

Letters from the Past - An English Family in the 19th & 20th century tells a compelling story of four generations of the Handley family. The characters experience the hardships faced by many of our ancestors: single parenting, constraints of pious religious beliefs, gruelling terror of war, and poverty. This fast-paced novel will carry you along with creative dialogue and descriptive images. At the end, you'll fill your cup of appreciation for the courage and strength of those who came before us.
Cynthia Young, Author, *Leaving was just the Beginning*

In this novel, Michael takes heirloom letters written by his ancestors, and skilfully interweaves these into this novel to create a compelling story of their lives down the generations. He takes the reader through a century of his ancestors' lives, bringing their thoughts, beliefs, feelings and suffering together in a clear and captivating way.

Trevor Newton, Writer

Michael Pantlin has truly honoured his ancestors in this multi-generational saga. Each chapter seamlessly unfolds from one generation to the next. Placed in their respective historical events, the relatable characters show lifelong effects of relationships, navigating horrific circumstances, and overcoming grief and loss.

Brenda Litloff Barber

A simply exquisite journey spanning a century through the eyes of the Handley family. Follow their lives as their children blossom and the family extends branches of care and love throughout their history. Peek through the letters written by Gladys as she navigates early life, the loss of her mother, and support from her grandmother to compensate for a distant father.

J. L. January Asbill, MBA, MSHiED

Letters from the Past shares the story of four generations of the Handley family, a working-class English family, striving to survive through good and bad times. This is a chance to journey around England using the eyes of the Handleys to guide you as their culture changes from an agrarian society to an industrial / commercial one. Religious and political beliefs are also explored. Joys and sorrows abound with a touch of humour popping in now and again. I am amazed how they persevered despite the pitfalls they often endured.

Ann Ward, B.Sc.N., Author, *In the Shadow of Brilliance*

In his *Letters From The Past - An English Family in the 19th & 20th century*, author Michael Pantlin takes us on a well-researched and delightfully readable family history, beginning with the young Ann Handley in 1851.

What could have been a recitation of dry facts, this story instead shows us relatable yet flawed characters. Their believable motivations give them dimension, and the interjected wit keeps us entertained.

The author does not shy away from difficult subjects, from rape to tyranny to absentee parenthood to a spoiled daughter. We witness important events of the times and a meticulous rendering of places, bringing history and geography alive.

I am not particularly taken with military history, relating better to the pacifist members of this family. Yet, Jack's wartime experiences during The Great War are riveting, as were civilian descriptions of wartime England in both World Wars. And the interweaving of religion — which should not be ignored in most family histories — is done without judgment, existing primarily to convey what can influence both the admirable and the despicable aspects of human nature.

Though not related to this family, I devoured this book. For researchers of English social history from 1850-1950, there are many details to draw upon. For writers and readers alike, there is much to admire.

Elizabeth DuBois, JD, Author, *The Louisa Saga*

Letters from the Past is a portrayal of how a common English family coped with the challenges of daily life in good and bad times — in poverty, war, and illness. Each generation, in its own way, tried to pursue prosperity and happiness for their loved ones. Although it's history, this story contains themes that still make it worth reading today.

Anne Marie Stoof, RN

LETTERS FROM THE PAST

An English Family in the 19th & 20th century

Michael Pantlin

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Some of the material in this book was previously published in *How I survived the Great War* which is a collection of John ‘Jack’ Handley’s war memories, edited by Michael Pantlin.

Cover photograph: Jack Handley and his daughter ‘Bunty’, Christmas 1931

Cover design by Martijn Pantlin — www.orgonemedia.nl

Dedicated to my ancestors
who look upon me to retell their stories for future generations.

“It’s the past that tells us who we are.
Without it we lose our identity.”

Stephen Hawking

PREFACE

Discovery

After living most of my life in the Netherlands, where I have no roots, I grew an interest in my British ancestors. What part of the country were they from? How did they earn an income? What were they like as a person — their personalities, talents, and short-comings?

Fortunately, my mother fed this budding passion by giving me bits of information, old letters and postcards, and telling me family stories. At the time, I just dumped things in a box for later. When later came, I sorted out the box and a rather fragmented picture of my ancestors evolved, so I felt the need to do research and fit the pieces together.

In doing so, I was humbled by the sacrifices my forefathers and foremothers had to make. They survived war, depression, hunger, illnesses, and poverty — things that I have never had to endure. They did their best to ensure their children would be better off than they themselves, and they definitely achieved it.

Exploring my family was a journey on which I reunited with relatives and found new cousins in the extended family.

Fiction or non-fiction?

I based this book on stories passed down by my ancestors and genealogical research. To let my forebears come to life, I've used my imagination to fill in the gaps, creating a mixture of facts, interpretations, stories, and fiction. All rolled together, the stories have become my truth. Anyone else writing this saga would have written a different story when given the same 'facts'.

Except for a few minor characters, their names are authentic, as are events with specific dates and locations. All dialogue is fictitious.

I don't know the actual feelings my ancestors had in their important moments, but I've imagined their circumstances and dilemmas, and, while writing, I became part of their lives and felt their emotions.

The book has seven parts covering four generations of the Handley family, my maternal ancestors, each part focussing on a character and how he/she viewed the world.

The addendum includes a simple family tree of the main characters, pictures, and a list of references. You can find more information and additional photographs on website www.pantlin.eu.

PART ONE

Ann Handley

CHAPTER ONE

FATHER KNOWS BEST

1851

Ann left school as usual, mid-afternoon, and crossed the lane to the footpath leading through the fields. It was a fine spring day with a bouquet of flowers amongst the hedgerows, but she felt down-hearted. Today was her last day of schooling, and she knew she would miss it as an escape from home. She wasn't in a hurry, because she had a tense relationship with her parents; they were strict and demanding and being outside gave her a feeling of freedom and independence.

