 'The Three Books' on their bookshelves. One cannot help but think it is our great thinkers who have erred, and that Cornelius in his great wisdom knew far more than we dare to imagine. My thoughts are fanciful, I know.

The moon is out now, and the stars hang outside my window like lights from faery. My drowsiness feels like a snug blanket.

SEPTEMBER 9TH, 1911, MEOLE BRACE

I fear we will have to sell the house before too long. Mother told me privately after breakfast today that we cannot really afford it. It will take a good deal of money when Douglas goes to Oxford. He can't possibly get a scholarship, she thinks, although I am not sure why. Mother also thinks (and Muriel hopes) that James will propose soon. If so, with Mervyn at school, that will only leave Mother, Olive and I at home, and she says Maesbrook is just too big for the three of us. Mother swore me to secrecy, so we are not saying anything yet, certainly not while the boys are home for the holidays. It is not good worrying beforehand, is it? It is just so lovely here, being right near the wood. In the early mornings I hear the 'ox-eyes' singing their funny songs all-round the house. And Maesbrook was the last place where Father was with us, so the thought of leaving the house feels like abandoning those happy memories.

I offered that we could take in paying guests, like we used to when we were in the old house. Mother pointed out; there is a lot of work involved. I am not even sure Mother can manage it nowadays, even with Sarah and Mabel helping out. The last time we took in paying guests, they were exquisite ladies with a good many fads. They used to send messages to me when I sang in the evenings to say their heads ached, and would I mind stopping. Poor dears. Likely they were musical, in which case my offerings after 'a concord of sweet sonnets' must have lacerated them. My voice has utterly departed now since my illness. These days, I prefer to leave singing to the birds, who are more capable than me.

I used to get frantic summonses from the same two poor ladies to go and speak to Kenneth and Douglas, as 'the boys had made a face at Miss So-and-So from the top of the walnut tree'. The boys invariably were guilty, for they were the most mischievous imps, but the most goodhearted. Father would smile in his tolerant way when requested to reprimand, and did so with a twinkle in his eye.

I shall never forget when Kenneth, at a rather late period as an extremely naughty and loveable schoolboy, climbed up onto the door frame, and startled one of the ladies heavily out of her wits by staring solemnly down at her over the top, with no visible means of support. When she said — inevitably — 'If you were my boy, I'd.' he remarked (as he was descending and preparing for flight,) 'But then you see, I am not your boy — and' (this was faint in the distance) 'I am jolly glad!' I think a lady P.G. is more difficult to cope with because she is there all the time, whereas a man typically goes out most of the day.

Henry and I are still stealing kisses from each other. Yet we are happy for them to be purloined rather than talked about. Today I told Mother I was going for a solitary walk, but met Henry down the lane, out of sight of the house. Of course we were not doing anything that was forbidden, I just don't want to always account for myself to others. I am more than thirty after all and should be entitled to run my own life. Henry talks to me of the world outside of Salop. I saw the outside world when I was sent to Mrs. Walmsley's School in Southport, but I was always so relieved to be called home after Mother had her riding accident and took to her bed. All I love is here.

SEPTEMBER 15TH, 1911, MEOLE BRACE

Douglas is bound for Canada, instead of Oxford. It is a long way away, but he is determined. He said he couldn't bear to be penned in here and feels there are more exciting opportunities overseas. Kenneth is doing so

well in Canada; Douglas is sure he can open doors for him. I tried to persuade him to stay and continue his education, but he has always been such an individual, and once he has made up his mind, none can sway him. Mother thinks it is for the best. The prospect of him leaving is dreadful – I cannot comprehend the thought of losing him too. I miss Kenneth. It only seems like yesterday that they two were boys, tearing around the house together.

I have not seen Henry for nearly a week now as he has fewer leisure hours available to him. In her latest letter, Mrs. W tells me that he has managed to secure some teaching work in Shrewsbury. Six hours a day at the school for boys. Six hours a day is a good deal of grind! Saturday, perhaps, is a 'half' at any rate. 'Halves' used to be given rather generously at Shrewsbury when Douglas and Kenneth were there. I hope they still are now.

I can't help but feel sad for my own loss. I had become rather accustomed to being able to claim at least part of Henry's time for our walks, our lively discussions and everything else, and yet it is difficult to see how he can maintain this generosity of time and spirit when he is working.

SEPTEMBER 20TH, 1911, MEOLE BRACE.

The trees are just starting to turn red, orange and gold — horse chestnut, ahead of the oak, beech and ash. Acorns are falling from the sky again. When I go out early in the morning, it is back to just me and the crows — the other birds are silent or absent. Blackberries now darken the thickets and drop their sweetness onto the grass below. The quality of light has changed too — it was darker this morning.

Mrs. W has enquired as to whether any of my rhymes might come out 'in book form'. I suppose if one or two rises above the rest, even gets augmented by others of a like nature — they may go tentatively London-wards. While I was thrilled that *Country Life* published my short story, 'A Cedar Rose', two years ago, I was relieved it was done anonymously. I've no pretensions to being a famous poet or writer. It is just that the wonder of things gets into my head and my heart to such a degree, that it must occasionally find an outlet and being wholly ungifted with regard to music and painting, I've fixed on writing as being the least impossible.

OCTOBER 1ST, 1911, MEOLE BRACE.

We waved goodbye to Douglas today. I am broken all over again.

DECEMBER 4TH, 1911, MEOLE BRACE.

Dark weather through October and November. I am feeling very alone now Henry is so occupied with his teaching. This heaviness of spirit has sent me elsewhere in my mind. My current thoughts are not ones I wish to record.

I feel that Christmas this year will be a somewhat gloomy affair. With Kenneth and Douglas in Canada, our family is incomplete, even though Mervyn will be home from school soon, and we still have the three of us girls and Mother, it is not the same. Henry has heard today that his mother and his sister Ethel will not be returning from Weston-Super-Mare. Mrs. W has decided to stay there and continue to take the waters and the

sea air. She prefers the liveliness of a seaside resort to our landlocked county. Henry seems a bit bereft, and Muriel misses Ethel's company. Today he was distracted and sad.

DECEMBER 24TH, 1911, MEOLE BRACE.

Why do all the men in my life go away? Henry has gone to Weston-Super-Mare to spend Christmas with his mother. He said that since he hopes this might be his last holiday as a bachelor, he should spend it with his family. I was rather taken aback, as he has not mentioned this before, and lately he has been preoccupied when I do see him, and there have been gaps in between our meetings. I feel torn, as I cannot help but wonder if he has seen sense and will soon announce his engagement to one of the local girls? Lucy Fielding perhaps. I should never have been so foolish to imagine he would really want to be with me. In my happiest moments I could imagine that he really loved me as he said, but then... I torture myself daily, and this only makes the longing worse. I almost think it would have been better if I had never known him. If he hadn't opened the door to all these feelings in me, I might have been content to be immured at home with Mother, but now I have seen there is more in the world than I could have imagined, and it is hard to go back to my old self. Oh, hair-brained woman. 'By heaven, I do love: and it hath taught me to rhyme, and to be melancholy'.

I have been composing lines to keep myself occupied, but I am struggling to write the ending.

The grape-blue hills are ripe; a thrill
Has stirred the aspen's carillon.
You foolish, chattering birds, be still!
My lover's gone!

Thunder is on the fields, and fear;
No thrushes sing and no bees hum:
But my heart's belfry rocks (oh, hear!)

NOTEBOOK TWO – 1912

JANUARY 3RD, 1912, MEOLE BRACE.

Another New Year without Father. I find it hard to comprehend how many of these I may still have to live through. The endlessness of my grief almost comes as a surprise. Mother says I must move on, that I am stuck like a cart in mud, suggesting perhaps I enjoy wallowing in my sorrow, and why can't I be more cheerful like Mu and Olive? I wonder how it might have been if she had been taken instead of him, and then I feel cruel and guilty for the thought. We may have muddled along just fine, Father, Minoni and I. Yet perhaps I would not then have had space in my heart for Henry. It is a terrible thing to be plagued with 'what ifs'. Perhaps Mother is right, in some small way. I know I am a terrible disappointment to her. And still I have not seen Henry.

SUNDAY JANUARY 24TH, 1912, MAESBROOK

What a day! Today has changed everything, to an extent that I feel I have been graced with a miracle. I am engaged to be married.

Today Henry visited for the first time since his return from Weston-Super-Mare. He sent me a note ahead of time, asking if I could make my excuses and meet him, telling me his teaching has kept him busy. I told Mother I was going to spend the day and most of the evening with Flora. Instead, I spent it with Henry. He looked pale and tired when we first met. We walked across the fields to the wood and talked, but not with the same ease and liveliness we usually have. I felt slightly petulant, since I have been missing our time together, and most anxious about his future plans. In my imagination, he had already left me. He asked me why I was so quiet, and I made an excuse about feeling weary, but he stopped me and took my hand and turned to me and asked me once more why I was so quiet.

I stared down at my feet. My thoughts were racing, so I tried to focus on the stitching in my brown shoes, and the green, stubby grass beneath them, whilst wanting to burst out and ask him all I have been thinking about these last few months. At last I asked Henry if he really wanted to hear the truth, even though he might not like it. He told me that from me, always; he would expect nothing less.

I told him how I had missed him, and how I had felt resentful of the time he was away from me, and how guilty I felt for feeling that way. I realised that he was working hard, but lately I had felt as if I only had news of him from his mother. I was troubled that he had news to share with me that I did not want to hear about him and Lucy Fielding, or whoever it is that has taken his regard from me. He let me rattle on so, with barely a pause to take breath, and did not stop me. Gradually he began to smile, which annoyed me. I asked if I was amusing him. Why was he so mean as to laugh at me when I thought we were friends? What made him so amused when it was unwarranted? This made him smile all the more.

'I have been extremely patient with you, Mary' (for he refuses to call me Gladys,) 'but it is time for you to banish your gnome of disbelief. I want to talk to you.' I was startled by his harsh words. Then Henry became

earnest and asked me why I hadn't realised that I am his, and he is mine. I could manage only the vaguest whisper of a sound in return. My voice had completely deserted me.

'Don't be demure with me, Mary. You know it as surely as I do,' he said. 'You must have felt it at that first literary evening, didn't you?'

I was astounded. I could feel myself growing more flustered. Words still failed me.

'Mary, why do you think I am teaching, then, if it is not so we can set up house together? How quickly could you come to me?'

I think at last I said something like, do you mean you want me to marry you? He smiled again, and said, 'If marriage is what you desire, then yes. We are tied faster than marriage, and I am not prejudiced either way.' He was leaning on the gate regarding me, when he said all of this, and was clearly amused by me being flustered. Then he asked, 'Will the summer be too soon?'

Still I was voiceless, and he grew exasperated.

'Yes, I would like you to marry me, please, Mary.'

I said I needed time to think, as I had Mother's voice in my head warning Olive and Muriel that they should never agree to a proposal the first time they are asked, as it appears too forward. Henry seemed not to mind. He smiled again, seemingly confident that he knew my answer before I did.

'Now, let's go home,' he said.

We went to the cottage he has taken since his Mother moved away, which is really no more than a single room, and I could start to imagine what life might be like with him, here in the hills, away from the pressure of everyone else. We had a cosy dinner together in the garden, and then talked about what we have been reading lately, and of his plans for the future, including what mine might be. I mostly listened. Before today, I had expected my future to be me and Mother — alone together until the end of her days.

I still struggle to understand how Henry could love me so well. He could have his pick of the county. Why is he choosing me?

As we sat and ate dinner, I told him how I wished I were beautiful for his sake. I'll never forget his reply, 'I don't care about the colour of your eyes or hair, Mary. There is more to beauty than outward appearances. Your spirit shines so; I can't see your features.'

He held my face in his hands and kissed me. My worries began to dissolve, and I gave myself to him. Henry's and my rules are not society's rules, and we will live our life differently, not following the crowd. Despite all of Mother's warnings, and all the sermons that are preached on Sundays, only Henry and I know the truth of what we are to each other. All I will say for now is — we are already married in our own hearts, bodies and souls.

We have chosen 12th June for our official wedding day. I feel so elated, as if I could burst with happiness. Now that I am getting what I have wanted these last twelve months or more, I never thought I would feel this blessed again. Having known such deep contentment before, and such loss, I can't help feeling a sense of unease. I know that life is full of loss, and now that I once again have so much that is precious to me, I can't help but feel vulnerable to the sudden loss of it. I know we must grasp what happiness we can today. Who knows what might happen in the future?

6TH FEBRUARY 1912, MEOLE BRACE.

A terrible row this morning. Mother is exasperated with me and has at last blown herself out and retired to her room. As I have to mine. This row has been brewing for nearly a week now, ever since I told her that Henry and I are to wed. I wasn't sure how she would take the news. When I told her, her lips grew thin and tight at first, but she soon looked to be almost pleased with the idea. Then, she started making plans — plans that had no resemblance to what Henry and I had discussed. We were thinking more of something small and quiet at Holy Trinity, filled with flowers, with just our immediate family members in attendance. If given the option, I would just as soon be wed outdoors, with just Henry and I, since that is where we spend our happiest hours. Then Mother started reminiscing about her own wedding to Father, how she had worn the finest satin and lace, how wonderful it had been to be at the centre of attention, and how all of Father's fellows from Oxford came down for the day and to give them a rousing send off. All the while Mother was talking, I felt my heart fluttering and falling like a birch leaf.

Perhaps if I had never been ill, I might have grown up to be the kind of lady who liked to be looked at, but it flies in the face of everything I am now. I know that it is expected that we will have a bit of a do, but honestly, I would be happy if it were just Henry and I and Reverend Bathar. Apparently this is not what Mother has in mind. My head aches with all the shrieking, my heart is racing and I feel my tremors returning.

10TH FEBRUARY 1912, MEOLE BRACE.

Four days of silence. I would like to describe it as blessed, but the tension in the air is almost as unbearable as the shrieking. Mother claims I am making her ill. In reality, her intrusion into our life plans increases my anxiety and I fear a relapse.

I will not be moved.

15TH FEBRUARY 1912, MEOLE BRACE.

A breakthrough, of sorts. Mother asked me to pass the jam at breakfast this morning.

17TH FEBRUARY 1912, MEOLE BRACE.

Henry has not fared any better than I, it seems. At this rate, we shall threaten them all with eloping to Gretna Green and be done with it. Or else I will move my belongings into the cottage with Henry and have no ceremony at all. We will just live together, as we want to. The previously friendly letters from Mrs. Webb have

abruptly ceased. It seems that I was acceptable as Henry's friend, but not as an intended daughter-in-law. Mrs. W is taking every opportunity to register her displeasure with us both. One would think I was still a child, and not a thirty-year-old woman. But I suspect therein lies the problem. Perhaps Mrs. W was hoping for more of a spring chicken for her only son — even if she were an empty-headed child who might know less of her own mind. I had thought marriage was supposed to be a celebration.

21ST FEBRUARY 1912, MEOLE BRACE.

Henry and I walked to Lyth Hill today, to see if the view could give us a fresh perspective. The oak branches were as bare and immovable as our own feelings. We returned resolute. The primal beauty seen from the top of Lyth Hill never fails to refresh my spirit. These hills and valleys will be unchanged long after we have ceased to pass this way. It certainly helped us to put our life back into perspective. If both of our mothers are so intent on making our wedding planning so difficult, then we will follow our own inclinations and arrange it to our own tastes.

I realise that marriage marks the end of a woman's life in the family home, but I had not expected to feel quite so isolated. Father would have supported us if he had been here. As it is, Henry and I must rely on each other wholly. It can only make our relationship stronger; I think.

FEBRUARY 25TH, 1912, MEOLE BRACE.

I have been shrouded in melancholy. I should be filled with optimism, and yet I have been just the opposite. Mother has made it clear that I must be independent once I am married, aside from an annual grant of a hundred pounds from the Scott funds left to Mother by her parents. We will not be a wealthy couple, but we should be able to get by. If Henry continues to teach, we will be fine. Our home will be more modest than what Mother aspires for us to have. We can afford no domestic staff. Henry and I will just have to work things out for ourselves. Perhaps we can make this fun? Henry says I shouldn't be anxious as I will learn domestic skills soon enough. He laughs and tells me, 'You can't always live on those chocolates you always keep in your pocket to nibble at!'

I am so incredibly happy to be marrying him. Henry is the brightest star in my sky. Yet, I feel that I am gambling all. To love somebody is to risk losing them. If I lose Henry, then I will have nothing left. I would be broken and spoiled, and more alone than I have ever been before.

The mood in the household is still tense. Mother and I have finally agreed to a total of seventy-eight wedding guests. Olive is tight-lipped although Mu seems more on side. I have insisted that I will be in charge of the invitations. I have not told Mother yet who the seventy-eight will be. She has agreed to this, knowing that she will likely have her way with the rest of the arrangements. In the meantime, I have taken refuge reading in my room. Even Grace Poole setting light to the bedchamber at Thornfield Hall is more peaceful than Maesbrook. I am tired. Perhaps tomorrow I can walk, if only to regain some peace.

MARCH 9TH, 1912, MEOLE BRACE.

At the Corner House again this evening. News of our betrothal was met with mixed opinions. Miss Sothern was delighted, and chattered on about how she knew we were meant for each other when she first put us together. Some of the ladies struggled to hide their surprised expressions.

Lucy Fielding was less charitable. I am not sure why her comment startled me so. Lucy made a point of loudly saying, 'When people are over thirty, Gladys, they should be careful.'

I am sure everyone in the room heard her. I felt my eyes grow hot with tears. What man would look at a girl again, even with passing interest, when he had been told she was over thirty and could see that she was plain? I felt like Henry's special look would never settle on me again. I did not know that Henry had come up behind me, and dared not look up when he spoke.

'Dear me, Miss Fielding,' he said, with speculative interest, 'I should not have thought you were any more than twenty-nine.'

If ever a face looked vengeance, Lucy's did. (I tried not to laugh.)

Henry turned to me, and immediately the thrilled and thrilling look was there. I thought his was the look a boy might wear if he were suddenly set down outside a faery town.

MARCH 21ST, 1912, MEOLE BRACE.

Spring is here. I have never felt so pleased to see winter departing behind me. The narcissi have again returned, so soon on the trail of the snowdrops and crocuses. The trees are still woefully bare, and will remain so for another month or two, but I can at least breathe again, and feel more optimism. The fields are beginning to take on that fresher green again, as grass comes into its new growth, and the nettles and cleavers sprout new leaves in the lanes. Henry and I come together whenever we can, with a passion and freedom that I would blush to express on paper. In real life it is pure and unsullied and an expression of our love for one another. And yet to express it in words, even to myself in my own diary, makes it feel smaller than it is, less than it is, and cheapens it.

APRIL 13TH, 1912, MEOLE BRACE.

Severe headaches and achy fevers. I can barely sit long enough to read or write, and my hands tremble. Mother too is unwell herself and doesn't come out of her room, let alone nurse me. Olive is busy at the church, and Mu is away visiting a friend for a few days. We are a sorry household indeed. Henry comes daily to look after me, as he can do now school has broken up for the Easter holidays. I don't want anyone else with me. How we might have coped if Henry were working, I do not know. Doctor Jones has been away, so Henry brought a young doctor who is up lately from London to see me, who gave me some dark red coloured capsules to swallow. I have not come across many medicinal herbs which display such a hue. The doctor assured me they were natural, and Henry was standing behind him looking so hopeful that I would take them. Perhaps it is a remedy from overseas. Henry has been desperate for me to take even the smallest amount of chicken broth to build up my strength. I almost wavered; concerned that he should not be tying himself to an invalid. Yet I cannot bear to betray my principles, even for my illness. I want no animal, not even the oldest chicken, to be sacrificed for me.

Tired. I must rest completely.

MAY 1ST, 1912, MEOLE BRACE.

Bringing in the May again, so soon — the year has flown past. I do not yet have the strength to walk beyond the garden, so today Henry hitched Betsie to her trap, and took me driving round the lanes, just like Father used to. I was wrapped up tightly in blankets, and elated to be out in the air, seeing the hawthorn blossom again.

We have six weeks or so to go. I addressed the invitations with Henry's help. He was surprised to see the recipients, but did not try to dissuade me, then cheerfully took the envelopes to deliver by hand. He says if I am happy, then he is happy. He said he doesn't mind who attends our wedding, as it makes no difference to him either way. I think he even finds my small rebellion spirited. Some people are apt to misunderstand us, as we see things so differently. We are not cold, nor heartless to the feelings of our families, but we must be truthful in our love for each other. Our vision of what a modern marriage should be is so different from what my Mother's generation thought it was. Love is purer than marriage.

I cannot quite bear to think yet about what I should wear, what hymns we should choose, what music should be played afterwards, or what breakfast should be served. All I want from this day is Henry, and I already have him. Mother wants to set up a marquee on the lawn at Maesbrook. Since I have steadfastly refused to bring her in on the question of the wedding guests, to ensure I am not thwarted, I am inclined to allow her what she wants without argument. It is only fair.

MAY 15TH, 1912, MEOLE BRACE.

Mother insisted on taking me to Shrewsbury today, if not to choose a wedding gown, then at least to pick out the fabric for one. Poor thing, she really can't understand how I can be so disinterested in how I shall look on my special day. I have tried to explain to her how it feels for me. I am so conscious of how people look at me, that I would really prefer our wedding to be small. I don't want people lined up expecting to see a beautiful bride and go away disappointed when I appear.

Not knowing how to explain all of this, I went to Shrewsbury, but I refused the flouncy gowns, satin and silk that Mu longed for me to have, instead opting for plain white muslin with a cornflower blue ribbon for a sash around my waist. I told Mother that I would prefer to sew my dress myself, and that Olive could help me, but she protested, and insisted that we employ Mrs. Fairly instead.

'If nothing else,' Mother said, 'even you must see that it is better to provide employment for those lesser than us.'

But there you see the whole issue — these people are not lesser than us, simply because they were born into a family with less economic privilege. Since we lost Father, even our 'station' in society is precarious. We no longer have the money that he brought into the family through his teaching and can no longer afford to run Maesbrook properly.

I am almost afraid to see Mother's expression when I tell her who the wedding guests are, although I can't suppress just a little glee. It may make me seem cruel, but I get tired of being rolled over by Mother's will in all other things.

MAY 20TH, 1912, MEOLE BRACE.

He is here! Kenneth is here! What a marvellous surprise! Mother wrote to Kenneth without telling me and told him that, since he is doing so well in Canada, he should return to give me away. I am overflowing.

I had a letter today from Flora McLeod, who regrets that she will not return in time for the wedding, especially as she and I have been such fast friends these last few years. This would ordinarily have been a great source of gloom. Yet with Kenneth here, I can't possibly feel sad.

MAY 23RD, 1912, MEOLE BRACE.

A crushing blow. We are to leave Shropshire! Henry and I walked to Ellesmere yesterday, and he seemed preoccupied. I almost feared he was having second thoughts. When I pressed him to know what absorbed him so, he said,

'I have a confession to make.'

I tried not to panic and fixed a smile on my face and waited.

'Mary, what do you want to do with your life?'

I told him that I would be giving my life to him and to all this — gesturing to the sky, and the oller trees and the bulrushes that encircle the mere. I wondered if Henry was about to break it off and tell me he would be leaving me here alone.

'These things and this place may not content me,' he said. 'I knew it today, when Reverend Bathar and his wife were hobnobbing about your mother's house, with Mrs. Fisher. Think of it. All of 'em, just the same, year by year.'

He told me there is a whole world outside, and that he had recently agreed to return to his teaching post at Brynmelyn, the boy's boarding school on the Bristol Channel. As he did, he looked at me keenly, trying to read the feelings on my face. Meanwhile, I was struggling to stay composed. So this is what it comes down to — an apparent choice. If I want Henry, it must be elsewhere, and not here.

I felt like a tendrilled vine being torn from its support. Hot tears began to stream down my face. How can I contemplate leaving here when all I know was taught to me here? The dawns that bloom like a hedge of roses above the amethyst hills. The bank of white violets that I have never yet missed in April. I thought of the subtle changes of the seasons, breathlessly fair, not one to be spared, while he watched and wondered if I would pass the test. I thought of how I sit and watch the breeze move through the leaves of the oak trees. I am the leaf song

of every tree. These things are of my essence, and yet I am his too. Both things are my home — these hills and Henry.

Why does my love test me thus, through pain? Yet he loves me, and has shown me more tenderness and care than anyone since Father. He nursed me through my illness and has an intensely intimate window on my soul. How could this be a choice?

I sat on a fallen tree with my head drooping. With a catch in my breath, but determined to lift the mood, I said at last,

‘Of course, Henry. You are my home. Wherever you go, I will go also.’

I looked up at him and saw only his eyes. His face has the strong sweetness that belongs to a man with his spirit intact. How could I refuse, when we are tied so tightly together already?

He sighed then, and I could see the tension had been unbearable for him. ‘You love me enough to be willing to go?’

I reminded him I had said so and said, ‘how stern you are today’.

‘You are a beautiful woman, Mary. If we go, I will make it up to you. What fairing shall I buy you, out in the world?’ He drew me to my feet and embraced me. I told him I want nothing. ‘Is there really nothing that will repay you? The delight of the big cities?’

No. How could there be when I already know where to find myself, and that is here.

We were silent for a time, while all around us the trees took up their spinning of multitudinous sounds. Sigh, and rustle, and soft footfalls of tiny breaking twigs in the undergrowth. All blending into a vague half-music.

Henry brooded on the surface of the mere, rippling gently in the breath of wind. The temptation could be to let the moment pass, to allow our lives to continue without probing deeply. But Henry has never treated life thus, and so he took his pipe from his pocket, and went about the ritual of filling it with tobacco, while I watched him in silence. Striking a match on his boot, he asked,

‘Are you sure?’ He lit his pipe. ‘In poverty and discomfort? In crude places beyond the sea? In the squalor of big cities?’ He was making this so hard, and I told him so.

‘Life is hard,’ he responded.

Again, I said yes.

‘Risking even death?’ he asked.

I begged him to let me be happy, just for one day. I was crying now. If everything in my life has led up to this moment, it was a cruel crescendo. If I am to have Henry, then I must lose my connection to my beloved land. We must instead wander the world like frightened children. Yet the prospect of staying here without him,

returning to my old life with Mother — but without Henry or Father is unthinkable. I can never go back now, so of course, I agreed to it. If I try to make him stay here with me, I shall lose him. He will tire of the sameness — even in this little corner of heaven.

Today, I stepped off the precipice at Wenlock Edge. Heaven only knows where I shall land.

MAY 30TH

Mother and I have both been unwell and have taken to our respective beds. Henry has been tending me again, so admirably, and it must have come as a relief for the others who could not tell who was more in need of nursing — Mother or me. I hope it will pass in time for the wedding. I do not wish to be carried up the aisle.

JUNE 12TH, 1912, MEOLE BRACE.

My wedding day! The sun is up already, and I can hear the sounds of the household getting ready downstairs, but I want to stay here, just for a while, and taste the deliciousness of it. This is our day, not Mother's. I must remember that, if I am made to feel awkward or imperfect today. If Father were here, he would be putting on his suit and getting ready to walk me to my new husband. But he is not here to look after me, and so I must try to stay strong, and be grateful that Kenneth has travelled all the way back from Canada to walk me down the aisle today. I must remember that today is about Henry and I, and our love for each other, and nothing more or less.

Already there are workmen beaver away out on the lawn, and it feels strange to know that they are all working for my benefit. I may lie on my bed and just listen for a while, hearing the sounds of hammering, shouting and laughter from the garden, as they go about the business of tidying the striped marquee they built two days ago. This is where I will welcome my guests. My guests. Not Mother's or anybody else's. Mother may have got to choose everything else but, in the choosing of the guests — I will have my way. I must keep it a secret for a while longer yet.

I can hear Mother downstairs, telling Mabel in a loud voice that I should be awake by now, and sending Mabel to see if I am stirring. I must go and join the day. Tonight, my home will be with Henry.

JUNE 13TH, 1912, MEOLE BRACE.

There was no time to write yesterday. It was a blissful, busy, and happy day. The locust trees came out in their full glorious blossom for our occasion, filling the air with their heavy scent that is so like jasmine. The sun was also in full bloom.

Breakfast was a most amusing affair, although one that will be likely to come back to haunt me later. I held my tongue about the guests until after we had eaten, while Mother chattered, wondering if Mrs. Foster would wear the biggest hat for the occasion, and whether or not the Sandringham girls would be made to wear matching dresses. I almost wanted to giggle like a child at my secret. But then I felt hard and mean spirited and

wondered if I had made a huge mistake. To harden my resolve, I had to remind myself of every time Mother has looked at me with regret. Surely Mother will have her own way when Muriel marries, at least.

JUNE 14TH, 1912, MEOLE BRACE.

I broke off from writing yesterday as Henry awoke from snoozing and I wanted to be with him, and give him my full attention. It is blissful being with Henry without the fear of being disturbed or interrupted. Already life feels freer than before, as we no longer have to be concerned with being found out. This world would be far simpler without the need to be concerned with other people's expectations. Where was I? Ah yes, our day!

After a rather anxious breakfast, I gathered everyone in Father's study, to tell them my big surprise about the guests. At first Mother said nothing, then she broke in two and began weeping loudly. I started to doubt myself again, as I always do when she looks at me like that. Am I a wicked daughter? Kenneth tried to comfort her, while Olive ran to get brandy from the kitchen for the shock. Muriel held her hand and patted her wrist. Mervyn kept behind, quietly watching the drama unfold, his hand resting over his mouth and his eyes slightly wide. I felt so awkward that for a moment I had to distract myself, staring at the flower arrangement on the mantelpiece, not wanting to weep as well. After a time, Mother simmered down a bit. I heard her say, 'The workhouse inmates? How could she do this to me, Kenneth?' At this point he gently reminded Mother that she was the mother of the bride today. It wouldn't do to arrive with puffy eyes and a red face.

I tried to explain that the hospital inmates are my people, friends with whom I wanted to share my special day. What a rare day this outing will be for them, who so rarely come to a 'do'. Father would surely have understood my great pleasure in giving them all a day to remember. But at this point Mother would not be comforted. She even howled that she would be selling Maesbrook soon, and then I would be sorry. Perhaps our relationship will fare better now there is to be physical distance between us.

I left Mother with Olive and Kenneth holding her hands and went to walk around the garden for a while to clear my head, and to look at the canvas dining room that had miraculously appeared. Inside, the air was warm, and the tables were being set up. I could hear the busy droning of the bees as they made their way around each flower in the garden, so soothing, so cheerful. I then went back into the house and managed to persuade Mother to come and look, which helped a little, as she dabbed her eyes and came to see the marvel of it all. Then it was time to get dressed in our wedding clothes.

The guests from Millington Hospital must have arrived at the church in good time, for when I entered the church with my arm tucked into Kenneth's, the pews were packed, and all were smiling from ear to ear. Kenneth whispered to me that I must remember Father was with us in spirit as he walked me down the aisle of the church. Even Mother was smiling then, in spite of herself, although she still clutched a large handkerchief.

And Henry. Dear Henry looked terribly handsome in his best suit with a pretty white rose in the buttonhole and his hair carefully combed back from his face. He is so dashing. I still cannot believe we are here!

JUNE 15TH, 1912, ASHES VALLEY.

So now we are sequestered in the Ashes Valley, wrapped in the arms of the Long Mynd, and having a blissful stay. A family friend of Flora's has loaned us their cottage. It is so peaceful here. Each day we walk across the hills, braced by the fresh breezes and the spreading green laid out before us. The walk up the hillside is lengthy and steep, but worthwhile when you see the view from the top. If only we could stay here and not have to go away, but I must not think of that now.

Back to the wedding, for one day soon, I am sure, I will wish to recall the details, and having this record will help. The ceremony went by in a rush, and the church looked as if the outdoors were stealing in. The old stone church is always so cold, despite the gas heaters and the warm red of the carpet that runs down the central aisle. It was just the right size to allow me to enjoy the day and forget to feel self-conscious. There were flowers everywhere — all along the aisles, in the vases on the altar, in each recess and windowsill. Flowers were also in every buttonhole, and on each hat, a snowstorm of white blossoms. Most ladies clutched a posy. I may not find God in a church or hiding behind a Holy Book, but His presence was there in each flower and leaf, so I know we made our vows in the Divine presence.

The sun was shining brightly through the stained-glass window behind the altar, and Tom Dowsett's girl Winifred — who was my flower girl — did a marvellous job for such a little thing — for she is only three. She was as earnest as anyone could have been, and her father — having taken the day off from gardening — looked as proud as punch as she dragged an enormous hassock down the aisle and sat on it in pride of place. I must make sure I leave her a special gift when we go. The service itself seemed remarkably short. Before we knew it, our vows were said, and we were proclaimed husband and wife. I glanced at Mother and even she looked pleased then. And as we came out of the side door of the church, the people all cheered and clapped.

The only sadness on this radiant day was the loved ones who were absent — Father (of course), Flora McLeod who was in Italy and unable to return, Minoni, and lastly, Henry's family. His mother would not relent and refused to be present, or even allow his siblings to join us. Instead we both took consolation in the smiles of the poor folk of the hospital, for they did so love our 'do'. Olive was in fits later, as she told us the story of old Mr. Draper. When she came to offer him another piece of wedding cake, the old boy said with a twinkle, 'Ay, and this time give us a piece that dunna bend'.

How glad I am that I remained resolute in my choice of guests. The day would not have been the same with Lucy Fielding and the Sandringham girls making me feel less than perfect. Kenneth also told me that he was glad I had been steadfast in my choice. We had dancing after the wedding breakfast, with old Mr. Dibden breaking out his fiddle, and his son playing his harp. It might not have been the refined dancing that Mother would have chosen, but the guests all seemed to be enjoying their day and Henry and I danced. All in all, it was a day for us all to remember with joy. Even Mother could not hold onto her angry thoughts. I could swear that I saw her tapping a foot in time with the music at one point (although I am sure she would deny it if asked).

As the evening wore on, Henry pulled me aside and said we should go, so they called for our carriage, and then waved us off with loud cheers and several handfuls of elderflower blossoms. I picked those little white flowers from Henry's hair for ages afterwards. We were driven to our honeymoon cottage, where we have been

ever since. I thought the wedding night would not bring us any intimacy we hadn't known before. Even so, it felt different not having to rush home, or hoping that no one would notice my flushed cheeks. Falling asleep with my love was blissful. I realised I had not seen him sleeping before. For a while I just lay and watched him, until I too drifted away.

JUNE 20TH, 1912, ASHES VALLEY

Our days here pass with enchanted peace. Days merge one with another, in that way that happy times do. We each feel holy and complete, needing only each other's company. Yet, I hear a voice which will not be stilled. A new life is awaiting us. We must soon take up residence in Weston-Super-Mare, away from my beloved Shropshire.

I remember how it was when I was fourteen and sent to Mrs. Walmsley's Finishing school in Southport. I felt like an exile. As if in sympathy, the locust blossoms have already turned and failed, and will not be there to wave me off as I go.

But I promised him, and cannot go back on my word. And I must remember, of course, that at least I am with Henry. Wherever he is will be my home.

I think too of what awaits us in Weston-Super-Mare. Henry will be gone to work, whilst I will make us a lovely home. I know I am not one who takes joy in housekeeping yet, for Henry's sake, I will do my best. We must also visit his mother and see if we can encourage her to warm to us. After all, I am her daughter now.

Until then, a few more days of the purple hills, and the fields full of this year's fattening lambs, who have grown quickly but are still betraying signs of their recent lamb-hood, with the odd heavier-footed leap in the air. The grasslands are full of red and white clover and pink-tipped daisies. The heather is already in bloom on the heath, visible beneath the brooding Devil's Chair, so unlike anything around it. I love its stern face, although the rocks strewn around it make for hard walking.

Each day, I try to breathe it all in as much as possible, knowing that each breath must sustain me while I am away. This time next week, my view will be of the shifting sea. How different I imagine that will feel.

JULY 1ST, 1912, PENROSE, LANDEMANN CIRCUS, WESTON-SUPER-MARE.

We have arrived safely in Weston-Super-Mare. I feel like I am still trying to catch my breath. Our train journey was long. Thankfully, Henry's new job comes with a home, so we did not have to spend time looking for lodging. We were able to move in straight away, as the previous Master moved out at the end of last term, which at least gives us a chance to get to know Weston-Super-Mare before Henry begins work. Henry has engaged Mrs. Hawkins to prepare the house for us and to stay for two weeks while I find my feet, which is wonderful, since it was already dark when we arrived. The house was clean and tidy, and supper laid out for us. I only hope I can keep up this standard when I am left to do things alone. I don't have the energy to look after us at the moment. Perhaps I will start to enjoy housekeeping when it feels like my own home. I arrive with the copy of Mrs. Beeton's

book that mother gave me before our wedding. She said that I would need it, since we can hardly engage house staff on a schoolmaster's salary. For now, I must eat and then sleep. I am exhausted.

