

*The  
War  
Bride*

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*For my mother*



## PROLOGUE

*13 January, 1920*

There didn't seem to be a band playing. And only a few people on the wharf at Dawes Point. A handful of Army types, a man in a suit waiting with a taxi, and the normal number of stevedores lounging around, grabbing a smoko while they waited for their cargo to arrive.

Frank was surprised. The last time a war-bride ship had docked – when his mate Smitty's girl came out – there had been crowds, an Army brass band, streamers and shouting and crying – even a man with a placard saying, 'Welcome to your new home, Mavis'. He'd thought about making one of those for Margaret, but now he was glad he hadn't. He felt silly enough, clutching a bunch of roses in a sweaty hand.

He hoped he'd still recognise her. Two years and four months was a long time, and women did things with their hairstyles. Clothes were different. But surely Margaret's tall, slender form would stand out the way it had at Reading train station, when they'd said goodbye. Surely he couldn't mistake that lovely, soft smile of hers for anyone else?

It was hot already, and humid, as Sydney summers always were, but he was ruefully aware that the sweat running down his back wasn't only from the heat.

Wound tighter than a watch spring, he was. Two years and four months and no giving in to temptation, no matter what. A married man, and he'd stuck to it, and God hadn't it been hard! But today . . . the house he'd found for them was all ready, the bed made with brand-new sheets. A thorn pricked his thumb and he loosened his grip; not long now.

The SS *Waimana* loomed closer; still painted in its camouflage colours, even now, fourteen months after the war had ended. Frank blinked, confused. There weren't any passengers lining the rails – no, wait, there were a couple on the top deck, holding up some kiddies to see. Where were the women? This was supposed to be a war-bride ship. It should have been packed to the gunnels.

The ship was tied up and the gangplank put across the gap. A trickle of passengers came down, but the only young woman who emerged was a redhead. She winked at him as she went past, her hand tucked into a corporal's arm. That was all – the others were a family group and a couple of men in suits.

Where was Margaret? He checked the letter from the Repatriation Committee again, for the tenth time; yes, the *Waimana*, arriving January 1920, check shipping news for arrival date. Which he had. Surely she hadn't got off at Fremantle or Melbourne? Maybe most of the women had been going to Melbourne, and that was why the ship was nearly empty. That would be it. But where was Margaret?

Who could he ask? An Army sergeant was checking off the corporal and his redhead from a list. With the enlisted man's

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instinctive avoidance of authority, Frank went instead to a sailor who was securing the mooring ropes at the bow of the ship.

‘My wife was supposed to be on this ship,’ he began.

The sailor hawked and spat into the greasy Harbour water. ‘Soddin’ women.’

Frank ignored his comment.

‘Margaret Dalton?’ he asked.

The sailor looked at the sky and sucked his teeth, thinking.

‘Brown hair? Good looker? About so high?’ He measured against himself. Frank nodded.

‘Yerse, I remember her. There were only a couple without their blokes. She came on board, but she took herself off again. Women – always changing their bloody minds.’

He’d felt cold like this when he’d been shot, at Passchendaele, in the streaming mud, trying to crawl under barbed wire. The shock had gone through him the same way, exactly.

‘Took herself off . . .’ he managed.

The sailor shrugged and made fast, then circled him to get back on board.

‘Life’s a shit, eh?’ he said as he climbed the gangplank.

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Frank threw the roses into the gutter as he walked away. Walked and walked, hot in his good suit (his only suit) and his shiny shoes.

Part of him wasn’t surprised. He’d always known that Margaret was too good for him. Too beautiful, too kind, too loving. He wasn’t worth that kind of girl; a nameless orphan with nothing more than what his two hands could make. But she hadn’t seemed to realise that. Had seemed to think they were on a par, that she was making a good bargain. Had seemed to look forward to a life in Australia.

When she'd walked with him to the station to see him off to the front, she'd cried silently, surreptitiously rubbing the tears away from her face, not wanting to make him feel any worse. They'd only been married a month, then, and parting had been so hard. When they'd kissed goodbye, her soft mouth had been salty with tears.

She'd loved him then, he was certain.

Two years and four months was a long time. Long enough, it seemed, for her to change her mind, even if it was at the last moment.

He'd had letters; but not for a while, now he thought about it. A few months. Maybe that should have made him realise. Made him prepare himself, instead of being side-swiped like this.

She should have warned him. Told him she'd had doubts. He could have reassured her. Hell, he would have gone to England to fetch her if he'd had to.

Unless someone else had changed her mind for her.

The thought of Margaret with another man hit him low and hard, and left him gasping.

He needed a drink. There was a pub on the corner. Not one he'd been in before, but it was open. He went in and hesitated, then ordered a whisky. Beer wouldn't chase away this shaking feeling inside him; wouldn't put him solidly on his feet again.

One whisky didn't, either. He had another, and another. A vague sense that he was spending too much money sent him out the door, jingling the coins in his pocket, along with the key to the house he'd prepared so carefully for Margaret.

It made him sick to think of living there alone. Made him walk faster, as if to outdistance the thought.

He stopped for breath and realised that he'd walked a long way; had taken a familiar path, to Stanmore, and Gladys.



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Well, why not? Hell, he'd been faithful the whole time, and what did he have to show for it? Anger rose up in him, finally chasing away the cold, sick dread. If Margaret didn't want him, there was one who did. Who always had. And there was no reason now that his daughter couldn't have a proper father.

That thought was the first good one he'd had. It would be wonderful to see more of Violet.