Because of her father's attitude, Ann only attended the practical lessons of weaving, knitting and sewing. Father had been clear, "You'll be a housewife and learn all you need to know from Mother. There's no use wasting time at school learning to read and write."

Hints Farm, where her father worked as a labourer, provided them with a thatched cottage - a simple abode with three rooms, a brick floor, and one fireplace. The water from the nearby well needed boiling before drinking.

Upon her return home, she entered the kitchen and saw her mother pouring tea.

"Ah, you're back. Here —" Mother said, handing a steaming cup.

Ann reached out to take it but the mug fell to the floor and broke; liquid splashed everywhere.

"You stupid girl! Look what you've done. Clean it all up immediately," Mother bellowed, pointing to the mess on the floor.

"You let go before I had hold of it," Ann whined, her shoulders slumped.

"Don't blame me for your carelessness."

After clearing up, Ann poured herself another cup.

The incident confirmed her frustration about her parents. Mother often complained about Ann being slow with her jobs, or hanging about instead

of doing something useful. Ann did, though, enjoy helping with meal preparation, and Mother praised her for her bread. As they had no oven, she took her dough to the village bake house and waited until it was ready. Their principal foods were milk, cheese, and eggs. Fresh fruit and vegetables were available in the garden and pickled or made into jam for winter. Twice a week they cooked a meal with smoked meats or bacon. Fancier dishes, like black pudding, were only for special occasions; they were treats the family could rarely afford.

One Sunday morning, the Handley family went to St Peter's, the local parish church in Coreley, a farming village in Shropshire. Ann wore her simple blouse. Her brown hair and dark eyebrows framed her face of light complexion, and blue eyes. At fourteen she no longer ran around in the boisterous way her young siblings did, climbing on walls and balancing on top.

During the lengthy sermon, Ann's mind wandered. Eyeing other girls in church with their ornate dresses made her envious. She yearned to wear skirts with flowery patterns, but her father objected to modern dress, saying it was boastful. He insisted she wore a simple long skirt and a grey head-scarf. The aggravation caused her to scratch the back of her hand until it bled. Mother noticed and gave her arm a swipe; Ann's cheeks blushed with embarrassment. She longed to be outside, with the other girls, chatting about boys.

After dinner, Father always read from the bible, for ages it seemed. She didn't protest because she knew there was nothing to gain by complaining.

"Today I'm going to read about obeying rules. It's from Deuteronomy," he said, opening the worn-down bible.

"If a man has a stubborn and unruly son who will not obey the voice of his father or mother, then his father and mother shall take him to the elders. They say, 'Our son is stubborn and rebellious; he won't obey us; he is a glutton and a drunkard.' Then all the men of the city shall stone him to death with stones. So you will purge the evil from your midst, and all Israel shall hear, and fear."

Ann and her siblings remained silent. She thought how terrifying it must be, to be stoned to death in front of your parents, the ones you'd hoped loved you.

Father explained. "God gave us rules for living. On the road we have the rule that carriages keep left. Without rules, there would be more accidents. We trust that the on-comer will stick to the left because he knows the rules too. If we all do what the bible says, we'll have the same rules and all know what to expect from each other. Rules also apply in

families. You children need rules so that you feel safe and know what's expected of you. God, our Creator, expects us to follow his rules as His children. Rules give us order and have been turned into laws so that judges can pronounce punishment on those not obeying the rules."

Mother told a story about a cousin who didn't observe the law.

"A relative called William Handley went out shooting with his brother and a friend. One night they crept into Shoulder of Mutton woods to place traps," she said.

"Where's that?" Ann's brother, George, asked.

"Over near Bayton," Mother replied. "Anyway, the day after, someone overheard them talking about going back for the game and alerted the gamekeeper. That night he heard a gunshot and walked carefully to the fence, so's not to disturb the poachers. Sticks cracked as if there was a person nearby. He ducked behind the fence. When he peered over the fence, he glimpsed a figure who raised his gun and shot."

"Have you made this up? It sounds like a tale," George said, in disbelief.

"It's a true story. It happened about twenty years ago. Anyway, the gamekeeper staggered home. He'd been hit in the right eye, blinding him. They caught and arrested the men. When questioned, the friend said William fired the shot. He was tried, sentenced to death, and executed."

Father added, "So, you need to watch yourselves!"

"I'd do nothing like that," George said. "They should have been cleverer at poaching."

Ann could see a serious look on the younger children's faces as the message sunk in that their father would punish them if they did anything unlawful.

After the evening meal, Father ordered, as usual, "Ann, get moving, clear the table and help your mother with the washing-up. George and Thom, I want you outside straightaway. We've got work to do." The boys stood up and scrambled to the door.

Being the eldest daughter, Ann was painfully aware she had to help her mother. She asked to keep going to school, but Father objected. Mother didn't contradict him as Ann's extra hands would lighten the workload in a household of five children, and a dog. The young ones, William aged ten, and Fanny, aged seven, needed regular attention. Ann's older brothers, George and Thom, had left to work on farms further away, where they boarded. But when they came home, they brought dirty clothes and joined in the meals.

Ann reluctantly accepted working at home where she had to endure constant criticism. She did her part to help with the washing, cooking,

changing beds, and looking after the little ones. Weekly chicken coop cleaning was the worst job, when she wore a scruffy old apron and a frayed scarf. Droppings covered the perches and boxes, and revolting crusts had to be scraped off. An ammoniac smell irritated her nose when she scooped up dirty bedding from the floor, making her eyes water. After she laid down new straw, the coop was clean and the air sweet.

Her mother complained if she didn't clear up immediately after making a pie, or muttered about her being slow to hang the washing on the line. When her father came home, things were worse. He could be furious about the smallest annoyance, such as slippers not in the correct place, or a lack of firewood next to the fire. He expected things done his way and in the proper order. Ann didn't dare defy him, she kept calm, and took satisfaction from having a hearty meal ready when he came home.

