

THE SWIRE ARTS PRIZE 2023

THE SPIRIT OF THE RIDGEWAY

CLARA

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CLARA

Clara stuffed her large black hat over her flaming red hair and pushed in three long hair pins, one topped by a green round natural stone, one with a finial made of ivory and the third sporting a purple glass decoration. This was the most subtle way in which she could acknowledge her allegiance to the Women's Suffrage Movement without causing major embarrassment to her employers. Green for Hope, white for Purity and purple for Loyalty. She actually saw herself as more of a peace-loving Suffragist and was not too keen on the militant attitude of the Suffragettes under the leadership of Mrs Pankhurst. However, she had read about the protest which had taken part in Parliament Square in 1910 during which the Police had beaten many Suffragettes and she had sympathised with them. It was time women had an equal vote with men, after all they were fifty percent of the population and women worked as hard as many men looking after the home and bringing up their children. Not an easy task when times were hard and money was tight.

Her hat held firmly in place, in each hand, gloved of course, she carried a wicker basket. As she left by the service door she breathed in deep lungfuls of fresh air and relaxed. She had two whole hours away from the hot, stuffy kitchen with its noise and chaos as the breakfast dishes were washed, dried, cleared away and lunch prepared.

Clara was twenty-two and had been in service for eight years. Her family lived in the village and it was a natural progression that she should find work at the Manor, following in her Mother's footsteps, starting as a scullery maid. Hard work, which played havoc with her hands but she had now progressed to Cooks' right-hand girl and proved her worth as a pastry cook. Some members of her extended family worked on the cressbeds, the men cutting the cress and the women bundling it into bunches for despatch to the London market. Others worked at the papermills, Bledlow Mill and North Mill set along the brooks. In The Lyde corrie next to the Church fourteen springs fed the streams with pure water which had permeated through the chalk beds of the Chiltern Hills for thousands of years and provided the perfect set of conditions for both industries.

Clara and Pietro had been married for a year and she was almost in her eighth month of pregnancy. She was fit and well and had been able to keep her position in the school kitchen even though she was now a married woman. That would change when the baby arrived and the loss of her wage was a source of worry for the young couple.

Pietro was Italian. Good-looking with a permanent tan. He had left his home village in the hills above Florence and made his way through northern Italy and France to Cherbourg. Here there were good links to England and he had found a job stoking coal in the depths of a Royal Mail Steam Packet Company paddlesteamer mv 'Balmoral' which crossed regularly to Southampton under the command of Captain Goldsmith. After two years of hot, dirty work he was desperate to get out of the bowels of the ship and into the light. Quitting the mv 'Balmoral' he was going to make his way to London, the bustling English capital city with endless prospects for anyone who relished hard graft and where distant cousins had set up businesses in 'Little Italy', Clerkenwell, using their skills in making delicious ice-cream for which Londoners were happy to pay a premium.

He moved slowly from Southampton, picking up seasonal farm work as he went so he did not have to delve into his savings. Anything would do, sheep-shearing and lambing, harvesting, seasonal vegetable and fruit picking, milking, fencing. He could turn his hand to any work and he was in no hurry.

She was breathing heavily by the time she reached the Ridgeway. She was no lightweight now in her last few weeks of pregnancy. Cooks' meals were not insubstantial and leftovers were never wasted. Perhaps she should have brought Hilda the new scullery maid with her to help with the task.

In the hedgerows the hazelnuts were well-formed, almost ready to harvest before the squirrels had them all and the wild purple damsons were covered with their greyish bloom, sour to eat but providing more jams and jellies to be prepared for the year ahead.

She could smell the first signs of Autumn in the air as leaves began to lose their chlorophyll and turn to brilliant orange, red and yellow before falling to the ground to be scuffed into the air on Sundays as families took a turn on the hill, children throwing armfuls of them at their siblings. The Sycamore and Field Maples were her favourites with their deep, butter yellow fingered leaves. Earth smells, like the first days of Spring after a warm rain shower but with a tinge of decay and an unwelcome promise that cold, dark months lay ahead. She shivered and pulled her scarf closer into her neck. She followed The Ridgeway track into the short-cropped sheep meadows, diverting now from The Lower Icknield Way, with clear views ahead of Lodge Hill and in the distance the faint impression of Whiteleaf Cross above the market town of Princes Risborough. The Cross was in need of re-chalking to remove the green algae and mosses. She loved these high places where she could see so far into the distance, to towns she had never visited. Once she had travelled to Oxford with her family to St Giles Fair held every September and her father had won an ornament for her, a fairing, cheap but treasured which sat on her mantelpiece in her new home, a Shepherd and Shepherdess with lambs at their feet. They said it was made in Staffordshire, wherever that was. It seemed that day as if she had crossed a Continent .