JULY 2ND, 1912, PENROSE, WESTON-SUPER-MARE

Such a disappointment this morning. I spent quite a wakeful night, and only fell asleep after hours of listening to the strange sounds of this seaside town. When I looked out of our window this morning, I was horrified to see that there is no garden! Not one to speak of anyway. The only view is of other houses on the street. There is a narrow strip of grass at the front of the house, but not a space that I could linger in. I won't be able to stretch out in a hammock or eat my meals there. Since I didn't want to make Henry feel bad, I put on a cheerful smile and said nothing.

This doesn't feel real yet. The Ashes Valley was a blissful escape. If only our whole life could be like that—just Henry and I and the hills together. Nobody else. No interruptions. No intrusions. Just being with him and forging a new daily routine together felt special. Waking up together, preparing meals together, and spending all day together.

My Henry, my own dear Henry. Saying 'my husband' still gives me a thrill. It is a phrase I never thought I would use.

JULY 3RD, 1912, WESTON-SUPER-MARE

We went to visit Henry's mother today, and there was such a scene, I hardly know where to begin. I was thrilled to be going and had planned to invite Mrs. Webb and Henry's sister Ethel around for tea as soon as they could come. I had thought it might be fun to invite Muriel to stay so she and Ethel can see each other again. I had even saved them a piece each of our wedding cake and taken it along, wrapped up in a pretty box with ribbons. But the day quickly started to unravel. A maid answered the door and would not allow us in until she had permission from her mistress. A full five minutes it seemed we were left on the doorstep, and when she returned, it was to admit 'the master only'. She would not let me enter! Henry apologised to me, but he said he thought it best if he went in alone, and would I mind terribly? So there I was, left dumbfounded on the doorstep with my packages of cake, and not knowing whether to laugh at the foolishness, or cry with the sorrow of it all. My own Mother-in-law and she would not admit me to her home. As I waited for him, I saw a twitch of the curtain in an upstairs window, and caught a glimpse of Ethel, her face pinched tight and pale. I fled then, and walked up and down the road outside; sure that everyone there knew my shame and would think me wretched.

After what seemed like an age, but was surely only half an hour, Henry with an expression on his face just like Ethel's.

'Come on, old girl,' he said, but I could see he was trying for a smile.

He placed my arm in his and took me home. I tried to ask him about it, but he was taut-lipped, before asking me to leave it alone. Then he turned away, so I stopped asking.

THURSDAY, WESTON-SUPER-MARE

I spent the afternoon alone for the first time in weeks. Henry went to visit his mother again. I was so upset by last week's visit and the lack of a garden that I did not want to leave the house. So today he went back alone, presumably to try and reason with her, and rather than leaving me pacing up and down in the street, he asked me to stay at home and make us dinner instead. This at least kept me busy for several hours, as I struggled with the range. I managed to produce bacon and beans for Henry (although I will never touch the bacon myself) just like he made for our supper in the Ashes Valley. Now that Mrs. Hawkins is no longer cooking for us, I am trying to think about things I can cook. I am sure I will get the hang of it soon.

I can't help feeling so far away from home, and our letters back and forth, while lovely, will not bridge the gap completely. The feeling comes on suddenly, like a wave of sadness that washes over the shoreline of our new home. I miss Olive, Muriel and Mother, and all that is familiar. Even Henry feels distant today. I wonder if coming here was a mistake. Henry had thought his mother might warm to us when she realised we had moved to be near her. How things have changed since the light and friendly letters we exchanged last year.

It must have been a stormy meeting, for when Henry returned, I watched him walking up the path from behind the curtain and he had that same pinched look. By the time he came through the door he had fixed a smile to his face. I did not want to distress him, so I did not ask how it was.

JULY 15TH

The best part of being in Weston-Super-Mare — we spent a wonderful afternoon with Mr. Morton Luce, for of course he lives here too. It was wonderful to see him and to spend companionable time with someone who has known us for so long. We talked of poetry and writing. We cut the visit short as Mr. Luce was beginning to feel under the weather — a summer cold he thinks. I shall call on him again next week and see how he is.

AUGUST 2ND, 1912, WESTON-SUPER-MARE

Henry did not return to his Mother's straightaway. Instead we busied ourselves with visiting the local area and taking walks into town to look at the sea together, but her wrath is still shimmering there under the surface of our days, like the old haunted village at the bottom of the mere. Every few days he tells me he is going out and will be back later, and I know he is probably reasoning with her further. I have been trying to keep the concern — and the hope — away from my face, as I know it only makes him feel worse if he sees me in distress, but I feel as if I am waiting for doom to fall.

Today we walked out to the Weston-Super-Mare Woods, and it was so cooling under the trees, it must have soothed Henry as much as it did me. He seemed so wrapped up in his thoughts that I had to work hard to draw him out from under them. I just want him to be happy again.

The countryside beyond Weston-Super-Mare is so flat, beyond the coastal headlands. When we stand on top of the hill we can see for miles. I miss the soft rolling hills of home. I feel exposed here. Even our house is overlooked, with so many other houses scattered along the road. Our neighbours at Maesbrook were some way

off, and there was privacy in that which is just not present here. If I were to sit in the tiny garden at the front, I fear I would be overlooked by at least ten other households. Still, I am determined to make this a home he can be proud of.

6TH AUGUST

Minoni is here! It has been so long, I was so pleased to see her familiar face at last, so dear to me. Henry thought it may help me to settle into life in Weston-Super-Mare, to have a friend with me for a few days. I shall enjoy showing her the town, and the coast.

12TH AUGUST

I was so sorry to wave Minoni off today, but I must not be sad, because we had a splendid few days together. She enjoyed the sea front immensely and insisted that we walk down to the pier and the promenade each morning to get some fresh air. We found a favourite tea shop, reminisced about old times, and compared notes on what we have been reading. I even showed her some of my poems, which she said were very good, and that I should rethink the idea of sending them to magazines and publishers. Perhaps she is right.

TUESDAY SEPTEMBER 10TH, PENROSE, LANDEMANN CIRCUS, WESTON-SUPER-MARE

Henry started school yesterday. We have had a good few weeks to settle and become acquainted with Weston-Super-Mare before I must inevitably lose him to work, but now he is gone, the town looks strange again. I walked with him to the school and felt bereft when he had to leave me at the gates. When I began to cry, he begged me,

‘Please don’t make a make a scene in front of the boys, Mary’.

I suppose he must remain aloof for their sakes. They don’t want to see their new Master being any less than upright and composed. I stood and watched him departing until he was lost from sight, and having stood there for a while, became aware that a lady was looking at me with sympathy, probably imagining me to be a boy’s mother, unable to cut the ties at the school gate. I fled then, pasting a smile onto my hot face whilst wringing all my sadness into my handkerchief. I asked him to invite some of the other Masters and their wives round for supper one evening, so that we might start to make new friends here.

To compound my sadness more, Mother has sold Maesbrook. I received the news of it in her letter today. I know she flung it at me before the wedding, but I did not think to take her seriously, since we had just had the battle over the wedding guests. Mu and James are to be married soon, and so Mother has resolved to move to Chester with Olive to be nearer to her own people. I feel as though a limb has been taken, or another portion of my soul. Olive writes that the new owner has plans to demolish and rebuild, so the last place where we had beloved Father will soon be gone, and with it my final connection to Salop. Not having a home to return to makes me feel unanchored. Susan Young wrote to say how sorry she was to hear of the loss, as she knew it would be hard for me, and, although she intended warmth, it felt all the more sad as she must have received the news before I did.

What to do with these empty days that stretch out before me, with no Millington Hospital to visit, and no hills to retreat to, to feel the old pull of the ollern trees around the mere, or the sighing of the oaks in the Little Wood? I feel heavy with longing for them, so I turn to my pen once more and try to capture their likeness in words. But how can the scratches of a pen on paper capture everything that is in my heart? If only there was a way to preserve our time before in amber, or in a jar. Then I could lift the lid whenever I liked, breathe in a great lungful of Salopian air, and then return, refreshed and renewed, to whatever I was doing.

SEPTEMBER 25TH, 1912, WESTON-SUPER-MARE

The routine here doesn't vary. Each morning I walk Henry to school, leaving him one road before the school gates. Then I walk back alone, usually to sit indoors all day until he returns, working away with my pen, cleaning the house as best as I can, and cooking us simple meals, and then invariably being dissatisfied with the fruits of my labour all round.

Sometimes I go down to the sea front and walk the wide sands at low tide. The sea sparkles in the sunlight, and is strangely hypnotic in its coming and going, but I find it rather terrible. Its colour ranges from grey to blue to brown, but the water is invariably impenetrable, and it looks foreboding. It would not hesitate in swallowing me up. I am used to bodies of water being deep and still, and so the boundless movement of it all is strange.

There is a spot, just beneath the Grand Hotel where the rocks give a sheltered inlet of water. This, they said when we arrived, is where ladies go to bathe, as the water is said to be healthsome and healing. Henry thinks it looks quite treacherous and that I should steer clear, but I thought I should like to try it. Last time I went there was a high tide, and the waves were crashing in at the inlet. Anyone trying to dip would have been dashed upon the rocks. I have had to wait patiently for a day when it was less raging, but today it was quiet enough to dip in. It was bracing, thrilling, and I think I shall like to do this again. (But perhaps I won't tell Henry.) There was a girl there, younger than me, and although we smiled shyly at one another and said hello, we didn't either of us have the nerve to talk more. Perhaps next time. Luckily, I was able to come home and dry my things out in front of the fire before Henry came home from school, as I am sure he would worry I might catch a chill. It felt like a good counter to the usual routine of life in the town.

Some days I walk about the streets, looking at all the houses, but I am not yet used to this life. One always feels rather on display, and everything is so formal. I would prefer to dress in old clothes and an old faded sun hat, but here the ladies like to be fully whale-boned, starched and fashionable.

My best days are the ones that Henry is home with me. When the weather is fair, we take bread and jam, wrap it in a cloth and pack a flask of tea, and walk out to Brean Down, just like we used to in the Ashes Valley, or up to Weston-Super-Mare Woods, or to the ruins at Worlebury Camp. Once or twice we have just stayed in the town and walked the Promenade to see the pier, but I like the less populated walks more. These are the places I am not yet brave enough to go alone. Perhaps soon we will explore further afield and see more of the county. I should like to visit Glastonbury, to visit the Abbey and walk up the tor, which is one of the few hills

among the Somerset levels. Perhaps the Abbey will only remind me of Wenlock Priory and then I shall be homesick all over again.

Minoni wrote this week to say that whatever happens in life, I shall always have a home with her. It seemed like a strange thing for her to write when I am so newly married, but I can see she wanted to tell me how dear I am to her.

SEPTEMBER 28TH, 1912, WESTON-SUPER-MARE

Mother writes that she is disappointed in Mrs. Webb's manner, and she is ashamed for me. I think she is also desperately hoping no one will know the rift is there. She prefers to paint a picture of our being a happy family in Weston-Super-Mare. Muriel still writes to Ethel, and Ethel wrote that whenever my name is mentioned, Mrs. Webb pretends she has not heard and changes the topic of conversation rapidly. Although I can continue my life and pretend it doesn't matter, I do wish I could have had a friend, if not in Mrs. Webb, then in Ethel. The fact that she is still a friend to my own sister Muriel at least warrants a polite meeting, but it seems not to be the case. Olive is at least due to visit before Christmas, which will be a welcome break in the solitude.

Life here is quiet, lonely. I am missing the beech leaves rustling in the breeze, and the crackling, lively sounds of the wild wood, and the slow ripening of the pears in the orchard, and the growing sweetness of the plum trees. I am sure these things are present in Somerset, but in Shropshire they were all around me. I even miss the sound of familiar Salopian voices – here the accent is harsher, less melodious to my ear. As a child, Minoni taught me the Welsh word for it – hiraeth. It is akin to homesickness, only more intense and powerful, and all consuming. It is the feeling of my soul longing to find its rest among the familiar sights, and sounds, and scents. When she taught the word to me, it was just after I was sent away to school, and I was writing protracted and miserable letters to her about missing her and my brothers and sisters, and then the mere, the woods, and the hedgerows. I finally understand the true depth of my hiraeth now.

There are no vibrant poppies over spilling from the fields onto the roadsides, no freshly harvested carrots and beans from the garden. Here the vegetables are purchased from a greengrocer, and I don't know the ground they were grown on. I get glimpses of nature in other people's gardens, but there is nowhere I can go to immerse myself in the wildness of it. I am so used to eating each meal outdoors, and yet, here that is not possible. It takes my appetite away having to eat indoors. I haven't yet found my special place I can connect to. Somewhere where the wild apples grow, where I can hear the sound of the cuckoo calling.

It is out there, and I just need the courage to go and look, but I am sure the local people would then think me strange – a lady does not wander off alone in this town. So all I can do is walk the sands and watch the sibilant waves, and, like me it feels so restless, so brooding. Just the odd solitary ship, slow moving across the horizon. I miss the freedom I had at home to go off wherever I pleased on my bicycle or with Betsy. Even when I was alone there, I was never truly solitary, as there was always someone around to talk to. I would always stop and chat to Mrs. Jones as she weeded her front garden or Mr. Waite while he was trimming his hedge. Here all the faces are unfamiliar, and I miss Henry. Aside from Mr. Luce, Henry is my only 'someone' here and yet he is at school all day.

I suppose I could read more, but I miss Father's library too as I only brought a few special books. I have had to find other ways. Mr. Luce has said I can borrow whatever books I want to. I have also taken to visiting a bookseller in town and the shopkeeper is now used to my weekly visits. I have turned again to my folklore studies, in an attempt to keep my feet on Salopian Soil. *A Sheaf Full of Gleanings* is sure to engage my mind as much as it did at home. I am also resolving to explore more literary corners that I have not yet delved into. Singe is one, as Mr. Luce keeps telling me I would love him, and he is not the first to observe that. I also found a book by Dame Julian of Norwich that intrigues me. I would like to understand more about what happens when I am in nature and carried away for periods of time, as maybe then I will be able to replicate it more consistently.

I will ask Olive to bring me books when she comes.

10TH OCTOBER 1912, PENROSE, WESTON-SUPER-MARE

Last week was blissful. Flora McLeod surprised us with a last-minute visit and we had a wonderful time together. It was like finding a lighthouse in the deepest darkness of night. She and I hardly stopped talking the whole six days, and it felt wonderful to welcome her into my married home for the first time. We walked arm in arm along the promenade, and for the first time, I didn't feel so alienated from the rest of the town. Perhaps that is the way to make this time seem less solitary? Having guests to care for does at least allow me to forget my sadness for a while. I try to put a braver face on for Henry, but inside I feel quite broken by this place. Perhaps it is not this place particularly, but just being away. I need more keen employment to keep my mind on other things. Flora said as much when I confided to her how I felt.

20TH OCTOBER

Henry came in with a medical article about Grave's disease for me to read today. I don't know how I feel about it. It was published in 1905, so it is a few years old now. One of the Masters at School mentioned it, and Henry sent away to London for a copy of the journal. The author is Hector Mackenzie M.D. (He sounds very grand). It makes for grim reading. The symptoms he lists are all the ones I have had — nervousness, fatigue, weight loss, moist skin, palpitations, irritability and muscle weakness — and also a few I have not noticed. The most shocking part of the article was a picture of a monkey they had experimented on by giving it the disease — poor creature. He had the marked prominence in his eyes, and all of a sudden, his hair was standing on end (I have no idea why). As we already knew from my own doctors, treatment was completely hopeless. Rest, good food and fresh air, all the things we have done. They have tried removing the thyroid in some patients, but that resulted in more deaths. He writes that the prognosis should be guarded, particularly in those who are poor. Weight loss is a warning sign, as it means I might be deteriorating. I should also drink more milk apparently. So no surprises, although it is good to see that doctors are at least showing an interest.

When I wrote 'Vie Medicatrix Naturae' I said that nature is the best healing force. Dr. Mackenzie seems to agree. If only the publishers had felt the same way, my thoughts might be in print by now.

30TH OCTOBER 1912, PENROSE, WESTON-SUPER-MARE

Henry and I walked up to the wood early on Sunday morning. It reminded me that I love being out before most people have stirred. At home I never felt the need to breakfast or follow a complicated routine like most, which meant I had nature to myself for the most part and could be back at the house in time to join everyone once they were about. I have a fancy that I could go to the Weston woods on my own. If I leave early enough, it is likely that I will be able to go without the puzzled stares that I would attract later in the day. It would give me the rest of the day to write, or read, and I am sure it would be no hardship for Henry to walk to school by himself. The mornings are starting to come later and later now, and the air has a crispness to it that is betrayed by the mist on my breath, but I suppose that this will be just the thing I need to start me writing again, which may help make me feel more at home in this world. I am pondering the possibility of more short stories, as well as my poems. I know that the publishers that Flora and I sent the essays to were non-committal, since no one is likely to buy a book by an unknown writer, but perhaps if I start with more magazines first? There may be ladies' magazines who will accept shorter stories. Then I might be doing something more useful than keening after Henry all day.

6TH NOVEMBER 1912, WESTON-SUPER-MARE

This morning I ventured out to the woods alone. It felt daring. The roads were quite quiet, so no one saw me go, and I walked up to where Henry and I had been, as I knew the way there. I felt so wonderfully alive to be out there on my own. I kept looking over my shoulder in case anyone else was there, but I came home feeling as if I had been released. Being alone in nature is different from being lonely at home. I never feel alone when I am out among the birds and the trees. It is as if they feel my presence and move in to embrace me in their secret thoughts. In our souls we become at one with each other.

I have taken in two cats who were abandoned, according to our neighbour, and badly in need of a home. I will always fall for a tale of Oliver Twist. Henry was remarkably tolerant of me, although he said he would rather have had a puppy. My first attempts at writing have been thwarted by the cats, who wanted to know what was absorbing my attention so, when I should have been serving up their breakfast or letting them sleep on my lap. When their plaintive mewling went unanswered, they decided their best course of action was teamwork. One sat right in the middle of my notebook, and would not be moved, while the swish of the other one's tail kept threatening the safety of the ink pot. I decided enough was enough and went and began some housework instead. I am trying to lift my spirits and be more mindful of my household duties as well. Whoever thought that I would be missing Mabel and Sarah quite as much, but it is only fair that if Henry must go out and work, then I must also hold up my end of the bargain.

The wood today was beginning to take on its wintery look – the last few remaining leaves are still clinging crisply to the branches, waiting for the next storm to set them free. There was a stiff breeze blowing in my face, but it is still quite mild. The paths are now thick with mud from all the rainfall. I am sure it never rained like this in Shropshire, but Somerset enjoys a good downpour, and it graces us with one whenever it can. I never realised there were so many varieties of rain until we came here.

30TH NOVEMBER 1912, WESTON-SUPER-MARE

I barely seem to write in my diary recently, which is a sign of my writing muse being hard at work elsewhere. This is good. I have been thinking about mine and Henry's beginnings, and wondering what would have happened had we decided to forgo the wedding and live together. A story is beginning to form in my mind, and I am not entirely certain what I will do with it. Will it be a short story, or dare I try writing a novel? In the meantime, I am working on my poems. To Isolde,

Safe in his arms, one moment I abide

Above the sinister waves. For him, for me

Dawns a brief peace, a fleet eternity.

Our silence drowns the full and threatening tide,

And we forget how many loves have died.

How stealthy comes the dark and ebbing sea,

When one, arms empty, calls on vacancy

And hears the echoes mock on every side.

How brief is our warm joy, how soon to end!

Let us hold close and spend our interval

In Heaven! But busy stranger, eager friend.

It still needs some more work, but I am pleased with its progress so far.

CHRISTMAS 1912, PENROSE, WESTON-SUPER-MARE

Christmas day and it feels bleak to not be going to Maesbrook. Mother invited us to Chester, but I do not yet feel ready to go there and see all of our things in a strange house. Susan Young invited us to Bayston, in case I wanted to be in Salop, but instead we stayed in Weston-Super-Mare. It has been lovely having Henry at home all day for the holidays, except for his visits to his Mother. But then I have been content to sit with my writing for those hours. That way I can work uninterrupted, and don't get irritable with him when he asks me to fetch him a drink, or get his book from upstairs. I am so used to how he was in the Ashes Valley when I didn't have to put on this role of housekeeper. It is cosy when we both sit by the fire in the parlour and read to each other. I am currently reading a translation of Mann's *Death in Venice*, while Henry is dipping into Aleister Crowley's latest offering, which I am certain will turn a few heads in horror. I cannot help but wonder if that wasn't his intention in publishing it. I do enjoy his poetry, though, as it is woven astonishingly intricately.

NOTEBOOK THREE – 1913

13TH JANUARY 1913, WESTON-SUPER-MARE

Another year has begun, and while our family of furred souls is growing, there are not yet any signs of our family growing in other ways. I visited a doctor yesterday as I have been desperately hoping we might have good news soon, and he said it is uncertain as to whether I will ever be able to have a child. It is the fault of my illness again — that Medical Journal article mentioned lack of menses as another symptom. Then the doctor looked over his half glasses at me and said,

‘Mrs. Webb, I can’t help but notice that you are so painfully thin. Do you eat a good and varied diet?’

I explained that I cannot bring myself to eat the flesh of anything with a mind of its own, but he looked at me as if I were quite soft in the head. When I said to him that usually I eat very little, he said nothing but just ‘hmmmm’. He could offer no real answers, but that if I do not increase my meat intake, then I must trust God’s will and keep trying, and hopefully in time, I might be able to conceive.

When I concluded by saying to the doctor, ‘O time, thou must untangle this, not I. It is too hard a knot for me t’untie’ the Doctor looked confused. I am not sure if it was the nature of the line, or the fact that I said it that was unclear. Do ladies not read Shakespeare in Weston-Super-Mare?

Since I rarely have regular women’s courses, it is hard to know what is happening inside my body, and I cannot try and predict what it will do. I fear it is a law unto itself, but I am not sure that God’s will really comes into it. And I cannot bear the idea of eating meat, even though I will cook it for Henry. I keep the kitchen windows wide open to take away the smell of burning flesh. It is as though my body has a distant memory of that stench from another time, and just the smallest hint of it turns my stomach. Mostly, Henry takes his main meal at school, so in the evenings he only wants a light supper. He mostly exists on bread and cheese at home.

My poems at least are still flowing, although I am not sure ‘flow’ is the best word, since they always require a lot of work to make them as perfect as I can make them. It reminds me of when I used to watch Father painting a canvas. Even when I thought the picture looked finished, he would continue dabbing with the oil paints for several days afterwards, making each inch of the canvas more perfect. Just as he was never satisfied with his efforts, so too I am never quite convinced I have put the words in their perfect place, and must sand them down more, polish them and turn the piece from every angle until I am satisfied that ‘it will do’. The essays were easier to perfect, and I was able to reach a state of near being carried away as I wrote the words on the page. Perhaps I should try for more stories instead? When I looked after all the children when mother was ill, I used to adore telling them fairy tales, making them up as I went and weaving them around whatever activity we were doing that day. Minoni and Father would both listen attentively from the other side of the room, pretending that they were not absorbed in what we were doing, as they knew I grew self-conscious if I thought someone was eavesdropping. Minoni always preferred to read to us from a big book of stories – King Arthur and his Knights, or Sherlock Holmes on the trail of his latest mystery, or Mr. Scrooge and the rattling chains of Jacob Marley. But I loved to compose my own. Sometimes we would play act, and the sagas would wind around us like mist, allowing

us all to forget that Mother was not well, or that we had some chore that was waiting for us to come and attend to it.

TUESDAY, PENROSE, LANDEMANN CIRCUS

February is always a dark month. The woods are sullen when I go there, and the air is heavy with the smell of the dank, mulchy earth. But there is a silence in winter which is so healing for my seared spirit. When my illness comes, I spend so much of myself in trying to keep my head above the water, and it is exhausting. Thankfully it has been kept at bay since before the wedding, but I feel I need healing, and my mood is so grim presently. I need to immerse myself in earth as one would in water, and the woods in winter offer that respite. The fallen leaves are being turned to fresh earth, and bare roots are exposed now they do not have the layer of green to protect them. The branches are revealed in their naked strength, and one can see forms that are never revealed in summer. Winter holds the truth of what is, and presents it without veils, or softening. I know the depth of what I have lost in leaving home, but perhaps this is a time that is meant to be testing for Henry and I. He tries to cajole me and takes me in his arms and reminds me that we will always be alright as we will always be together. The loss of Maesbrook and all that was familiar since childhood, has made me lose Father again. But rather than grieve as I would like to, I need to stay as strong as the bare beech trees which bend before the storms of winter, without layers of pretence or protection.

MARCH 21ST, 1913, WESTON-SUPER-MARE

Henry is beginning to dread going to school, so it is not just me who feels the weight of this place. He starts to get a petulant look of a Sunday evening, having spent the day pleasing ourselves. I see him in his chair, reading a book in front of the fire, and his jaw muscle gets tighter as the day goes on. When I ask him, he tells me the boys are rather dull, the lessons repetitive, and he would rather be writing. If only we could find a way to isolate ourselves and both write to our heart's content. But we have talked about it and concluded that my allowance is not quite enough to keep us both at home, and it is no good asking his Mother while he is with me. He spends time visiting with her when he can, but her continued refusal to allow me in takes its toll on all of us. She is an immense woman, like Boudica, and she has an expression of passive and enduring obstinacy. So stubborn, that woman, I could almost admire her strength of resolve if it wasn't directed at me.

Spring is slowly edging its way into Somerset – the daffodils are busy about waving their yellow heads in the wind that blows in from the sea. This house would be a home if we only had privacy and green around us. I miss being able to dip my hands into the earth and feel its cool dampness covering my fingers, uncovering the worms, the beetles and the wood lice, and watching them scurry away from the light of the sun, back into their dark heaven. Mother always despaired when I was planting or weeding, as she could not persuade me to wear gloves.

'You will have hands like a gardener if you are not careful,' she would say, not realising that I found no insult there.

Instead, all I can do is gaze at the gardens around us, hoping no one will notice my wistful looks, and begin to plot my escape with Henry.

MARCH 26TH, PENROSE

I received a letter from Mr. Luce for my birthday (how did he remember?) and he sent some sonnets with it. I think these are even better than *Thyssia*. There is a mastery of material that makes me so envious, and I shall tell him so. He captures the very spirit of the sea ('your wild tears are on my face'). He writes with the power and gravity of experience, and the fire of youth.

He also tells me that he has been very poorly indeed. I felt bad, as I should have been to visit him weeks ago, but I have been so busy around the house. If I can complete my work here, I will visit him in the afternoon between three and four and tell him so in person.

NOTEBOOK FOUR – 1916

JANUARY 1ST, 1916, ROSE COTTAGE, PONTESBURY, SALOP

Whatever happens throughout each year, and however sporadic I may become with writing in this diary when I am so busy with my words elsewhere, I do feel I should always write at the New Year with a summary of where our life is. It may only be a sketch, rendered in the barest of charcoal lines, but perhaps one day I will look back and be glad to have charted our progress across the heavens.

So then, diary, where do you find me on this New Year? For the third time, Henry and I have foregone our separate Christmas and New Year celebrations with our respective families, and decided to stay right here at Rose Cottage in my beloved Shropshire Hills, much to the dissatisfaction of both his mother and mine. Although Mother was polite enough to hold back on the full force of her opinions when she wrote last, Mrs. Webb was rather less circumspect. Of course, Henry never lets me see the letters, so I do not know the full extent of her wrath, but I can make an educated guess by the tightness of his mouth as he reads them, and the length of time he then needs to spend locked away in his study with only his Latin and Literature for company afterwards. By the time I returned from my walk, the study door was open once more and he was surrounded by his papers, as happy as he could be, working on his translation of Gilgamesh.

All I know is that I trust him implicitly. As I wrote in my novel *The Golden Arrow* last year,

To give — to be with her man — to be so utterly at one that no explanation was ever necessary — to work, laugh, sleep and watch the splendid seasons together, being in other things than sex free and equal, and in sex so mutually generous as to forget self and rights — such was Deborah's idea of love. This idea, though vague, made her feel glorified and not lowered by giving herself to a lover.

As long as we are together, we are complete. I really should not mind where we are or who does not come to visit.

We have concluded that we must give up Rose Cottage, sooner than I had hoped. We can no longer afford the thirty-six pounds per year in rent, when my income from the trust is only a hundred pounds. *The Golden Arrow* is not yet published, so I can't expect that to bring in income yet. Even with my daily walks to sell our vegetables and buttonholes at Shrewsbury market during the growing season, we barely scrape by, and I am never one for commercial bargaining with the people of Shrewsbury. They must have food they can afford, and with the war creating such disruption everywhere, costs have inevitably increased. Each year this conflict continues, we get a little more patched and darned, a little more faded. And with supplies inevitably affected, whatever I can do, I do willingly and with an open heart.

Even with Henry working as an insurance tout (which he simply loathes) we cannot make our ends meet. He wrote to Morton Luce today, and read me the letter before he sealed the envelope. It was all very jovial and good natured (especially the part where he told Morton that he had broken the typewriter with his wretched efforts at typing his latest manuscript).

If only I could sell copious copies of *The Golden Arrow* it may help, although Henry says I must not count my hens before they have hatched, since Constable and Co. have not yet confirmed a publication date, and the advance they offered was so pitifully small. 'It's only your first novel', they told me. Of course, Henry knows it all too well since he was published back in 1911 with *Silences*, but then struggled with the last manuscript. Perhaps if I can get some good notices. I think my writing career will be something that I will have to be patient tending – more a slow growing orchid than a sunflower.

We get by, of course, although sometimes miraculously, growing a lot of what we need, and trading with neighbouring farms, but it is in the extra expenses we must forgo that I notice the difference. Paper is so expensive, and my poor rosewood piano has not been tuned in a very long time. While it makes a rather fine dining table if we don't mind standing, I only wish I could use it again for the purpose it was intended for. Instead I have been writing poetry at it.

Market Day

Who'll	walk	the	fields	with	us	to	town,
In	an	old	coat	and	a	faded	gown?
We	take	our	roots	and	country	sweets	
Where	high	walls	shade	the	steep	old	streets,
And	golden		bells	and	silver		chimes
Ring	up	and	down	the	sleepy	times.	
The	morning		mountains	smoke	like	fires;	
The	sun	spreads	out	his	shining	wires;	
The	mower	in	the	half-mown		leasur	
Sips	his	tea	and	takes	his	pleasure.	
Along	the	lanes	slow	waggons	amble;		
The	sad-eyed	calves	awake	and	gamble;		
The	foal	that	lay	so	sorrowful		
Is	playing	in	the	grasses	cool.		
By	slanting	ways,	in	slanting	sun,		
Through	startled	lapwings	now	we	run		
Along	the	pale	green		hazel-path,		
Through		April's	lingering		aftermath		
Of	lady's	smock	and	lady's	slipper;		
We	stay	to	watch	a	nesting	dipper.	
The	rabbits	eye	us	while	we	pass,	
Out	of	the		sorrel-crimson	grass;		
The	blackbird	sings,	without	a	fear,		
Where	honeysuckle	horns	blow	clear	—		
Cool	ivory	stained	with	true	vermilion;		
And	here,	within	a	silk	pavilion,		
Small	caterpillars		lie	at	ease.		
The	endless	shadows	of	the	trees		
Are	painted	purple	and		cobalt;		
Grandiloquent,		the	rook—	files	halt,		
Each	one	aware	of	you	and	me,	
And	full	of	conscious		dignity.		
Our	shoes	are	golden	as	we	pass	
With	pollen	from	the	pansied	grass.		
Beneath	an	elder	—	set	anew		
With	large	clean	plates	to	catch	the	dew
On	fine	white	cheese	and	bread	we	dine:
The	clear	brook-water	tastes	like	wine.		
If	all	folk	lived	with	labour	sweet	

Of their own busy hands and feet,
Such marketing, it seems to me,
Would make an end of poverty.

JANUARY 8TH, ROSE COTTAGE, PONTESBURY

The last few years at Rose Cottage have been so idyllic. It was such a relief to leave Weston-Super-Mare and return to Shropshire. I can't help feeling sad at the prospect of moving and have been mithering lately. The wheel keeps turning, away from the painful times, but also away from the happiness too. I must keep reminding myself that this too shall pass, whilst trying not to cling too desperately to Henry and our moments of peace. I can't bear the idea of us being separated for a moment.

We have already found a suitable cottage by way of a replacement home —it is called the Knills and is just below Pontesbury Hill. It is a rather plain looking whitewashed cottage, but it has a garden I can work with, and it is far more affordable at thirteen pounds per year. This should enable us to get by with fewer struggles, but it is not Rose Cottage, and my delicate blue eggshell heart shatters a little every time I think of us leaving. I have known some of my happiest moments here, and written some of my best work, inspired by finding somewhere quiet and peaceful to sit amongst the wildflowers. And, oh, what fruitfulness it brings, especially when I don't rush myself to be back by teatime, or in time to wash the dishes. It seems that the longer I drift away, the more I can create. When I was writing *The Golden Arrow* last summer, the pen could barely keep up with me.

There is a little voice in my head that questions whether I will be able to write another. Perhaps it was a once only event, sent to tantalise me and then evaporate like mist over the mere. Henry doesn't think so. He said all writers worry about that, to a certain extent, and I think he is right, although I don't think I was completely alone when I was writing it. If I focus on a detail in nature — a violet, a blade of meadow foxtail swaying gently in the invisible summer breeze, I can start to gain knowledge of things. It is as if through a gradual awakening to natural beauty, I reach a perception of the ineffable that seems to be peculiar to myself. Nature is never just an assemblage of pretty things, but a harmony, a poem. A tremor, mysterious and thrilling, seems to run with the light through all matter, from a single open blossom of the wild apple tree and through the whispering wood.

Something watches there; something waits for me, but this being is not a thing I am afraid of. It is like coming home. Yet it is always just out of my reach — if I seek for it, if I strive for it, it slips away between the layers of the leafy, ferny wood. If I turn too quickly, it is gone. Will it tell me its secret? If I sit with folded hands in the corner of the garden, so still that even the birds are not afraid to land on me, I can just allow the spirit to come to me, and it does. Young and fugitive it seems, as the baby thrushes that peeked out of the nests in the early morning when Mother and I used to go bird nesting, yet darkling and terrific as the core of a thunderstorm.

My going out into the green temple is something that Mother and Olive would never understand, since they are so devoted to the church. And when I return, such a harvest — poems, and stories, just like when I was a child. They tumble out of every part of me, and with such force. I don't recall the last time I went to church without going as a family group, and I do not feel as if I need to. While I will always love those cool spaces, and feel the holiness of them, I prefer to commune with my God in my palace of jade out in the meadow. And while I

love walking out with Henry, or with any one of my friends, in order for the magical creation to happen, I have to have solitude, and Shropshire. I know now it just doesn't work anywhere else.

I cannot help wishing that we could have our own home at last — not one that is rented, but instead a home that belongs to us only, then I could craft the garden and create a space for myself that I know is mine, one that we can afford to live in without the constant worry of that next letter that comes in asking for more money. We should be able to live on our earnings as writers, surely? But it seems not. Even with my income from the reviews I have been writing for the Liverpool Post, and the odd poem that gets published. The money the *English Review* paid me last year vanished in a moment, as quickly as it had appeared.

10TH JANUARY, ROSE COTTAGE, PONTESBURY

I wrote to Mother asking if she might find a way to help us, and her response rather shocked me. I had hoped she might send money, but instead she sent an advertisement she had clipped out from the local newspaper. The King's School in Chester is looking for a Master of English, History and Latin, and she is proposing that Henry applies, and we then move to Chester and live with her and Olive. We couldn't do that, could we? The thought of leaving my own hills behind me once more strikes me down. I mentioned it to Henry, scoffing as I did, and expecting him to be as equally appalled as I, and his reaction was surprising. He raised an eyebrow, but then tugged at his moustache for a moment and simply said,

'Well, Mary, we mustn't rule anything out.'

He then pocketed the newspaper clipping and went back to his books.

13TH JANUARY, ROSE COTTAGE, PONTESBURY

Henry thinks we should go to Chester. My whole body feels heavy with it, but we talked long into the night, about how we might be able to arrange things differently if he was working again. We do need the income, but the thought of being separated each day fills me with sadness.

I received a lovely bundle of letters from Kenneth today, the first to get through for months and heavily censored of course. They must have been caught up on someone's desk, awaiting processing, as they all came at once. No word from the other two this week, but each night I light the lantern for them and leave it in the window, just like Father used to do if we were away. It was the same one he carried when he went out to check the animals last thing at night, our very own Flockmaster. He told us it was there to guide us home safely. I have been composing some lines. I am reasonably pleased with them.