Ann always looked forward to the annual village fair, a weekend each summer when everyone in the village enjoyed themselves. Prizes were awarded for the best cow, sheep and horse. But also for the finest cakes and jewellery. Each year, Ann did her utmost to make a prizing-winning cake and often won an award. There was a raffle with prizes of local produce and craft work. Games included skittles, hoopla, and quoits. On Saturday evenings, the band played and Ann joined the country-dancing. That weekend, her father and mother were usually more relaxed about the rules.

After enjoying the fair and returning to the daily chores and criticism, Ann felt even more depressed and longed for a change in her life.

CHAPTER TWO

Ups and Downs

1858

Ann, now twenty-one, had learned how to run a household, and especially how to cook. They still lived on Hints Farm, where her father fed the pigs, milked the cows, repaired fences, cut wood, cleared ditches, and more. In the peak season, he helped at Hemm Farm since young John Starie inherited it.

In Ann's presence, Father spoke to her younger sister, Fanny. It was a familiar story to Ann.

"Now you're fourteen, it's time you stayed at home to help your Mother."

"But I want to go to school! I'll miss my friends," Fanny said, arms crossed and a frown on her face.

"Your duty is to be a housewife and you won't learn that in those lessons."

"But other girls aren't leaving. Why should I? I'll start new subjects."

"They'll be no use. You'll learn all you need from your mother," Father said, with a raised voice and fists sunk into his sides.

"But Ann's here, so why do *I* have to help?" Fanny said, defiantly.

Ann realised it was her chance to escape her retched situation.

Mother interjected, "Fanny, Ann is an excellent cook, and can earn some money. You must take her place." Turning to Ann, she said, "It's time you started to work."

"I'd like to. Perhaps I can prepare meals for someone else?"

To Ann's delight, Father said, "I'll talk to Starie. I think he needs a cook."

Fanny huffed, stamped out of the house, slamming the door behind her.

"She'll cool down later," Mother declared.

“I remember John,” Ann said to her father. “He wasn’t in my class, but he seemed a likeable person.” She hummed, as she set about peeling potatoes.

It took Ann thirty minutes to walk to The Hemm. Her route took her past the school, across a brook and along footpaths through the fields. She enjoyed the early morning air, larks singing high in the sky, and red campions in the hedgerows. John Starie welcomed her and showed her the kitchen and scullery. From the kitchen window, she had a view to the orchard and vegetable plot. She looked forward to picking fruit to make pies and jam; to pickling vegetables; to drying herbs for winter. The oven delighted her - she could bake her own bread and cakes.

It didn’t take her long to acquaint herself with the kitchen and John’s preferences. He gave her a free rein, making her feel trusted and confident: a feeling she did not have at home. She looked forward to when he came in for his nineses, elevenses, dinner and fourses. She made sure she had his favourite food and a pint of beer ready. He expressed his delight with the meals, glad she worked for him. His praise was a relief from the criticism at home.

But something about his attention caused her to be uneasy.

1859

In April, Ann arrived home after a day’s work and found her mother wailing over her father’s motionless body sprawled on the floor. Fanny stood in a corner, transfixed, clutching little Elizabeth with trembling arms.

“Bring water!” Mother shouted.

Grabbing a mug, Ann rushed to the pump. Mother splashed his face and shook him. He was colourless, lifeless, his eyes closed. She laid his head down and looked up at Ann. “He’s left us, gone to his fore-fathers,” she sobbed, her face wrinkled in despair.

They both wept, clutching at each other. It was all so sudden. Thoughts rushed through Ann’s mind. He was *never* ill. And he’d been fine when she departed earlier that morning.

Losing a parent was an enormous shock to Ann. Because her father had been such a dominant figure all her life, she couldn’t fathom life without him. A strong and healthy man, only in his fifties. She loved him, despite his unrelenting strictness. She appreciated his commitment to the bible and his insistence on doing things as written in the scriptures. Others spoke of his stubbornness, but she admired him for standing up for his beliefs. She wondered whether God had called him to his day of

judgement. Surely he would be judged favourably because he'd sternly adhered to His word.

Ann was crying when she vaguely heard her Mother's voice. "Calm, Ann, help". She looked up and tried to concentrate. "Ann, listen to me," Mother said. "I want you to fetch the doctor. And the parson. You know where they live."

Still wearing her coat, Ann pulled her scarf tighter to keep out the rain before making her way up the winding lane. Before long, she was returning with the men and a church elder.

The doctor confirmed the death, then they lifted Father's body from the floor and laid him on the bed. Mother straightened his clothes and ran her fingers through his hair, and then sat down beside him. The elder asked Ann to find a cloth to cover the mirror so the reflective glass wouldn't trap her father's spirit. They also drew the curtains, and stopped the clock from ticking and chiming.

Ann saw that Fanny was at a loss and got her busy brewing tea. From the kitchen, they could overhear the reverend. "Dear Lord, we pray to you for Joseph Handley, to grant him eternal rest through the mercy of God, and let perpetual light shine upon him. Guide his soul to the holiest place. Reward Joseph for his dedication to God's word, and look after him in Heaven. Rest in peace. Amen. Lord, please help Maria Handley and her family to overcome their sorrows. May they come to you to share their sufferings. Amen."

The next morning, Ann woke from a dreadful night's sleep, eyes gummy, and lacking energy. On arriving at the farm, she found John busy in the yard. He looked up when he noticed her.

"You're wearing black. Has something happened?"

"John,,," she burst into tears before she could say a word.

He put an arm around her shoulder, saying, "Tell me. What's the matter?"

"It's my father...." Before she could explain, a torrent streamed down her cheeks.

"I'm so sorry to hear," he said, embracing her. He cocked his head to one side, "My poor Ann, how did it happen?"

"I came home, and ..., and ..., he was lying on the floor. Mother was next to him and said he'd passed away." Her shoulders shook with each sob.