She could hear the men in the woodlands on either side of The Ridgeway. Their banter back and forth as they cut trees and readied them for the heavy horses to drag the boles down the old drovers holloways. She knew all the men on the Estate, had grown up with them, learnt to read and write alongside them. She had expected to marry one of them and settle down into life in a small cottage in the village with an unruly brood . Well, she was married and she lived in the village with her young Italian and the first of her brood was on its way .

As she worked her way along the blackberry bushes she could hear Pietro's lilting tenor voice. His dark, lightly curled hair and black eyes had entranced all the female members of the household, including the daughters and wife of the Headmaster. Pietro's eyes smiled as they roamed across the bodies of all the women, even Cook, as he assessed their attributes. He knew just how to charm them and Clara was amazed at how the old Cook purred at him as she gave him an extra cake or a hunk of cheese.

On the one day each week that they could call their own they would walk onto the Ridgeway after Church , sometimes with a picnic or climb the steep rise to the top of Chinnor Hill where two burial mounds nestled in the grass, reputed to be the burial site of Anglo-Saxons, one a princess. Was this the reason for the Old English name for Bledlow meaning Bledda's burial mound she wondered. With Pietro she indeed felt like that princess, but full of life, not dead and rotted.

She would pick bluebells in the woods in the Spring, though they always wilted before they reached home and wild orchids in the Summer from the top of Chinnor Hill where they could easily see the windmill on the edge of the village. The wild flowers on the escarpment were wondrous and visited by myriads of Marbled White, Peacock and Red Admiral butterflies and fluttering Chalkhill Blues. The hill was alive with bees visiting the marjoram and thyme and she knew the names of the birds which filled the air with song. Skylarks in the meadows, blackbirds and sparrows in the hedges, thrush and

duncock, kestrel hovering over rough grass waiting for signs of a vole or shrew. The members of the village competed with each other to see who was first to hear a Cuckoo in April, see the first swallow arrive in the barns on the farm or who saw a Barn Owl quartering in the meadows for mice. At the side of the Ridgeway Path badger had dug burys amongst the tree roots whilst fox scavenged through the village and woods in the quiet of nightfall. The woods, hills and meadows encroaching on this ancient thoroughfare were a continuous source of entertainment throughout the seasons for everyone.

Picking and snipping she smiled as she heard her husband's laughter coming from the wood, remembering his quiet laugh during their more intimate moments. Her elderberry basket was almost full and the blackberry one filling fast, though it would have been faster if she hadn't eaten so many, as the purple stains at the corners of her mouth testified. She wiped her mouth on the lacy handkerchief that Pietro had given her for her birthday, annoyed at the staining. Cook would have a recipe to remove them.

The large elderberry bush was dripping with fruit. She reached up on tiptoes with her stick to draw the branch down so she could cut off the sprigs of juicy, black heads. She felt a sharp pain in her abdomen which made her let go of the branch and the stick flew into the air. The pain seared through her again and she cried out involuntarily. Something warm trickled down her legs and as she lifted her skirt she saw a red stream of blood forming rivulets to her ankles. Another stab of pain and she fell on her knees, calling out for Pietro in her panic. As she fell her head struck a sarsen stone erected along the fence line. She screamed, fell forward and was silent. But the men hadn't heard her. They hadn't seen her.

When the men walked back to the Estate Office at lunchtime they saw an unusual hump on the Path. They hurried along to find the saddest sight. Clara's blood had seeped from her body and she lay cold. The infant, sheltered in his mother's skirts, gave a weak kitten cry. The youngest member of the team ran his fastest along The Ridgeway back to the village for the doctor and a stretcher. Pietro tried to revive his wife whilst another man wrapped the baby in a warm jacket and held it next to his body as he hurried along the Ridgeway home to his wife who was a nursing mother herself. It was too late for Clara, her autumn bounty strewn across the Path, but with luck their child would survive its traumatic journey into life.

During World War One Italians were regarded as 'aliens' and were obliged to register with the local Police and not to travel more than five miles from home. This was a very difficult period for Pietro. After the Great War in Europe he stood on the deck of the old paddlesteamer as it docked at Cherbourg. High on his shoulders his young son could see the busyness on the dockside as passengers and baggage were unloaded. Porters were noisily calling to each other, pushing trollies loaded with suitcases and hat boxes. Peter's excitement was infectious and as Pietro lifted him down from his shoulders he hugged him, kissed the top of his head and tousled his flaming red hair. "Let's go home son" he said as they finally boarded a train for Italy.