I can never say this out loud and to anyone else, especially Henry as it seems a source of great chagrin for him — but I am so grateful for Henry's bad back. What a blessing it turned out to be. We can never acknowledge it openly, not with women handing out white feathers on the street corner to fellows that they feel should have enlisted. I quite lost my temper last week when a lady tried to palm one off on Henry.

‘He is not well,’ I shouted at her, and then Henry, equally humiliated by both her action and mine in drawing attention to it, pulled me away. I am sure the poor woman has a son or a husband out there, just as I have brothers, and that I should be kinder. ‘They know not what they do,’ swirls around in my head, and we must be forgiving.

15TH JANUARY, ROSE COTTAGE, PONTESBURY

Henry has telephoned to the Headmaster of the school in Chester about the job. He is going by train tomorrow for a meeting. I wanted to go with him, but he insisted he go alone. I feel wretched.

I have had a note from Minoni, counselling me to try to not resist the change as it will become harder to adapt. But I don’t want to go.

JANUARY 19TH, ROSE COTTAGE, PONTESBURY

Henry is home, and he said the meeting went very well indeed. He likes the school, as well as any other, and he wants us to go. As he was telling me this, I was sitting looking at the fire, trying not to cry, and hearing his voice from a faraway place. I don’t think he noticed I was distracted as he was so excitable. As a compromise we have talked about the possibility of staying with Mother and Olive in the week — that way I will have company while he is at school – and then we can come home to the Knills each weekend. This at least means I am not completely pulled away from my Salopia, but I am wrenched from him. We have both written a letter or two – I have written to the owner of the Knills to say we want to take it as soon as possible, Henry has written to the Headmaster, and then I have also written to Mother.

THURSDAY, ROSE COTTAGE, PONTESBURY

I finally received a letter from Constable and Company today. ‘Dear Mrs. Webb, we are pleased to confirm a publishing date of July 16th for *The Golden Arrow*.’ I feel so elated. Of course, I must be thankful I found a publisher, and with such apparent ease. Perhaps the right planets were aligned. I remember so clearly the trouble I had with my essays. I was shocked at how apparently simple it seemed this time. They have said they will write soon with edits for the manuscript – I am not sure how I feel about someone else taking on this task, but I suppose it is part of the process and I must be patient. And then I must wait for July to come to see it in print. There, you see! I will be the published author, Mrs. Mary Webb, not just Gladys who scribbles things from time to time.

JANUARY 27TH, ROSE COTTAGE, PONTESBURY

The move is all set, and everyone agrees. I wonder how I will manage being with Mother and Olive again, every day. I had quite got used to my freedom. At least Henry won’t have to do awful jobs that he cannot abide, like collecting rates or selling insurance. Perhaps his mother will stop being so disgusted by us. ‘Debasement’ and ‘outrageous for a Cambridge Graduate’ were, I believe, the terms she used.

I received the first proofs from Constable today, which allowed me to distract myself with work. I am trying to set aside the discomfort, and not see it as a personal criticism.

FEBRUARY 13TH, ROSE COTTAGE, PONTESBURY

The move is all happening at a hare's pace, far more quickly than I imagined it would, and the house is full of activity. Henry starts work for the Easter Term on the fourth of April, so we need to get everything moved over to the Knills, and then decide what we need in Chester. I am sitting surrounded by boxes, when all I really want to do is run away to Lyth Hill and sit beside Little Wood and then write. Instead I am wrapping our life in newspaper and placing it in tea chests.

FEBRUARY 20TH, THE KNILLS

It is smaller and less spacious than Rose Cottage, and somehow not quite so homely, but the neighbours seem nice – the Morris family. We had a polite but warm conversation over the gate this afternoon, just as the men were carrying the crates in. The house feels slightly cold and echoey, and a little draughty, perhaps because I know we are going to only be here at weekends. We still need to unpack the last of the tea chests and find a home for things. Rose Cottage was such a cosy and safe place; somehow, I think I will always long for that time. Still, as long as Henry and I are together, I shouldn't complain. There are so many terrible things unfolding in the outside world, I cannot be selfish about this. We could have been much worse off.

In between the unpacking, I have been working on the next draft for Constable.

MARCH 3RD, THE KNILLS

Tomorrow we travel to Chester to visit Mother, and for Henry to make the final arrangements at the school. Letters arrived from Mervyn and Douglas this week, just in time for the move. Relief. All is well. Minoni also wrote to tell me news of her visit to her sister in Sussex. She said that she loved the sea there, and the pebble lined shore. So different to the brown sea in Weston-Super-Mare.

MARCH 10TH, THE KNILLS

The visit to Chester seemed to go well. Mother and Olive seem to be looking forward to us coming. A break in the routine perhaps, and some variation in the conversation. It feels odd when we are there. Of course, Hough Green is not Meole Brace, but with all the familiar family possessions in the house, it feels almost like a facsimile of Maesbrook. Except when I look out of the windows, I don't see the familiar meadow and the ford; I see a wide and noisy town street. And the road is so busy with carts and traffic coming in and out of the city (the walls of which are barely a mile away) I can barely hear the birds when I open a window.

More proofs. I thought they said there would be minimal editing.

MARCH 15TH, THE KNILLS

Our first house guests at the Knills. Mu and James are coming to stay, and we must get the house ready. However much of a married lady she has become, she will always be my Moo-Moo. Henry and I have both been busy with a duster, and Mrs. Morris next door has taken pity on me and been baking as if we have an army coming, not just my sister and her husband. Henry was terribly grumpy at the prospect as he still has revisions to do on *Gilgamesh*, but he will be sociable when they arrive, I know. I can always count on Henry to be charming when he needs to be. It is still so cold, but the daffodils and primroses are in bloom, and while each morning brings a light frost, the weather has been fine. Wouldn't it be marvellous if Mrs. Webb or Ethel would visit? But I cannot ask for a miracle. Perhaps Henry's other sister Mary and her husband Shelley will come, at least they have not struck us off completely and are in more regular contact.

Constable are content at last. No further editing. Now back to writing at last.

MARCH 21ST

Our weekend with Mu was wonderful. We had fine weather and it was unseasonably warm, so we walked up the Long Mynd, and took a picnic lunch with us. Later in the afternoon, everyone wanted to rest when we got back to the Knills. I managed to slip away for an hour or two, stealing the time from the cares of the move to Chester, and worrying about how this new arrangement will work. Instead I drifted away on the music of nature. When I came back, the ground felt cold and hard underneath me, and I managed to get inside before great big droplets of rain started to fall. Such a terrific thunderstorm, shaking the very hillsides around us with loud bangs and crashes. Nature's performance was as spectacular as ever; her silences, merely pauses and not conclusions, only emphasized the terrific volume of the music. It was between thunderclaps, when the reverberations had sunk into tense stillness that I started to understand the thunder. When I leaned from the window into the silence of the night, I was not aware of it at first. It was like being in an invisible, enclosing bowl, and I became aware of its depth only when a dog's bark rang in it, like a sharp silver thing striking the sides once and yet again. Few things bring such healing to a worn spirit as this silence, which falls softly, layer upon layer, on the jaded mind, like blossom on a rough cart-track. I felt quite soothed by it, and as if I can cope with anything that comes our way.

4TH APRIL, CHESTER

Henry began his new work this morning, and I feel empty.

WEDNESDAY 12TH APRIL, CHESTER

A week without Henry in the day times. Mostly I feel hollowed and worn out. It is strange this feeling; I know I will see him again at the end of the day, but that is so far away, I cannot find relief there. Instead I busy myself, writing letters to Kenneth, Mervin and Douglas each day, wondering where they are, and what they are looking out on. I know Kenneth is billeted behind the lines, since he is in the Canadian Ambulance Unit, but poor Douglas and Mervyn are, I suspect, right in the trenches. Mother keeps telling me that I have never been a woman of half-measures – if I write, I must write every day, and if I weep, I must summon up a storm. She tells me they will be too busy to write back every day, and how foolish I am to expect a reply so soon, but I don't

mind. I just think of the tendrils of connection between us. Maybe that one letter will bring a message of deep love to them when they are struggling to abide something that we cannot possibly know, living safely here.

The newspapers report that the war efforts are impacting on the country in ways that people never thought that they would, and it is just as Kitchener said in the beginning. This is turning into a long war with many losses. It is easy to imagine that the war is far away in France, but it follows us wherever we go. In London the geraniums at the palace have been replaced by potatoes, and apparently, the lake in St. James' has been filled in and repurposed to make way for a new ministry of shipping building. Everywhere the war effort takes precedence over all else.

Meanwhile Mother and Olive entertain a string of ladies, coming for morning coffee or afternoon tea, sometimes just gossiping about other ladies, and sometimes making plans for campaigns and fundraisings. I sit in the corner of the parlour, quietly exploring the patterns on the wall paper, tracing the cirrus of ivy drawn across burgundy, with its little baskets of flowers repeating endlessly up and down the rows, whilst my hands are busy sewing whatever we are working on that week – blankets for our boys, or a new shirt for Henry. It keeps me busy at least, but it's not my writing.

I had not thought I would feel this way again, now that I am married. I am dropped into my body of six years ago, feeling what she felt as she was — overlooked and underestimated.

My head is aching.

14TH APRIL

Dougie is home! Only for the weekend, mind. He was given leave at last, and didn't tell us he was coming until the last moment as he didn't want to get our hopes up, only to disappoint us if it were cancelled at the last minute. That means Henry and I did not travel to the Knills this weekend, as I wanted to see my boy. But, oh, how changed he is. All at once, in the heart-breaking way men seem to have at such times, Dougie has withdrawn himself from my love and tenderness. He is suddenly hard, concentrated, and impervious, apparently to any emotion. I can't understand this, but Henry does, and he has explained it well. He says it is only a more far-sighted and practical way of loving than mine.

'Mary,' he said, 'if he hasn't put on armour against you, he would never be able to go back there. A chap isn't made of wood, you know.'

Perhaps after all this is done and finished, we will get our three boys back, but I hope they have not all changed beyond recognition. Dougie said he us up for the military cross for bravery, and that maybe he will explain why when all this is concluded. The awful thing is, as soon as he leaves England, silence and invisibility will descend once more, and we will be left anxiously waiting for the footsteps of the postman, or for a cable to come.

SATURDAY 22ND APRIL, THE KNILLS

Freedom at the Knills. Tom Morris collected us from the station in the pony trap and I spent the whole journey drinking in the details of the hedgerows – clusters of yellow primroses and white and pink-blushed blossom on the apple trees. The blackthorn is in blow, but already the petals are fading and carpeting the lane in confetti. The daffodils have also faded, leaving their green spears with brown paper curls at the tips.

Two days of peace stretch out, but I feel sure that they will be filled with words. I feel them coming. There is a girl – Hazel. A nature spirit so pure she can only be misunderstood and broken by that hard world outside. And there is a fox, with amber eyes filled with fear. And a man with a mind like a steel trap, waiting to ensnare her.

30TH APRIL, THE KNILLS

If only I could write during the week. It might fill Chester with something more fulfilling. But somehow my voice is stifled there, and it can only be released in Shropshire.

‘Give it time, Gladys,’ Olive tells me. ‘You will adjust.’

But I don’t think I will. It feels wrong. I am out of place, and at the wrong time. But I don’t feel I can tell Henry, when he has only been in his post for a few weeks. All that trouble we took in moving here.

On Saturday and Sunday the words can pour out like floodwater in the valleys after heavy rain in the hills. Mrs. Morris has spent the morning tutting at me, as she found me this morning at the table in the sitting room, surrounded by swathes of paper, the fruits from one nights’ labour. It took her and her daughter, Winifred, hours to reorder the pages again. I must remember to number them in future.

In truth, it is no labour. I connect the pen to my hand, place it on the page and the outpouring occurs. But then the daylight comes and brings utter exhaustion, and I must rest, and try to eat something. Then, when I am recovered, Henry, who has been hard at work on his own writing, lures me out into the hills for some fresh air.

Chester has become an annoying interruption.

MAY 1ST, 1916

Henry and I are in the train to Chester. Another week with Mother and Olive. Now we are talking of exploring Lyth Hill as a possibility. If we could just get a small mortgage, the plan would be to build that little house we have always dreamed of atop the hill. To live on Lyth Hill and in a house of my own – lovely, impossible things I long for. It also consoles me for the fact that we would still have to pack ourselves off to Chester again each week when all I want to do is stay. The Knills is a wonderful anchor to Shropshire, but if we had a house we had built for ourselves, perhaps Henry would be more content to stay.

There is such a contrast to our weekends. Chester is only an hour or so away, and to look at it you would think it had much in common with Shrewsbury, since they are both centuries old. But it is so grim to me with all the red brick houses between Mother’s house and town, and the clatter of carriages on the road in front of the

house. I don't know if it is the military presence, or just the fact that when we are there the war is all around us, everywhere you look. If I allow myself to focus on the feelings aroused by seeing the Red Cross fetes, the servicemen, the politicians coming to visit the munitions factory, then I begin to despair, and I start to feel so unwell. My illness has stayed away for so long, I don't want to bring it on again, but it is standing at the outer edges, shuffling its feet in impatient anticipation, waiting for me to stumble into it.

We must keep doing this if we are to raise the funds for our little house to be built. I would rather not, but if it means we can save money for the building, then Henry earning a salary has to be better.

FRIDAY, CHESTER

Such awful news everywhere I turn. I have stopped feeling I am able to read the papers that Mother will insist on having delivered every day. And yet, I feel compelled to rush down each morning and scour the headlines, looking for news of anything remotely near to where Douglas, Kenneth or Mervyn are thought to be stationed. Of course, they write as often as they can, but the letters are so heavily censored, it's hard to make out what's really going on. Some of the letters are so heavily blacked out that I wonder why the censor even lets them through, as they are hardly worth sending. But they have held that paper in their own hands and inscribed it with their feelings of love and loss and fear and hope. I cling to that barest sense of them carried through the paper, as if the sweat and toil that surrounds them lingers still, held in the paper like a fly in amber. I do my part, writing to each of them every morning, hoping that this will at least sustain them a little.

Still Mother insists on her ridiculous mantra. 'At least our boys are safe in the trenches'. I could cry each time I hear it, and I usually do. What is she thinking? Safe from what? Mostly I take myself off somewhere she will not see me, as it usually just increases her irritation if I weep in front of her.

The reports coming out following the Somme battle last year are just devastating, and the final numbers will be enormous, I don't doubt. Each time there is a new report, the numbers increase, and Lord Kitchener has come under heavy fire in *The Times*. There have also been air strikes on London. I pity the poor Londoners who have these atrocities brought straight to their doorsteps. Here we are relatively safe from bombings, but we still have to black out all the windows from dusk until dawn and listen out for every plane that flies over. In Chester we would be fined for lighting the lantern for them, so instead I keep it inside. I die a little death each time I see the poor fellows who have returned from the front line, broken and in pieces, as I can't help seeing the faces of our own amongst the crowd, even though they are not there. I imagine us receiving our poor boys back, or them returning to us as empty bodies with their souls long departed, or worse still, just vanishing like a will o' the wisp over the mere.

I feel I have to offer something different, some healing to the world. If they could just see the world the way I do, with the sacredness of nature, and by extension, the holiness of each of us, then they might be prevented from tearing each other to pieces. Then perhaps there would have been no need for this hellish violence in the first place.

9TH MAY

A week of my deepest dark weather since Father died. I sleep with the heaviness of those who have nothing to wake for. I hate it here. Henry almost suggested we should not go to the Knills last weekend, but I cried so piteously he bundled me up and took me off to the train station. The journey home brought a break in the clouds.

I spent the weekend feeling I could breathe again for the first time in days, but then when it was time to go on Sunday, my headache returned. We even contemplated having me stay at the Knills, while Henry returned to Chester alone, but could not bear the idea of being separated, even for four or five days.

MAY 12TH, CHESTER

It seems I have made so few entries here, and I wonder why that is. Mostly I struggle to find time alone. Despite its size, the house seems so full with Mother, Olive, Henry and the downstairs staff. And I get these awful crushing headaches. Day after day. Pain and stomach churning. Of course, Henry is at school, leaving me with Mother and Olive, and all they do is point out my faults. Their latest concern is my apparent lack of feeling for church. They both insist on walking all the way into the city to go to the cathedral, even though there is a perfectly serviceable church just down the road. When I point that out, Mother sniffs about St. Mary Without-Walls being surrounded by terraced houses, and then goes on to compare the beauty of the Cathedral. It does have a sweet walled garden right in the centre with a fountain that gently sings. While Mother and Olive hobnob with the great and good of Chester, I slip away and sit by the fountain. If I linger there for too long, I get frowned at. Yesterday I overheard Mother complaining,

‘Whenever I want her, she’s always somewhere else. It’s tiresome.’

I pretended I hadn’t heard, even though I was standing right behind her looking at the most beautiful mosaic-tiled murals of the prophets on the wall. When I should be paying attention to the Bishop, instead I stand with the women by the river Nile pulling Moses from his basket of rushes or sitting with Elijah in the garden while the angel taps him on the shoulder, and tells him to arise and eat, for the journey is too great for him.

Also, I feel quite concerned that this notebook has been found and read. When I came to it just now it wasn’t quite where I left it.

15TH MAY

Dark weather descended today, and I could barely get out of bed. I know I should feel happy – I am to be a published author at last, I am married to the most exquisite man, and all should be well. I worry for my brothers, and the outside world is so full of horrors, and I miss the very air of Shropshire. Chester is so paved. And covered in soot. The voices all sound so alien, not the lovely warm burr of Salopia, and yet this is still the borderlands. When Henry left for school yesterday, I simply went back to bed and stayed there. When he came home he found me, the drapes closed, with my head bursting from pain. He felt my forehead, and declared me to be suffering from a fever, and went to get me a cold cloth to place on my forehead, and shoed Mother away

from the bedroom door. I could hear them whispering outside the door, but Henry was insistent – I needed rest and not to be chivvied.

19TH MAY, CHESTER

Headaches. Blinding headaches.

I spent most of last week in bed with the curtains drawn. But even though they are made of the thickest, heavy brocade, and they are lined, even the barest glint of light hurts me so much.

When the pain comes, my stomach churns so badly I cannot eat, and my visual faculties are so disturbed with light spots and floating worms that I cannot even read or write. Chester is experiencing an uncommon heatwave currently, and that just adds to the discomfort. Everything makes my flesh crawl and I want to retreat into a cave, naked and cool and not come out again.

I miss the outdoors and the feeling of the breeze on my skin. I miss the light.

SATURDAY, THE KNILLS

Today I asked Henry if we really had to stay in Chester, could we not just move home, and find him a teaching job in Shrewsbury again. He became tight lipped, and shrugged his shoulders, and said, 'I don't know, Mary.'

Oh, how I wish.

MAY 21ST, CHESTER

I have been on strike. Olive keeps asking me,

'Why won't you come to church, Mary? You must take the regular sacrament if you are to rest in the arms of our Lord?'

Perhaps I don't want to rest in the arms of our Lord. Olive is so busy with her work in the Cathedral that she seems to think we should all attend as often as she does. All that imagery of blood and death and suffering. It does not inspire spiritual thoughts in me. At least when we are at the Knills I don't have to attend services, and I can rest in the arms of my Lord, out in nature where I am supposed to be.

SUNDAY MAY 28TH

Another blissfully quiet weekend at the Knills, Henry worked on his manuscript yesterday, which allowed me to sit in the garden beneath the Mountain Ash with my back to the bark, and drift away. It fuelled further outpourings during the night, and again, Mrs. Morris found me again this morning spent and worn. At least this time I had remembered to number the pages. Hazel is coming along nicely, but I fear I must sacrifice her in the end to emphasise a point. Poor Hazel, I am sorry I could not let you live. Now I am become a jealous goddess of my own, inflicting suffering and death on my own creations.

6TH JUNE

Such sad news! Field Marshall Earl Kitchener is dead. *The Times* says he was travelling to Russia for negotiations on the HMS Hampshire when it struck a German mine off the coast of Orkney. 737 souls lost. Now of course people are saying that if the Secretary of State for War is dead, how can we expect to win this war? All I can think is 'our poor boys'.

TUESDAY 7TH JUNE 1916, CHESTER

The weekend was absorbed with Hazel and Reddin, whilst Henry made the final corrections to *Gilgamesh*. It could be seen as all too solitary, him absorbed in Mesopotamia, and me on God's Little Mountain, but we always meet for mealtimes, and have wonderful chatty catch ups then. When I think back over the pages I wrote last weekend, the hunting theme comes through rather strongly. It was always the only source of tension between me and father, the only raincloud on an otherwise fine day. I hated it when he and Mother would ride to hounds each week. It is cruel for all concerned, except for the blood-thirsty hunters. The poor dogs, and horses — forced to take part in such savagery, and the fox. The poor, dear creature, forced to run with its heart beating so hard it might burst out of its chest, ripped to pieces by the dogs and held aloft, bloody and dripping, as a trophy. And for what? Just for being herself. For living her life by her own nature, hunting only for food not pleasure, and trying to raise its own family in peace. I wonder if Mother will realise it is there and take offence. She always tried to get me to accompany them when I was younger, but I would not, and nearly tore the house down with shrieking at the prospect. When she had her accident, I could have said, 'I told you it would end in ill,' but I didn't. I never once complained when I had to take on her duties around the house. We did well, Minoni, Father and I, until she came back so suddenly. All five of the children grew up to become splendid adults and no worse for the absence of their mother all those years.

I may have had to make way for Mother, and I may have had to sit obediently while she discussed my lack of marriage prospects or my health with various ladies who came to visit, but at least I never killed a poor defenceless living soul, or had its blood daubed on my face like some hellish war paint, and neither have I eaten flesh since I was twelve years old and knew no better.

TUESDAY 13TH, CHESTER

Each week goes by with the pace of a snail crossing a leaf, while each weekend goes like a minnow in water, darting silver into the distance faster than I can keep track of. I write, I write, I write, and all is good in the world. Then I sit and watch the hands on the clock turn slowly, waiting for Henry to come home from school, and counting the days until we can flee again.

WEDNESDAY

Memorial services for Kitchener all around the country. Mother insisted we attend at the Cathedral. It was of course a very sombre affair.

THURSDAY, CHESTER

Headaches. Crushing my poor skull from the inside out. This was a huge mistake.

FRIDAY

Freedom.

TUESDAY 20TH, CHESTER

I wish I could capture the feeling of being at the Knills on paper, but Hazel and Reddin keep me so busy while I am there, I have no words to spare. Saturday Henry and I dined on warm bread and freshly made cream cheese that Mrs. Morris brought round. It had come from her sister's dairy farm, and I swear you could taste the clean Salopian air all through it. We talked again of my wish to have our own house, and to return to the simple life we lived at Rose Cottage. He agreed it would be marvellous to have our own place. Teaching in Chester is not bringing him the fulfilment he expected.

Maybe if I can get this novel finished and sold as easily as *The Golden Arrow* but with a bigger advance, we might be able to buy a plot of land on Lyth Hill, just as I have always dreamed of. This certainly spurred me on in my writing. I am already a third of the way through.

TUESDAY 4TH JULY, CHESTER

The first copies of *The Golden Arrow* arrived in the post yesterday morning, before anyone in the house was aware. I was sent a box of twenty, nestling safely in amongst packing paper. As I opened the box, a sharp intake of breath. And a feeling I cannot describe. I was so shocked to see them made manifest, I hid the box underneath our bed and told nobody. Then I kept sneaking back to our room, lying widthways across the bed to slide the box from out beneath the bed frame. It was real. They were still there, and I had not imagined it. The covers are so pure and faun in colour. The paper feels a little thin, but then it is war time after all.

WEDNESDAY 12TH JULY

I finally plucked up the courage to let the books out of the box. This morning before breakfast, I inscribed a book to Henry, Olive and Mother, and placed them at their places on the dining table before they came down. I then sat demurely, and waited for them to come down, whilst trying to keep a straight face and not say anything.

Henry was first down, and he didn't notice at first. He started serving himself from the sideboard and chattering about what his plans for the day were — a class on *The Lyrical Ballads* this morning, and how he hoped that if just one boy might be inspired to love Wordsworth and Coleridge, he might feel it worthwhile. Then a Latin tutorial in his office this afternoon, before meeting the Headmaster at three. As he brought a glass of juice and a bowl of porridge to the table, he gave a gasp.

‘What’s this, Mary?’ he said, with the broadest smile I have seen in a while, and I finally gave in and chuckled.

‘*The Golden Arrow* by Mary Webb’ he read aloud, and somehow hearing him say those words made it seem more real, and exciting. He then turned to the inscription page, where I had had the publisher print, ‘To a noble lover’, and underneath I had handwritten, ‘To my dearest acquaintance, with my love and devotion until death, as always, the author.’ He came over with the book still in his hand, kissed me deeply, and was speechless with pride. Then Mother and Olive came in, asking what the excitement was, and exclaimed over their copies.

Mother blushed when she read the dedication, and Olive giggled. It was just as I expected them to respond. We then talked about who I should send my seventeen other copies to, and it was a lively conversation. Three must go to our lads out there in northern France. I wonder if they will get through to them? Henry also suggested I send a copy to his sister, Mary and her husband, Shelley. Perhaps it may remind them to come and visit us. Then there is Morton Luce, and of course Minoni. And since the Morrisises have been so kind, one to them also. I also have been harbouring a secret wish. I might send one to Thomas Hardy. He is such a paragon of all things literary to me, and I can’t help thinking of Hazel being a love song to Tess as I am working away. They are both such women of pure spirit. Perhaps I will send him a copy.

13TH JULY

I have done it! I telephoned to Mr. Constable last week to thank him for the box of books, and asked him to find the address for me, and it only took him two days. Then before I could lose the nerve, I packaged up a little parcel with a note expressing my absolute love and admiration and sent it off to the man of Wessex at Max Gate. My hands were shaking as I handed it over the counter to the post mistress. She looked at me quizzically, clearly finding my behaviour strange, until she glanced down at the address, at which she became quite nervous herself, and said ‘O’, and gave me a delighted wink. I shall dream of its progress across the country and into his hands.

14TH JULY, CHESTER

I feel like I can breathe at last. Henry and I have agreed on a plan for Lyth Hill! I thought he might balk at the idea of uprooting again, and at the prospect of having to find money for building, but he was with me straight away. We went and sat on a bench near the Little Wood, and we were able to agree how we might make this work.

‘Of course, I would need to resign as soon as possible. It will be much easier to arrange things from the Knills than from Chester. And would probably need to talk to a bank about taking a mortgage, but if I can get work in Shrewsbury again, that would help.’

I nodded, and let him continue, all the while feeling my soul want to burst out from my chest with excitement.

‘Will you miss Chester?’ I asked, willing him to say no.

‘To be honest, no. It’s not what I thought it would be. The teaching is the same as anywhere else, and I do feel rather like we are under your mother’s gaze quite a bit. And of course, there is your health. You must have noticed how sickly you have become here, and you’re as thin as if you’ve been put through a mangle.’

I felt the heat of shame rush to my cheeks then, as if I have become a burden, and a child. He saw my expression, and then said, ‘Won’t you feel better being able to go out into the fields whenever you like? If we manage to buy the land at Lyth Hill, you could walk to the Little Wood every morning. Just imagine that, Mary.’

15TH JULY

Henry has written to all the schools around Shrewsbury to see if there are any positions available. He has the benefit of being known, at least, in and around the area. I can only wait and hope that they have something.

MONDAY 17TH JULY

Publishing day! I tried to stay so focussed on Hazel all weekend, but I had a little coil of nervousness in my stomach that I could barely eat a thing all of Sunday. Henry had to coax me in to eating some cheese and apple at least by tea time, and I sipped at some weak tea.

For once I was eager to see the papers today, to see if anyone had reviewed it. So far all is well, and the one review I read in *The Times* said all good things. ‘Mrs. Webb’s writing is evocative of the Shropshire Hills, her characters lively, and her story imaginative’. I will have to wait and see who else writes.

Now it is released into the wild, I must go back and concentrate on the work in hand.

WEDNESDAY

The Priory School in Shrewsbury has thankfully jumped at the chance of having Henry. One of the effects of this war is that schools are so desperately short of masters. Most have them have long been conscripted or signed up, and Henry can (more or less) go where he chooses. He is going to be Master of V and VI. However, it also means we need to move again, as the Knills is too long a walk. More moving! It seems we are destined to be constantly packing and re-packing this year. I wish for once we could just settle.

THURSDAY 20TH JULY

A train arrived in Chester today carrying wounded soldiers from the front line, and there was very quickly a large crowd there waiting to welcome them home. Mother sent Olive and I along, and it was so piteous, seeing so many boys broken and damaged by this terrible violence. Of course, I could not help but look for our boys, although I am sure we would have heard if anything had happened, but you see the faces of the men metamorphosise into the faces of those you love as you stand in front of them. I am sure the hospital will be overrun now and badly in need of nurses. Although she is not trained, Olive was considering taking time away from her volunteering at the Cathedral to go along and help, if only to wind bandages. Mother looked slightly horrified, but Olive reminded her about Christian duty, and she was not able to object for long.

We have not been a harmonious household in Chester, and I can see that Mother's irritation levels have increased with me here, as I do not do things in the way that she would like them to be done. Where she likes order, I like unbound. Where she expects restraint, I must be free. I am not only plain, but dreamy and stupid too. Despite our daily firework display, I think the house will seem empty when we go.

MONDAY 24TH JULY

It is no coincidence, I know, that the moment we leave Chester for the Knills my headaches clear, and I become industrious again. It just confirms we have made the right choice. This weekend was my final flurry – Hazel's story is complete. *Gone to Earth*, I shall call it, like the cry of the hunters when the poor vulpine creatures retreat underground, only to be dug out from the safety of their warm burrows, and thrown to the dogs. Henry is reading it again now, but I think I will not even wait for him to say yay or nay, I will send it straight to Mr. Constable and see if he will take it.

Mr. Morris told us of a plot for sale on Lyth Hill this weekend. I badgered Henry to let us go and have a look at it, so Mr. Morris drove us over there in the trap to see it. It is perfect. It is just on the brow of the hill and the earth is well rested, and there are no other houses nearby, although I am sure there soon will be. I could grow so many things there. As I walked around the land I could picture just where our home would be – a small, modest cottage with two or three rooms. A guest room would be splendid. And a beautiful garden, blooming with roses, gardenias and all manner of fruit bushes and vegetables. The view from the top of Lyth Hill is the most splendid vista in all Salopia.

I fear Henry will not agree, and I have no idea yet how we might pay for it, but if I could just buy the land, maybe we could save for the building.

FRIDAY

The strangest reports from around Shropshire. I don't quite know whether to laugh or cry. Mr. Morris telephoned to us in Chester to let Henry know that folk have been burning copies of *The Golden Arrow* in Ironbridge and Coalbrookdale. Apparently, they are put out by Deborah and Stephen not being married when they set up a home together. It is only fiction. I did wonder if it might raise an eyebrow or two, but I never thought it would cause that much offence, this is 1916 after all.

I almost cried when Henry told me, but he did not seem so concerned. He told me in the street, as I was walking him to school. I cannot help but wonder if he did it that way as he knew I could not cry when he told me – wise old Henry. There was such a bustle in the street with the noise of everyone rushing off to work – the sounds of the automobile engines, hooves clopping on the road and horns hooting, newspaper sellers on the street corner, ex-soldiers begging for a coin, and the rumble of buses, it almost drowned Henry out. At first, I thought I had misheard him.

'Burnt it? Are you sure?'

He nodded.

‘Absolutely sure. Apparently, it even got a little column in the Shropshire Star. Ted Morris has kept a copy of it, just in case you wanted to keep the clipping.’

At that I must have looked appalled, as he quickly took my hand and placed it in the crook of his arm, and as we strolled onwards, I tried to look up and focus on the white wisps of cloud moving slowly across the sky.

‘Well, Mary, perhaps we should take this as a sign that you have truly arrived. Plenty of other authors have caused a stir. Look at poor David Lawrence and the stink that erupted when he published *The Rainbow* – his book got burned, and now he’s the toast of Bloomsbury.’ When my bottom lip still trembled a little, he said, ‘It’s all balderdash anyway. Who cares if some silly ass country folk take umbrage at your scribbles?’

I wanted to say, ‘But Henry, that is the very thing. Those country folk are *my* folk!’ Instead I held my tongue and just tried to laugh it off. ‘Do you think we are safe going back this weekend?’ I asked, at which Henry started to laugh in earnest.

‘Of course we are, dearest! Even if we did go to Coalbrookdale or Ironbridge, no one would know you from a crow.’

He is right, of course. How stupid of me. Just because my work is in print, it doesn’t mean people would know me in the street. They do in Shrewsbury market, of course, and all around the villages we lived in – Pontesbury, Meole Brace and the rest, but my world is really rather small and modest. When I look at it like that, it is no wonder I struggled to get published in the first place, and that makes me feel even more deflated. The only little glint of sunshine was Henry’s parting comments regarding Mr. Morris. Apparently, he was so intrigued at what all the fuss was about, that he picked up the copy I had given him, and read it from cover to cover, not stopping even to go to his work. He missed a whole day’s wages, the duffer!

On the walk home from the King’s School, I briefly stopped in at St Mary-Without-Walls church, just to find some peace. As I walked around the inside of the building and looked up at the stained-glass windows all throwing their colourful gaze down on us mortals, I didn’t find peace there. All I saw was sorrow and suffering on the face of him who was on the cross. I lit a candle for Father as I knew he would have liked that, and then made my way outside to the churchyard. In amongst the gravestones there is always a sense of peace and bird song. Although it is in the centre of so much bustle, it is a little oasis of calm in a frightened world.

I walked slowly on to Mother’s house and got back into bed, leaving Henry to get on with his preparations for the Prize giving Ceremony at the school on Friday. At least then we shall be free.

Counting down the hours.

TUESDAY 1ST AUGUST

Home.

TUESDAY 8TH AUGUST

Better news at last. The post was late this morning, but Constable and Company have written to say they want *Gone to Earth*, and with barely any edits! They have offered me a much better advance which should just about cover the cost of the land on Lyth Hill, with barely a hare's whisker for anything else. It would not cover the cost of building on top, I am sure. I immediately began to write letters – first to the land agent saying that we want the land, and could we please come and see it again at their earliest convenience. Then to the bank in Shrewsbury asking for an appointment to see Mr. Bates, the manager, straight away. He has known Mother and Father for many years, and I am hoping he will make the process easy for us. Then I walked into town just to get a change of air, and was reminded again that, there may be life here, but it is not my life. I miss the life at Shrewsbury Market, and dare I say it, I miss waking up at three in the morning to walk into the town with my bunches of violets and sweet peas.

16TH AUGUST

I have sunk into that strange state that comes at the end of a big project. Now that *Gone to Earth* is written I am left feeling a little listless and not quite sure what to do with my time. Of course, I will fill it with the business of edits and rewrites and letters with Mr. Baker. Now I understand the process it will be easier. It is too soon to begin another. I must allow the tendrils to die back and the soil to remain fallow for a season before I can begin to plant another seed.

Perhaps I might be able to keep busy with something else in the meantime.

19TH AUGUST

We have managed to find rooms at the bottom of Lyth Hill. This will be perfect for two reasons – Henry will be able to walk to the Priory School from there, and I will be able to keep an eye on the works on the land, once we have it all settled. I feel like I am within touching distance of my dreams for once. Now all I need to do is remain resolute.

27TH AUGUST

A momentary pause in a changing world. This has allowed me to catch up on my reading which I had paused while I was in the company of Hazel and Reddin. I don't dare read while I am writing in case other people's words leak out through my sub-conscious and onto the page. This means when I stop, I can enjoy wallowing for a while. These last few weeks I have devoured Gosse, Lawrence, Joyce, Galsworthy and a bit of Yeats thrown in for good measure.

No further reviews.

1ST SEPTEMBER

More moving. Once more we are packing our things in newspaper to be moved over to Lyth Hill at the end of next week. I keep finding things I had forgotten about that we haven't quite unpacked since the move back from Cheshire, only to wrap them again and put them back in their boxes.

Once we make the final move into our very own house, I will never have to pack again! I also can't help looking in the window of all the shops in Shrewsbury looking for items of furniture for the cottage. I saw the most beautiful grandfather clock today, with a picture of a ship painted on its moving face. A ship, a cottage, sun and moon, a nosegay. The dial turns and the ship rides up and sinks again, the yellow painted sun sets and the blue painted moon rides high in the sky of this miniature universe. I would love to see that clock in our new house.

4TH SEPTEMBER

The rooms in the cottage at the bottom of the hill are quite small – our things are still mostly in boxes, but there is a peacefulness here that is most engaging. Today I was able to walk up to the top of the hill and just sit for a while on the plot of land that will soon be ours.