"That's terrible. I liked your father, he was such a great help. Too young to leave this world." He squeezed her tighter, laid his chin on her head.

She withdrew from his arms, sensing an intimacy between them that didn't feel right. His warmth had calmed her; a man had never shown her sympathy like that, but her instinct was to withdraw. "Thank you. I should get on," she said, wiping her eyes she squared her shoulders and moved away from him. It relieved her to be on her own and find comfort in preparing the midday meal.

Ann could see her mother was so distressed she couldn't concentrate on what needed to be done, so it was a godsend that Aunty Marianne, came to help.

"A coffin needs to be made," Marianne said.

Mother nodded.

Looking at Ann, Marianne asked, "Can we ask your Uncle John to talk to the carpenter?"

"He's coming tomorrow, so I'll ask him then."

Marianne turned to Mother. "We'll prepare the body in the morning. Has the parson come to see you?"

"He came first thing. He knows, ... knew, Joseph well," Mother said, clearing her throat. "Said he knows enough for the sermon."

"Did he say anything else?"

Ann answered: "We have to dig the grave. I'll ask George and Thom to do that."

"It'll take three of us to prepare the body," Marianne said. "We'll need all our strength to wash and dress him. Can you help?"

Ann turned her head away and closed her eyes. At first, she couldn't speak. Then a shrill voice came from her throat, "I can't bear to look at his dead body!"

"Well, we'll ask one of his sisters," Marianne said.

After preparing Father, they laid him in the coffin, which rested across two chairs. Family members took turns watching over him day and night. To Ann, he didn't quite look like his real self. The strong, dominant father she knew was now like a figure of candle wax.

Joseph Handley was so well-known for his piousness that the church was bulging with parishioners for the funeral. On giving their condolences, many said how surprised they were by his sudden death at only fifty-three. John Starie came to show his sympathy and shook hands with Ann, holding her hand longer than need be, while wishing her strength.

The service began, and the reverend's words echoed through the church.

“As we lay away Joseph Handley to rest, his body returns to earth in the natural way, by an act of God. For He said, ‘Out of the ground wast thou taken, for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return’. God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore, we must not fear. He is within us and will help us at the break of day. The Lord Almighty will save us. Amen.”

His prayers didn’t resonate with Ann, as her mind kept switching from sadness about her father to thoughts about John Starie.

CHAPTER THREE

The Hemm

1859

Ann appreciated John's attention in the weeks following her father's funeral. He often took time to comfort her when they sat down for the midday meal. One rainy day, she was laying the table when she heard his footsteps on the wooden floor.

He stood beside her, placed a hand on her shoulder and cocked his head towards her. "How are you faring today?"

A ray of sunlight shone through the window, reflecting off the cutlery. "I'm alright," she said, placing another knife.

"How is your mother coping?"

"She's managing. My brothers are helping her out. William does any heavy work around the cottage. George and Thom come home more often and make sure Mother has enough money." The room darkened as the sun disappeared. "Let me serve the soup."

They sat down, and tears filled her eyes. John reached forward and took her hand. She didn't pull away. "What's upsetting you?"

"I don't know," she sobbed. "It's difficult for my mother. She's got no savings and has to leave the cottage."

"Why does she need to move?"

"The farmer needs it for a new farmhand."

She dabbed her eyes with her apron and did her best to stop crying. John squeezed her hand and then let it go. They started their soup in silence.

After a while, John said, "There's a cottage down the road, near Bache Farm. The people there are leaving soon."

"I don't know the place."

"I used to live on that farm. After I was born, my mother fell seriously ill, so they sent me to Mr & Mrs Jones, at the Bache. She's my father's

Aunty Sarah. They didn't have children, and treated me like a son. He taught me everything I know about farming."

"How dreadful not to have lived with your own family!"

"I never knew differently. I enjoyed being on the farm."

"Where were you born?"

"In London. My parents are still there. Father had no interest in this place. He runs a bookshop. The Staries have owned the farm for generations, so I'm proud to keep up the tradition."

"Do you go to London often?"

"As little as possible. When I do, I'm always glad to be back here. I don't like the busy, dirty place."

A few weeks later, Ann was clearing the table and John followed her into the kitchen. He complimented her on the meal and her prettiness. Standing behind her, he took hold of her shoulders, but she quickly stepped away and turned to face him. "What are you doing?"

"You've been here a while and we're getting to know each other. Let's get to know each other even better," he said, and stepped towards her.

"Well, why would I want to allow that?" Ann said, scratching the back of her hand.

He laughed, tilted his head, and looked her in the eye. "Why wouldn't you?"

He reached for his pipe, filled it with tobacco, and moistened his lips before putting it between his teeth.

"You're my employer. My father warned me."

"Warned you about what?"

"He said I shouldn't befriend an employer." She folded her arms across her chest.

"You can't disagree that we're both young and single. What harm is there in being closer?" He struck a match and lit the tobacco. Smoke wafted through the air, the aroma reminding Ann of her father.

"Right now, I think it's the *barn* you need to be closer to," she said, turning away. "I've pastry to get on with."

But as time passed, Ann found it increasingly difficult to resist John's advances. Absent of a conscious decision, their relationship became more intimate; their touches lingered longer, their playfulness increasingly sensual.

One afternoon, when she was working in the kitchen, John came up behind her and grabbed her hips. She felt his warm breath on the nape of her neck and then a kiss. She turned to face him and he put his hands on her waist. Their eyes met.

“You look lovely,” John whispered.

Ann smiled, but was unsure what would follow. She turned her eyes away from him, but his hands moved slowly up towards her breasts. When she looked back at him, she saw a determined expression on his face. He looked different, somehow.

“No John, it’s not right!” she said.

But still his hands roamed across her body.

“Stop it!”

He pinned her against the kitchen sink.

“No! John, get away!” she said, louder now, struggling to free herself from his grasp. He was so strong and forceful that she couldn’t break loose, however she tried. She begged him to let her go, but her words got lost in her tears. John didn’t seem to notice those tears, or he simply didn’t care. Either way, he didn’t stop. He was only determined to get what he wanted. When he’d finished, Ann felt sickened. Tears trickled down her face. Sobbing, she fled to the scullery to wash herself.

In his presence, she no longer felt safe, kept her distance, avoided physical contact and communicated as little as possible. She did as he asked if it related to her work, fending off his other suggestions. She was afraid of antagonising him, and spent each day on edge, wondering whether the same thing might happen again. She was also grieving for the loss of what she’d had before – a job she enjoyed, and a little happiness for the first time in her life.

She didn’t dare tell anyone when she found herself pregnant. She feared her mother’s reaction and was unsure about John’s response. Months later, after church, she drummed up the courage to tell Mother.

“I’m ashamed of you, Ann. It’s shocking!” Mother’s bottom lip quivered in anger. “Who’s the father?”

Ann lost control of herself, the tension erupting after keeping the secret for so long. She cried, sorry she had to disappoint her mother while she was in mourning.

“Was it John Starie?”

Ann sobbed so much she couldn’t speak, but nodded.

“How could you let yourself go? And so soon after your father’s death? He warned you so many times to keep a distance - just to do your job. You’re a disgrace to this family and the church.”

“It all happened so quickly.”

“You’ll have to marry him.”

“I can’t!”

“You must, otherwise people will scorn you. No other man will want to marry you, and you’ll end up in poverty.”

“But he forced himself on me. I didn’t know what was happening. I was busy in the kitchen when he came in.”

“You should have pushed him away.”

“I tried! He was too strong.” She held her palms up, hoping her mother would sympathise.

“Have you told him about your situation?”

“Not yet,” Ann said, in between sobs.

“Well, you tell him tomorrow. He must ask you to be his wife. He’s the father.”

“But I can’t be near him like that!”

“You have no other choice, girl. You’ll have to marry and move in with him, because you can’t stay here.”

Ann was at a complete loss, ashamed and guilty. Had she brought it upon herself? She cursed herself for playing along with his flirtations, giving him any inkling that she wanted more.

The next morning, she walked to work as usual. John attempted to be friendly, but she pushed past him.

“What’s the matter?” he said, in an irritated tone.

“I’m with child,” Ann blurted, looking down at the floor.

“What! Who’s the father?”

“Well, who do you think?”

“It can’t be me!”

“There’s no other, so it must be you.” She crossed her arms, defiantly.

“That cannot be,” he said, his eyes cold.

“There’s been *no other!*” Ann said, her face glowing with anger.

“Don’t expect me to marry you.” He turned his back on her, pressed his fingers to his forehead.

“But it’s your duty!” Ann said, punching her fists into her waist. “It’s your duty to marry me! It says so in the bible. How can you deny it?”

“I’m not marrying an illiterate labourer’s daughter employed as a cook. What will my family think?”

She couldn’t believe what she was hearing. It was the last straw. She picked up her bag, ready to leave.

“Where are you going?”

“I’m leaving. I’ve no interest in a man who declines to accept the truth.”

“Then it’s the end of your employment here. I’ll find someone else.”

Ann left, kicking a bucket on her way out. She ran back to her mother’s, completely distraught by the rejection, not only of herself but also of her unborn baby. Had her own day of reckoning come? She had lost her father, disobeyed him by not keeping her distance from her employer, and now she had run away.

16

She told Mother and broke down in tears.

“What am I to do? If I can’t live with my child’s father, where will I go?”

CHAPTER FOUR

Single Mother

1859

Ann's mother rented a small cottage on Brick Kiln Floor farmstead, so the family prepared to move. Her older brother, George, now twenty-nine, still lived with them, and made countless cart rides with their belongings. Given her advanced condition, Ann could only do light work, so she helped by keeping little Elizabeth out of everybody's way.

They settled in and soon reverted to their normal routine. Mother had an interest in medicinal herbs and earned some money by giving advice to people with ailments, selling them herbal preparations. It enabled her to stay at home to look after Elizabeth. George worked as a servant and handed a sizeable chunk of his earnings to Mother to cover the cost of food and lodging. Ann did temporary work as a maid until her expanding size would give away her condition. She wore loose, wide garments, and stayed inside when she could. She directed her attention to knitting baby clothes, although her mother also gave her items she no longer needed.

Since her father's death, and John Starie's gall in leaving her stranded, there were no dominant men in Ann's life anymore. The question of finding a husband haunted her, but she quickly dismissed it whenever it came to mind. She wasn't sure she wanted a man at all.

She often had nightmares, in which faceless men attacked her from behind, forcing her to do things against her will. She pushed them away with all her strength and fled to find consolation amongst women who kept her safe. But they became ghostlike and slowly disappeared, leaving her lonely and vulnerable.

The worry of managing as a single mother gnawed on her, day and night, until she realised she needed help and would need to reach out.

“Mother, I’ve been thinking about what to do. After giving birth. I’d like to stay in Coreley, but I’m afraid people will look down on me. It’s better for me to leave.”

“It’ll be good for you to have a fresh start elsewhere, but who’s going to mind the baby?”

“I don’t know. Family, I hope,” Ann said, cautiously.

“What family? I’ve had enough of minding babies. Elizabeth will soon go to school, so I’ll be glad of more time on my hands. I’d like to be a midwife.”

“You’ll be excellent at that, I’m sure.”

“There’s a single-mother home in Ludlow. Why not try there? You could ask teacher to write a letter asking whether they’ll take you. He’s someone you can trust not a gossip.”

Ann looked vaguely at the washing flapping on the line. A fear of being on her own flooded through her. She was losing the bond with her mother, just when she needed it most. But she said nothing, only scratched the back of her hand. She knew it was her own fault; she’d brought this on herself; she sorely regretted being flirtatious with Starie from the start.