Henry is busy with his preparations for the new term which starts next week.

8TH SEPTEMBER

Last day of freedom with Henry before he goes back to school. I have been stitching some new shirts for him, enjoying sitting in the garden in the late afternoon sunshine, listening to the sound of the birds as they serenade me.

10TH SEPTEMBER

First day of school. I walked into Bayston Village early to call in on the Youngs before meeting Henry with a flask of milk on his way home. Henry and I sat on the green for a few minutes, and he chattered away merrily about his day. Mine seemed quite dull in comparison. Dull, but peaceful. I cleaned the rooms, did the washing and cooked us a meal today. It felt important to have something wholesome for Henry to come home to.

THURSDAY

Reading Frazer this week – *The Golden Bough*. I am not sure why I haven't read it before as it is my kind of book. Naturally, it has caused some considerable scandal in certain circles, but Henry is eager for me to finish in time for the weekend as he wants to read it next. I am enjoying the deliciousness of taking my time though, just dipping my fingers in the water each day for a short while, and then daydreaming about the sacrificial god as I weave my way in and out of the Little Wood.

17TH

Poetry. Pouring out of me. One good sentence, 'They clamour of me to the empty skies'. The rest clumsy. But I will persist. I will at least be industrious with Henry working so hard at school. All those classes to prepare and all that marking to do.

20TH SEPTEMBER

The words broke through at last, and I am happy with this one, I think. I shall call it 'The Flockmaster'.

I come
Out of the heart of night, where calm distils
Like dew in the helleborine.
Forever the sheep have known me, straightened and dumb in their life like a dark ravine;
They clamour of me to the empty sky and the hills;
They cry with a great homesickness under the moon
For something they know and know not, within them, beyond –
That they feel when I dwell on the slope in the heat of noon;
That they taste in the cold dew-pond.
Only a little less of me have they known
Than the poet knows, and far as he they have wandered
With their lambs, on the clear skyline like shadows stealing,
Clad in the fleece of their crying,
Following me on whom all creatures have pondered –
Inarticulate, sighing
After the half-revealed, the unrevealing,
The shepherd who dwelleth alone.

TUESDAY 22ND SEPTEMBER

Great news for Henry. Macmillan has purchased his translation of Gilgamesh. They want to call it *The Everlasting Quest* which I wasn't sure about, but then it's Henry's project after all. It will be out next year. A small advance, but it all helps.

The purchase of the land is going through so smoothly. One would almost imagine there is a divine hand helping us.

25TH SEPTEMBER

A busy day today, and I am worn out. We went to the solicitor to sign the papers for the land on Lyth Hill. We now own a little piece of paradise, and I shall grow something magical there. First a little home, modest at first. And then a garden.

We have agreed a mortgage for the cost of the build, so from the solicitor we had to go straight to the bank to sign the mortgage papers, secured (thankfully) by my trust income and Henry's post. Then we had to go to visit Mr. Purslow to show him both papers, and to sign an agreement with him for building our little home. I will design it all by myself over the coming weeks, and he will take care of the construction. The only problem is the works will not be able to start straightaway. Of course, with all the men away at war, there are very few left to build houses, and they are generally much older. Mr. Purslow has enough work lined up to keep them busy until spring, but he has said he will do his best to schedule us in through the winter.

Shrewsbury town centre was quiet today; the rain was coming down steadily and no market. It seemed there was a hushed reverence for what we were doing, and even a wisp of magic in the air. Some days things go terribly wrong – a pony that sheds a shoe on the way to town, a wheel that gets stuck in the mud, a pen that will not write and leaves barely visible scratches, or the splashing of one's skirts from a passing automobile. Today was not one of those days. Everything just seemed to slot into place as if it had been divinely designed, and all the cards were merely being sorted and placed in the index drawer they were always meant to go in. We arrived at the solicitor's modern offices with its newly papered walls; the documents had arrived just before us. We

arrived at the bank, Mr. Bates readily agreed to our request for a small amount of funds up front by way of a deposit. We arrived at Mr. Purslow's, caught him between visits, and he had just the right amount of time available for us to conclude our business before his next appointment. And although builders are usually unhappy at the prospect of working with the imminent coming of winter when the ground becomes hard, he told us he had just had a large project put off until spring, which means he can start on our little house earlier. This means they will dig our foundation while the ground is still yielding, then pause for a few weeks to complete their other job, before starting on the house in late November. I briefly sketched out on paper what I would like, and he has agreed to meet us on site on Monday to survey the plot, and he will bring his water diviner with him.

By the time we made it back to the rooms, I was exhausted, but exhilarated, and Henry had an excited glow about him at the prospect of being a landowner. It is really happening! By spring, we shall own our own cottage.

WEDNESDAY

October is already turning into a whirl of activity. Today we met Mr. Purslow and Mr. Williams, the diviner, on Lyth Hill, so we could decide where to dig the well. That will determine where the house should go. I have insisted that it face the edge of the plateau, so that we really get the benefit of the amazing view of the hills. Mr. Purslow immediately replied,

'Of course, Mrs. Webb. Why would we do it any other way?'

I know we shall get along very well.

Just then, Cedric Denny, a wizened old man with the gentlest demeanour you could imagine, gave a shout, 'Hold'. His birch rods had crossed just a little way off, on the north side of the plot, which is perfect, as it means the cottage can more or less sit centrally, and I shall not need to go far to pump water.

Then we discussed sizes, and I told him we just want three simple rooms. A bedroom, a spare for visitors, and a little sitting room for us to work in. That with a little kitchen and scullery on the back. Mr. Purslow has suggested we opt for a new bungalow design, as they are simple to build and will keep the cost down, and we agreed. Fancy us being all the rage! Then we staked it out, with wooden posts driven into the ground and twine. It is remarkable seeing it take shape in front of our very eyes. And so quickly. I thought this process might take months, but it isn't so. The build will only take twelve weeks at the most, since we already have the land. The only delay is in gathering enough man power. With plans to break ground in just four weeks' time, I must complete my drawings. Then, of course we must furnish it. Although we have many things already, I do so want to find one or two key items that are new to us in this house. I wonder if that clock will still be in the shop in Shrewsbury?

WEDNESDAY 31ST OCTOBER

All Hallows' Eve, and Mr. Purslow broke ground today. I was there on hand to witness it. Poor old Henry missed the first shovel full as he had to go to school. Also, Mr. Denny has told us we will need a rotary drill to get

to the water. Because we are sitting right on top of the hill, they need to dig right down into the rock to get to the spring. Of course, that means more expense, as the rotary drill is not usual. In valley sites they might just dig down to the natural spring, but not here, for the source is hidden deeply in the bedrock. The rotary is coming next week.

Mr. Purslow asked if I would like to bury a charm beneath the foundation stone, as he knows plenty of folk that do. I must have looked surprised, because he gave a little cough in the back of his throat and said, 'To protect the house, you know, from witchcraft or other ill.'

I pondered this, and said I thought it was probably a good idea. I also remember talk of the wise folk in the market and am just a little intrigued.

'I know a cunning man over beyond Bayston, I could ride you over there in the trap if you would like?'

'But what would he use?' I asked. 'I couldn't bear him to be suggesting we bury a cat under the front step. No animals must perish for this house.'

'No need for that, I am sure,' Mr. Purslow replied, looking sideways at me with a hint of a frown. 'Some folks bury a shoe, or hang a horseshoe over the door, or plant a rowan near the front door, to keep the witches away, you know.' I swear at this point he blushed a little, but he turned away to hide it. So that's it. Tomorrow I am driving over to see this Mr. Callard, of Callard's Dingle.

THURSDAY

I told Henry about the plan I hatched with Mr. Purslow, and although we are both perfectly capable of protecting our own house from enchantment, we decided it couldn't hurt. Who knows, perhaps one day I might write it into one of my stories. Henry will have to content himself with me recounting the tale, as he could not be excused from school today. When he arrived at the house, Mr. Purslow asked me if I have an old shoe I could part with. Apparently, Mr. Callard will need one. I took one of my old shoes from when we were married. That should add extra goodness to it.

We drove then over the Callard's Dingle, and thankfully arrived early. It was such a lovely journey – the beech trees have turned to russet, and the air was beautifully crisp. Autumn is well and truly picking up speed, and when we reached the place, what a surprising house! I say house, but really it is part cave, part stone house, as it is built into the rock face, and emerges from it like a strange hybrid-beast. The door was answered by Mrs. Callard, a very petite mousy-looking lady, wearing a sombre shade of brown. She wore her glasses slightly crooked, as if we had interrupted her in the middle of something. The front door brought us straight into the kitchen. A cat was sleeping peacefully on an old wooden rocking chair by the open fire, and Mrs. Callard had been making bread on the old oak kitchen table, for I could see the dough resting with a square of calico on top. Through an open doorway, I could see the man himself, writing in a large book, and by contrast to his wife's plain appearance, Mr. Callard was almost the exact opposite. His hair was still jet black, although I suspect nature may have been helped, for it had not the faintest trace of silver in it. He wore it long to the collar, and slightly curled.

He wore trousers of deep burgundy red, a shirt of many colours in a diamond pattern, and his coat (which I saw hanging from the hook by the door) was a cloak of midnight blue velvet with silver stars sewn on. He had a slightly faded shabbiness to him, as if this outfit was well worn and not often replaced, but his study was no less entertaining. I suspect it was all carefully stage managed for visiting souls like us.

Mrs. Callard led us straight into his study, and it was like stepping into a page from Agrippa's *Three Books of Occult Philosophy*. The walls were lined with oak shelves. On one side they were busy with glass jars of herbs of every description – each one had a name label that was written in Latin, with a planetary symbol next to it (I remember seeing them there on the page in Agrippa, so I knew what they meant, but I wasn't going to tell anyone there that). On the other side, the shelves were lined with books — big, old looking, and in several languages. I could see Culpeper's *Herbal* in English, *The Greater Key of Solomon* in Latin, and other tomes whose spines were obscured from sight. No doubt, Mr. Callard didn't want folk knowing where he had learned his knowledge.

I kept thinking, I dearly wish Henry was with me as he would have found the whole visit quite a hoot, and fascinating at the same time. At first, Mr. Callard did not realise we were standing in the doorway, and then I realised the man must be quite deaf, as he was quite absorbed in what he was doing, and this was when Mrs. Callard seemed to come into her own. She ushered us into the room and then started speaking with her husband using her fingers to spell out the words, whilst repeating the words in an ordinary voice, which I soon realised was for our benefit. I have to say, I was agape at how well they communicated, clearly having done so for years.

'This is Mrs. Webb of a Lyth Hill,' she said to him, and he nodded his understanding, muttering a faint 'ah' sound. 'She has come for a house blessing. Mr. Purslow here is building her a home.'

He spelled something out to her, and she turned to us and asked, 'Have you brought a shoe with you?' And I nodded, handing over the shoe that I realised I had been gripping to quite tightly. It looked small and shabby in my hand, and I remembered how new and shiny it was on my wedding day.

'Will you wait while it is prepared?' Mrs. Callard asked, and, looking first to Mr. Purslow for his assent, I said, 'Yes, please.'

She took us then back into the kitchen, poured us a steaming cup of tea into two earthenware beakers, and bade us sit on the wooden bench that rested beneath the kitchen table, and wait. She then returned to her husband in the room next door, closing the door tightly. The kit-cat, a pretty little tabby, stretched itself and yawned, showing us its fine fangs and eyeing us momentarily, and then circling itself back down, no doubt relieved to not be a part of my charm. The air was scented with wood smoke, with a background scent of herbs – it was a deep smell, very earth-bound and rich. It was soporific and I felt drowsy. Mr. Purslow and I had not traded a single word between us until this point.

'What do you think he is doing in there?' I whispered, almost wanting to giggle, but I think it was more from nerves than from amusement. Just at that moment, we both looked over at the door, for there came from within the sound of chanting, in two voices. Mr. Purslow was rendered dumb for most of the visit, simply

shrugging at me, and opening his eyes even wider. We could hear Mr. Callard's lower tones, sounding heavy and thick, and her higher ones, enunciating the sounds of the words more clearly. But if you had asked me, I would not have been able to tell you what they said, for it sounded like gibberish. Not quite Latin, but it sounded something akin to a forgotten language, resurrected just for our benefit.

'Eko eko azarack,' they chanted, muffled through the thick oaken door, so they must have been reaching some volume. 'Eko Eko zomelack.' The rest was harder to make out, but after several moments, they seemed to reach some kind of crescendo, after which the room fell silent.

After a few more minutes, the door opened, and with it came a cloud of incense smoke. Mr. and Mrs. Callard both emerged, and he held in his hand a bundle of sack cloth, tied up with a black cord. Mrs. Callard was the first of us to speak.

'Bury this under the front door stoop, on a Saturday between half past eleven and half past twelve and it will protect the property and keep away all Witchcraft,' she instructed Mr. Purslow, and he nodded intently. 'And don't, whatever you do, open the bundle,' she warned.

'How much do I owe?' I stepped forward and asked, reaching for the coins in my purse. I handed over the sum she had asked for, and we left, feeling a strange combination of emotions. Outside the wise man's home was a little collection of local village folk, all waiting to be seen. A few had brought their animals with them – a cow, two goats, and a cage containing a bundle of chickens — all strangely quiet and presumably waiting for a blessing. The group looked like an odd collection of souls, some hopeful and some troubled.

Mr. Purslow and I got back into his trap, and he drove me back to the rooms. I left the bundle with him and arranged to meet him up at the plot tomorrow. I felt sure if I had brought the bundle home myself, Henry would have been sure to undo the knot and take a peek at what is inside, being such an inquisitive fellow.

3RD NOVEMBER, SATURN'S DAY

Well, we did as Mr. Callard instructed. It felt quite ceremonial, especially realising where my front doorstep will be when the house is finished. I feel so many possibilities with this home, so much potential. What books I shall write here, and Henry too. I know he has longed to write more for so long, and sometimes I wonder how it must be for him, having to teach, but seeing me writing up a fictional storm. He's now busy with proofs of *The Everlasting Quest*, and so far, he doesn't seem to have felt the stirring of a new project.

MONDAY

I am sick with worry. Neither Mother nor I have heard from any one of the boys in over a fortnight. To add to my discomfort, the rotary drill is held up. It will be another week.

MONDAY 20TH NOVEMBER

I took a day off from writing to go and watch the rotary drill, and even Henry was excused from school for the morning, for it was to be such an occasion. I always felt we should have hung streamers from the trees.

Mr. Denny was there with his divining rods again, just to make sure that he was certain about where the water runs across the land, as it is an expensive operation and we would not want any mistakes. When we arrived, he was already walking across the plot, following the line of the spring, just where it had been on his last visit.

Once Mr. Denny had confirmed again where the water was, and where they should drill, they set the rotary to work. Thankfully we have not yet had a heavy frost.

The drilling rig was huge, and hard for them to manoeuvre through the gateway at the lane end, but with some toing and froing, and going backwards and forwards, they soon managed it, and got it into position, just where Mr. Denny said. I was surprised, as not only could he show them where the water was, but he could also tell them how deep they would need to go, and they trusted his knowledge to be correct, with only two birch rods to measure it. They do this every day of their working lives, so they must know it to be true.

Then came the anticipation as the drilling commenced, and we held our breaths. It was slow work, and hard, for the men operating the drill were soon glowing with sweat, even though it was a cold day. After a time (that felt like hours but was less to be sure) they gave a shout, and up it came – a plume of fine water, fresh, clear, and it went so high; I was astounded at the speed of it. The men then had to withdraw the rotary drill as quickly as they could while all around heavy rain was falling on them from the earth, and the ground was turning to mud. After a few minutes, the geyser subsided, and the men then set about fitting the pump, and Henry had to return to school. I walked to the Little Wood then, to have some time to myself.

We have water at Spring Cottage. I decided that in honour of discovering and tapping our very own spring of water, and in honour of my own well of writing (or which I expect to do much up here) we shall call the cottage that. My first book written was the Spring of Joy, and I hope to find a publisher for that one too in the next twelvemonth. Perhaps our little home will be its wellspring. And, of course, Mr. Purslow has assured me that we will be moving in during the coming spring.

I also met the Mrs. Thorne who lives close by. I can see us being good neighbours to each other.

MONDAY 27TH NOVEMBER

Word from Dougie at last. He saw Kenneth a week or two ago on the front line, but neither has heard any news of Mervyn. I am praying for his safekeeping, and all I have to give are my words and my love for them.

The Lad Out There

Oh,	Powers	of	Love,	if	still	you	lean
Above	a	world	so	black	with	hate,	
Where	yet—	as	it	has	ever	been—	
The	loving		heart		is	desolate,	
Look	down	upon	the	lad	I	love,	
(My	brave	lad,	tramping	through	the	mire)	—
I	cannot	light	his	welcoming		fire,	
Light	Thou	the	stars	for	him	above!	
Now	nights	are	dark	and	mornings	dim,	
Let	him	in	his	long	watching	know	
That I too count the minutes slow							

And light the lamp of love for him.
 The sight of death, the sleep forlorn,
 The old homesickness vast and dumb —
 Amid these things, so bravely borne,
 Let my long thoughts about him come.
 I see him in the weary file;
 So young he is, so dear to me,
 With ever-ready sympathy
 And wistful eyes and cheerful smile.
 However far he travels on,
 Thought follows, like the willow-wren
 That flies the stormy seas again
 To lands where her delight is gone.
 Whatever he may be or do
 While absent far beyond my call,
 Bring him, the long day's march being through,
 Safe home to me some evenfall.

NOTEBOOK FIVE – 1923

1ST FEBRUARY 1923, BAYSWATER, LONDON

I never fail to feel a sense of inner excitement with a crisp new notebook or a blank page. Writing my diary has been quite intermittent more recently. I choose not to dwell on the bad things, which used to be largely the subject matter of my thoughts. The day-to-day disappointments are not things I want to record. When I am working on a story, my words seem to get used up, leaving me few left over for this place. Today I find myself on another journey, as I so often seem to be when I write in these notebooks, each chosen with great care to carry my thoughts. For stories I need the stillness to allow the detail to coalesce, while movement frees my own introspection. I wonder what it is about travelling that releases my flow of reflective words so well. I am on my way to Spring Cottage for a week, although this time Henry has had to remain in town as he is teaching an important pupil now. I must not complain, as it does help with the flow of our income, which has been a trickle in recent months, even though four of my books are now in the world. And I must travel. I find it so difficult to write properly in town. I miss the hours in the meadow, or the time spent in the Little Wood. Kensington Gardens is just too clipped, too perfect, too tamed, and too populated for me to get the deep connection I need to allow the stream of words. I must travel home for the sake of everything — for the work, and for my own sanity.

I will return to Henry on Sunday next, in time to join him in Hampstead at the Headmaster's dinner on Monday, and to join Caradoc Evans for a literary gathering in Bloomsbury on Wednesday. I found the London literary gatherings so intimidating at first, they are so different to the gatherings we used to have at the Corner House, and Henry prefers the company of the people from King Alfred's School, so I cannot prevail on him to go with me. I am a brown sparrow in a room full of peacocks. But Caradoc makes it easier for me, and we have fun with each other. Thank goodness for Caradoc! We 'met' when he reviewed 'The Golden Arrow', and I sent him eggs from our hens as a thank you. I didn't meet him until we moved to London, and as soon as I knew we were on our way, I wrote to him and Rebecca West and told them both that I was coming. Caradoc wrote back straightaway, and he took it upon himself to take me to as many literary events as he could, and we have now fallen into a fast friendship. He is the only person in London who always insists on calling me Gladys. He says it feels more like home to him, and he loves the roll of the vowels off his tongue far more than Mary. And besides, he himself is no stranger to going by one's middle name instead of the first. Caradoc sounds more suited to him than David.

4TH FEBRUARY

I have been invited to Anerley today to attend Mr. de la Mare's writers' gathering. I am most excited and must get ready. I did ask Henry to come with me, but he did not seem half so interested as I thought he would. I am taking one of my poems from last year with me, just in case we are expected to share something

To a Blackbird Singing in London, January 1922

Sing on, dear bird!

Sing on, dear bird! Bring the old rapturous pain,

In this great town, where I no welcome find.

Show me the murmuring forest in your mind,

And April's fragile cups, brimful of rain.
O sing me far away, that I may hear
The voice of grass, and, weeping, may be blind
To slights and lies and friends that prove unkind.
Sing till my soul dissolves into a tear,
Glimmering within a chaliced daffodil.
So, when the stately sun with burning breath
Absorbs my being, I'll dream that he is Death,
Great Death, the undisdainful. By his will
No more unlovely, haunting all things fair,
I'll seek some kinder life in the golden air.

5TH FEBRUARY

Anerley did not disappoint, although the journey across town on the underground railway was long and tedious, and then I had to catch a train from Charing Cross. The conversations were most engaging, and I feel I have made some new friends. James Barrie's secretary, Lady Cynthia Asquith, was there, and she was particularly welcoming. She is considering editing some anthologies and said that she might like to include my work, if I can write some more short stories.

9TH FEBRUARY 1923 BAYSWATER, LONDON

Constable has written to tell me that while my books sold tolerably well, it wasn't enough to keep *The Golden Arrow* and *Seven for a Secret* in print, so now my first two are hanging in limbo. Sales on *The House in Dormer Forest* and *Seven for a Secret* are also not as much as I had hoped. Mr. Constable suggests that if the English public are ever to take my work really seriously, I must mix in these writerly circles, because it will bring work – reviews, short stories in anthologies – these people seem to hold the keys to the doors that open up London society and, ultimately, the publishing world. Clearly, I came to London with a lot to learn, and I am learning as fast as I can. Back in the safety of Shropshire I must confess I assumed that the writer wrote the books, and then the publisher took care of everything else. How little I knew then! And the literary men seem altogether gentler than the women – they at least ask me about my work and listen with interest.

Running two households on Henry's school salary and my meagre allowance means we barely get by, and to be honest, the salary is not high. Although I could ask Mother for help, she feels entitled to ask questions and judge my life when I do. I wrote to her last week asking for an advance to cover an unexpected household bill, and the letter I got back sent me into paroxysms of despair. It was all about how I should be able to manage a budget at my age, and what was I spending my allowance on anyway? And the question implied but never spoken was 'doesn't that husband of yours contribute enough to the household income?' as if it made him less manly to need my contribution to the household costs. And, if that wasn't enough, she then started asking me questions that no polite woman should ask, about how much I spend and on what. She doesn't understand how the simplest things in London cost more than they do elsewhere, that costs have been so high since the war, and we cannot supplement our income by growing our own produce in Bayswater. We are living in two rooms with no garden, and we are not in Shropshire often enough to keep the vegetable garden growing there. Last time I went home everything was dry and shrivelled from lack of attention. We spent the whole of last Easter digging through the vegetable beds and weeding, but they need regular work. Of course, I could pay Mr. Thorne a small

amount to come and water and tend to the garden, but then that is another drain on an already diminished budget. I have been cutting out my typed copies of poems and sending them out, but so far nothing.

13TH FEBRUARY 1923 BAYSWATER, LONDON

I am taunted by the tantalising reflections of sunsets when I go into the centre of town – on the windows of the larger buildings, or colour leaked into the smoke from the chimneys, or splashed across the under feathers of a herring gull flying overhead, thrown inland by storms at sea. I cannot quite get used to the lack of horizon. I must try to remember to look up, at least. At ground level I may not be able to see the wide-open views that I love in Shropshire, but when I remember to turn my gaze upwards, there is that same open sky, even if it is enshrouded in dove grey during winter. On clear days, it remains the same mystic hyacinth blue that I can see from Lyth Hill.

I see deprivation all around me; so many men came back from France broken, and in pieces. And it feels so personal when our poor Mervyn came back so horribly injured. Mother says that although his wounds healed, he is so self-conscious about his face – such a horrific injury, a shot to the jaw – and now he will not leave the house. Poverty and need everywhere we look — there are people with lives far harder than ours, that when the money does come in, I can't resist shining a light for the odd family here and there. Of course, I don't tell Mother that. I wonder if I could have done more with my writing during the war. I always tried to make my work a healing force, for good, to bring people back into a sacred connection with the earth again. But some of the conversations in the drawing rooms of Bloomsbury, or at the gatherings at Anerley, listening to the other writers and what they did with their work, and their commitment to highlighting the need for change, I wonder if I shouldn't have done more to stress the awfulness of what our men were living through in France? The letters that Kenneth and Douglas used to write to me sent me to despair for the awful things that were happening. Even with the censorship, I knew them well enough to read between the lines and get to the truth underneath. I did the only thing I felt I could at the time, and shared my fictional Salopia, hoping that the beauty of nature would bring people healing and respite, just as it had for me.

I burned Mother's last letter immediately and went and lay on the grass beneath an oak I know in Kensington Gardens, which only attracted the stares of everyone perambulating around the park. Women don't behave like that in London, clearly, particularly in winter. One may picnic on the grass with a blanket in summer if one is a child, but even then, their nannies are expected to sit on a bench or a deck chair, and never to sprawl out on the grass with no mackintosh square. I cannot be myself here (or indeed anywhere but Lyth Hill). I must wear tidy city clothes that are not faded and patched, which I fail miserably at daily. I must not have mud on my shoes, and I must conform to what polite London ladies should do, or what the wife of a schoolmaster should do, or what a mature woman should be able to manage by my age, or indeed what a literary person should do. These 'shoulds' are exhausting, and all I really want is my home of light and colour, and the Little Wood, where nobody cares if I sink down in my skirts among the meadow grass and sit for hours while I am visiting faerie. At least I know I will be there later today.

19TH FEBRUARY 1923, LYTH HILL

My head is so full of worries all the time, and yet I must rein it all back in and concentrate on the work. It is the work that must be my first concern, not household bills and running costs. I wish Henry could share in this worry, but he is so busy with school that he doesn't care about the running of the household, and I don't always think he notices how shabby we have become.

After my last bout of illness, the doctors were adamant that a change of scene was what I needed, but I am not sure if London was what they had in mind. And I could tell that boredom was creeping in around Henry's edges, and he was longing for a change. I would have been happy to stay in the simple existence we had forever without end, but he had started to drift off in his mind even before we left. He would be distracted, not really present when I was talking to him about our latest read that week. And he so clearly loves it in London. While I am a dull brown country bird, he is a duck in water.

25TH FEBRUARY, 1923, BAYSWATER, LONDON

A rather brutal review in the Standard last week for *Seven for a Secret*. The reviewer clearly did not see my point and wrote that it was writing of a kind she had read a million times before, provincial and dull, and then went on to praise the Hogarth Press writers very well indeed. I have dropped into bad weather as a consequence and cannot seem to pull myself out. See what a twisted world she pulled me into. Down into the depths, plunging, no stop for breath. Bad writer am I? And yet I can still meet Joyce with his complex, unhyphenated compound words. There is a beauty in Joyce, but I still fail to break the surface, mostly. I think I am trying to make things too hard for myself. I need to bring simplicity back to the fore, as it is everything. And yet the level of simplicity I function at these days is not the level I used to function at. So why am I afraid? I am clearly moving along and learning each day, in ways that the younger me who attended Miss Lory's gatherings at the Corner House could never have imagined. Perhaps I am worried that these changes and this growth will always take me further away from Henry. When we met, it was he who was the writer, and I was the 'reclusive lady poet' whom they told him about, largely keeping my scribbles to herself, and I always imagined that the literary success would be his, especially when *Silences* showed such revolutionary zeal, such potential. But lately his world is mostly taken up with school, and so little of his attention is spent on me, or the things we used to discuss. Even at weekends he is more inclined to be out on social calls than sitting at his desk and writing. I worry that it must be hard for him, seeing me growing in ways that neither of us could imagine in the early days. Although I am not yet where I want to be, I can see the destination ahead of me, glowing on the horizon, and I wonder how that makes him feel? The notices in the press, for good or ill, should be his, not mine. And although he always used to tell me it did not matter to him, as we are both one and the same, still a part of me wonders. The people I have met in London, like Caradoc and Mrs. West, Mr. de la Mare and Robert Lynd, should be people Henry mixes with, and yet he seldom comes with me to events. It is as if that was another Henry, and I am another me.

This morning was hushed. Unusual for London. Daylight was hindered by a thick layer of grey cloud, and all the sounds were muted, even on Bayswater. Only the insistent singing of the birds indicated that the day was in full swing, although the people wrapped up tightly in wool to fend off the biting cold may have wished it wasn't so.

1ST MARCH

A few days away, and I have been bathing in birdsong and busy reading my way through a huge stack of horticultural and natural history texts, not for the sake of gaining knowledge, but in order to review them. I am drawn by the illustrations more than anything, and although they are not the same as meeting the species in person, they are faithfully rendered on the page.

10TH MARCH 1923, BAYSWATER, LONDON

The crisp rustle of daffodils as they wave their golden heads in Hyde Park and Kensington Gardens, while crocuses colour the grass. Spring comes earlier in the city. Perhaps it is the flooding of light – gas lamps, electric lamps, all jostling to be the brightest. Or perhaps it is the fug of the diesel fumes from the omnibuses that seem to keep up a constant stream on each road through the city. Or the collective warmth of all those bodies, walking around in groups. I think I may be the only person on this city that longs for solitude, as everywhere I go there are crowds. Even in the park, the sounds of nature are overlaid with the dull roar of engines, or the clattering of carriages. In fact, the only place I have managed to find relative peace is on the top deck of the omnibus when it is raining. Most city dwellers shun the open air in the rain, except those, like me, who are not bothered by their appearance becoming a little sad. I must look like a child at the funfair, as I am then able to sit right at the front and watch the sights and sounds of London in the rain, unbridled and unhindered by this constant need to keep up appearances. But the bright city also has a darker edge. Shop windows are full of goods of every colour, particularly on Oxford Street. Those giant department stores lit up like a town by themselves, with their ever-changing window displays. Nothing stays the same for more than a few days at a time. It is so different from the shop windows in Shrewsbury. Back at home when I was younger, most of us would buy a new dress (or rather the fabric for one) if our old dress wore out, or if there was a special occasion coming, but here, there is a drive to have new things each week, whenever the fashions change. It is as if people display their wealth by how many different clothes they own, but it appears so shallow to me. As Baudelaire wrote – the essence of this ‘modernity’ is ‘the transient, the fleeting, the contingent’, but contingent on what? And how does one measure one’s worth in material things?

This move towards the mechanical can only bring trouble. We are all part of a machine – a bad one – and we are worshipping the wrong gods. It is not man that should be hailed as the divine creator of all that is around us. In the city, people have all but forgotten Nature as the divine source of all things. Simmel wrote that there is a threat to independence in living in the city, a threat to man’s integrity and independence, and I think he was right. When mankind loses his individuality by getting swallowed up in the crowd, what happens then? And while these temples of want tell us that every household must have all of these shining goods made of the latest Bakelite, what of the soul? Where does the soul worship, when the body is so enslaved?

I must return to the gardens, to the simplicity of Lyth Hill. But what of Henry? Has he forgotten all that he wrote before? He says he still believes that, but, ‘We have to move with the times, old girl, and just enjoy the opportunities while we are here.’

And he is right, I know he is right. But I also need to escape this. The buildings are so tall I can barely see further than ten feet in front of me.

25TH MARCH 1923, BAYSWATER, LONDON

I was anticipating a quiet birthday, with Henry going off to school as usual, but he had a surprise for me. He had taken a day from school, so that we might spend it together. What a wonderful thing! Henry told me to put on my best hat and dress (which is still a poor daggly thing) for he was taking me out. He took me to the Lyon's Corner House in Piccadilly as a 'special treat' and it was quite overwhelming. They are open twenty-four hours per day (who would take tea in the middle of the night?) and I have never seen so many people in one tearoom, nor so many kinds of cake and pastry on display. The decoration inside is in the latest style from France – all chrome and stainless steel, straight lines, glass and an explosion of clashing colours in the drapes and the fabrics on the chairs. They do at least show flowers in the patterns, but they are stylised and not in any way realistically shown. I would not normally be somewhere like this on my own, and I tried not to look like I was overwhelmed by all that luxury, and Henry looked so excited and so hopeful, so keen to please me, that I wore my best smile and, I must confess, a tear or two in my eye. It has felt like so long since we did anything together. We talked like before, of books and ideas and of the future – our future, and while I could see that we don't always agree as we did before, as we left the Corner House he tucked my arm in his, and kissed me full on the mouth. He laughed at my expression (as he is never so demonstrative in public). Then we went for a walk by the river and watched the tugboats and the barges chugging along. The Thames is almost as busy as the road bridges that cross over her, but it was nice to find a seat in the sunshine and just sit for a while watching it all going on around us. The river is a great beast curling its way through the city. In Oxford they call her the Isis, which engenders a softer, more feminine spirit, but here in London she is darker, more primeval, and ready to claim a soul or two. We sat in silence for a while, and then we unfurled, momentarily.

'Who would have thought, eh?' Henry said to me, 'that you and I would be sitting here by the Thames one day!'

I took a deep breath, and asked: 'Don't you ever miss home?'

'Sometimes, to be sure,' he said, 'but this is our home now, isn't it? And Lyth Hill is still waiting. You know you can go there whenever you want, I don't mind. I can take my meals at school while you are away.'

I smiled at him, but inside I felt so lonely. I wanted him to say he will go home with me, and not that I can go alone whenever I want to. I know I will need to go more often now as I have started work on growing a new story in my mind. The seeds are planted, and I am just allowing it to germinate now. It will need careful tending. When I took in my last review, Martin Armstrong at *The Spectator* told me he believes my best work is still to come. I was taken aback when he said it. At first it stung, but then I decided it was in fact a compliment, as he believes I will write better things. I am determined that the next book will demonstrate that faith was worthwhile, so it must be nurtured so carefully, and well, like the most delicate of flowers. I also want it to capture something of my undying love – for Henry, for my purple hills, for Father.

13TH APRIL, BAYSWATER

Caradoc has invited me to come to the P.E.N. Club next Tuesday, and we arranged to meet today outside the Garrick Club. We went to a tearoom nearby. It was raining outside, so the windows had all steamed up inside, and we were cocooned from the busy street outside. It was remarkably quiet inside. Just us and a stern looking lady in a rather ornate hat with feathers sitting tall on top, who sat silently with her young companion, who was clearly listening in to our conversation, but trying not to appear so. This only added to Caradoc's sense of naughtiness, I think. He does like to play up to an audience. He sat stirring three sugars into his strong milky tea, as the young lady's eyes grew wider and wider with each spoonful, and told me how he thinks the Bloomsbury writers are 'third rate women novelists' while I badly suppressed a laugh by blowing the steam off my own cup, served just how I like it without milk or sugar. He saw my amusement, as well as the companion's shock, and stirred in a fourth sugar, 'For good measure,' he said, 'it is working men's tea, and it is the only time you will ever see me conceding to the influence of my roots in the valleys,' rolling his 'Rs' and extending his vowels for greater emphasis. He then spent the next hour telling me all the things I should look out for when in Bloomsbury.

TUESDAY 17TH APRIL, BAYSWATER

Sure enough, all of Caradoc's predictions were correct. I must learn to control my facial expressions better at future events.

20TH APRIL, 1923, LONDON

Tea with Rebecca West today at her apartments. We had such a wonderful talk about Graves' disease. Her mother suffers from it too, and she was interested to know how I have been treated and what was helpful, or not. We took tea indoors, and then a little turn around the gated garden outside her building. It is very grand. I know the press print such scandalous stories about her, but I find her to be very kind, and generous with her thoughts on writing. And much kinder than the others. I look forward to our meeting further.

A letter came from Minoni today. She is soon to be moving to St. Leonard's to be nearer to her sister. I do hope she will be happy there. Perhaps once she is settled, I will go and visit.

23RD APRIL 1923, BAYSWATER, LONDON

The sun is warmer this morning, but there is a faint trail of mist when I breathe. The blackthorn blossom in the park has all but disappeared, leaving a few faint tiny flowers between the skeletal fronds and the leaves. On days like this I miss the beech trees lining the lane up Lyth Hill, although being so high up they will be a week or to behind us here. They open with such a joyful, vibrant green, the colour of life force. There is nothing quite like them. They beat the bounds of home, for it will always be home, lining the lane with their tall, soothing presence. In the park here in Bayswater, the pathways are littered with white blossom petals, between the marks of horseshoes, bicycle tyres and dog paws.

1ST MAY 1923, BAYSWATER, LONDON

April was spent busy reviewing and nurturing my ideas, and although I have not yet put pen to paper, it is absorbing all of my attention. The main characters are going through a process of introducing themselves to me, and are keeping me busy, as is the cast of other people that will dance around them.