Three weeks later, a letter for Ann arrived. She took it to the teacher, who read it out loud.

Dear Mrs Handley,

Your request to find accommodation has reached us in good order. It is with pleasure that we can inform you that a room will soon be available in a house in Rock Lane, Stanton Lacy, just outside Ludlow. There is a charge of four shillings a week. The private home is owned by Mr Monday. Mrs Tantram is the housekeeper, and she is looking forward to making your acquaintance.

“Oh, that’s delightful news,” Ann said, with a smile. “Thanks for reading it.”

“Do you wish me to write a reply?”

“Yes, please. Let them know I’ll visit in the next few weeks.”

She walked home with a divided heart; the thought of a new life excited her, but she worried about how to pay the weekly amount.

“Mother, the letter says I’m welcome in Ludlow, but they charge four shillings a week. How am I going to pay that?” She bit her lower lip.

“You can apply for a benefit, but it means appearing before officials and swearing you truly know the father’s name.”

“I’m not doing that, ever!” Ann cried. “He’d only deny it.”

George heard her raised voice and came to ask what had upset her. When he understood, he offered her a pound from his savings, sufficient for five weeks of rent.

“Oh, thank you George, you’re wonderful. When I find work, I’ll soon pay you back,” she said and wrapped her arms around him tightly. “Mother, I’m determined to earn a living, enough to care for my child, so I don’t have to marry.”

1860

In January, there was a cold spell with snow on the ground for several days. On the evening of the eleventh, a pain shot through Ann. It was an unfamiliar pain, not like her monthly pain. Mother told her it was the beginning of contractions. They would be increasingly frequent and harsher, so they’d better try to get some sleep. Knowing delivery might happen in the night, Mother didn’t change into her nightgown.

Before sunrise on the twelfth, snow fell heavily. All was quiet outside, but in the cottage Ann shouted, “Mother! Mother! ... Come quick! ... Mother! I think the baby’s coming!”

Mother was up in a jiffy, rushing to Ann’s bedside.

“Take deep breaths, dear. The spasms will come and go. Try to relax in between. Slow your breathing down. That’s right. I’m just going to wake George so he’s ready to fetch the doctor in case we need help.”

She returned with a cup of camomile tea and peered between the curtains. “The snow is deep. I won’t ask the midwife to come. We’ll manage without her,” Mother said.

Between panting breaths, Ann asked whether she’d be all right.

“Don’t worry. Do as I say and it’ll soon be over.”

Ann’s cramps came more swiftly. She felt her mother’s warm hands on her stomach and heard her comforting voice.

“The baby’s in the right position. It won’t be long now. Are you comfortable?”

“I’m trying to get comfy, but I can’t relax. *Oohh*. My back aches so much. *Oohh!*”

Mother massaged her back and wiped her clammy forehead with a cool, damp cloth.

“Now, lean backwards, take deep breaths and let them out slowly.”

Her mother sounded so calm, so confident, and Ann felt herself relaxing, despite the pain.

Two clean sheets were already at hand. One went on the bed between Ann’s legs, the other across her tummy, ready to wrap the baby in.

“I can see the baby’s head,” said Mother. “Keep pushing.”

“I can’t *Oohh!*”

“Push again!”

“*Oohh!*”

“It’s coming. Don’t push hard anymore, just pant,” Mother said, reassuringly, putting her hands around the baby’s head. “The head’s out now. Well done. The worst is over.”

Ann contracted a few more times before the baby fully appeared.

Mother held the newborn up for her to see, “Look, it’s a boy.”

He started crying and coughed up some fluid.

“That’s a good boy, get rid of it all,” his grandmother said, tipping his head down. “He’s a lovely baby. Well done!”

Ann reached out, took the baby, and held him against her breast while her mother knotted and cut the umbilical cord. She beamed with happiness. His skin was yellowish, but he looked healthy and sweet. She adored him immediately. His nostrils were tiny dots, his little hands clenched before his chest, his eyes closed. The sound of his cries filled her heart with joy and a love she’d never known before.

Ann soon recovered. Her breasts produced enough milk for her eager son, and his yellowish complexion turned pink. He slept in a cozy wooden box she’d lined with woollen material to keep him warm. After feeding and washing him, she cooed while putting him in the cot, and placed it on a chest so it wasn’t on the cold floor.

George took her to the registrar’s office to record the birth. She named him Joseph Starie, out of respect for her father, and as a sign of who the baby’s father had been. When the registrar asked how to spell Starie, she said she didn’t know. So he recorded: ‘Joseph Stary Handley’.

He turned towards George. “Are you the father?”

“He’s my brother,” Ann replied quickly. “He brought me here.”

“Who is the child’s father?”

“I don’t know.”

The registrar left the father’s name blank and asked her to sign.

“I haven’t learned to write,” she said.

“That’s alright. Just put a cross here.”

Spring was in the air, and daffodils were flowering among the trees when Ann asked George to take her to Stanton Lacy with Joseph. She packed all they needed for living there permanently. As he loaded the cart, she said goodbye to her mother and Elizabeth.

“Let me hold Joseph before he leaves me,” Mother said.

Ann gladly passed him to her.

“My dear boy, I’m going to miss you. I hope I’ll see you again soon,” Mother cooed. Looking at Ann, she added, “Make sure you find work as quickly as you can.”

“Don’t worry Mother, I really want to earn my keep,” Ann said, and touched Elizabeth’s cheek. “I’ll miss you both.”

“You’ll be alright. It’s only for the time-being, till you get a job. Then you may have to go elsewhere,” Mother said.

“Yes, I’ll let you know where I end up. We’ll be back to see you, when we can.”

She took hold of Joseph, kissed Elizabeth and Mother, and climbed on the cart.

George shouted, “Giddy up,” and off they went.

Birdsong and baby noises filled the air. Trees and bushes had early shoots of green. Ann marvelled at the parallels between her budding Joseph and the budding of spring.

CHAPTER FIVE

Cook

1860

George stopped the horse outside a house on Rock Lane, where the road sloped up out of Ludlow. In Ann's eyes, it was a large residence with white plastered walls and windows symmetrically positioned on each side of the porch.

George leaped from the cart. "This looks a pleasant place. Plenty of rooms, I'd say."

Ann climbed down, holding Joseph. "I'm so excited. Will you come in with me? We can bring the luggage later."

With Joseph in her arms, she approached the door and rang the bell. A woman with a broad smile welcomed them, introducing herself as Mrs Tantram. She showed them to the front room. "You must be tired after such a journey. Take a seat and I'll make some tea."

Ann glanced at George, who said, "I'll just stay for a cuppa and then be on my way."

After his departure, Mrs Tantram suggested showing Ann around the house.

"Do you mind if I first feed the baby, Mrs Tantram?" She shifted Joseph on her lap.

"Of course, by all means, and please call me Mary. I'll leave you to it and come back later."

They walked through the house, downstairs rooms first.

Upstairs, Mary opened the first door on the landing, "This is your room."

Ann moved to the centre of the room. "Thank you, it's all I need."

"There's a delightful view of the garden from this room. Over there is the common with the woods beyond," Mary said, pointing towards the horizon. They moved further along the corridor. "Mr Monday is the

owner. He's quite elderly, so needs some looking after. He's out at the moment; you'll see him later. My two sons, Herbert and Fredrick, have this room. Herbert's an errand boy and out all day. Fredrick's at school. The room at the end is Mrs Holloway's. She's another Mary, which can be a trifle confusing. She's a widow and lives here with her son."

Ann guessed Mary was a widow too, probably in her early fifties.

Ann initially found it difficult to settle. She'd never slept away from home and was now in a strange place with new people, without family or friends for conversation and to share her joy of young Joseph. She missed her mother, although there were moments when she wondered whether Mother had been glad to see the back of her.

Mary soon took a liking to Ann and asked her to assist with the meals, giving her the opportunity to practise her cooking skills.

"Ann, how do you like living here? Have you settled in?" Mary asked, lifting a cast iron frying-pan on to the stove.

"I have, thank you. I miss my family, though. They seem so far away."

Ann filled the kettle and placed it on the stove to heat, while Mary took cups and saucers from the cupboard.

"I'm lucky to have relatives in town, but for you it's a day's journey back home."

Mary laid the saucers on a tray.

"At church I've met a few friendly women my age, but I haven't got to know anyone properly yet."

Steam wafted from the kettle, so Ann spooned tea in the pot and poured in the boiling water. Mary opened the larder for milk and filled a jug.

"You're free to bring someone to visit, if you wish."

"Thank you. Perhaps I'll do that," Ann said. "Maybe I should first look for work. I want to earn enough money to save for Joseph's education when the time comes."

"There are several big houses around here. Surely there's one in need of a maid."

"I'd love to be a cook."

"Cooks are better paid, too. When do you think you plan to start?"

"In a couple of weeks, when I've weaned Joseph off breast-feeding. I don't know what I'll do with him. Someone needs to look after him."

Once Joseph was on baby food, Ann went to houses asking about vacancies for a cook. But to no avail. They all had cooks, and none were planning to leave. At one place they showed her a newspaper advertisement for a house in Chesterton, beyond Bridgnorth, quite a long way from Ludlow or Coreley, so she dismissed it.

Back at the home, she mentioned the vacancy to Mary. “Well love, go there to see what it’s like. You’re a wonderful cook and I’ll write a note recommending you.”

The carriage ride to Chesterton, near Worfield, took two-and-a-half hours. As the lush Shropshire countryside passed by, Ann thought about how to bring up the subject of a child. Would they turn her down when she mentioned having a baby and no husband?

She found Chesterton House in the middle of the village: a red brick building with the entrance right on the road, covered by a wooden porch. A pretty maid with dark wavy hair opened the door and gave her a warm welcome. Her vivid eyes struck Ann.

“Please come in. You must be Mrs Handley, coming for the position of cook. Follow me, please.”

As Ann walked behind her, the swing of the maid’s walk distracted her. Her nose caught whiffs of soap and baked bread on the way to the kitchen. A staunch cook came into view and Ann’s mouth suddenly felt dry.

“Good afternoon, Mrs Handley. I’m Mrs King, the cook. Have you had a pleasant journey? Let me take your coat.” While hanging Ann’s cloak on a peg behind the door, she nodded towards the maid. “This is Miss Emma Roberts, our parlourmaid.”

Emma offered Ann a cup of tea, and the three women chatted about the weather and Ann’s journey, which eased Ann’s anxiety.

“Let me take you to meet Mrs Marindin, the mistress.” Mrs King stood up and led the way out of the kitchen and down the hall. She knocked on a door at the front of the house. A firm voice said, “Come in”. As they entered the room, a stout lady stood up. Ann’s pulse raced as she came towards her, holding out a hand.

“I’m glad you’ve taken the trouble to come, Mrs Handley. We’ll need a new cook soon.”

“Thank you, Madam.” Ann cleared her throat. “Here’s a letter from my previous mistress.”

Mrs Marindin took it and skimmed through the praising words. “Well, you sound just the right person,” she said, turning to the cook. “Will you show Ann around the house, please, Mrs King? Thank you.”

The rooms were cosy, neat and tidy. Sunlight shone into the lounge through doors opening onto the terrace and garden. They ascended the servant’s stairs to the staff bedrooms in the attic. Ann’s room was small but light, facing the early morning sun. She peered out of the window and saw a kitchen-garden surrounded by a red-bricked wall, fruit trees trained along its length, and a host of different vegetables. Flowers brought vivid

colours to the beds surrounding a lawn. At the side, she noticed stables and a cobblestone exit to the street.