At home they will be bringing in the May, but of course, here there is no such thing. Londoners go about their daily bustle, just like any other day, and don't seem to notice that nature has seasons that change. I had to go and really hunt for some hawthorn, instead of just stepping out into the lane at Rose Cottage, or out into the garden on Lyth Hill. In the end, I had to go all the way to Hampstead Heath before I could find any, which means I had to take the dreaded underground railway all the way from Bayswater. I prefer the omnibuses as at least I can be up in the open air, but the journey would take too long that way. The underground is so full of soot; I could barely breathe and had to keep a handkerchief near my mouth for most of the journey. How Henry manages it twice each day, all the way to Golders Green and back, I will never know.

As it happened, going to the Heath meant that I could drop off Henry's mackintosh coat for him; for I felt sure the rain would come in before he came home, and I would hate him to get caught in a downpour. Rain never bothers me, in fact, I barely seem to notice it when I am out walking, but Henry always fusses if he gets damp clothes and hair. I was so relieved when we received that anonymous donation through Lady Cynthia Asquith last year. One hundred pounds! Such a generous amount of money, and of course I knew exactly what I needed to do with it. A wool lined mackintosh for Henry and a fortnight by the seaside for poor James Packham and his family. I am sure it did his consumption the world of good, and I know Henry said I was a fool when James's family sold the gifts I gave them, but at least I know I have helped a boy create a wonderful memory. If only I had more to give them. All of the poor children whose lives are so blighted by awfulness.

Ted, who was on duty at the school gate today, clearly thought I was soft when I explained, and I must have looked a fright, for I had walked up from the bottom of the heath at Belsize Park, up through the woods past the viaduct and over into the extension. And of course I got so distracted for a while by the pond, as it is so unusually peaceful there. The pond is three times ringed about, as if it has been three times put in a spell. First there is the ring of oaks and larches, willows, ollern trees and beeches, solemn and strong, to keep the world out. Then there is the ring of rushes, sighing thinly, brittle and sparse, but enough, with their long, trembling shadows, to keep the spells in. And of course, these are interspersed with yellow flags reaching up to the sun. Then there is the ring of lilies that bring such contentment. Perhaps when the weather is a little warmer, I will swim there.

It took me a good while to get to the school gates, as I was looking for the hawthorn as I went, and I found a good hedgeful up by the upper pond. This meant that by the time I arrived I had an arm full of hawthorn on one side, and the arm full of mackintosh on the other, and no free hands.

All of this must have paid havoc with my appearance. I wondered why Ted had looked so puzzled, looking at me with his head slightly to one side, and his eyes wide, as we waited for Henry, until a message came back saying that he was teaching for the next three hours full, and would I mind seeing him back at home. Ted

finally remembered he may be perceived as impolite with his staring, and he said, 'Right you are, Mrs. Webb. I'll see that he gets it.'

I wondered why he was staring so and then just as I got back onto the underground carriage I caught sight of myself in the window. My hair, which was so tidy when I left Bayswater, was making a bid for freedom, and my bonnet had slid to one side. Looking down at myself, my shoes were caked in thick London clay-mud, and my patched and worn skirts were likewise coated in a layer several inches high. Poor Ted. I wonder he kept a straight face at all seeing me standing there in front of him. Most of the time I forget to look in the mirror, and I am always struck by ladies dressed up in the latest outfits, who wander along the busy street with their heads pointing to the left or right, and not straight ahead, as mesmerised as Narcissus gazing into the pool as they see themselves reflected in the shop windows.

Although Henry had said he would see me at home, he is late again this evening. It is now past eight, and there is no sign of his lovely face. I wonder if he has stayed to have dinner at King Alfred's again. I would have thought he would have said, but then he doesn't always remember to tell me. I do try not to worry, but my stomach flutters so when he is away. And last night we argued bitterly about his staying away so often. In the end I said I thought we should move closer to the school, to Hampstead perhaps. Then I could walk and write, and it would give him more time at home and less spent on the underground. I rather like Hampstead, and there are plenty of creative people there for us to get to know. I also wonder if being closer to the Heath would help me with this crushing hiraeth that calls me back home all the time. And Hampstead is only one line down to Euston for when we travel home for weekends and holidays. Henry was surprisingly reluctant at first. I wonder why? But eventually he conceded and said I could start to look.

First thing tomorrow I shall write to St. John Adcock, Edwin Pugh, Caradoc Evans and everyone else I know to see if they know of anywhere we might rent. It doesn't have to be grand, since our budget is always so meagre.

Thoughts of the new book continue. It is not quite there yet, but they are keeping me occupied. Perhaps a few days at home on the hill will loosen the bonds and allow the words to come?

MAY 10TH, 1923, BAYSWATER, LONDON

Edwin, whom I now affectionately know as Ned, sent me a copy of *The Bookman* today and I was completely bowled over. In it he had reviewed *Seven for a Secret* and said I was 'one of the greatest novelists of my genre'. I didn't know what to say, and it took me several hours to compose a dignified thank you letter that did not seem to gush too much. He also described me as a 'first-class writer'. There would be nothing more to say if I really was a first-class writer. But he, like many people, fills up the gaps in one's work out of his own imagination, which is so nice for the writer.

We have had a bit of luck with the Hampstead move, also thanks to our good friends. We have found a small cottage on the Grove, and it is just perfect, although rather smaller than we had anticipated. Catherine Carswell was a previous tenant, and the owner tells me she was visited by David Lawrence, no less. I take that to

be a good omen. Also, it is placed just perfectly for Henry to walk across the Heath to school when the weather is fine enough, and for me to walk over and meet him from school again. And of course, we can reach the underground station on the corner of Heath Street within just a few minutes if we need to go into town.

The only cloud on my horizon is that Henry has said we must get a tenant at Spring Cottage – we cannot cover the cost of both homes without income from somewhere else. Mr. Morris had written to ask if we would consider letting, as he knew a young couple who were looking – they are lately married and expecting a baby. Henry is right, and for the couple (Ethel and Barney Jenks) to arrive just at the right time, I am sure it is the right course of action. But I cannot help feeling a little unsettled at the thought of someone living in our home.

Midges are starting to congregate over the paths through the park and tucked away beneath the bird song and the noise of the traffic is the chirping of chicks in a nest hidden away in a hedge. Even in the centre of the city, the faint signs of new life are present. Ivy and the other evergreens now look tired and dusty from keeping the green through winter. Sunlight flickers on the surface of the Serpentine, and ghost clouds swirl and drift on the surface.

My seedling is coming along quite nicely. This one feels stronger and fuller than any of the others before, and yet I know I need to go home to begin writing this one, which means more time away from Henry, and I don't know how I shall achieve this with Spring Cottage let to tenants. But it must be done.

12TH MAY 1923, HAMPSTEAD, LONDON

A grey, overcast day with the wind rustling the oak leaves. Things have been so busy, organising the move has taken up my every waking minute and between that and working on a review for *The Spectator*, I have barely had time to think about the book. *The Spectator* has sent me another nature book, and while I always enjoy reading them, I wish they would allow me to branch out a little – a novel here, a volume of poetry there.

There seemed to be so much planning to do and I hate practical things, but Henry was so busy with the end of the school year, and we wanted to make sure we moved in the holidays so as not to disrupt his life. As it happened, he has picked up private tuition, which is wonderful as it means we have extra income, and he does seem to prefer individual tuition to classroom work. But that also meant that he was often not around if I needed to ask his opinion of things. I am sure he will soon let me know if something is not to his liking.

However, time away from my brooding over Prudence and Kester (at least, I think it is Kester) has done them good. It's as if they have been growing in the background without my knowledge. Sometimes seedlings need time alone to grow, without prodding. I am almost ready.

THURSDAY 24TH MAY, WESTON-SUPER-MARE

My first visit since we left here. I spent all day last Saturday looking for a room, and had almost thought I would have to beg Mr. Luce for a spare bed, but managed to find an inexpensive single in the town. Henry stayed with his mother. I am never invited there, not even for a meal, and she even resented my presence in Weston-

Super-Mare. I left Henry free to her without troubling them at all. I wouldn't have come at all, but it feels so lonely in the house by oneself, especially if the neighbours happen to be away.

I particularly wanted to see Mr. Luce, but as I didn't have his letter with me, I had to call in at Smith's for his address. I asked Mr. W. Best for it, (at least I think it was W. Best, though he looked a good deal younger when we lived in Weston-Super-Mare!) When I called round to see Mr. Luce on Monday, I was much disappointed to not be able to see him, as he was unwell. I pleaded with the housekeeper to allow me to speak to him from the landing, but alas, she was firm. Instead I wrote him a letter and left it at the front door.

One day I walked along Brean Down to the fort at the end, and found a white rock rose – very rare. I also went to Sand Bay.

As it happens, it has been a most solitary visit. I saw Henry today for the first time since we arrived last Saturday, and he said he had also called in to see Mr. Luce — I didn't know he had since I have seen very little of him and his in Weston-Super-Mare. Perhaps next time I will go to Chester or Spring Cottage instead.

27TH MAY 1923, HAMPSTEAD, LONDON

A warm day, such a contrast to the last few. We should be more like the weather – instead of carrying cares from one day to the next, why don't we wake up with a completely fresh countenance?

Henry seems to have all but given up his literary work. It would suit his health far better to do reviewing work, and then he would be happier. He does too much at school and comes home worn out. I had hoped that by coming to London he would gradually have got congenial work and been able to give up teaching. I don't mean that teaching is not congenial: only it is too tiring.

I went and met several of the other teachers' wives for luncheon today in Golders Green to try on the life of a simple housewife for size. But I don't fit well with them either and I should have known how it would go. I have seen this conversation many times before. To begin with, they all have children, and spend a lot of time discussing how well their sons are doing with their grades, or whom their daughters are at school with, and then when they turn to me and ask, 'Do you have children, Mrs. Webb?'

And, as always, my negative response is met with looks that range from pity to surprise, and the conversation stutters to a halt. I can see they are desperate to ask me why, and of course that would never be polite, so they are hoping I will confess, unprompted. I would have loved a baby. I would have loved lots of babies. But since nature has not deemed fit to bless us in that way, and I do not encourage delving in that particular private area, I generally purse my lips and look down at my tea, at which they give a silent 'oh,' with a sidelong glance to each other, and then the topic is changed, after a pause that is a fraction too long. The fact that I work throws them rather – household concerns do not really inspire me. Today, following an earnest lunch-time discussion about who was doing what and with whom, and who has the best house staff, and an ever more intense discussion over tea afterwards about the latest fashions, and what dinner needed to be cooked before their husbands got home from school, I needed to get away. I was yearning to visit Kester on the Heath. There

were too many other people's words in my head. I crept away and walked up past King Alfred's School to the Golders Hill Park and then out into the wood.

There is a bench I know at the top of the hill where the rosebay willow herb grows tall around, and the crickets whirr in the meadow grass. The leaves sway in the breeze and emperor butterflies flit from cow parsley bouquet to blackberry blossom. A single large peacock-blue dragonfly hovers above the meadow grass. Magpies chase each other across the oak trees. One could almost imagine one was at home on Lyth Hill, above Bomere, except that the view is over the city, and not the Shropshire Hills. I almost think if I close my eyes, I will open them on the Little Wood, the Long Mynd and the Devil's Chair.

I need to step away from the chatter to be able to hear Prudence and Kester speaking clearly. I need my eyes wide open on the world, and to fix my attention on a detail — the wind blowing through the leaves, or a gushing brook, or clouds forming, growing and dispersing overhead. I must write in the morning when I have the energy, and rest or read in the afternoon when I don't. I need my hammock back in the garden at home.

I tried to lie in the grass beneath a tree in Hyde Park, but the people walking by did stare so, and I found it so difficult to switch off from their world and into mine. I clearly need more peace than I can find underneath that Kensington tree. The Heath is better, since it is big enough to get further away from the sounds of the city and away from the dreaded crowd, but they are still there, thrumming beneath the sounds of nature, even in the most remote corner of the place. The wind in the trees on the Heath today sounded somewhat akin to the waves rushing in against a shoreline. There was a high tide in the treetops following the brief but heavy thunderstorm this morning. The rain left as quickly as it started, and the ground was left dry and hard again, but the wind remained high up in the canopy. A pure white butterfly was flitting from place to place, alighting first on the blades of meadow grass, and then the blanket I was sitting on. Its wings pulsed slowly for a few seconds, open and closed. Then it took flight once more. Willow fronds were moving in the breeze, tickling my arm, lifting then falling, like my own consciousness. My thoughts were blessedly silent for once, as I had switched off that irritating inner dialogue that chatters on incessantly. There were no thoughts, only what was present in front of me. I took a deep breath, and felt a surge of excitement at having managed to replicate a piece of Salopia in London, if only for a few brief moments.

Strange how I find trees so necessary here in London. I think if there is such a thing as future lives, I would like to return as a willow tree, sitting restfully by a brook or a pool, my branches swaying gently in time with the breeze. I think willow trees must be poets at their core. All that time for quiet contemplation in nature, with only the sound of the water and the breeze and the birds.

28TH MAY 1923, HAMPSTEAD, LONDON.

I have booked a train home for tomorrow on a whim, and I shall be staying at the Morrisises. It will give me a chance to go to Spring Cottage and meet Barney and Ethel Jenks and their little daughter, Mabel, who arrived safely a fortnight hence. (While I am there, I might see if time in the Little Wood will help with my writing.)

In town to meet with Miss May Sinclair, a new friend I met at the P.E.N. Club last week. I came in early so that I could spend some time in the parks and gardens of Bloomsbury first, exploring new city vistas to connect with the nature of the city. I must learn how to be a town mouse if I am to survive here, and I must not lose Henry to the allure of the city. So I am sitting in Russell Square Gardens on a bench beneath the London plane trees, since that is what city-dwelling ladies do – they do not sprawl out on the grass, getting their skirts stained green and allowing their hair to become all wispy and untidy. Sitting under the cool green embrace of the plane trees, Russell Square almost feels like a wood, with beds of blooming salvia and tulips. Green branches swinging down like arms reaching to the earth, sighing in the breeze, glistening in sunlight, peaceful in the deepest silence of sleep still. The wind lifts its fingers through the branches again, losing a handful of leaves that drift towards the ground, where an early layer of gold and yellow litters the grass. It gives me a momentary peace.

I must walk on grass to keep myself grounded. But then when the weather is inclement, mounds of earth cling to the bottom of my shoes, and scatter the floorboards of polite society, bringing the outside in. Then I am torn between admitting it was me that let the earth in, or just pretending I have not noticed anything untoward. I need to not care one jot whose floor I am trailing piles of dirt onto.

I am wondering how on earth I will find a publisher for Prudence and Kester when my first two are now out of print. Henry told me it could only be good for my career being in the centre of things in London.

Henry leaves home with a bounce in his step as he walks down the garden path in the mornings, tipping his hat at Mrs. White next door. I look out on him from the upstairs window without him knowing. I watch him until he disappears from sight, whistling to himself. But then, by the end of the day, the bounce has left him as he walks back towards the Grove.

29TH MAY, THE GROVE

I woke this morning with a rush of cares in my mind. Today I have a knot beneath my left shoulder blade, which hurts when I breathe. Maybe spending time with Kester and Prudence will allow me to capture something of what Henry and I had, and I hope we will have again. Maybe, if I capture us in them, they will remind him that he was once a noble lover.

Must rush to catch my train.

4TH JUNE 1923, SHROPSHIRE

An overcast day. The air is damp with rain that has not yet come, and the heavy white blossom edging the fields has vanished overnight. The smell of the blossom is replaced with the smell of the green. Tendrils of fine, invisible web drift from the hedges across my face, and I find myself clasping at things which may not be there. Cuckoo spit on the meadow grass. It is the time between the fading of the hawthorn, and the blooming of the elderflower – a momentary pause, a breath in between, and I wish I could come home more often. Although the Morrisies have been our fast friends for many years now, being in someone else's house does not allow me

the freedom to come and go as I wish, for I must be mindful of my hosts. I wish we hadn't let the cottage. Although the Jenks are lovely people, seeing their things in the place of ours feels wrong.

6TH JUNE, THE GROVE, HAMPSTEAD

Caradoc has introduced me to several people who have asked me to send them the odd review. Arthur St. John Adcock and Robert Lynn have already hinted that there may be more for me. If I can get more regular work reviewing, then perhaps people will get used to seeing my name in print, purchase more books, and give us some much-needed income. Then perhaps I could also write them short stories for publication, and I would not be this writer whom no one has heard of. And then I can find a publisher who will understand and give this obscure woman a chance.

JUNE 13TH, 1923, HAMPSTEAD, LONDON.

Be careful what you wish for, Gladys. Disaster at home. The Jenks are in trouble, and so busy with the baby that they are unable to pay the rent. What a dilemma! Of course, I should be stern and tell them they must leave, but I feel so sad for them, and want to try and help if I can. Henry is considering what we should do. I keep receiving letters telling me my accounts are overdue, and I worry about money, although Henry at least is not likely to starve. He takes most of his meals at school, so he does not seem to notice the bare cupboards at home, and although I never needed much food to get by, besides tea with bread and scrape, even I find it dull. In the evening, when Henry is home, I can generally steal a few hours of writing while he studies or plans his classes for the next week. Often, he is out, so I can be working all day and all evening and never notice the passage of time, except by remembering to glance at the clock after dark when he should have been home. When he returns, his face is so tightly closed these days, and he looks wilted. Weekends bring him a fraction more creative energy, but mostly he prefers to spend time at school or with his tutoring students, and I must travel home to Salop at weekends in order to give myself enough fuel to keep writing in the week. Perhaps I should travel during the week instead, if I time it carefully so I don't miss the P.E.N. Club events and the gatherings at Anerley.

I get so absorbed in Kester, I forget that the Henry I have now is not quite like him anymore, and sadness creeps in at the edges. I worry for Henry and myself, and Mother. I worry for the fate of Spring Cottage, although I would rather die than lose it. I wish we could have filled it with children. I miss the absolute certainty we had then that what we were doing was right for us.

Then we would talk of what book we should seek out next and compare notes on what we both thought of it, and how we might have written it differently if it was our book. Most days I would come back from the library with new volumes – the latest fiction from London that was making waves, according to *The Bookman* or *The Spectator*, or the well-loved and well-worn classics that wrapped us up in their covers again. Sometimes it was simply us absorbed in each other. Then, I delighted him and made him breathless when we were together. Now, it happens less and less.

I remember how Father used to call me his precious bane when I was small, and it was too knotty a concept for my head to understand at the time. How could I be both dear to him and a source of distress? But

the grown up me knows it all too well, now I have a precious bane of my own. I have decided that is what the new book will be called. Ned doesn't like it as a title, he says it is too unclear, but Rebecca West and Caradoc both liked it when I asked them, so we are three against one.

I am learning, I am growing. I travel home each weekend, and my characters, Prudence and Kester, meet me at the station without fail. We walk up the hill together, and they clutch at my skirts like children, willing me to sit down with them, almost before I can put my bag down and remove my hat. They are loud, and determined, and I must give in to them. Prudence's brother Gideon is most vociferous and bullying, while I am delighting in also weaving in so much magic and writing Mr. Callard in. He has been knocking at the door in my mind asking to be written ever since I heard the tales of him from the women in the market, long before I met him in person. We are making progress, and Kester allows me to return to the Henry of old, if only when I am in Salop. Kester soothes me, holds me in his embrace, and scares me with his piercing vision that looks beyond the facial features, and hears the whisperings of my soul. He reminds me that I was lovely once and may be again. If only he could remind Henry of this fact.

JUNE 29TH, HAMPSTEAD

It may be terribly forward of me, but I decided to seize upon the hint of work and wrote St. John a begging letter, asking for work, either as his secretary (for I heard he perhaps needed a helper) or in review writing. This week I have been reading Marty Palmer's *Old Days in Country Places* and I should love to review it. It felt wonderful writing to the offices of Hodder and Stroughton. Now I wait to hear.

3RD JULY, HAMPSTEAD

The best news. Martin Armstrong urged me to try a new publisher called Jonathan Cape. He felt that it might be my best chance – to be considered while Cape is still establishing his list. Well, I wrote to Mr. Cape straightaway, and he responded with remarkable speed. He tells me he has 'an intuition about fifth novels'. Prudence and Kester will have a home to go to.

JULY 9TH, 1923, HAMPSTEAD, LONDON

So many thoughts buzzing around in my head. Henry, Kester, Prudence, Gideon, Caradoc, Jonathan Cape, Mother. New school year approaching, Lyth Hill, Mother, Olive, events to go to, busy busy. No vigour, no time, bad weather, home.

JULY 30TH, THE GROVE

I have been working on the manuscript, but it is not flowing as it should. I think it is because I am here, and I should be there.

Barney Jenks has written today to say they are leaving and going to live with his mother. They were so grateful for our help, but of course they have left owing us two months' rent money, which I can't bear to follow

up on. I am just so relieved to be going home. I have agreed with Henry that I must find regular work writing if we are to keep Spring Cottage empty and ready for me to go to whenever I like. I must follow up with St. John.

Henry has agreed we can go home for August. Utter bliss.

2ND SEPTEMBER 1923, HAMPSTEAD, LONDON

The visit home broke the dam, just as I had hoped it would. The words are now flowing faster than I can write them, even in London.

13TH SEPTEMBER 1923, HAMPSTEAD, LONDON

It is complete. I am exhausted. Now I must send Prudence and Kester out into the world and allow them to fend for themselves. Three months in the writing, longer than the others. 'The Golden Arrow' only took me three weeks. I hope it shows in the writing. This one feels fuller, more complete. I miss my new family as if they were real and must remind myself continually that they are not. I think I will stay at Spring Cottage for a few weeks to recover myself before I must start the process of edits with Cape.

21ST SEPTEMBER 1923, SPRING COTTAGE, LYTH HILL

Watching the year unfold once more from the top of the hill, the dark weather of my low mood has passed again. Henry joined me for a few days, and it was near as perfect as it could be. We settled back into our routine so quickly – the walks, the fireside reading, the hours spent toiling in the earth, just as we once had. And then as soon as it came and reminded me of our perfection, it was gone. He wanted to return to London before school started so that he could prepare things properly. When he left the house felt so empty again, so quiet. It is amazing how one person can fill a space, so that even when they are quiet and not speaking, you know they are there.

And now it is time for me to pack up my thoughts and return to join Henry in London, and try to slot back into there as easily as I slot back into life at Lyth Hill. It is never as easy that way round.

30TH SEPTEMBER 1923, HAMPSTEAD

Working hard on my little garden but missing the rich earth of Shropshire. London soil is so heavy and thick, I am not sure yet if my efforts will yield any results. The bulbs should at least come up in the spring sunshine, but vegetables are altogether different. It's possible I will only ever manage to coax potatoes out of this cold strip of clay. I have planted a pink rose tree, a white rose tree and a lilac. They will preside over the garden, and the pink roses will press so confidently against my window.

OCTOBER 10TH, 1923, HAMPSTEAD, LONDON

Autumn has crept across London's streets, touching her with all its cold, colourful beauty. Already the less populated paths on the Heath are beginning to get thick and sticky, and walking across the green in Bloomsbury cakes the bottom of my skirts in thick, brown mud. Today I stumbled upon a house in Store Street

which was covered from head to toe in Virginia creeper, the hues of red, gold and claret all jostling for position on the eye. I stood and gazed in wonder for it for ten minutes or more, while all around me everyone was rushing along to their next engagement. And yet, autumn is full of leave-taking. In September the swallows were chattering of destination and departure like a crowd of tourists, and soon they were gone. It is the day of small things; the wren's bell-like note, the liquid patter of the thrush and the wild little song of the robin, all though winter.

OCTOBER 19TH, THE GROVE

Morton Luce has written, asking if I will review his latest volume of poems in *The Spectator*. Of course, I wrote back straight away, saying that I will need to enquire – they normally only take nature books from me. How wonderful if they will allow it!

OCTOBER 21ST, THE GROVE, HAMPSTEAD

Good news! A busy month of letter writing. Ned has introduced me to St. John Adcock at *The Bookman*, so perhaps 1924 will show more promise than 1923. Now that we no longer have a tenant at Spring Cottage, I need to make up the shortfall somewhere, and I have a sense that *The Bookman* may be just the ticket.

A misty morning. Brilliant sunshine and steam rising from the heath again, shafts of bright sunlight and the lengthening shadows. In the woods there is a treasure of conkers nestling in the undergrowth. Cobwebs were spun between every upward growing spear of grass or plant life.

25TH OCTOBER

Busy. Mr. Adcock has sent me a challenge – three novels to review that must be returned to him by the end of the first week of November so they are in time for the December edition.

3RD DECEMBER 1923, HAMPSTEAD

November brought dark weather again, and I felt so listless that I could not bring myself to do anything for two weeks once I had sent the review in to St John. Even visiting was too much for me to bear. Some days it was just me and an empty fireplace, until Henry came home from school and undertook the business of lighting the stove and making me at least drink tea and nibble on bread. My appetite, so scarce at the best of times, is entirely absent. When the storm clouds gather, food seems pointless. I wonder if my mystical insights are easier won by refusal to listen to the physical needs of this weak, frail, imperfect body. The Christian Mystics often shut themselves away from all physical comfort, as did the Buddha. It worked for them, and I am sure it is the same for me. But Henry does not subscribe to asceticism.

'Come on, Mary,' he will chivvy me along. 'You are fading away like an apple blossom.' He even suggested I go home for a few weeks, but the thought of being there without him was not enough to tempt me, and I knew he would never get leave before the end of term. So, I stayed at the Grove, and simply existed for a few weeks until the dark weather passed over.

12TH DECEMBER, HAMPSTEAD, LONDON

Cape has apparently accepted the latest edits on the novel, and Henry agreed that we could return to Lyth Hill over the Christmas break. However, because he had also promised his mother he would visit her in Weston-Super-Mare for a few days, and of course the invitation is never extended as far as me, I am to travel alone to Chester to spend a few days with Mother and Olive. I have calculated carefully that five days will be enough for us to rub along tolerably well, without creating the friction that so often comes with extended visits.

Even while living several hundred miles away from her, I can still feel the tendrils of regret at my perceived loss of potential extending down through her pen, winding its way onto the paper and curling itself around my throat. Although she has mellowed in recent years, I anticipate that the tension will start to creep in around the edges by day three, but we should be able to avoid all-out war until day six.

I wonder if I disappoint Henry as much as I disappointed her.

13TH DECEMBER

The Bookman arrived today! My name is right there below the article. It's not the first time I have seen my own name in print, but when it is a journal I used to read and imagine being published in, what a thrill! 'Three Pleasant Books'. I had written with such care and attention to detail, and to see it in print is remarkable.

15TH DECEMBER 1923, HAMPSTEAD

I went to the British Museum today, and spent some hours wandering the different galleries. In Ancient Greece I chanced upon a classical statue of Pan seducing Echo, and something in the marble held my gaze. I stepped back to view it from a different angle, the flow of his arm wrapped around her neck, their feet slightly out of step as she pulls away from him. It suddenly came to me that me and Henry are like that now, except the roles are reversed—it is not Henry's Oxford brogues that represent the cloven hooves of the goat-foot god, it is my own sensible brown boots. Now, the more I lean into him, the more he pulls away. It should be 'toerts not frommet', as Kester would say. I stood for a time wondering what I can do, but of course, as even Pan himself learned, one cannot force someone. They must come willingly.

I stood by that cold marble, while all around me people moved along to the next exhibit, the naked form of Aphrodite, crouching. Her body and her face are so undeniably fine-looking; it stirred once more the feelings I tried to evoke when I was writing *Precious Bane*, of Prudence gazing upon the perfection of Jancis, which I so often feel when I am faced with great loveliness. Strange how those images can stay with one, long after the gates of the museum closed at six o'clock. They have lingered in my thoughts all day, and I expect them to remain for some time.

On the way home I lingered too long, and had a fancy to gaze at the marble structure at Euston Station once more. I have never seen the spectacle of what they call 'rush hour' before. The name does not do it justice. I stood frozen to the spot, watching all the world racing through the station, when a man physically picked me up and moved me out of his way. Just then I saw a policeman standing close by keeping an eye, but rather than stop

the man, when he saw me looking his way, he smiled almost apologetically and gave a shrug of his shoulders. As if it was only to be expected, and what did I think I was doing standing around gazing at the crowds so? As I stood, it suddenly it struck me, it was like watching a herd of sheep struggling to get out of a field and through a gate as quickly as possible as a sheepdog worried at their ankles. At any moment, I half expected one of them to start leaping over the back of the person in front of them, determined, even by trampling each other down, to get ahead of the one in front. I swore then that I would never be tempted to follow the crowd. That way lies intellectual barrenness, and loss of reason. That's how we got into the mess of the war and all the death and cruelty.

19TH DECEMBER 1923, LYTH HILL

So happy to be home again for a few stolen days before we must both go our separate ways for Christmas.

Tonight, we will walk down to the hall at the bottom of the hill and sing carols with the folk of the village. It will be brightly lit by fluttering candlelight, and the faces will glow gold in the cold air. And tomorrow I will go and visit and give all the children their trifles I have brought from London. I do so wish that we could have had our own family, but clearly it was not to be. But at least the children in the surrounding area can enjoy the love I could have so willingly bestowed on my own. I am afraid I got quite carried away again this year, but I am anticipating the expressions on their faces when they see what I have brought. I didn't tell Henry, but Mrs. Evans had told me that her boy was so desperate to learn to play the piano, and I do so love the idea of being able to be someone's angel for the day. Perhaps Martin will think of me occasionally as he practices his scales in his mother's own parlour on his new upright piano. Then for the others there are dolls, and toy trains, and more presents than they might expect from the 'lady writer on the hill'. I am sure they think me quite soft in the head, but it is worth it when I see their eyes filled with shy wonder, and the magic of Christmas.

DECEMBER 26TH, 1923, CHESTER

Already a new year is waiting just around the corner, and I do so hate seeing it in with Henry absent. While he is in Weston-Super-Mare and I am in Chester, even hearing his voice over a telephone line is bleak. I hope this does not bode ill for our year ahead. The older, superstitious part of me part of me wonders if we should be starting the year as we mean to go on, not at different ends of the country.

I wonder if it is city life that makes us so strangely at odds with each other. Our routines don't seem to meet for long in the middle. I find myself sitting alone at home so often, anticipating his return from school. Of course, there are weekends, but they pass by so quickly, and even then, Henry has one eye on preparing for the week ahead. When we were in our early years, and at Rose Cottage, I felt the full warmth of his sun, and when he turned his gaze towards me there was a stellar fierceness to it – all challenges would melt away, all doubts would be burned to a crisp when his gaze turned towards me. But now, the sun only peeks out from behind a cloud from time to time, and instead the long shadows of winter creep towards me. And I am not sure how to return the sun to its full strength again.

I miss the liveliness of our discussions, and the fun we used to have together. I miss our bodies being so close together. Even when we were out in public and away from the privacy of our home, our hands would find each other, our fingers entwined as we walked across the ridge of the Long Mynd.

DECEMBER 29TH, 1923, CHESTER

Mother and Olive are well, and have managed to find the peace together that I never could at home. They are contained, whole, and so well established in their routines they barely need to communicate with words to understand each other. A look, a gesture, a sigh, is enough to ensure that Olive knows exactly what Mother wants – tea at a certain time, a stroll around the nearest park to take the fresh air and blow away the cobwebs

This visit Mother is more frail. She has a persistent cough that she cannot shake off, and looks thinner than usual, slightly worn around the edges. She does not have the usual hardness to turn on me. When she asks me questions about life in London, rather than wither me with a single look, she accepts my responses without question. The visit is not the battle of wills I was expecting. It is quiet, uneventful, and companionable almost.

By contrast, when Henry telephoned to me last night (for I can never ring him at his mother's house, as the house telephone would be swiftly placed down on the receiver as soon as I said who I was) I could hear his mother harping in the background, asking who it was he spoke with, and what did I want. When I hear her, I cannot help but think of Lady Catherine de Burgh. She continued a low background commentary the whole three minutes we spoke with one another. It seems we are destined to always have tension in our lives.

NOTEBOOK SIX – 1924

5TH JANUARY 1924, HAMPSTEAD

An unsteady start to the New Year. Our reunion in London was marked with quarrelling. I came back petulant, having not been able to speak to Henry whenever I wanted, and instead having to await his call. It felt as if he rarely called at all, and when he did, he was distracted with his mother. When I said so he blamed me, and said, 'If only you got along with each other we wouldn't have this problem,' and I said that 'I tried', and 'it is unfair of you to blame me'. He momentarily stopped short of saying it was all my fault and I stopped short of saying it was all her fault, and so we reached a ravine that could not be crossed.

So much time has passed now, and I can barely recall the details of the friendship I shared so briefly with Mrs. Webb before Henry and I became betrothed. It does not make sense to me. If I had a son I should welcome someone to cherish him, to walk with him in the woods, and to fire his imagination with stories and ideas.

The first few days, then, were tense, hung over with the ghosts of words not quite spoken.

13TH JANUARY 1924, HAMPSTEAD

Caradoc and I have been ruffling feathers. It seems that a certain lady-writer (Mrs. Sackville-West) did not take well to my review of her book, *Greywethers*, in *The Bookman*. All I said was that although there were touches of greatness in it, there were faults in her technique (the character of Daisy was not in focus; the queerness of the Lovel household was overstressed; and the country people expressed themselves too well). Perhaps I should have written in more glowing terms, as now when we enter any literary events the Bloomsbury folk are at, they look like they have sucked on a lemon. To counteract it, Caradoc and I have begun a new routine. He puts on what he calls his 'best Welsh voice' as we walk in, (always slightly late) and says to me, 'Now Gladys, don't mind those spit venoms,' or some such nonsense to make me laugh. He says this under his breath (but a little too loudly.)

The events were hard at first — all of those people of influence in one room used to terrify me — but I do so love the P.E.N. Club dinners. The spit-venoms peer over their glasses and down their long noses at us and audibly say mean things. So, as we go in, Caradoc will say something like, 'Oh, how I do love your dress,' he continues with a flourish. 'Is it from Paris?' 'Oh no, dear,' I reply rather more loudly than I need to. 'Isn't it pretty? It took me three whole days to make.'

You can sense the wave of dissension move all around the room. I don't fit in with these women, and they are always at great pains to remind me that I am not like them, in subtle ways of course, but it is not the wealth that makes me stand out so. Lord knows Mother came from wealth, and always aspired to get back there, so the grand dining rooms full of oversized silver candelabra (now replaced by electric lights) heavy wine-coloured velvet curtains, brightly coloured silken Turkish carpets and gilt framed oil paintings, and the ornate collection of silverware on the table are not unknown to me. It's just that I have always leaned more towards the simple life, the unpretentiousness of the three rooms we have on Lyth Hill. I don't need the latest fashions and

opulent luxury, but I also know that mixing in the company of other writers at the P.E.N., or the Bookman Circle is something I have to do, and it is working. The reviews are more regular than they've ever been, and just having all these new people to talk to about writing is opening my eyes to different ways of composition. May Sinclair told me she easily spends three quarters of her time editing what she has previously written. Three quarters! I have never tried writing fiction that way.

15TH JANUARY 1924 – HAMPSTEAD

The school year has begun several days early, as there were preparations to be made at King Alfred's and all the masters were requested to be present, to meet with the Headmaster and prepare for the return of the children. I am busying myself with renewing old ties – contacting friends to let them know we are back in town, and proposing excursions to gatherings. This year I should so like to attend the Bookman Circle, as it will widen my reach more.

Mr. Cape suggests I take one small step at a time, so that by July, when he is ready to release *Precious Bane*, I will have a nice steady foundation of people who want to read it. He has an air of confidence about him. He reminds me of a fox – so cunning, so confident, so sure, but also quick to turn on his heel and disappear if he felt for one moment he was not trusted. This bodes well for me, and I am sure my work is safe in his hands, and that together we will go far.

I saw Mr. White from next door this morning, and he commented on how well I looked to him. It's strange when people feel it is acceptable to tell you how well or ill you look. I gave him as warm a smile as I could when he said this, while feeling the tightening in my stomach, and not wishing to fall out with him. It is wiser to stay on good terms with one's neighbours, and he is normally more sensitive than that.

1ST MARCH 1924, HAMPSTEAD

February has passed in a whirl of reviews and engagements, swirling around me like the rivulets in oak bark. I posted two separate reviews off to *Cassell's Weekly*, and to Ned at *The Spectator*. I have also written to the editor at *The Times Literary Supplement* to enquire about doing work for them, but I am unsure of the response. I do not know the editor in person, and it always feels strange writing a 'Dear Sir' letter when you have not been properly introduced. I am also writing to publishers in New York, to see if my earlier books can find purchase over there, but so far, no luck.

I have also discovered a wonderful new bookshop on Flask Walk that has recently opened, and have spent wonderful hours browsing the book cases there. Unlike some shops where they encourage the reader to make their selection and purchase as quickly as possible and leave, this bookshop has sign up that says 'browsing is a dying art – help us to revive it' and even has a saggy old sofa placed at the back of the shop for people to sit on while they follow the instruction on the sign. In this way, I have spent several afternoons, and although I have not yet summoned the courage to tell the owner, Mr. Durham, that I am a writer, I have enjoyed the witty and learned interactions he has with several customers who are clearly regular visitors. He readily steps out from behind the counter to guide them to the latest releases in their favourite genre – the latest romance, or the

latest book about travel to the remoter parts of the Andes. When he talks about the latest novels, then I prick up my ears. Yesterday he was busy telling one reader all about a new story by Elizabeth, she of *Elizabeth's German Garden*, and his voice fell to a rather loud whisper when he said the authoress is the mistress of H.G. Wells, and lives in this very village. I couldn't help but laugh when I heard that. Perhaps London life and village life are not so far apart as I had thought.

Henry and I had adored *Elizabeth's German Garden* when we first encountered it at Rose Cottage. We used to laugh uproariously about the 'man of wrath', and her descriptions of the garden itself were exquisite. So yesterday I came away clutching two treasures in my hand – *The Enchanted April* – which so far gives me a delightful window on two Hampstead housewives – and *Vera* – which slipped into publication last year without my realising it. The two Hampstead ladies of *The Enchanted April*, while completely alien to me in their leisure activities of attending charity functions and ladies' clubs, are at least friendly and sincere. I don't feel quite so isolated when I am in their company as I am with the school master's wives or the literary ladies at the P.E.N. Club. I am always rather more inclined to find understanding in the company of men in London, although of course I will always have my sisters and Minoni to converse with by letter. London women seem to have a gorse-like edge to them – brightly coloured blossoms, placed in amongst spiky thorns that will nip you if you mistakenly try to reach in and pluck one or smell its delicious coconut scent.

Mother is due to visit later this week, so I am making rather more effort than I ordinarily might about the house. I did invite her to visit with us at Lyth Hill, but having left Shropshire, she says she is not inclined to visit again and would rather sample the capital. Of course, we will be rather cosy at the Grove, but I will endeavour to show her my favourite parts of the city. And of course, it will give Olive a rest for a few days, as she will not be coming with Mother.

3RD MARCH, HAMPSTEAD

A few spring flowers have come up, no doubt planted by our predecessor here. I have decided to plant more lilies, sweet peas and violets, as they are sure to do well, and I do so love to see them wherever I go. They make me feel more at home. While I wish the lime tree was an apple or a pear so we could have the benefit of the blossom and the fruit, it does at least give the birds somewhere to sit and sing, and it will give me something to focus on when I will sit in the shade in the warmer months and write.

5TH MARCH 1924, EUSTON STATION

Just waiting for Mother's train at Euston. The train is somewhat delayed, and I hope she will arrive before it becomes busy. Whenever I pass through Euston, I am always breathless at the beauty of the main entrance way – all the marble staircases and the colonnade holding up that entrancing ceiling. It really looks far more of a temple, than a railway station. But so many people. Everyone passing silently through the precinct – purposefully, hushed and almost reverently.

10TH MARCH 1924, HAMPSTEAD

I was so busy with Mother's visit; I had no time to write here. Her trip could be deemed a success, although it got off to a rather shaky start. Mother arrived on Wednesday last, thankfully early enough for us to get on the 'Twopenny Tube' before the herds emerged blinking like moles from their business, since I had warned her not to arrive after half past four. She found the whole experience underground quite trying on the nerves, or so she said. But I caught a glimpse of a sparkle in her eye. I am sure she enjoyed her adventure, even if only to give her something to discuss with the ladies at her coffee mornings. She huffed a little during the walk up the hill from the station, for it is steep, but having only brought the smallest travelling bag, it seemed a shame to summon a taxi for so short a journey. I carried her valise and kept pace with her. I told her we were travelling like real Londoners. As we arrived at the Grove, I opened the front door and led her into the tiny parlour inside, and she said, 'Well, Gladys.'

She is the only living soul (aside from Caradoc) to still use my childhood name, and always says this when she enters a home of mine. It expresses, amongst other things, her abject disappointment that this place is no better kept than the last one she visited, but you see, I shall never make a good housekeeper. There are always a hundred and one things I would rather be doing with my time.

Knowing she was coming, Henry and I made a special effort the day before to ensure the place was spick and span, and there was a hot dinner awaiting us on top of the warm stove when we returned, but all three of our feline family had been lured in by the warmth of the stove, and had draped themselves over as many surfaces as they could manage. I tried to shoo them away, but they would not move without voicing their loud, yowling protests, which elicited another raised eyebrow from Mother, and a tight-lipped expression. I showed mother up to the guest room to distract her from their poor manners, and while there are no views of the Heath from our tiny home, there is at least a view of the pretty garden that I have been working so hard on.

Over the next few days I showed Mother the sights of London. She wanted to stand outside the gates of Buckingham Palace, so we rode an omnibus down along Charing Cross Road to Trafalgar Square, and we visited the four lions, so grim and so noble. Then we walked down through St. James's park, marvelling at the plethora of bird life around the lake — far more than one would ordinarily see on the mere — ducks of every colour and variety, the swans gliding like billowing long ships, the pelicans dwarfing everything around them with their huge bills skimming the water for fish. In the war this was all filled in and turned into vegetable beds and temporary office blocks, so it is all the more special to see it returned to a park and filled with water again. Most of all we adored a small family of herons, closer to us than we would ever see 'in the wild'. I use the emphasis, as of course the herons, like all the other birds are free to take flight and leave whenever they so choose, but here they seem to prefer to stay, held captive perhaps by the warmth and comfort of the city, like so many of the souls who descend on London. We could choose to go at any time, and yet, in this alien landscape of iron and stone, concrete and clipped gardens, here we all remain. I wondered if I would stay here without Henry. It is more likely I would fly home with the heron, soaring over my hills and coming to rest beside Bomere or on top of one of the tall beech trees on Lyth Hill, content to stay for all eternity, not bothered by book sales and reviews. Then I started to cry, and Mother handed me her handkerchief and patted my arm, before taking it in hers and leading me down to the golden gates of the palace. The flag was flying at full height today, but of course there was no

sign of His Majesty at any of the windows, no sign of any life inside. A strange existence it must be, shut away from the rest of us, placed up high on a pedestal like a living statue.

Once she felt she had seen enough of the palace, we made our way back up the Mall towards the Corner House, where we took tea, and compared notes on where we think Kenneth will settle once he is back from Canada next month. I told her I felt sure he would want to be close to her, and she took warmth from that. Then we talked about how Mu is faring in Wales. It's been so long since she has visited either of us, we both feel cut off from her world, although she writes each month. Mother's face fell then. I said perhaps I will invite her to London for a few days to see if she is willing to reconnect in person. Mother said, 'Who would have thought we would all end up living so far apart?' so I took her hand across the table, but she looked embarrassed, so we did not stay that way for more than a moment.

11TH MARCH 1924, HAMPSTEAD

On the second day of Mother's visit, I walked her across the Heath to see where King Alfred's is, and Henry met us at the gate, a rare thing, for I am usually never allowed so far in. He took us to see a spot in the grounds he has marked out for building an open-air theatre for the children. It will be a big project, but his face came alive as he showed it to Mother. Then it was time for him to go and teach, so we walked down the hill and took the train from Golders Green back into town, and visited Madame Tussaud's for fun. I have never been in there, and never thought to go, but Mother was keen to see the new wax work of Mr. Baldwin, as she said one can never get the real measure of a man from his photograph in *The Times*, particularly when they are blurred, and taken from a distance. We both agreed his face has a kindly quality, and a dash of wit, if his wax work is true to the real man of course. Then we visited Thomas Hardy, and Eleanor Roosevelt. I wondered if I will ever have my likeness anywhere, and then shuddered at the idea, hoping that if I do, they portray me as I once was. I am more like a bird, these days, with my owlish eyes and misshapen throat. While I do wish more people would read my work, I am not so sure I would want them to look upon me like an exhibit in a sideshow. All these thoughts crossed my mind as I was gazing on the flawless faces of Norma Talmadge and Clara Bow, and mother must have seen what I was thinking, as she took my arm again then, and suggested we take tea on the way home.

All in all, we had a wonderful few days, and I was glad she came to visit. I enjoyed having her all to myself, if only for a while, and I felt sad when I returned her to Euston for the train to Chester. It reminded me of my early years, when I was the first, the only, and special. If only Father could have been here too.

MARCH 20TH, 1924, HAMPSTEAD

Mr. Cape has been keeping me busy with the last proofs of *Precious Bane*, and it is coming along nicely. I am determined though that it must be just perfect – I want only the best for Kester and Prue. This meant of course that after I had sent the last version in, I thought of one more correction I wished to make, and had to telephone Mr. Cape in rather a state. He told me gently but firmly that I must stop and let him do his job now, as otherwise we will never be finished.

We should have our first copy back in July.

He tells me that the binding is to be green, with gold embossed lettering on the front. If it sells well, he says he would like to issue an illustrated version one day – imagine that! I can't think who would do the drawings, but Mr. Cape said, 'Never you mind about that, Mrs. Webb. You just concentrate on writing the next book so that we have something to work on.'

Then I felt foolish, as I have not been writing lately, having been so busy with Mother's visit. And I have had no ideas yet as to write. I have enjoyed my foray into history. Perhaps I will go there again? Or perhaps back to an earlier time.

I took my worries out to the Heath to walk things through, and spring gave me the hope I needed. The beeches are unfurling their earliest leaves, so pure that it really takes my breath away. The oaks are budding, and the hawthorn hedges are in full green already. The heath is loud with the sounds of bird song and running, gurgling springs are topped with orange foam. Water runs in impromptu streams down the middle of each path, but the mud is heavy, hard, sucking work to walk through. In winter it hardened, but this clay soil wants to pull me in, and it spatters itself up my skirts.

I didn't have enough sleep last night, awake early with cares and worries, and then the woods were calling 'come and find me'. I will return to Spring Cottage this weekend to hear the lambs bleating in the fields that nestle at the foot of the hill, but this time I return without Henry again. He seems to take less and less interest in going home these days. Without Pru and Kester to meet me, it will be a solitary visit.

APRIL 12TH, 1924, HAMPSTEAD

On the heath, lime leaves, perfectly pleated, and pairs of butterflies beginning their perfect spiral dance through the air together. Borage, apple blossom, May buds turning from green to cream. Snakeshead fritillaries, a species I never saw in Salop. I had to go to the books and look them up.

The Spectator has published my latest review and I never fail to feel a thrill seeing my own words in print, but also it is unnerving, knowing that it will be read and wondering how it will be received. This one took me quite some time to perfect. I was asked to review 'Poems' by Emily Dickinson and since it is a highly-anticipated book for me, I wanted to ensure I gave it all the consideration it deserved. And I must admit, the fee will be welcome, as I got my accounts in somewhat of a tangle before Christmas, and since Mother came to visit. I did not keep a count of what we were spending while she was here, as I did not want to mar her visit with my poor financial skills, and we did have tea out on several of the days, as well as the ticket costs and I refused to allow her to pay for us all of the time.

I keep feeling afraid that Henry will find out what a mess I have made, and I am sure he will be exasperated with me if he finds out. 'Not again, Mary!' I can hear him saying in my mind each time I think of it, and then I feel so nervy and afraid. I lie awake in the middle of the night worrying about it all, and of course, as he knows nothing, Henry is sleeping like a baby beside me, quite unconcerned that I am being pitched around on a stormy sea. I must speak with him, but each day my nerve fails me, and each day I feel more agitated.

APRIL 22ND, 1924, HAMPSTEAD

The world is nearly green again. The path through the woods is veined with exposed tree roots. Tall grasses in the meadow release clouds of seeds as I brush by them. Bracken uncurls itself for another year, looking like a fresh green ammonite. There is a whisper of rain in the air. Yews step back into the green shadows, to allow others to take centre stage. Celandine carpets the ground, next to the paths, and the ground is already dry and compacted. The first glimpse of swallows, silently flitting across the surface of the pond, flying like bats or dragonflies. Their return always feels like a cause for a celebration. So silent, so fast – they are like ghost birds. Perhaps if I focus hard on all of these details around me, London will feel as much like home for me as it does for Henry. And yet I still have not been able to speak to him about my concerns. What is this wall that has been built between us?

APRIL 25TH 1924

Mother has died. I am on a train to Chester. We received a telegram from Olive yesterday morning to say that Mother had a seizure. She had gone to Llandudno for a change of air. Kenneth was en route to collect her, but he arrived too late. She had already gone. He is now making arrangements to bring her back home to Chester for burial. When I telephoned to Olive, stupidly my first response was, 'But she was so well just a few weeks ago,' and Olive had to calmly explain to me that these things can come on rather suddenly. When I said I would get on the first available train, she merely told me to wait for more news from Kenneth, so I sat alone all day at home in the house with no fire, and no tea. Even the cats brought no comfort for me. I thought about all the years I have been so far away from her. Henry was so late home, and when I told him what had happened he said, 'I am so sorry, Mary,' as if it were only my loss and not his at all.

This morning Olive and I decided I should come to Chester to meet Kenneth when he arrives with Mother, and I had to leave a note for Henry, saying I would telephone when I could, and asking him to join us when he can.

APRIL 26TH, 1924, CHESTER

I am haunted by fleeting thoughts. She is at rest now with Father. I don't know how to feel. Empty.

APRIL 30TH, 1924, CHESTER

Henry arrived today, but must return on Sunday. The funeral is on Friday so he has taken unexpected leave from school. He said that Mr. Wicksteed, the headmaster, was very understanding. He returns to London on Sunday, and I shall stay on with Olive to help organise Mother's things. Of course, there is the will to sort out and arrangements to be made for selling the house. I wonder where Olive will go. I feel wicked as, despite my sorrow, another thought occurs which is that I may at last find respite from these constant economic sorrows. Iniquitous thoughts when I should be mourning my mother. I had wondered if Mother would wish to be taken to be buried next to Father, but Olive said no, she said she wished to remain here in Chester, as this was where her life was now.

MAY 2ND, 1924, CHESTER

Mother's funeral was today. We buried her in a corner of the cemetery at Overleigh, by the river, shaded by deep green of the yew trees that sighed in the breeze. The view out over the river Dee is so beautiful from there, and the walk along the lane from the town is so pretty. Today as we followed behind her, a heron sat on the weir, patiently waiting for passing fish. The riverbanks were thick with mud, and the hawthorns were already in bloom. The fresh verdure of those ancient yews will soothe her now, I think. All six of us were there. We all stood round so solemnly, too distracted with sadness to feel any comfort in being together once more. I stood with my hand in Olive's, and there was barely space for a breath between us. The rain held off, which was just as well, as it began as an overcast day. By contrast, Father's funeral in Salop had us all standing around the graveside in driving rain, and I felt so sorry for the undertaker and his men, who had to stand there stoically in the downpour, not even breaking ranks to wipe the water from their faces as it dripped off their noses. For mother, at least, there was clear blue sky, and only the whitest of wispy clouds. The birds were singing in the leafy canopy, so loudly in fact I almost forgot where we were.

Then we had to go back to the house and welcome the guests in, and Olive, Muriel and I played hostess to the local community that Mother had made her life within. All these people I didn't really know, as it has been eight years since Henry and I left. I was always curious as to why she had chosen Chester. I suppose it is just a reminder that Mother had a life before us, for she had her own history, her own emotional pull to that place that the rest of us didn't really feel, all except Olive, of course. I wonder when it is prudent to broach the topic of the house sale with Olive. I suppose we must see Mother's solicitor first. All I know is this great feeling of sorrow at her loss, and still the anxiety of my financial pickle. It's like a spectre that stalks me, lurking in the shadows, waiting to catch me when I am unawares.

MAY 5TH, 1924, CHESTER

Disaster! I feel betrayed, cut off, and so hurt! How could she? I have taken my bag and left the house. I am waiting at the station for the first train to London. I must leave here and never come back!

We met with Mr. Rothman for the reading of Mother's will today, and it was ghastly. Why on earth didn't she tell me? She could have warned me, at least! We sat there for what seemed like an age, waiting for Mr. Rothman. The six of us, and a rather stern looking gentleman who was introduced to us as one of the 'trustees'. Apparently he is a second cousin of Mother's whom we have never met. He was a moth-like man, very lean and about six foot three or more. He had neutral coloured hair and eyes, a nondescript suit, limp looking hands and slightly turned up toes.

'What do they mean, the trustees?' I thought to myself, but it didn't seem like a good time to ask, and I thought mine was the only face measuring any level of surprise, so I held my tongue. The wooden panelled room smelled strongly of linseed oil. A heavy, cloying scent in so enclosed a space. The windows were tightly shut, and it was hot in there. All we could hear was the ticking of a loud clock that sat on the mantle. Steady, rhythmic, oppressive.

Just as I was beginning to feel like I couldn't breathe, and was trying to catch Douglas's eye, since he was closest to the window, and more likely to be able to throw open the sash, the heavy oak door opened, and in came Mr. Rothman. He looked like a Dickensian lawyer – with a sad-coloured grey pin-stripe suit and a complicated looking arrangement with his cravat, old fashioned side whiskers and pince-nez balanced so carefully on the end of his nose that I almost held my breath waiting for them to topple off the end. He came in clearing his throat, like a jackdaw about to break into a loud croaking cry, but instead he sat, and then surveyed each of our faces over the gold rim of his glasses, before looking down at the papers in front of him. Then started the heavy drone of a preamble, and I felt my spirits lifting, hoping that Mother would at least be able to rescue me from this mortifying ruin that I am facing. The droning continued, all through the heavy legalese. I am sure they only obfuscate to secure their own future employment, for who could make head or tail of it all that dense language without a lawyer? The droning and the oppressive air was enough to make me feel heavy headed, but I tried to remain alert. Then we got to the crucial part. The sums are, 'To be held in trust,' droned Mr. Rothman, as my stomach fell into my shoes, 'for the support of my daughter Olive, who has been my companion since the death of my husband'.

Why did she not warn me?

Mr. Rothman then rambled on, about how everything has gone to Olive, since she stayed unmarried and with Mother all these years, while Muriel and I have husbands who will make sure we are provided for. We are simply to continue to receive our annuity, and a small figure on top, which will not nearly cover my financial pickle at all, and I am too ashamed to ask Olive for more. The reading then went on for another thirty minutes, while we were introduced properly to the trustee, and were told that should any of us wish to 'apply for funds' for anything, we are of course welcome, but that we would need to make an application stating what it is for and why we need it. I was quite beside myself by now, and was holding on to reason only by a tendril of thread thrown down on high to rescue me, and it was at risk of breaking at any moment. The trustees are distant relatives, known more to Mother than to the rest of us, but this stern looking gentleman came back to the house and questioned each of us about our lives and what we do, presumably so he can report back. When it came to me he was clearly most displeased. He lingered on my face too long in silence, a flicker of amusement licking the corners of his mouth. As if to say, 'a writer? But you are only a woman!' Of course, no words came, and he stopped short of crossing himself, but his eyes narrowed, and I could feel my face getting hotter and hotter. He and most of my relations will be bound to hate my lifestyle. They are clearly very religious and conventional people, for he wore a signet ring with a cross on it on his right hand. How, then, could I apply to them for assistance?

After he left, Olive said that, naturally, she will continue to live at the house for now, she couldn't think of selling and going somewhere else. I would ask her for help, I would, but I don't know how to find the words.

The only consolation should be in having us all together to follow the complicated processes we must go through in settling Mother's life and her estate. I was so pleased to see all of them initially, but now we are back all together, I feel isolated, different from them. While I love them dearly, I still couldn't find a way of broaching the topic with them, and telling them why I need the money and how I have got into this mess. I just stayed

silent, feeling so hurt inside. It is bad enough feeling this grief again, without all this extra worry. I am sure if it were the other way around, if Mother had died first leaving us in Father's care, that he would not have left us so. And then, again, I feel wicked for having had that thought. Oh, the anguish.

Then we had the awful task of dividing mother's possessions. We would have preferred to wait a while, except Douglas had travelled a long distance, and must return to the Americas next week, as he has a new job waiting for him in California. Even in the new world, no man is truly free. So, we had to go through the process of pawing through her belongings. Again, I felt so frustrated. As the eldest daughter, I should have first choosing. I felt certain, that way at least, I may be able to select one or two special items like Mother's sapphire brooch, which might reach a tidy sum if I were to sell them. But that was not to be either. The items were divided up equally, as per the terms of the will, and the sapphire brooch wended its way to Muriel, since she had loved to play with it as a girl.

I hate feeling this way — I cannot pretend all is well, and yet there is no one I can talk to, not even Henry, and I hate myself for having such mercenary thoughts. At the point that the others were talking, my final thread of reason broke, and I rushed about the house, gathering my things, and said I must be gone from there. The others were so taken by surprise; they stood and stared, mouths ajar, not knowing what to say to hold me back, as my own volume became louder and louder. By then I could not stop myself, even though part of me stood to one side with them and watched myself in horror. But I was too far in my own desperation to dim it down. I had no choice but to go on.

So now, here I am, sitting on the station platform waiting for the London train, and I know I must look a sight. The slightly anxious, sympathetic glances of the other passengers tell me this is so. They look afraid, as if I might rear up suddenly like a skylark from the heath, and startle them. And the train will not be here for another hour, at least.

MAY 7TH, 1924, CHESTER

Back at the house. Dear Kenneth. Once he had realised where I had rushed off to, he came to retrieve me. He had been sitting a way off on the platform, waiting for me to regain my breath and my composure. Seeing me writing furiously in my notebook, he did not want to interrupt.

'Mary,' he said, holding both my hands in his, 'what on earth has got you into such a storm that you would want to dash off and leave us like that?'

And then the truth came tumbling out of me like a river after a rainstorm, and I could not stop the words, even if I had wanted to, they rushed out in a torrent and all tipped with white foam.

'What on earth is Henry doing to help you?'

My tight-lipped expression must have told the tale on me, for Kenneth knows my expressions better than anyone, even after all these years apart.

'Why haven't you told him?' he asked incredulously.

To be fair, I was not able to respond with one answer that sounded reasonable as I voiced it. Why haven't I told Henry? Isn't he the one person I should be able to count on, whatever we face? Wasn't that what we promised each other in those vows we made? But the truth is there is a gulf between us these days that I don't even know if I can trust my own intuition anymore.

Just having Kenneth share my woes for the space of an hour lightened the load slightly, even if there is no easy solution. We are each trying to make our way in this world, and now that we are orphans (albeit grown up ones) the world is several degrees harsher today than it did just a few weeks ago, when mother seemed so well. She was still my closest link to Father, after all, besides Minoni. And while Minoni and I write with the same regularity we always have; I feel as if I have lost a significant body part in the loss of both parents.

Kenneth took me to the tea house next to the station then, and we drank hot sweet tea until I was calm again. But these episodes leave me empty inside. My legs were not quite following my instructions, and all I wanted to do was to go home and sleep. But where is home these days? Spring Cottage is the closest, and yet what good is a house without love?

Three more days in Chester, and then we will all go our separate ways again.

Of course, Kenneth has lent me money to try to ease the load, and says I should write at once if I have any more problems, but I do not want to burden him again. I must remain steady.

MAY 15TH, 1924, HAMPSTEAD

Dark weather, the darkest of all, and coupled with my old foe. The worst thing is, when the sickness comes it steals my words – all the names of the most familiar plants have gone from my memory and I am left grasping for them. The blue bush is in flower and all the trees except the planes and the copper beech are back in leaf.

Back in London. I have no one anymore. All I have is this vast and aching homesickness. It blankets me completely, and I can no longer see or hear or feel anything else. I don't even want to write about it. I am sick of the sound of my own voice in my head.

JUNE 3RD

St. John has asked me to do another review for *The Bookman* and I am so grateful for the work. I was beginning to think he had forgotten all about me. The first is *Ghosts in Daylight* by the wonderfully named Oliver Onions (it must be a pen name, surely?) The second is *The Play Box* by Mrs. Henry Dudeney.

JULY 3RD, 1924, HAMPSTEAD

The air is scented with roses and lavender, but the sky is overcast and the air is chilled. I stumbled upon an old copy of *The Times* today, when I was folding up paper firelighters to light the stove. I used to think they

were magical when Father and I used to make them. Stretched, concertina-like snake chains of new print, giving glimpses of words and phrases, now changed in meaning as they folded in and out and away from each other. He used to challenge me to create a verse using the words that were visible. Today as I was folding up an old paper I came across the headline that said Edith Nesbit had died from a tumour on the lung. The author had mentioned what a fine figure she had struck at literary gatherings in London in the early years of the century, her cigarette holder in one hand, and a glass in the other, surrounded by a coterie of young men. I should have liked to see her, and I wonder if she might have been more welcoming than the Bloomsbury writers are these days. Or perhaps, like me, she just found the company of men easier to rub along with. The departure of E. Nesbit marks another link with my childhood passing out of this world. Father used to sit me on his knee in the study, and we would run away together with Nesbit's own children – flying away on the magic carpet with the Psamead, or through the archway of the amulet to ancient Babylon or Thebes.

I wonder what they will say of me when I have left this world. I expect they will think me very odd. The lady writer who refuses to eat the flesh of any creature, and who finds trees and flowers more companionable than people. I hope one day they will revere me as a writer. I hope one day I will touch somebody with my stories. And yet I can't help wishing I could reach more people, and being afraid, that just like Edith Nesbit, I will be someone's firelighter one day.

The dark weather has brought exhaustion with it this time. I can barely move down from the bedroom to light the stove. But in the last few days I have at least had visitors. Ned Pugh came round and sat with me for several hours on Wednesday, and he promised to come out walking on the Heath with me once I have my strength back. I am longing to hear the whirring of the crickets in the meadow grass. And he also brought a parcel of natural history books for me to read. After Ned left I unwrapped the parcel to look at them all and I couldn't help but be transported back to Father's study, poring over the illustrations with him, and then having him point out all the different species in person when we used to drive around the lanes. If I could go back in time and remain forever in one period for all eternity it would be that one. I think that is my vision of heaven. When I die, I would like to think he will be waiting for me, with the old cob still in her harness, ready for us to drive over to Wenlock Edge.

JULY 9TH, 1924, HAMPSTEAD

The first copies of *Precious Bane* have arrived! Today for the first time I held my latest progeny in my hands, and it was worth every one of those labour pains to see it in the world at last. Mr. Cape has kept his word, and it is bound in the most beautiful oak-leaf-green with gold lettering. The quality is just perfect, the paper crisp and thick to the touch.

Ned called around this afternoon to take me for a walk on the Heath, and so I was able to give him my first copy, and inscribed it, 'To dear Edwin Pugh, with best wishes from the author and friend, Mrs. H.B.L. Webb'.

It is a joke we have, that whenever I feel affronted, I seem to use my full married name in correspondence. Ned could never be the cause of such upset, but he does find it rather amusing. On arrival he often asks me which of my ladies I am today. Is it simple Gladys the country girl, Mary the grown up author, or

(God forbid) Mrs. Henry Bertram Law Webb? Today I was somewhere between Gladys and Mary, enjoying the feeling of accomplishment that those green volumes brought me in abundance, and also enjoying the fresh air and the plethora of things in full bloom on the Heath and the area around it — the gardens of Hampstead were a tangle of roses and lavender spears. Today was warm, and so I walked without even a shawl, and we wandered across the Heath for hours. Each time we reached the end, we turned and chose another direction. The hedges were swarming with life – butterflies, bees of every shape and size. At one point there was a cloud of wagtails flying ahead of us like waves on the sea, no doubt catching a good meal of flies. I tested Ned on his ability to recognise all the trees, and he seemed most amused by my ability to name each one, even the unusual ones brought in from overseas. I felt free, and young again, vital in all the ways I hadn't realised I have missed. There was a buzzard crying overhead, and just through the trees I could almost pretend I saw the skyline of the Shropshire hills, but the Devil's Chair was in fact St. Paul's Cathedral.

Ned has promised me a review in the next edition of *The Spectator*.

18TH JULY 1924, HAMPSTEAD

There is a muggy warmth to the day, but the woods were dark today, concealing something, someone. As I walked, a far off figure disappeared into the trees and vanished, making me want to keep looking over my shoulder. I am never truly alone in this landscape. Tiger-striped dragonflies flit above the hawthorn hedge. The first blood-coloured blackberries, dark green sloes and hawthorn berries – tight, hard, like little pellets, waiting to fill out and loosen with colour. Honeysuckle and passionflower begin to drape themselves over the garden fences, but the lavender spears are already turning brown, and bright red rowan berries herald the coming of autumn, not far behind.

2ND AUGUST 1924, HAMPSTEAD

The first reviews are here, and it has been a kinder experience than it was for *Dormer Forest*, which dropped me into bad weather for months. Ned, of course, wrote many kind things in *The Spectator*, and Mr. T.L. Connor at *Cassell's Weekly* has made it his book of the week! Only the *TLS* had unkind things to say – I wonder if they truly understood it, as they said it was florid and provincial. I rather think they missed the point of it all, and so I am trying to remind myself that the good words outweigh the bad. I must not allow them to send dark clouds over my skies. I want to relish this moment of literary joy, and bathe in it fully, lingering as the kingfisher blue dragonflies hover over the surface and then alight on the hawthorn branches. Although the water might feel quite icy, either I will get used to the temperature of the reviewers, or I must choose to bathe more quickly and then disregard the cold spots.

Now that school is broken up at last, I have persuaded Henry to come away with me to our piece of heaven on the hill. We set off tomorrow on the 9.20 from Euston. I must go and prepare.

15TH AUGUST 1924, LYTH HILL

Autumn is very much in the air already. Two weeks in my sacred space so far and all we have done is bicker and argue. What has come over us? Henry has been unbearable. When he's roused, he spends most of his time shouting at me for one thing or another, which just makes me want to shout back. When he's quiet and sitting in his chair, he's like thunder rumbling in the middle distance. Tense, crackling, not far off, and oppressive. It's almost a relief when he shouts, because at least then his resentments are out in the open. Whatever I do, I can never seem to do the right thing. Mostly I stay quiet as a mouse, or I go and sit in the meadow by the Little Wood on my own. So today I have come out early for consolation and communion, even though it is early and I feel sleepy and dull-headed. My body refused more sleep, so I crept away into the dawn. The air demanded an extra layer of undergarments as homage.

Perhaps I need a new writing project to occupy me, but so far I cannot write the words I need for novels. It is probably because I am trying too hard to find it, and it is not as if one can take a draft of literary spirit of figs. Perhaps I shall go back to short stories for a time? Ned mentioned that Lady Cynthia Asquith was looking for short pieces for a volume she is putting together. I shall write to her to ask, or better still, visit as soon as time and money will allow.

The first unripe acorns are just appearing in the wood, along with the first blackberries – tart but quite wonderful. The smells are intense – savoury, and green. Vetiver and patchouli leaves, with a hint of violet and jasmine or orange blossom. When I walked through Sander's farm this morning, the oaks had all lost a ring of bark around the bottom of their trunks, reminding me of that awful elephant's foot umbrella stand that Ned has in his hallway. The bark is worn away where the pigs have been rubbing up against the trunks, snuffling in the undergrowth for acorns, and scratching their backs on the rough grain of the bark. And yet the oaks do not seem overly concerned. They carry on thriving, regardless.

Only two weeks more and then we must return to Hampstead for the new term. Henry is determined to start work on his outdoor theatre in the spring. The Headmaster has agreed the piece of land, and he wants to break ground before the decision is reversed in favour of a new tennis court or another project that the governors may favour more. My only concern, as with everything else, is for Henry himself. He is bound to take on too much of the physical work himself, and I do so worry about his back.

4TH SEPTEMBER 1924, HAMPSTEAD

Disaster! I don't know what to do. The walls are closing in on me, and I have nowhere to go, and no one to turn to. A summons of all things, for debt! Oh, the humiliation! Of course, Kenneth's loan helped, but it didn't cover everyone I owe to and I was too embarrassed to ask him for the full amount I owed. I was just praying the debt would go away for a while until I could think of a way out, but when we got back from Spring Cottage it was there on the front door mat.

The journey was already tense. We travelled almost all the way from Telford without speaking once. He spent the whole journey gazing resolutely out of the window of the carriage, and when I tried to brighten him and coax him with conversation, he would not open up at all. In the end I started asking him about the outdoor theatre, and that at least got him to speak a bit, but when I asked questions they were mostly single-word

answers. By the time we reached Hampstead it was so tense, and then of course Henry found the summons, and read it before I could get to it, since he walks faster than I do and made it up the hill before me. At first I didn't know what it was. But I could tell by his face that it was something terrible. The awful thing is, he didn't shout, and he just looked at me and said, 'A court summons for non-payment of bills to Messrs Goldman and Co. How typical of you, Mary. You are useless with money.'

He placed the summons on the kitchen table and left me to read it, crumple, and wail like a vixen in the night. Meanwhile, I don't know which room Henry took himself off to, but he left me all alone.

So then, I took pen to paper, and, sobbing all the while, reeled off a dozen letters to whomsoever I could think of that might be able to help. I begged Mr. Cape for more advance on the book but he has refused, wrote to Ned to ask him for more reviewing work and to see if he could introduce me to anyone else, and then wrote to Lady Asquith to enquire as to whether or not she might take my short stories, and to Macmillan to see if they have yet made a decision on publishing the books in America. I even wrote to Olive and Kenneth to ask if they could help. Now, it is the worst, as I have cast my nets wide, and must wait and see what they bring in.

10TH SEPTEMBER 1924, HAMPSTEAD

I had to make several calls at the offices of a solicitor in order to avoid a court appearance, but at last I managed to secure some more time to find a better solution. I went straight round to Cape's offices in Bloomsbury, and he refused to see me! He has flatly refused any more advances. I am ashamed to say that Cape sent a young man out to speak to me on his behalf, and I slapped the poor man. It was bad form. O the shame and humiliation. What was I thinking? I can never work with Cape again!

13TH SEPTEMBER 1924, HAMPSTEAD

Olive, of course, has been an absolute angel. She sent me a sizeable chunk immediately, as soon as I asked, but I have to find better ways of surviving than begging for money from my younger siblings and lashing out at poor young men who are only doing as they are told.

Yesterday was my first walk in solid sheet drizzle. Today is a little sunnier, and the heat of the sun is making drifts of steam rise from the meadows, and coating the cobwebs in fine droplets.

15TH SEPTEMBER 1924, HAMPSTEAD

A busy month of more letter writing.

A misty morning. Brilliant sunshine and steam rising from the fields again, shafts of bright sunlight and the lengthening shadows. In the woods there is a treasure of conkers nestling in the undergrowth. Cobwebs were spun between every upward growing spear of grass or plant life.

Henry is tight lipped and silent. A brooding presence in his chair instead of the bright laughter and chatter we once shared. I miss him, deeply, even though he is right there in front of me.

26TH SEPTEMBER 1924 – HAMPSTEAD.

No word yet from Macmillan, but Lady Cynthia Asquith has been reading my work, and has asked to publish two of my shorter pieces that I wrote during the war years! She has said I must accompany her to some literary events. She is the secretary to Mr. J.M. Barrie, no less. I feel so privileged to know these people. How wonderful to have a light on the horizon and of course it will take me to a wider readership than before, so it is all good. Worn out with writing poetry.

29TH SEPTEMBER

Ned has reviewed me in *The Bookman*, and I am speechless. 'All her books are masterpieces' and 'she has a style of exquisite beauty which yet has both force and restraint, simplicity and subtlety, she has fancy and wit, delicious humour and pathos, almost subliminal gifts. She has in short, genius.' And 'the day is surely not far off when she will be acclaimed as among the greatest of living novelists.'

I only hope he is right.

3RD OCTOBER 1924, HAMPSTEAD

Ellery Sedgewick from *Atlantic Monthly* was over from Boston, and came to tea to talk about my work. I hadn't seen him since the dinner at the P.E.N. last year when I took him as my guest. Of course I laid on such a spread of buns for him, that he looked overwhelmed, and embarrassed to tell me he thinks my work wonderful, but he is not sure if he has a market for me yet. He will keep trying though, and I must take hope of having one more ally, and this one international. Poor Henry was laid up in the next room with a heavy head cold, so our conversation was punctuated by Henry's coughs and sneezes. As soon as Ellery left, I made Henry sit over a bowl of steaming creosote with my Vicuña shawl draped over his shoulders.

Autumn has crept up on us this year with a suddenness of spirit that I have not seen for many years. Perhaps I was too wrapped up in my own troubles to see it coming from a distance. I noticed the conkers, but did not notice the leaves turning. All of a sudden, the Heath is dressed in her gown of gold, shimmering with reds and yellows that take my breath away. All except the hawthorn, which does not appear to change colour – it just grows sparser, but the evidence below points to orange leaves. The rest of the world is turning amber. There is a good bite in the air already – it is as if overnight, as the calendar moved from September to October, the cold wind blew in from the East and brought with it the need for shawls and mittens.