During their tour, Mrs King introduced her to two younger servants, the housemaid and the stable boy. Back in the kitchen, Emma asked what Ludlow was like. By the way she spoke, Ann could tell she was her own age, about twenty-four, and thought they would get on well together.

Looking around her workplace, she noted a decent set of pans hanging on a white-tiled wall, a coal-burning cooking range and a softwood table for cutting and chopping. In the corner was a large cupboard for utensils and cutlery. At the window, a table and two chairs looked enticing and, as if Mrs King could read her thoughts, she suggested they sit down. After pouring tea, she explained the family's eating habits and asked Ann a few questions about her experience cooking for a family.

"You seem to have the experience required here. You'll be a worthy successor, I'm sure," Mrs King said, shifting her chair to stretch her legs. "Let me tell you about the mistress. She's long been a widow and lives here with her three daughters, son and his wife. He's an assistant master at Eton, so not around much. There's another married son, but he hardly ever visits."

"When do you expect to leave, Mrs King?"

"I'd like to stop next month. My family's in Bath, so I want to go down there."

The warm welcome at Chesterton House made Ann eager to take the position. She asked Mrs King about a home for single mothers in the village.

She frowned. "No dear, there's no such place in Chesterton. Mrs Marindin expects all domestic staff to live on the premises. How are you going to manage?"

Ann mirrored the frown. "My son is only a baby," she said, scratching the back of her hand. "I'll ask my mother to look after him."

"Well, I need to tell you that the mistress is very strict when it comes to working hours. She won't be happy with a cook who needs to be away frequently."

"Thank you for warning me. I'll miss little Joseph but won't let that get in the way of my duties."

"Shall we go back to Mrs Marindin?"

They went to the study, taking tea and biscuits for the mistress.

"Well Mrs Handley, what do you think of our abode? Would you consider joining us as a cook?" Mrs Marindin asked.

"Yes Madam, I'd love to take the position. Everyone is so friendly. But I first need to find a home for my son."

“I understand. You need time to sort things out. Can we agree you’ll send me a letter when you decide? Will you do that by the end of next week? You can start here as soon as you’re able.”

Ann was relieved she hadn’t been questioned about a spouse. She thanked Mrs Marindin and made her way back to Stanton Lacy.

Ann had no choice. If she wanted to be independent, she had to work, and to do that she’d need to leave her son in someone else’s care. She chatted to Mary, who often had wonderful suggestions.

“I’m sure I’m going to like Chesterton,” Ann said.

“What makes you so certain?”

“I liked the mistress and the staff. The parlourmaid is about my age; I think I’ll get on nicely with her. It’s a pity I can’t take Joseph.” Ann looked down at the floor.

“Well, he can’t stay here, so what’ll you do?” Mary asked.

“I need to persuade my mother to look after him.”

“Why don’t you go to her with Joseph? Let her hold him, play with him. It’ll make her realise she’ll miss her grandson. Perhaps that’ll make her change her mind. Will it help if you say you’d like him to grow up in Coreley, amongst family?”

“I want to raise him myself, but I can’t see how. I need to work,” Ann said, as if convincing herself. “It’s better for Joseph to be with my mother than with someone else.”

“What’s holding her back? Is it to do with her daughter having a child out of wedlock?”

“I don’t know. It’s *my* fault, so why would people hold it against my mother?”

“They might blame her for not bringing you up according to the bible, and think it’s her fault you’ve wandered.”

Ann and Joseph arrived at Mother’s in Coreley on a summer’s day.

“Hello dears, come in. Let me just hang this on the line.”

She carried the basket of wet clothing out to the garden, pegged everything on the washing-line. Coming back in, she gave them both a kiss. “What a big boy you are, Joseph.”

They sat down at the kitchen table. Mother took Joseph on her lap, stroked his blond hair to one side. Bobbing her knees up and down, she sang:

Ride a cock-horse to Banbury Cross,
To see a fine lady upon a white horse;

Rings on her fingers and bells on her toes,
And she shall have music wherever she goes.

“You’re such a lovely little boy,” Mother chuckled, rubbing noses with him.

Ann was aware of the clock ticking and the fire shifting. She brushed her hands in a circular motion on the tabletop.

“I had a day out to Chesterton yesterday,” she said.

“Where’s that? I’ve never heard of it.”

“It’s a village beyond Bridgnorth,” said Ann, waving her hand in a northerly direction.

“What’s going on there then?”

“They’re advertising for a cook.”

“That’s a long way off. Why there?”

“I can’t find a job in Ludlow. The people at Chesterton are friendly. It’s not a vast place, but there’s a big kitchen-garden. The cook’s leaving.”

“Are they interested in you?”

“The mistress has offered me the position and a room in the attic,” Ann said, scratching her left hand.

“Can Joseph be there with you?”

“They want all staff to live on the premises. I told her about Joseph and she didn’t ask about a husband. But the cook warned me that the mistress wouldn’t want me distracted by Joseph. There’s no single mothers’ home in Chesterton, so that’s not an option. She’s given me a week to work things out.”

“Who’s going to look after him?” Mother said, pursing her lips, Joseph still on her lap.

“I don’t know. I’d like him to be in Coreley, to grow up amongst his kin.” Ann bit her lip and scratched her hand again. She walked to the scullery for a cup of water, waiting for a reaction. Mother put Joseph down and watched him crawl and push himself forward with his knees.

She turned towards Ann, not looking at her but at her own hands. “Some people in the village ignore me now, you know. How would they react, if I took Joseph under my wing? It could even affect my work as a midwife.”

Joseph tried to open a cupboard door, so Ann went to pick him up. She jostled him in her arms, kissed him, and looked at her mother, avoiding eye-contact, not saying anything.

“You know I’ve had enough of toddlers.” Mother folded her hands across her chest.