13TH OCTOBER 1924, HAMPSTEAD

The Grove is bleak at present. I may have managed to pay off some of my creditors, but that then leaves little for the day to day running of the household. I have limited the amount of hours I spend in the house due to the need to heat the place, so instead I go out and wander the streets and the heath, keeping myself occupied, and then return in time to welcome Henry home from school. His first task is always to light a small fire in the kitchen. So far this week we have burned our way through as much firewood as I could gather on the Heath without eliciting too many stares. Henry started it off nicely with letters and manuscripts, since we have no other

paper to make fire starters with. I felt a pang as he did so, but he tried to cheer me with, 'Never mind, Mary. They do get a good fire up!' and I realised it was the most cheerful I had seen him in a while. It makes me wonder if his cheerfulness came from seeing my work burn. Does it bother him that I still write, while he has settled into life as a master? If we were closer, I might have been able to ask him, but I do not want to prod at a sore spot and get a snarling scratch in return.

We have suddenly been dropped into the middle of autumn. Nature has pushed the lever with force, and the wheel has turned one more notch onwards.

16TH OCTOBER

St. John has come through with another review. He has me reading Hugh Walpole's *Young Man Merciful* – *The Old Ladies* and it is a fine piece of writing. One would imagine that any elderly lady who came within the radius of Hugh Walpole's boyhood must have unconsciously suffered a devastating, yet not unkind analysis. It reminds me of Mrs. Colindale who used to take tea with Mother back at the house when father was teaching. I was always rather resentful of the fact I had to sit and keep quiet whilst she and Mother talked of the church flower rota, or who was next due to host the charity evening. Whenever the icy chill of meanness froze her soul (for there was always one lady in the room who said an unkindness) she would wistfully say, 'I think I will go to Newton Abbott.' The warm airs of youth blew at Newton Abbott, golden suns shone there, enchanted moons, unfrozen stars, just as they do for me at Lyth Hill.

There are no such warm airs in Hampstead. In the house I am bundled up in several layers, and reduced to digging the potatoes from the garden. The thick clay soil may not have given me much of a yield of other things, but I can coax potatoes out of the poorest earth. These at least keep me going, while Henry gets his nourishment at school. And I have never needed much food.

1ST NOVEMBER 1924, HAMPSTEAD

Macmillan has at last come back to me.

'Dear Mrs. Webb,

Thank you for your recent correspondence.

It is with deepest regret...' and so it continues.

Precious Bane will not be published in America yet.

Mr. Cape has said he will categorically not pay me any more advances, but I have managed to persuade him to let me have proofreading work. It is piece rate, paid by the page, and at least this is keeping me occupied, and bringing the promise of money. The main problem is that this then keeps me away from my own writing.

This morning looks like the pure essence of autumn on the Heath. Yellow and gold, showing through the mist, and the spiders had been hard at work overnight, weaving their silks of silver across the stems and hedges. Each rose stem was spun with silver, each evergreen draped in veils, like Miss Havisham's table brought to life. This morning held that feeling of snow – a sort of hushed reverence that cloaks the world. A feeling of magic in the air.

Late this morning, a retired soldier knocked on the door at the Grove and asked for help. He was severely disabled in Flanders, and while he was lucky enough to come home, he now finds it impossible to work. I gave him my sincerest best wishes and five pounds, and then realised, after he left, that the money I had given him was due to feed us for the next few weeks. I will have to see what I can eke out of what remains in the larder and the garden. Of course, if it were spring I could go out on the Heath and gather wild garlic and dandelion leaves, but it is winter in every regard.

10TH DECEMBER

Good news! St. John wants to include some of my poems in an anthology. I always love to see the poems published, more than the reviews. The bad news is that I won't see it until twelvemonth hence as he still must collect the others. He tells me that so far, he has Kipling, Lawrence, Hardy, Yeats, Joyce and Walter de la Mare. Me! Amongst those men whom I have admired for so long. St. John has selected 'An Old Woman' and 'Foxgloves'. How I would love my own volume one day.

15TH DECEMBER 1924, HAMPSTEAD

Proofreading and writing and attending events have kept me thoroughly busy.

Last month I submitted another piece to St. John. 'The Authoress in Fiction'. He gave me a trio of lady novelists – Ethel Sedgewick, VH Friedlander and Constance Smedley. I am growing a little tired of novels written about lady novelists by lady novelists. Cannot we Moderns (for it seems that is what we are) band together and make a solemn oath never to let the self-conscious lady writer into our books? Surely there is someone else we could be writing about?

Yesterday I attended the Dickens Fellowship Christmas party, and it was such a hoot. I had spent so long preparing my costume, for I went dressed as Madeleine from *Nicholas Nickleby*, that I even had a portrait taken to remember it by.

Christmas looks to be a gloomy affair this year, without Mother. Henry is still planning to go to Weston-Super-Mare as he does each year, even though I begged him to include me in his plans for once. When I asked him last week, I expected him to be more relenting, as it is my first Christmas without either of my parents.

'What is it you want me to do, Mary?' he asked me, clearly irritated.

I tried to persuade him to come home to Spring Cottage with me, but when I suggested it, he just shrugged, and gave no other answer.

So I wrote to Olive and the others instead, and we are all planning to meet in Chester. It will be strange to be there without Mother. But better than being alone.

The trees are stubbornly gripping the last of the crisp, dry leaves, just as I am holding on to Henry.

DECEMBER 25TH, 1924, CHESTER

A quiet day today with Olive, Kenneth and Mervin. Douglas is still in Canada, and Muriel is visiting with her husband's family in Wales. So the four of us settled in. We went to the midnight service at St. John the Baptist's last night. It was quite high church, right down to the heavy scent of frankincense in the air when the priest came through with the smoking thurible. But the church was so pretty, all lit by candle light, and it did make me feel more festive. Until then I had been so inside myself. I found myself looking with wonder around the church as we stood singing carols, our breaths visibly writhing away from us in the dim light. The outside is all built with local red sandstone. But inside, where the original Norman features survive, the nave is a creamy white, and gothic, and overhung with two enormous brass chandeliers. The stained glass is so vibrant – in daylight it is a riot of colour, and, although it is dimmed by nightfall, it holds a special magic when lit by the pulsing glow of the candles. And all around, standing in shadowed alcoves, are the ancient effigies, some as old as the ruined chapel in the churchyard – faded, faces worn smooth and featureless by time, and watching over the proceedings with silent intent. I can feel the life they exude; there is a sentience there, even if most would never know it. It is as if they absorb a piece of the many lives that pass before them, and this gives them a life of their own.

Mother always came here. If I came to stay and did not accompany her to church each Sunday she became most exasperated, so although I rarely attend a service anywhere else, I would always go with Mother. While I can appreciate the comfort that it gave her, my vision of deific power is not confined to the sandstone walls of a transept. Its altar is not set with candles and golden objects of great worth; it walks with me in the woods and the fields. It whispers in the night to me, and calls me out in the darkness before the dawn. If only the mortal world could live up to this vision of the divine.

As I stood in St. John the Baptist's, shoulder to shoulder with both Olive and Mervin, I began to miss the open spaces where I commune. I did not take the sacrament, as it would have been hypocritical to have lined up with the others, and Olive looked slightly scandalised by this. But she knows me well enough not to argue with me. Instead I chose to close my eyes and quest out, feeling a presence in that place in spite of all the dogma, not needing a priest to intervene on my behalf. I am my own priestess.

NOTEBOOK SEVEN – 1925

2ND JANUARY 1925, CHESTER

A new year has begun, and one without a single telephone call or telegram from Henry. Usually, he at least sends me a message to say, 'Happy New Year, old girl!' Not this year. I feel heartbroken.

3RD FEBRUARY 1925, HAMPSTEAD

Despite the patchy start to the year, things seem to be improving and I can see a light on the horizon, although it feels too far away. St. John Adcock has asked me to write regularly for *The Bookman*! We met for tea last week and he had his daughter Almey with him, such a lovely girl. We got along very well. On first impressions he appears quite stern, but underneath it all there is a twinkle in his eye which may not be immediately obvious to a casual observer, which Almey seems to elicit with such ease. He reminds me a little of my Father, which immediately makes me like him. I have spent the last week formulating my next six months in my mind, for it is always good to have a plan for the year, even if I digress along the way and find other things to do. I have also decided that this year I will begin my next book. I absolutely must!

Home is still strained. Henry is there a little more at least, but he is distracted with plans for the open-air theatre and doesn't always hear me when I speak to him. This leads to more irritation, as when he does not respond, I have to repeat the question two or three times before he says to me, 'I am sorry, Mary. Did you say something?'

I will repeat again, and it is hard to keep the crossness from my voice, so he always thinks I am the one maddened with him and being bellicose.

He is all set to begin work on the theatre as soon as the earth is defrosted enough for him to start digging. I think that gives me a month or so to try to persuade him to take a directorial role more than one of labour, but each time I broach the subject, he gives me short shrift, a sigh or an exasperated tutting, and he leaves the room. The warm companionship we used to feel has fled the place, and instead we are left with tense silence at best, and bitter arguments at worst. I can't remember the last time he touched me or had any interest in me at all. I know all marriages have periods of challenge and they can fade into companionable friendship, but this is neither of those things. I am afraid he will leave me. I am afraid he hates me. I don't know how to reach out to him without irritating him even more.

I know some husbands are physically cruel and beat their wives, and thankfully he has never done that. But this emotional distance, the coldness of it, is crippling. Now when he talks of our early years (which he rarely does) I get the feeling he feels as if I ensnared him – the implication is that it was my doing. And yet we both ensnared each other. There is a permanent feeling of unease in my stomach. Lord knows, my digestive system has never been my friend, but now it is incorrigible.

I must take hope. Outside, the world is in a state of promise. We are not yet released from winter, but spring tells us she is surely not far away. Daffodil shoots are pushing their way up through the cold earth, catkins dangle from the branches like jewellery on the London ladies' earlobes. But for now, the paths are still choked in thick mud, and the colours are muted. Browns, moss green and russet.

15TH FEBRUARY 1925, HAMPSTEAD

A light, continual sprinkling of snow this morning. Yesterday was so bitterly cold, that today I have an extra hidden layer of woollen long johns under my skirts, stolen from Henry's wardrobe. The first buds are just beginning to appear on the tips of the branches. Today the ripening spears are fattening at the tip, ready to burst into yellow. All around the lawns little buds of purple and yellow as the crocuses emerge, and little clusters of snow drops. For weeks now I have been watching the squirrels lining their nests in the hollows of the plane trees. They struggle to climb the knotted trunks with a mouthful of evergreen or dried leaves, unnoticed by the passers-by on Haverstock Hill.

I met with St. John this morning to discuss the next series of articles for *The Bookman*, and we were both completely in agreement about what we want. Some reviews, but also some extended articles on writers of my choosing. Sometimes the writing I do has the feeling of being more for earning a wage, but this will be so exciting. I will start straightaway. I love being able to throw myself into work, as I can at least find peace and distraction between the pages.

He has given me a fine selection to look at — *The Romantic Tradition* by Beatrice Kean Seymour, *Soames Green* by M.R. Larmine. I started straight away on the Seymour and have been reading all afternoon. At first glance, it shows great promise, but I get a sense that she keeps holding back. There are delectable things to be had in the house of Beatrice Seymour's mind, if only she will not keep the cupboard so severely locked. One good sentence, but the rest clumsy. The sentence? 'The dews of mortality are abroad, and settling heavily'.

21ST FEBRUARY, ST. LEONARDS

Henry has been away to Weston-Super-Mare. I couldn't face another stay in a room alone in Weston-Super-Mare while he stays with his mother, so I instead I took the chance to come to St. Leonard's to visit with Minoni instead. Sometimes it is only when you experience a feeling that you realise it has been missing in your life for so long. I feel cherished by Minoni in a way that I have greatly missed — Mother was not a natural maternal soul, unlike Minoni. Henry used to cherish me, but has apparently lost that ability.

The weather has stayed crisp but dry, so Minoni and I have spent the last few days walking down to the sea front and talking from sunrise to gloaming. We have had so many years to catch up on, and yet, I feel as if it were yesterday that Mother sent her away. A governess should be so much more than a paid employee; I always feel a sense of shame at how she was so readily removed from our presence, just because Mother had decided she wanted to be mistress of the house again. But, naturally, Minoni is too good natured to hold that against us and has been nothing but open and warm to me. I often wondered if her nature was better suited to father than Mother's was, yet then I begin to feel disloyal.

3RD MARCH 1925, LYTH HILL

A few days away to catch up with work. Henry breaks ground next week, and I will return to London to make sure I am there for him.

The first primroses this week nestled in a bank behind Spring Cottage. A day of blue skies overlaid with white clouds that shimmer on the mere. A single Canada goose sat floating across the surface, calling out to the other absent geese. Each call had him straining his body forwards, wisps of breath escaping from his beak like puffs of white from a steam engine.

This month I am working on two pieces. An extended gallery for *The Bookman* on Morton Luce — it feels redemptive since I was unable to review his poetry for *The Spectator* last year, and his work was such a comfort to me after Father died. He shall have a full two pages, apparently. I am rereading his *New Idyllia* and simply in awe of his words. One of Morton's gifts is his delicate perfection of form. This is my favourite so far:

A flowering rhapsody — mere syllables
 Burst into blossom in our ears
 Yet more —
 I speak it boldly — nearer to my heart
 The unbidden weed that blows by stream or field
 And spells the homely prattle of its name
 Than all the titled blooms which flaunt and stare
 The stiffened slaves of art. Nature came first,
 Comes last.
 Therefore to-day even the Ideal
 Makes holiday among forget-me-nots,
 Smells the sweet turf, falls back upon the breast
 Of the Earth Mother; thus my heart recalls
 Its dewy morn, and into yonder flood
 I cast my weight of years.

If I opened any random page, the words would be just as sweet. It is simply distracting. But I must also concentrate as I am also working on a review — *The Goat and the Compass* by Martin Armstrong and I like it very much. He is so original & fascinating — he has a way of seeing the world differently and making me question what I am seeing. Also, *The Twelve Saints* by Ruth Manning-Saunders (witty).

14TH MARCH 1925, HAMPSTEAD

Work has started on the outdoor theatre, and oh! I am miserable. It is just as I thought it would be. Henry was distracted and late before, but now he arrives home, dirty and exhausted and aching. He will hurt himself; I know he will, and then where shall we be? I have tried to reason with him, but he will not hear me. He just remains tight lipped, silent as an empty church.

21ST MARCH 1925, HAMPSTEAD

The first day of spring, and yet I do not feel my usual delight in seeing the daffodil flower heads emerging from their sleep. The birds are singing just as sweetly as ever, but I cannot find solace with them.

My stomach is almost constantly giving me discomfort – pain and burning. I have tried only eating bread and scrape with a cup of weak tea, but it still pains me. I don't have anyone to confide in about this. I must try to think of other things.

Henry comes home tired and covered in dirt, only to sit by the fire and put his nose in a book. Apparently, work is continuing well on the theatre, although when I ask about coming to see it, he tells me, 'Not now, maybe later.' There was a time when I was part of every dream that Henry had, and involved in all of his plans. These days I get mostly silence. He doesn't even read little snippets of his books to me as he once did. Some evenings, the crackle of the fire makes more conversation than we do.

13TH APRIL 1925, HAMPSTEAD

My stomach has calmed down again, at last, so I was able to attend the first of my Bookman Lectures this week with May Sinclair and the Lynds. It was so inspiring. It was about how the teaching of English Literature in schools should be more progressive; to fit with what is happening in literary circles. I went home full of ideas, and wanting to talk them all over with Henry, since he teaches. I thought he might be as inspired as I was. But he barely raised an eyebrow, and I could not think of a way to enthuse him more.

He tells me work will be completed in a month or six weeks.

The woods are starting to look so green; it makes me ache to see them again. As long as the leaves unfold each year, I have a seed of hope remaining that things will improve, and I will find my way back to peacefulness. I keep hearing the playful chirping of the swallows, although I can't see them yet for it is far too early. I have faith that they will return from their African adventures soon. Bluebells linger, and rhododendrons are flowering already.

21ST APRIL 1925, HAMPSTEAD

I attended a gathering held by May Sinclair at her club this evening. It was wonderful — who should I be sitting next to but Evelyn Underhill? I blushed when I realised who she was, and, having sat for a moment in awkward silence, I exclaimed how much I had enjoyed her book on mysticism. From there we talked non-stop all evening. She was particularly interested when I described for her how I write my stories. She said the long brooding is something she has encountered before, but she asked me how challenging it is for me to find the quiet spaces I need in nature when I am in London. I told her that is why I must return home to the hill at regular intervals. While the Heath is a beautiful piece of paradise in this vast city, it's not somewhere I can get the solitude I need to keep my writing process topped up. I wish that Henry still felt that way about it.

23RD APRIL 1925, HAMPSTEAD

May Sinclair telephoned to me today to ask how my evening had been with Evelyn. How canny of her – of course she sat us both together deliberately. May is so well connected in London, if she weren't so generous in her time and influence, I might despair of ever reaching her level. She knows Virginia Woolf on a first name basis, as well as Ezra Pound, Hilda Doolittle and, before she died, Katherine Mansfield, yet she is so modest. She said last night that the one thing she cannot bear is being interrupted while working, or people sharing details of her personal life.

20TH MAY 1925, HAMPSTEAD

The unveiling of the open-air theatre was last night. All of the school masters were there, with their wives dressed up in their best church-going outfits. The headmaster cut the ribbon, and we went into the space, cooing and smiling at the sight of it. It is smaller than I imagined. When I said this, Henry tersely said, 'Well, what did you expect, Mary? We are in Golders Green, not in the wilderness with empty land around us.'

And then I had to mentally kick myself for the next few hours about how insensitive I had been, and how unthinking. Some days I open my mouth and wonder at the stupidity of what tumbles out of it.

After twenty minutes or so of following behind Henry at a distance, as one person after another came up to congratulate him, we were all ushered into a seat to watch a group of children performing some extracts – the scene where Cleopatra talks of her Antony, which was performed by a young blond girl. She was clearly far too young, but I can see how the role might draw one to it. She did have remarkable presence on stage, although she stumbled over a line once or twice. Henry seemed most absorbed in the scene, and when I tried to whisper to him about how well the sound carried in the amphitheatre, he just said, 'shhhh!'

It must have been the excitement of seeing his project come to fruition.

Later, we had more Shakespeare – Titania and Bottom in the Wood, and some music. The choir sang a sweet rendition of 'Down in the Valley'. It was a triumph all round, for Henry and the Headmaster. After an hour or so of mingling, I felt a headache descending, and so I left Henry bathing in the praise, and walked home across the Heath. The woods were quiet this evening, and I did not pass a single human soul on the path. The air was cool, but the breeze in the newly opened leaves was a tonic for the soul. I stopped for a while and sat on an old tree stump, and just allowed myself to enjoy the feeling of air coming in and out of my lungs, breathing in rhythm with the leaves. And just for a few moments, I found peace, freedom and re-union with the divine. When I heard a rustling in the undergrowth, opened my eyes, and there stood a fox in front of me, the copper and white fur of its patchwork coat almost luminescent in the dim light of the wood. It sniffed the air for a moment and gave me a bold glance as if to challenge me to a chase.

When I was younger, I might have risen to the challenge, but these days I feel that my energy levels are so diminished. They must be carefully conserved and doled out, piece by piece. I simply sat, breathless, in case he should take fright and flee. We sat like this for several minutes, Reynard and I. And then, just as quickly as he arrived, he left, his brush floating out behind him as if it moved independently. There was a heavy threat of rain in the grey cloud cover, so I made my way home, suddenly bereft of him, as if I had lost a friend.

21ST MAY 1925, HAMPSTEAD

Last night, Henry didn't come home for hours, and even when I heard him come into the house, it was an hour or more before he turned in. I stayed upstairs in bed, listening to the sounds of him moving around downstairs, and I hesitated to join him. Once I may have gone down and talked over the triumph of the evening with him, but he seldom wants to share with me these days. So I remained tucked under the blankets, eyes wide open in the darkness, watching the shadows of the trees swaying across the flowered wallpaper; grey, pink, white and green, all muted by the night, but lit by the glow of the street lamp outside garden wall. It never really gets dark in London, even up here in Hampstead. The glow of the old arc lamps in the city below floods the night sky with a glow, covering over the light of the stars. We used to go out into the garden together on Lyth Hill, and spread a blanket out on the grass (since Henry hated to get grass stains on him) and stare up at the stars, having a contest to see who could identify the most obscure of the constellations. We could see the fierceness of stellar space spread out in front of us on the canvas of the night sky. My favourite thing to see was always the Milky Way, its broad brushstroke painted across the stars, all the while feeling the warmth of togetherness, of family, even though it was just the two of us, and there were no children to grace us with their curiosity and love. The two of us were whole then. I always allowed Henry to name the last constellation, knowing it before he named it.

13TH JUNE 1925, LYTH HILL

Separate lives.

I attend lectures and talks and literary gatherings when I am in London, while Henry's life is taken up with school, and theatre productions and private tuition. Most nights he is out dining with other masters or tutoring pupils.

This diminishes me. Even though I try to become a whole person in my own right, I always know that something is missing.

Rereading *Tess* this week put me into despair. I used to read Hardy, knowing that his view of marriage was so brutal, so tragic and so different to mine; it was the only way in which he and I diverged in our opinions. When Angel Clare rejected Tess for her failings, when Clym Yeobright's adoration for Eustacia Vye was tarnished by her lack of grace, when Bathsheba Everdene was so ill used by her proud husband, and loved by Gabriel Oak, I always knew it was Hardy's own voice creeping through but I believed not all marriage was destined to be so disappointing and disappointed. It seems I was wrong.

Rereading Elizabeth von Arnim's *Enchanted April* for pleasure, and realising that, unlike in the book, even a stay in a real San Salvatore would not redeem us now. My greatest fear is that he has stopped trying altogether. The thought that wakes me in the middle of the night with a gasp is that he will leave me, that one day I will wake entirely on my own in the world. What would become of me then? Without Henry, what would be left of me?

21ST JUNE

The article I wrote on Morton for *The Bookman* gallery was published this week, and he was so pleased, he telephoned to me to say a hearty thank you for my work. We had chatted well for a full twenty minutes before he asked after Henry, and I had to tell him he was not here.

30TH JUNE 1925, HAMPSTEAD

Today I met with Caradoc after he had finished work, and we walked our usual route through Victoria Gardens and along the Embankment, watching all the busy lives spent on the Thames. We stopped for a while by Cleopatra's needle, and just watched the world floating by. It is strange, but there was an offering of flowers left by the needle, as if it were a memorial or a sacred place. I wonder what goes on in this city that I don't know about. There is talk in Bloomsbury of secret societies and strange ceremonies taking place behind closed doors in secret temples. Henry used to be fond of attending gatherings in Weston-Super-Mare, and he used to try and persuade me to join with some of the ladies, but I shied away from it then, just as I do now. I just don't see myself being part of a crowd-mind in that way, particularly when it comes to my mysticism. I asked Caradoc what he thought of it, and he laughed. 'Can't see myself dressed in an apron just yet, dearie!' he said, and then we moved on.

Exciting news from Caradoc — he has written a play, called 'Taffy'. It's about his experiences growing up in the Valleys and he says it is quite wickedly funny, and rather close to the bone. He had problems when it was published last year with Welsh ministers openly burning copies of it on the steps of their churches and chapels, which, of course, Caradoc says he was most amused by. He handled it with far more aplomb than I did when my books were burned in Salopia. Caradoc has concluded talks for the play to be put on at the Royalty Theatre in Soho. The opening night is set for September 9th. He said that I must come to the first performance, and, 'You make sure, Gladys, that you make a really special gown for the first night party.'

How exciting. I rarely go to theatrical productions, and never in the West End.

Once we had tired of the life on the water, we wandered over to Charing Cross Road and browsed among the booksellers, and then took tea in his club.

5TH JULY 1925, LYTH HILL

Housebound. So ill with stomach cramps. I even struggled to sit in the garden today, much less go anywhere else. The only consolation was a lovely letter from Olive.

25TH JULY 1925, HAMPSTEAD

Henry has a new student for private tuition, and it has put a bit of a spring in his step. He is more cheerful now. He helped me to dig out the weeds in the garden this weekend and was whistling as he worked. We talked more easily than we have for some time. He took me out to lunch on Sunday at a café on Heath Street, and then we walked across the Heath. It's been a while since he let me show him my favourite places. We walked down to the pond, and he even suggested that we should come back another day with our bathing things. I think I shocked him when I told him I have already swum in the ladies' pond on several occasions, and that he should

try it as it is invigorating. I always enjoyed a dip in the mere with my brothers and sisters, but then, we were always alone together there, and tended not to be seen. He laughed then and told me I still have the capacity to surprise him. I think I had lost the taste for bathing in ponds in recent years, possibly because Mother and Olive often talked of activities like that not being seemly for a married woman. Londoners do swim in the ponds though, so it didn't feel like I was doing anything wrong. If anything, it felt deliciously wicked. There are ladies on the Heath who swim all year round, even in winter. 'What larks, Pip!' If Henry takes to it, it would be good to find something that he and I could do together, something that is just ours again. Maybe it would encourage him to spend more time with me.

4TH AUGUST 1925, HAMPSTEAD

Rehearsals have begun on 'Taffy'. I longed to go with Caradoc to watch them, but he doesn't want me to see anything of the play until they are ready for the actual performance. He is being so secretive!

Still no success with finding a publisher in America. I have been writing to countless publishers and they all return the same mimeographed response. 'Dear Mrs. Webb, thank you for your enquiry, we regret Blah blah'. I feel like giving up.

The Heath is basking in heat today. A heavy, vibrating haze sat over all the paths, even the most shaded were baking. I inadvertently overheated myself standing by the side of the lake near the viaduct, and then felt quite unwell when I came home. I was watching dragonflies dancing on the surface of the water – they are always so helpful in allowing me to slip away from the conscious world for a while — and then a rat moved among the shrubbery by the side of the lake and it brought me back down to earth.

The sickness means no supper for me this evening, as the thought of food turns my stomach. Thankfully Henry had supper at the house of his pupil. He must have had a good day, as he was quite chirpy when he came home, and didn't seem to notice I was gripping onto the arms of the wooden kitchen chair trying not to be sick. It has subsided now, and I am sure by morning I will be better.

9TH AUGUST

Reviewing *Daimon* by E.L. Grant Watson – there is in the human heart a kind of love – spiritual, exotic and strange – which for a lack of a better phrase may be called geographic passion. A beautiful book. I felt I had found a kindred spirit.

15TH AUGUST 1925, HAMPSTEAD

Ned has suggested I try Duttons in New York. He thinks I will have a more favourable response from them. I must write at once.

1ST SEPTEMBER 1925, HAMPSTEAD

The first day of September, and already autumn is curling its way in around the edges. This morning there was a mist rising over the Heath, although by nine or so it was already dispersing as the day grew warmer.

No word from Duttons. I have been distracting myself with another gallery piece for *The Bookman*, this time on Helen Prothero Lewis's latest work. Mr. de la Mare once propounded to me the conundrum when we were at Anerley, 'What is it that best sellers and geniuses sometimes have in common, which holds the imagination of the everyday reader?'

I hazarded "humanity" and he smiled as if in agreement, although I am not sure it was the word he was originally thinking of.

Lewis put me in mind of Sir Edmund Gosse, Dickens, and Dante. She only needs to feel a little more deeply the nature ecstasy, the 'hiraeth' to do really fine work of this kind, for one feels that the rapture, the passion, the grief of the mountains are in her soul and only need expression.

I met with Caradoc yesterday for our weekly tea and perambulation and he is full of exciting talk of theatre. It is a language I have never spoken before – upstage, downstage, flats, squibs, costumiers, props and sets, and lighting. I think I may like to learn it – it sounds so rousing. It has never occurred to me to write a play. Perhaps I will try after *Taffy*.

9TH SEPTEMBER 1925

Tonight was the opening, and my goodness, what enchantment. I have never in my life experienced anything as thrilling. Ned and I were given seats in one of the boxes, and from the moment that the curtain rose, I was entranced. I felt like a child at the circus, watching the acrobats on the high wire for the first time. The performance did elicit loud voices of protest, which Caradoc had thought it may, but not enough to disrupt the performance. There were a few shouts in Welsh, from the audience, and then as the curtain fell, someone gave a rousing chorus of a verse sung in Welsh. Ned and I had a moment of shock before breaking into laughter. But, oh, the best part was still to come. Caradoc met us in the foyer, took us behind the scenes and gave us a tour backstage. The whole experience was so phenomenal. From our seats in the box everything looked so polished, and seeing behind the scenes did not dim that experience – it only made it more charming. There is a whole world back there that the audience knows nothing about. The rooms filled with costumes, and the props, and the lighting, and the dressing rooms. It was wonderful. I will try my hand at writing a play. It must be possible to switch from novel writing to being a playwright, surely? Perhaps this will allow me to lift the fetters that have held my writing down for the last twelve months or so.

When I came home, I expected Henry to scold me for being out so late, but when I got here the house was in darkness still. I wonder where he has got to.

Still no word from Duttons.

2ND OCTOBER

A combined review again. *More Culloden Papers* – Duncan Warrand, *The Dancer's Cat* – C.A. Nicholson, which feels different since I know her in person. How does one review the work of a person with whom one is acquainted? Do I hold back and write platitudes, or say what I really feel? I fear Mrs. Nicholson shows a tendency

to develop a 'disease complex', having one or two people sick in every book, and it makes me a little tired. This made *The Dawn Fulfilled* very painful. If one is well, it is not necessary to brood about sickness. If one is ill, it is suicidal to do so.

St. John sent the first copies of *The Treasury of Living Poets*, and it looks very fine.

NOVEMBER 3RD

Feeling a little overstretched. I reviewed five books this month, and I fear I have taken on too much. My head is pounding with words. I have no time for anything else, and yet, there is a verse that took me away from my work and held me in its lines until I had made them whole.

Alone

The lonely cuckoo calls
 With a long hollow sound among the rocks
 Of sun-touched sandstone, and the echo falls
 Between the straight red pines to me, and knocks
 Upon my heart again and yet again.
 It thrills me
 With some mysterious mingled joy and pain
 That slumbers in the echoing refrain
 And stills me.
 If only you were here,
 We'd go together through the buckler-fern
 And watch the nuthatch climbing to his dear;
 Then — so that you might follow — I would turn,
 And, smiling, mount the steep, and leaning so
 Above you, you, laughing kiss with eyes a-glow.
 Await your dream — you do not even know
 Ah! foolish dream — you do not even know
 I love you.

NOTEBOOK EIGHT – 1926

13TH JANUARY 1926, HAMPSTEAD

A terrible row with Caroline Nicholson. She was not happy with my comments in the last review, and we have had an angry exchange by letter, and an even angrier one by telephone. She had the cheek to say I might be less ill if I looked after myself properly! How dare she. Why would another person feel they could comment on my health? When I told her I am struggling with money, and being frugal is an economic necessity, she then went on to ask how I can afford to have a telephone in the house when I can't afford a varied diet and proper medical care. That telephone is essential to my work. I was so angry, when she finally asked me how the novel was progressing, I am afraid I told a terrible lie, and said it was finished, and that it would be published later this year by Messrs Robert Holden under the name *A Strong Man Armed*.

I feel like such a failure.

JANUARY 15TH

Working again to distract myself from the hideousness of not being able to work on my own book. *Glorious Apollo* by E. Barrington was an effective diversion.

FEBRUARY 3RD

Henry will only talk about his pupil. When I start talking about my own interests, he gazes off into the distance, as if he has already left the room. How can I compete with that? Reading *Hangman's House* by Donn Byrne for a review. Dialect is not convincing. One of the characters puts me in mind of the girl. An irritating little fool, selfish, deceitful, feliney feminine, who wants whipping instead of the cream. But he also writes of fox hunting, and in that matter, I wish I were a witch to cast a spell on him and lure him to a tall haunted mountain I know, nearly 2,000 feet nearer to god than most folk's dwellings. Then I would turn him into a little red fox with anxious amber eyes and a very quick troubled pulse, and hear the scattered notes of questing hounds, and think 'teach him to glorify fox hunting!' And then – why then I should remember his really exquisite style and disenchant him just in time. Donn Byrne should have a future. He could write like a demon or a seraph. He might, in middle age, even write like a god, but not while he glorifies such violence.

MARCH 15TH

Oh the humiliation! It is there in print in *The Bookman*!

'Mrs. Mary Webb has completed a new novel, *A Strong Man Armed*, to be published shortly by Messrs Robert Holden.'

Who wrote this column? The only person I had told was Caroline Nicholson. How will I ever show my face at the Bookman Circle?

3RD JUNE 1926

She is a child. She is a damned child. Why would he be spending all these hours in the company of a child of eighteen, this Kathleen?

'She is just a pupil,' he says. 'She is my pupil, and you have to understand that we need the income,' and the tail end of that sentence still hangs in the air, even though the words have not been spoken aloud since they were shouted and hissed at me the last time we rowed about this. The words that said my own work does not bring in the income to match the money that leaves our household. That I will insist on helping those who are desperate, even when we have so little. That I am a bleeding heart who will believe any sob story that presents itself at my door while he goes out to work and has to toil to earn that money. That by insisting that we keep Spring Cottage, which he will never go to now, and not being content to remain here in London where our life is, I am putting an extra strain on us. Here where our life is. What a joke that is. Here where she is, more accurately. This child who takes up all of his time and attention, and who he will not give up.

When I met her, she was quiet, this blonde child-Cleopatra. I remembered her from the theatre opening at the school. But he swears she is only his pupil, that there is no more to it than that, and yet he spends more time with her daily than with his own wife. Something in his reasoning with me doesn't quite add up, and yet he continues to strenuously deny my fears, and insists it is only my own paranoia.

'You need to get out more, Mary, instead of sitting in the house surrounded by piles of screwed up wastepaper,' because with all these thoughts whirling around in my poor exhausted brain, I cannot even write. I, whose only refuge left is in writing, can no longer write. And when I think of her perfect face, her clear skin and those deep blue eyes, framed by those blonde curls, cannot help but compare her to my own imperfect self. In the glass I look old, too thin and gaunt. My brown hair has lost its lustre, I am an old husk.

I walk alone on the Heath knowing that Henry is in the company of Kathleen. The ducklings and cygnets on the lake are growing bigger by the day; the sun is sprinting on to its full midsummer strength, and I dawdle alone, always striving to reach my own zenith, and never quite reaching it, and instead I shrink back down into myself.

Is it any wonder he would seek the company of another?

7TH JUNE

A letter to say I am to be awarded the Prix Femina for *Precious Bane*! I am speechless. It validates everything I have been trying to do.

The reviews are continuing apace, and I feel like I am learning how to write all over again. This month Martin Armstrong's *Desert* (a wonderful book) and last month *The Art of Thought* by Graham Wallas.

15TH JUNE 1926

I received the final notification of the evening to present me with the Prix Femina today. A letter arrived by mail, and I knew it was something lovely before I even opened it. Something about that quality of the

envelope – creamy and thick, with such neat writing on the outside. Good quality blue India ink, swirling across the blank space, filling it with such possibilities. When I opened it, the seal was perfect across the whole width, none of that cheap paper that doesn't quite close properly.

I am cordially invited to attend the Institute Francais on July 6th, and will be in the company of Rebecca West, among others. It will be wonderful to see her again, and I wish we could have been faster friends. The last time I visited it felt so awkward when I was told she was not in, when I knew she was. (I could hear her). We had had such engaging conversations about Graves' disease, since she said her mother suffered too. I felt she was so vital, so whole. I would have valued seeing her more. And of course, St. John will be there, so there will be more familiar faces. And it is to be presented by Sir Edmund Gosse. I so loved *Father and Son*, so different a study from my own father. And yet so tragically poignant when the love leaked through in spite of the barriers.

I am almost loath to ask Henry if he will come, we are so seldom civil these days. He still spends so many hours away from the house — he says he is walking alone on the Heath, but I don't believe him. I am sure there is a large kernel of something he is not sharing with me. But if I ask, I get hostility thrown back at me. It's like living with a snarling cat — when we talk we circle the room with our backs to the wall and facing each other, almost hissing at each other. Neither of us trusting the other enough to turn away, in case they should strike out with a claw.

Is what we had before redeemable? I don't think I know now. Once I would have said it was, but I think he has lost interest in building roads between us. I cannot build one alone, and he would have to stay in the same room as me for longer than a few minutes in order to do so. The only time he spends in my company is when he is asleep, and part of me holds on to that — at least when he is at his most vulnerable, he lies next to me. I hate this feeling of constant fear of loss. It leaves me feeling desperate and on edge — I am brittle and in danger of emotional collapse. And the writing makes me feel even more useless. This book will end me if nothing else does. I had such a clear idea of what I wanted to create when I started, something worthy of sitting alongside Kester and Prudence on a shelf, but however hard I try, the words just do not flow out of the pen in the way that they should. I think the effort of striving is actually making it worse.

Midsummer approaches, and soon after it the harvest at Lammas. John Barleycorn will be sacrificed again, but this year I fear my yield will be very meagre indeed. Barely enough grains to see me through the winter.

JULY 2ND 1926

Little time for writing, a blessing at least to give myself some respite from the novel, although I did another review for St. John, this time on anthologies. I have been making my gown for the Prix Femina presentation — the deepest shade of heliotrope, and I have been embroidering it solidly for the last two weeks. I have sewn a high collar. I must look quite lovely for my big moment. We have agreed that Henry and Kenneth shall both accompany me. My two favourite men both with me at the same event for the first time since our wedding.

At least when I have a needle in my hand I find a sense of peace that is not found in the pen at the moment. This latest book is sending me on a downward spiral. It feels more like writing poetry than prose. And yet when I have finished placing the words so carefully, the end result is not what I wanted. I hope my well of words has not permanently run dry.

6TH JULY 1926

It is late, and yet I really cannot sleep, despite the fact that Henry and Kenneth have gone to bed. Henry turned in almost as soon as we got back to the Grove, although Kenneth stayed up with me as long as he could. But tomorrow he must travel back to Chester, so when his eye lids started to droop, I sent him off just like I used to when he was a boy. (Short of tucking him in and telling him a story).

Now the house is quiet except for the odd creak of a floorboard, a little crackle of flames, the low snores from my furred friends, and the scratch of the fountain pen on this page. What a triumph this evening was! The Institute was very grand – lit by burning torches outside, and the French flag flying so cheerfully in the breeze. I felt quite Cinderella-like. There was even a red carpet leading us in through the portico and into the entrance hall. Chandeliers, heavy red velvet drapes, and the most enormous oil portraits on the walls of men in military dress looking very self-important. Kenneth took my arm and walked me into the main hall, where the presentation was to take place. The room was packed full of people, all dressed in their finest. And the speeches! They were wonderful. At first I felt a little embarrassed as I am not used to that level of attention, but then I remembered, this was my moment, my evening.

It's funny how my work is so well read in France, and yet still not as popular here. I wonder what it might take to get the English reading public to really embrace the books and love them as much as the French readers do.

Meanwhile, I am going to bask in the lovely feelings tonight brought for as long as possible. Nothing will make me feel bad. Not Henry, or that child he will not leave behind, or the debtors banging on the front door. They can all go to hell, for one night at least.

And tomorrow, I journey to Lyth Hill. My world is complete, even if only for a fleeting moment. Henry is to join me in a day or two once he has completed his tuition sessions. Perhaps then, alone in our special place, we can try and rebuild ourselves again. This house has cracks in the walls, and the wind is rushing through the gaps. We need to stop them up.

10TH JULY 1926

Oh, the agony! He's brought her here for goodness sake. What was he thinking?

Henry was later arriving than he promised he would be. I walked down to the station to meet his train, feeling cheerful and full of hope that we would at last be able to get back to us. The London train pulled in, and I waited for the doors to open, and for him to get off, but nothing. I stayed and waited the three hours until the next train, sure that he would be on it. Sitting alone on that platform, I tried to concentrate on the breeze lifting

and falling and fluttering the leaves all around me, and the sunlight warming my bones. And all the while my poor stomach was like a butter churner, going round and round of its own accord. The second train pulled in. And through the belching steam along the platform, I felt sure I would see the shape of Henry emerging from the grey gloom, but no. There was nothing. By then dusk was falling, and I knew there would be no more trains that evening, so I walked back up the hill, feeling quite wilted.

The next morning, I went again, to meet the midday train, certain that he would be on it, and he was. I was lifted, just for a moment, and then came crashing back down, because just behind him, peeking shyly around his shoulder was the girl. How dare he bring her here? This is our heaven together; it is not to be shared with just anybody, and certainly not with her. I was so lost for words, all I could do was gape at him and her, and...

'Come now, Mary, don't stare so. Please be more welcoming to our guest,' he said. And still I gaped. 'You remember Kathleen, don't you? Her parents and I agreed it might be good for her development to come and visit Shropshire, so here she is.'

At this point the girl-woman stepped out from behind him and reached out a gloved hand to shake hands with me. Somehow, I managed a tight 'how do you do' and then we began the walk up the hill. Henry arranged for the station master to deliver their cases; his small, since we leave most of our things here, so we don't have to carry lots when we travel, but hers like an ottoman. How long is she planning on staying? And what on earth is in it? And all the while, as we walked up the hill, they chattered together with the ease that we once had. She is taking him from me. Doesn't she know he is a married man? What kind of girl-woman sets out to steal another woman's husband like that?

Is she evil wearing the face of an angel, or is she just plain stupid? I can't decide. I never want to think of people being that unkind, and yet, I am clearly naïve. And all the while I am mired in agony, at a complete loss about what to do. He is persistently and wilfully blind to the anguish he is inflicting on me.

12TH JULY 1926

Huge rows. The humiliation. Yesterday I went alone to the Little Wood to try and find peace and communion once more, because I could not bear to sit and watch them chattering together for a minute longer, and he now tells me that the Little Wood is a sinister place, so full of whisperings. He used to love it there. As I sat beneath the old oak tree, listening to the whirring of the crickets in the long grass in the meadow, and the sigh of the breeze, I could hear voices not far off. Cold crept in as the voices came closer, and then there they were. Walking along the path, as close together as they could be, but not yet touching. She was carrying a bunch of slightly wilted poppies and meadowsweet in one hand, the sunlight glinting in her perfect blond hair, and the other hand shielded her eyes from the glare of the sun as she gazed up at him. And he. He was walking, chest puffed out and holding court about something, oblivious to my presence until they practically fell over me.

I have never before felt anything but love for Henry, no matter how hard things have been between us. Today was the closest I have come to feeling something other. My pulse was racing, and yet my body felt as cold as marble. And my mind was absolutely clear. I rose from my place, startling them both into silence.

‘Enough,’ I hissed at him. He looked shocked, as did she, but as she held up her cool white hand to her mouth in surprise, did I see the ghost of a smile pass across her features? Her eyes were deep as cornflowers, and fixed on my face, and they narrowed slightly, almost imperceptibly. He of course would not have seen it, as he gave his full attention to me for once. I stalked back to the house, and never looked back, even though I am sure I heard him call my name once, at least. When I got back I went inside and slammed the door behind me, trying to vent some of this fury, knowing that if I allowed him to see it, it might cause even more of a rift.

I stayed in our bedroom, pacing up and down the little room, feeling imprisoned by the walls papered in blue cornflowers, that I had once loved so much. Now they felt garish and dark. After a time, he followed me. I heard the garden door open, and listened hard for the sound of voices, but there were none. Only silence and the sound of single footsteps approaching. I don’t know where he had left her. He knocked, and came in. And despite all of my attempts to keep the fury reined in, it bolted away from me, unchecked and untameable.

‘How could you?’ I started. ‘How could you bring her here and let her see those places that are special to us, when you won’t even go there with me now?’

‘How could you be so rude, and so cruel, and so unkind to a guest in this house? It’s bad form. You must be mad, Mary, and now I fear for your sanity.’

A final slap of words that made my stomach sink even further. We rowed bitterly. All of the hurt, and the frustration, and the times that we have tried to keep a handle on the wild feelings of betrayal. We shouted ourselves out until there were no words left, only torrential tears. I howled and cried, and at last he fell silent. But rather than comfort me as he once would have done, he silently left the room and shut the door behind him. When I emerged from that unhappy cocoon, the girl was gone, and her belongings with her.

I went back into the bedroom, and I have stayed here for the rest of that evening. He must be sleeping elsewhere, as he has not come to bed. Husbands in Elfland are always Heroic, Romantic and Right. If only it were so in the real world.

14TH JULY 1926

Such days, I don’t know where to begin. He has gone. He has abandoned me, and I don’t know what to do, so I am London bound once more, my dreams of a happy summer together in tatters. The train that is carrying me is hot and stuffy, and I cannot breathe.

Yesterday morning, I awoke early and emerged from our bedroom just as the sun was breaking over the hills. There was no sign of Henry in the living room, so I checked the spare room, and he was there, stretched out on the bed, still dressed in his clothes from the day before. I longed to go and stroke his hair, but I was afraid to face his anger again.

I slipped away into the early morning sunshine, intending to go for a short walk down to the wood. I walked further than I had meant to and went down to Bomere instead. Something was drawing me on to sit by the still waters for a time, hoping to find some answers in its depths. I must have sat for an hour or more,

watching and waiting, and I found some peace, however temporary. I realised I needed to go back to the house to try and begin talks. We couldn't stay angry with each other forever, could we? My resolve hardened, I walked back up the hill, but when I reached the house, it stood silent, the windows all closed tight even though by now the morning was in full flow, and the sun was high in the sky.

I opened the door and was met with more silence, and the level of stillness a home only has when it is completely empty of all living souls. I called out his name, but there was no response. Cold started to creep in. Having not found him there, I ran out into the garden, and over to Mrs. Jeffrey's house. I am afraid in my distress, I hammered on the door with great alarm, even shouting out her name. There were times in the past that I cursed her, as she spends so much time sitting in her window watching the world from within, and then commenting on our comings and goings, but today I was grateful for her watchful eye.

'Mrs. Jeffrey! Mrs. Jeffrey, have you seen my husband?' I cried out.

Instead of coming all the way to the door, after what seemed like an eternity, for she is so frail now that she cannot move with speed, she came and opened the casement window in the front room and beckoned me over, greeting me as warmly as one may. All she could tell me was that she had seen Henry heading off down to the station, two hours or more before. As she said this my stomach gave a huge lurch, and I feared I might disgrace myself there in her front garden.

'Why Mrs. Webb, are you unwell? Here, let me get you a glass of water,' but by the time she would have returned, I was gone. I almost ran down to the station, arriving in a maelstrom of heavy breathlessness and tears. But it soon became apparent that Henry was long departed. The platform was empty, and I sank down to the ground and covered my face with my hands, and wept, not caring who saw me, or whether I was causing a scene. Mother would have scolded me brutally, had she seen me there. After a while, I heard the cheerful whistle of Mr. Reynolds, the station master, and went to find him. He was sweeping out the waiting room, and looked startled when he saw me, for I must have looked a fright, with the whole story written across my face. When I asked him if he had seen Henry, he shook his head sadly, and told me, 'He took the first London train, this morning. Didn't he leave you a note?'

I was too ashamed to tell him no. But even then, I was sure Henry would return to me. As Mr. Reynolds went about his daily business, I remained in the waiting room.

Afternoon drifted into late afternoon, and I was sure he must come back. Surely he would. But each London train arrived, and there was no Henry. Mr. Reynolds had long departed by now. I lay on the waiting room bench, the hard wood grinding against the bones of my arm and my thighs; in truth I have never been so physically uncomfortable. But I didn't care. I just did not care.

How long I slept would be anyone's guess, but it was a fitful sleep, disturbed by nightmares and my own distress. By the time the birds began to pick up their dawn song, I knew I could stay there no longer. Henry was gone, and he was not coming back. But where should I go? I did not want to be alone, because I knew I was not well. But who was safe? Who could I go to in this moment of tortured soul? I resolved to walk to Bayston, to see

the Young family. At least, Susan Young might be able to comfort me. As I walked north along the lanes, my feet were leaden, and I felt empty inside. I had to stop three times to be sick in the undergrowth, and by the time I reached their house all I wanted to do was collapse and die. But I knew I could not be alone. I rang the bell, and prayed that Susan would be home. I rang and I rang, but there was no answer for an interminable age, until at last a young girl came to the door, but she was not someone I know.

She looked startled, shy to be speaking to anyone, as if she were not supposed to be answering the door. Her hair was covered with a cotton scarf, and she held a broom in one hand, a smudge of dirt across her left cheek.

‘Ma’am?’ She asked.

‘I want to see Susan,’ I said. ‘Mrs. Young.’

‘I am sorry, I am afraid no one is home. They have gone to Edinburgh for two weeks.’

My heart sank once more. Would this day bring anything but awfulness and disappointment? She closed the door on me, and so I turned and walked back towards the village, not sure where I could go next. Then I remembered the new telephone kiosk in the village. There was such a big piece in the Shropshire Star when it was put in. I could telephone to one of my friends for advice.

Ned was away, I knew, so I telephoned to St. John, and he listened so patiently while I howled down the line to him. When my torrent of words began to ebb, he was so kind. He simply said, ‘Mary, you must come back to London at once. Henry is not an unreasonable man. Come home to London and try to talk to him. I will meet you at the station and drive you to Hampstead, if it helps?’

And he was right. So now, I am washed and tidied, and back on the London train. And not knowing what I will find.

15TH JULY 1926

Parleys.

16TH JULY 1926

He says he will not leave me. That we are still husband and wife. That he is not in love with her, and he is not walking out with her, but that she is just so vital, and inquisitive, and engaging. His eyes sparkled when he said that to me. But he promised he is still mine. His words told me he is mine. He swore he is not intending to leave me. And then he went out, leaving me to ponder the depths of my own fear. Why am I unable to face a life without him?

18TH JULY 1926

Still no change with Henry, despite all the words we gave each other. Still he barely acknowledges my presence, and still he is mostly absent. He claims he is not with her, but when he left the house today I followed him to her house.

1ST AUGUST 1926

Dinners with her parents, walks on the Heath with the girl. I should not refer to her as a child really. She is after all quite mature enough to know which kind of fire she is playing with. How can I compete with her? So fresh faced, so young, so vital. She is, in every way, my complete opposite. This is agony.

13TH AUGUST 1926

O the torment. I received a letter today from Mr. Wicksteed, Henry's headmaster. He had the audacity to write to me, urging me to 'release Henry' and let him start a new life. How dare he! How dare he write to me of such private, personal things when he has only met me in the most public and polite of settings? He does not know me. He does not have my confidence, so why should he say such a thing? And what on earth is Henry telling people?

I sat for a long while at the table in the kitchen holding that hideous missive in my hand, not knowing what to do, or what to say to Henry, or if I should respond. Should I confront him with it, and demand to know what it means? Should I howl, and shriek and throw things at him? Should I go and drown myself in the pond on the Heath?

As I heard the front gate click, and Henry's footsteps approaching the house, I threw the letter into the fire and watched it burn.

Tomorrow I must return to my writing. I must claw back some semblance of a life, before my body revolts completely and no longer allows me to.

20TH AUGUST 1926

Duttons have written to me to say they want to reprint my books in America, but the percentage they are offering me is not good. It is hard to feel enthusiasm when everything around me is so mired in dark weather. Even this fails to lift my spirits as it once would have.

28TH AUGUST 1926

Still struggling to form the words I need to write this damned book. Each day I sit with my pen in my hand, staring at a fresh page of my notebook in front of me, yet still I labour to pull each single sentence out. And my poor stomach does not allow me to take rest. Churning, vomiting, and awfulness. Mostly I hide it from Henry. But then if I stood in front of him and vomited on his shoes, I am not sure that he would notice. He has taken to coming in late and sleeping in the spare room, 'not wanting to disturb' me, he says.

4TH SEPTEMBER

Reading *Far End* by my dear friend, May Sinclair. If one were to ask from reading this one novel, 'Knowst Thou the Land?' she would answer in the affirmative. If only she would tell us where this village is to be found, deep drifted in magic. Then I could steal away to it, not by train or motor, nor even by aeroplane, for it is not to be found in a Baedeker travel guide. The skies are tender blue there, the gales are warm and hawthorn scented. And yet she writes with a great economy of words. A very simple attitude to life, and yet so tender. One of my better experiences in this city, meeting her. I think we have much to learn from each other. I wish I could run away to her village, for this one is not somewhere I want to be anymore.

13TH SEPTEMBER 1926.

So stupid. I fell today. I stood to go and get us some tea, for we were both sitting at home, each working in companionable silence for once. It almost felt like the old times. As I stood my head began to spin. Perhaps I stood up too quickly? The next thing I knew, I had fallen, and bumped my knee against the side table, and knocked my head against the floor. As Henry rushed over to right me again. I could feel a warm pool of blood, and my knee was bleeding profusely. So much so that Henry ran to next door to ask Mr. White to summon a doctor, before coming back. He lifted me on to the sofa with such tenderness I have not seen it in so long, that it completely undid me. I cried like a little child then. He took a towel from the kitchen and held it to my knee until the bleeding stopped.

When the doctor came he talked to me as if I were a little girl too.

'Dear, dear, Mrs. Webb, what have you been doing with yourself?' he smiled at me, and his eyes were kindly. 'Now you must rest, and eat something hearty when you can, and you will soon be better.' They covered me with a blanket where I was on the sofa, and Henry showed the doctor out. He was gone from the room for some time, and I could hear a murmur of voices in the room outside, but they spoke too low for me to catch even the smallest hint of what they spoke.

'An acute nervous prostration' the doctor said aloud, and he has recommended a 'home'.

When Henry came into the room again, he stroked my hair, kissed me on the forehead, and told me not to worry, that all would be well, and I would be better soon. I was so desperate to receive even this meagre kernel of tenderness, that, like an opium smoker after the pipe, it left me feeling more desperate for him than before.

20TH SEPTEMBER 1926

Still feeling weak after the fall. Ned came by and tried to cheer me up. He read to me from a new book by Sylvia Townsend Warner about a spinster who decides to become a witch. Everyone in Hampstead is talking about it, apparently. I was torn between feeling envious of the attention she is receiving and adoring the book. Her nature descriptions are rather wonderful, and her wit is sharpened to a point like the first green spears of spring flowers. I wonder if she is in London.

25TH SEPTEMBER 1926

Weak, but at least able to stroll across to Golders Hill Park and back. It seemed to take me an age to walk back, as I had forgotten it was all up hill and I was so out of breath. I am sure the air will be helping to rebuild my strength though.

3RD OCTOBER 1926

There is a talk on tonight at the P.E.N. Club, and all my friends will be there. I had fully intended to join them, but when it came to it, just as I was sitting on the kitchen chair preparing to put my boots on and lace them up, I could not quite summon the energy to do it. The thought of walking down the hill was enough to put me off, let alone going on the underground railway all the way to Goodge Street. My bed was more appealing. I stayed at home composing lines.

I am sure I will be well enough to re-join my normal life soon. But for now I will lie here, and escape into my fictional worlds instead. Tonight I am kept company by my most beloved, Christina Rossetti, and assured by the fact that she had the same illness as me. I have always loved her ability to harness the feeling of nature in her words. Strange to think that just a few years ago, she was walking the same streets of Bloomsbury that I have walked more recently. If only we might have crossed over in time, I should have liked to have met her and shared a companionable afternoon or two. I am sure if she were here we would compare notes on this sickness, and she would have relief to share with me, even if our religious proclivities were not alike. 'Goblin Market' has always been a favourite. But tonight there is another song whose words haunt my thoughts.

When	I	am	dead,	my	dearest,
Sing	no	sad	songs	for	me;
Plant thou no roses at my head,					
Nor		shady		cypress	tree:
Be	the	green	grass	above	me
With	showers		and	dewdrops	wet:
And	if	thou	wilt,		remember,
And if thou wilt, forget.					

By way of reply, I wrote these words to her, so small they seem:

Alone she came;
 None kissed her gown nor spoke her name.
 Indifferent all things stood –
 The wood, and the thick purple shadow of the wood;
 The long green hill;
 The tall green tree that sang when winds were still.
 Unseen she went;
 Nor had the trees presentiment –
 The hornbeam, with its weight
 Of years, and the young willow all disconsolate –
 That they must be
 Her mendicants for immortality

5TH OCTOBER

Dust on the Wind by C.A. Nicholson. Perhaps this time I should be kinder. I also saw the first advert for *The Treasure Ship* – 6/-net. So grateful to have been contributing work to these anthologies. Cynthia Asquith has been a very loyal and generous friend.

OCTOBER 19

I think I may have over-exerted myself working so furiously yesterday, for today I can barely lift my pen.

I trust that one day I shall wake up to find, like the bees, that I have built quite a large piece of comb and that it has honey in it.

7TH NOVEMBER

Working on a *Bookman* Gallery piece again – much longer than the usual reviews. I think I shall call it 'Our Immortal Jane'. It is blissful being able to indulge in my passion for Miss Austen (and call it work). Such a witty and overlooked writer. 'Romance novels' they call them. (That's probably what they will call me one day). And yet they miss the subtlety of her observations and her characters.

8TH NOVEMBER 1926

I keep stumbling across great swathes of yellow ash leaves on the path, as if the ash trees have held on as long as they could, and then thrown down all their leaves in a temper. A crisp walk this morning. Such weariness has taken me these last weeks; I could barely be bothered to walk far. There are storms outside tonight that will take away the last few remaining lime leaves, and it makes me feel grateful to be snug and warm on the inside. But I do long for the days I could step out in the garden at Lyth Hill and watch the storms raging in the valley below. Such a show of lightning and thunder that would whirl all around the hill, but never quite reach up its fingers to us on the top. And when the lightning cracks behind the Devil's Chair, it is worthy of its fiercesome name and its stories that echo round the county and beyond. One could imagine the horned one sitting atop his seat, conducting the elements in their performance.

Being ill in London is more confining than in Meole Brace. At least there, I could be taken out to the garden where there was a variety of life to keep me occupied. And there, of course, I had my family all around me. The garden here, while infinitely better than living without one, is lesser than the gardens I have known and loved before. The clay soil of London has not engendered as much growth as Henry thought it would.

11TH NOVEMBER 1926

Too cold to sit in the garden today, even wrapped up in all my layers. I have had to content myself with the window, just like old Mrs. Jeffrey on Lyth Hill. Now I must never be critical of her again, since I can see the appeal now I have experienced it myself. I find myself remembering loves long since passed, and have spent many an hour with my eyes closed, journeying back into Father's study, with him and Minoni to keep me company in my imagination. Was it as peaceful and without worry as I remember it to be?

18TH NOVEMBER 1926

Success. I was able to travel all the way into town today to take tea with Caradoc. I have really missed his sly wit and his observations on life. A Welsh incarnation of Oscar Wilde, I should say. I hope that one day, both he and I are appreciated for our work in a way that I don't think we have been in life. When I said this to him, he chuckled and said, 'I would much rather be appreciated while I am still alive, dearie. If there's an afterlife, I am not sure we would be bothered to come back and spy on the people reading our work. There must be much more fun things to do. But then, I am not sure I would be suited to angelic garb.'

What would I want to do? I think I would want my body to be merged in with the hills and rivers and meres that have given me such peacefulness. I would like to think I might live on in my books. I am sure if I were gone, Henry would soon move on in a way that, if the tables were turned, I know I would not. Perhaps it would be better if I were to go before him, then. He at least will be able to adapt and make a new life without me.

Caradoc shook me out of those thoughts when I shared them with him.

'Henry is a fool,' he simply said, 'if he thinks that he can do any better than you. No empty-headed child can compete with a woman with a mind as fine-tuned as yours is. And whatever happened to his own ambitions to be a writer?'

'I wish I knew,' I said. '*Silences of the Moon* showed such promise. I always anticipated his next book would be stellar, but it never quite came. I hope I have not held him back.' I could feel that tingle of tears behind my eyes, but not wanting to embarrass Caradoc, I blinked them away as fast as I could.

'If Henry allowed anyone to hold him back, least of all you, then he is an even bigger fool,' he returned. I love talking with him. Somehow, he has the courage to say the things I am not quite brave enough to even think aloud. And since he is married and is deeply wrapped in his thoughts, he knows some of the challenges that come about in this life. I only wish we could live in a world in which he could be fully himself, without the life we have to live for appearance's sake. I think that must be a long way off, since he must keep so much of himself hidden from polite society. We have never really spoken about this openly, although once or twice he alluded to it, when he said his family 'know nothing of the real me, and if they did, they would not let me come home'. Whatever the churchmen say, or the laws, or the rules of etiquette, we should all be allowed to live the life we want to, in peace and without judgement. People are so quick to look down on each other, and they miss the miraculous fragility. That is where the beauty is, in our vulnerability, and not in the faces we present to the outside world.

There is talk of there being great openness among the literary folk of Bloomsbury, with people getting in and out of assignations with either sex, but while there may be truth to the rumours, it all happens behind closed doors, and this freedom does not seem to trickle down to us lesser mortals.

10TH DECEMBER 1926

Unsure as to how to spend Christmas this year, but I think I will travel to Chester again, as I normally would. I do so long to see my brothers and sisters and feel buoyed by their love. No doubt Henry will not join me. There is hardly any point in even asking him.

23RD DECEMBER 1926

On my way to Chester, and mortified. I had thought Henry would have visited his mother, as usual, but he has not. I feel humiliated. He has stayed in Hampstead, choosing instead to spend Christmas with Mr. Wicksteed's family (or so he says). I suspect he is with Kathleen and her parents. Of course, when I asked him if I could stay, he demurred, and said he did not wish to impose on their kindness by asking if I could join them.

Hurt. So very hurt. But why should I be taken by surprise, when this is how things are now.

Today I could only manage a single paragraph, scratched in the back of my red notebook. It will be the final paragraph of the story.

'No, my child I said. I see that you have not yet learned what alone-ness is. But I know it, & that stark silence, grey, absolute, in clear of all revealed things in which I was when I lost thee, I had like to have died. But then God came in, with power & a retinue of stars, and since that time He hath filled all the place and there is no room for thee.'

I just have to write from here to there.

NOTEBOOK NINE – 1927

3RD JANUARY 1927

Dark weather remains. And bone-aching tiredness.

11TH JANUARY

I read the report on the Bookman Literary Circle that took place last week. Mr. Shan Bullock took the chair for Mr. Shaw Desmond, who lectured on the Irish Mind and the English. I should have liked to have been there, but I was too ill.

13TH JANUARY 1927

A little break in the dark weather. The Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin, has written to me. Me! Imagine what Mother would have thought of that. He wrote to say he had been sent a copy of *Precious Bane* by a friend, and it sat on his bedside table for the longest time. He just didn't find the time to pick it up, but, oh, when he did.

'It transported me to the Shropshire Hills, Mrs. Webb, so that I felt I was standing there beside you, having you describe it to me in person.'

Once he had finished the book, he sent away immediately for the others, and his personal secretary got them all to him within a week or two. And do you know? He sat down and read each of them in turn.

2ND MARCH 1927

Dark weather all through February. No words.

13TH MARCH 1927

The spring flowers are joyfully bobbing their heads in some surprisingly clement weather.

29TH MARCH 1927

I have written to Minoni promising her a visit as soon as I can get this manuscript off my back. Why did I think it was a good idea to write in such archaic script? But to go back and start again would be too much for me to bear now. I could almost rewrite Macbeth's line, 'I am in words stepped in so far that should I wade no more, returning were as tedious as go o'er'.'

My own language might be failing me, but at least I still have mind enough to remember other people's, even with a little bending of the truth of them. I tried to talk to Henry about it last evening, but I had the feeling that, although he seemed to give me his full attention, in his eyes he was elsewhere and not really present with me. Dreaming of his girl, I shouldn't wonder. I almost wanted to slap him out of it, but I don't think even that would have any effect now.

5TH APRIL 1927

This week has mostly been spent in the garden. The garden is in its yellow and blue phase. So pretty. Writing on Miss Burney.

1ST MAY 1927

Another May Day. This year I do not have the puff to get up to the Heath and bring the May in, but Henry brought me a sprig when he walked back over the Heath from his tutoring sessions today. It is heartening to know I am not completely out of his thoughts.

16TH MAY 1927

Caradoc came round for tea today. It has been such a long time, since I have been too unwell to visit him in town. And just for a few hours the sun came out from behind the clouds, and it was good to feel the rumble of laughter again.

What would I do without such good souls in my life? If only I could have walked across the heath with him, as I used to with Ned last year. Each of my friends has called on me in recent weeks, and has sat with me for a time. Such good people.

Another trilogy this month. Reviewing *From Place to Place* by Irvin Cobb, *The Golden Key* by Henry van Dyke, and *Lucky Numbers* by Montague Glass. 'Counsels of Perfection', I shall call it. What's required for a good short story? It has been so thought provoking; making me question those I have read and written over the years. It is such an underrated skill, writing the perfect short story. One day I should like to see my own, gathered together in a single volume.

JUNE 4TH, 1927

Minoni has written again this week, telling me how dearly she wishes to see me. She writes that she and I are not getting any younger, since I am forty-six and she must be nearly seventy (I was never bold enough to ask her age). We really must make the effort. Should she come to London, or would I consider another trip to Sussex? The downs really are a sight to see, with the White Horse gleaming on the chalk. I would welcome a different landscape. Perhaps when I finish this book, I will have a little holiday, and take the sea air with her.

JUNE 19TH, 1927

I spend so much time reclining, and so little time working these days. But even writing in my diary does not draw me in. What is there to say? My husband is so rarely present, and instead chooses to be with the girl, despite his assurances that he would not leave me.

Which part of 'I will not leave you' requires him to be absent except when he is sleeping?

JULY 3RD, 1927

Enough. Tomorrow I am away to Lyth Hill. Alone. I must finish this book.

My body gives me such pain. When it is not my stomach it is wearying aches in every part of me.

There is a heatwave rolling through London. The garden is parched in the heat, and even the lime tree offers no shade. My roses are wilting, even when I water them each evening.

JULY 6TH, 1927 LYTH HILL

Henry barely raised an eyebrow when I said goodbye to him.

When I arrived in Salop, I realised dear Mrs. Thorne from down the lane had come over to fill the house full of flowers to welcome me. If only Henry had been here to see it, I think even he might have smiled.

Hard to believe that it was over a year ago that Henry brought that child here, and we had such awful rows. Once more I am in my home of light and colour, and alone. I find peace here that I cannot find anywhere else, and yet, now, there is not another soul in the world.

Posted my latest review to St. John this morning. 'Irony and Mrs. Wharton' — *Twilight Sleep* by Edith Wharton. I do so enjoy reading her work.

JULY 29TH, 1927

Mrs. Thorne has been in the habit of calling each day and bringing me a pot of broth or a stew. The weather is hot for warm food, and my appetite, so fleeting before, has left me completely. I have this strange feeling of being full before I have even taken a bite. But she lingers to watch me take some food, and I cannot bear to disappoint her. She sat with me today, and said to me, 'Mrs. Webb, it is so unlike you not to be striding across the fields.' Her face looked a little sad, and not wanting to cause her concern, I said it was the warm weather that kept me sitting so quietly in the garden.

AUGUST 4TH, 1927

Henry remains in London. I have been here alone for a month.

AUGUST 13TH, 1927

My words have left me completely. The manuscript, now curled around the edges, is untouched for days. It sits and stares at me reproachfully in the gentle evening light. If it could speak without my help it would call me a failure.

AUGUST 24TH, 1927

I wrote to Minoni and told her how unwell I have been. Mostly, I try to remain cheerful in my letters to her, but I am afraid this time I did not hold back. She immediately wrote to me to say she wishes I would come to her in Sussex. I need looking after, she tells me, and a dear friend of hers runs a nursing home that has the best

quality care. She stopped short of asking what on earth Henry was thinking, allowing me to be alone, but it was there between the lines, as clear as day.

‘I am sure you will be right as rain, if only given the right care,’ she writes.

But I cannot bear to leave here, even though I have never felt so alone.

I wonder if she is right. I should like to see Minoni once more, and I am so exhausted beyond all care now. I cannot walk further than to the bench in the garden. Perhaps I should just return to the Grove. At least I am not completely alone there. I have Ned, and St. John, and Caradoc.

My body feels like it is failing me, piece by piece. Slowly before but building momentum now.

I will speak to Mrs. Thorne when I can. Perhaps Mr. Thorne will help me to get to the station. I loathe leaving Shropshire. I must come back here if I can.

SEPTEMBER 1ST, 1927, THE GROVE

The journey to London was interminable. I felt so tired; I could barely walk my way up the hill. I had to take my time and pretend not to notice the irritated jostling of the people behind me, willing me to get out of their way, and thinking such loud thoughts about why I could not realise just how busy they were. London is not for the vulnerable.

SEPTEMBER 9TH, 1927

So alone. Even here.

SEPTEMBER 14TH, 1927

Such pain in my stomach and an ache in my deepest bones.

Today I tried to burn the manuscript. I had sat for days just staring at it, willing the words to come, but they would not. Mr. Cape is expecting me to send him a completed first draft by the end of next month, but I can't bear to work with him any longer. He was so heartless last time I asked him for an advance. The pressure has been building and I had become overwrought. I tried to light a fire in the grate, and then tried to burn the thing. Two things saved it – the fact that my feeble fingers failed to light a proper fire, and Henry was in the house. He heard me, and rushed into the room and grabbed it from the grate before it could take light. Even in this grand gesture I have failed. I wanted to see the thing take light and fly away from me at last, but I am chained to it. I went to telephone to St. John, and he tried to soothe me back into calmness. What would I do without his kindness?

SEPTEMBER 28TH, 1927

Humiliated by my own weakness. I feel like I did as a child when I was so unwell. Mrs. Wicksteed called round today, and says she found me on the floor by a dead fire. She took an awful fright, as she said she thought I

had died. I don't remember anything at all, until I awoke with her worried face as she tried to chafe my hands, and then the doctor came.

The doctor looked very grim indeed. Henry came home at that point, and stood silently in the room while the doctor examined me. The doctor said very little. Henry said even less. As they left the room together a look passed between them that told me all I need to know. When Mrs. Wicksteed came back into the room, I told her I want to be with my Minoni. She promised me she will do everything she can to carry out my wishes. She telephoned to Minoni, and they have agreed between them that we will travel down to Sussex as soon as I am able to.

OCTOBER 2ND, 1927

Tomorrow Mrs. Wicksteed and I will catch the train to Sussex from Charing Cross. It feels like I must climb a mountain in order to see my beloved friend again, but Minoni is everything to me I wanted in my Mother, but never quite had. She holds my father's heart in hers. I can think of no other place I would like to be.

I have Mrs. Wicksteed to come with me as far as Bexhill. She will then take the train back to London with my thanks, and I will continue on to St Leonard's where Minoni will meet me at Warrior Square. I don't know yet when Henry will join me. He says he has pupils but will try. Minoni told Mrs. Wicksteed that she had chosen a room for me in the nursing home, one which looks out over the glistening sea. I cannot wait to be with her once more.

I am ready.

FRIDAY 7TH, OCTOBER 1927, ST. LEONARD'S, SUSSEX

So peaceful here. Grace.

AFTERWORD

Although Mary Webb travelled to St. Leonard's without Henry, he did arrive in time to witness her death, but not while she was still conscious. Apparently, on her death, he was grief-stricken.

Just over a year later in 1928, Henry and Kathleen were married, and went on to have two children, something Mary, in her capricious health, had never been able to give him. The newlyweds lived a very wealthy lifestyle on the royalties of Mary's now bestselling books, and Henry was at last able to retire from teaching and concentrate on his own writing career. His novels, published under the name of John Clayton, only received modest success, and never eclipsed those of his first wife.

Henry's second marriage was only to last ten years and was not entirely successful. While the couple lived in London, Henry was said to have had a cork-lined study to keep the noise of the household away. However, Henry and Kathleen were only to have ten years together.

It is possible to imagine that Henry might have been haunted by Mary, just as Gideon Sarn was haunted by his abandoned lover, Jancis in Webb's last completed novel, *Precious Bane*, singing a haunting song of 'Green Gravel' across the surface of the mere, luring him into the dark water, or in Henry's case, up a mountainside.

When Mary died, Henry arrived too late for her to know he was there, and perhaps he felt he had done her some injustice, we will never be sure, although this must have played on his mind. In 1939, Henry edited a new anthology of Mary Webb's works for Jonathan Cape, to be illustrated and published later that summer. Having submitted the selection to Cape, he travelled to visit his Mother in Weston-Super-Mare, leaving his second wife and children in London. The rest of the story was told by the inquest. Henry only stayed with his mother overnight. The next day he travelled to Cumbria, where he was last seen walking up Scafell. Eight hours later, some walkers found his body in a ravine. He left no note, and one could only guess what his intentions must have been. Mary Webb's principal biographer, Gladys Mary Coles, suggests that this was Henry's second fall from a mountain.

As people often say, true life is often stranger than fiction. Kathleen sold Spring Cottage after Henry's death, and then shortly after, she was married to Webb's own publisher, Jonathan Cape, selling him the copyright to Webb's estate. Kathleen was also to die suddenly at the age of forty-nine, after a short illness.

Mary Webb was buried on the outskirts of Shrewsbury, and her headstone bears the simple inscription,

Mary Webb

1881 – 1927