He turned into Cavendish Street and walked up to number 64, Mrs Leydin's boarding house, where Glad had a room for her and Violet. For a moment, before he knocked, he was afraid that she wouldn't want him, either. That she'd throw him off because he hadn't chosen her over Margaret, despite the fact that Margaret was his lawful wedded wife. He was frozen with that fear, for a moment; that he'd be back to being alone in the world, as he always had been until that miraculous day that Margaret had said she would marry him. Alone and forsaken. But he wasn't alone. Violet would always be his.

His knock would have woken the dead.

It was still early; Glad was on second shift at the biscuit factory, and she hadn't left for work yet. She answered the door and put her hand to her heart as she saw him; did he look that bad?

'She didn't come,' he said.

Her pale little face flushed and she took his hand almost shyly. 'I'm sorry,' she said. That was Gladys. She was sorry, always, at anything that caused him pain. She really loved him. Tears came to his eyes but he didn't want her to see, so he pulled her into his arms and hugged her. Violet came running out of their room and crowed with delight to see him.

'Papa!' she yelled. She barrelled into his legs and he swept her up with one arm, still holding Gladys tightly with the other.

He kissed Vi's cheek and she threw her little arms around his neck. There was nothing like that feeling.

Gladys leaned her head against his shoulder; her love and acceptance soothed the raw wound of Margaret's rejection.

'You and Vi should move in with me,' he said. 'We'll be a proper family.'

'Yes,' Glad said. She smoothed his hair back and smiled at him. There was a hint of sadness at the back of her eyes, but he concentrated on the smile, mirroring it until the sadness disappeared. 'A proper family.'

# 1

*26 January 1920*

‘Passport and marriage lines.’

Margaret handed over the small green book and carefully unfolded her marriage lines before laying them on the desk. Excitement bubbled up under her ribs; an hour, maybe less, and she would actually set foot in Australia. And Frank would be there, waiting for her. She wanted to skip from foot to foot, but she tried to school her expression into one of patience. Perhaps some of her anticipation showed, because the Immigration Officer – a nice old man with very clean fingernails – smiled at her.

‘Been a while since you’ve seen him, then?’

‘Two years, four months,’ Margaret said. ‘He was wounded at Passchendaele in ’seventeen and shipped straight back here from Belgium.’

‘By golly! That’s a time.’ He stamped her passport and handed her back the marriage certificate. ‘You’ve got your clearance from the quarantine doctor?’ She nodded. ‘No need to keep you any longer, then, Mrs Dalton. Welcome to Australia.’

She beamed at him, then made her way to Mrs Murchison, who was travelling with her husband, a sergeant in the Light Horse.

Most of the war brides on the SS *Borda* were travelling with their husbands, and often children too. A year and two months after the war had ended, and already some of these couples had two or even three children. She wished she and Frank had met earlier in the war. A couple of months together before he was sent off to the front hadn't given her nearly enough memories of him.

She pushed through the crowds to the handrail and stared avidly at Sydney Harbour. So much bigger than she'd expected! Busy with ferries and yachts and what she supposed were fishing boats, all dancing across white-capped waves under the brilliant golden sun. It was hot already, despite the sea breeze. She hugged herself in self-congratulation. She would never be cold again!

Tall golden cliffs guarded the entrance to the Harbour; their ship had been at anchor off the northern headland since just after dawn, when the quarantine doctor had come on board. Most of them had been given a clean bill of health, but two women and three children had been taken off to the Quarantine Station, a long low timber building at the base of the headland.

Thank God she was healthy! She couldn't have borne yet another delay. A year apart from Frank during the war. A year waiting for notification that the Australian Repatriation Committee had a berth for her on a war-bride ship. Three weeks at anchor at Tilbury in that disgusting old scow the *Waimana*. Then the change of ship to the *Borda*. Then the long, exciting but frustrating sea voyage.

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Finally, finally, they were here. As soon as the doctor was finished checking the crew, the ship would make its way to the dock. And she would see Frank again.

It was silly to feel butterflies. It wasn't nervousness, just sheer excitement. She had left nerves and fear and grief behind her, together with death and horror and cold grey despair. A new life in a new land. She and Frank, together at last.

The ship was moving so slowly, its little tug boat valiantly pulling through the wide open Harbour, past docks full of ships, steamships and schooners and sailboats, small and large. There were many more sailboats than she would have expected on a weekday.

'Anniversary regatta,' Sergeant Murchison said. He waved a folded newspaper at her – the pilot ship had brought the day's papers on board and they'd rapidly gone the rounds of the men.

A regatta! How nice of them to put on a show for her, she thought, laughing. She turned for a moment to tilt her face up to the sun. She was lucky, because although her skin seemed fair, and freckled easily, it tanned to a honey colour; not exactly like a lady, but better than burning under this blazing southern sky. She looked up only for a moment: she had to turn and watch the Harbour again, all its movement and life and colour.

Margaret felt greedy for every impression, every sight, every sound. She'd imagined this so many times, but she'd got it wrong. She'd forgotten to imagine the sea smell, and the trees – so many, many trees on the headlands and foreshores, all a dull shade of green, almost olive. And the gulls. They didn't mew sweetly like gulls in England. They positively squawked and shrieked as they tussled over scraps the kiddies threw to them.

She laughed aloud. Good for them. Good for everyone and everything who reached out and held onto life. Everyone who

looked forward instead of back. That's what she would do, from now on. No more grief or regret. The bad times were over, the dead were buried, and it was time to enjoy life. With Frank.

It felt just right to hear an Army band play 'Waltzing Matilda' as the ship drew into the wharf. Some of the men on board started to sing, and she joined in, her voice rising above theirs. She'd learned that song, and a few others, on the journey. The men had taken it upon themselves to teach their wives how to be 'real Aussies', and they had included her and the three other women travelling alone in the lessons. She knew the difference between New South Wales and Victoria, 'outback' and 'back of beyond', a privy and a dunny. At least the currency was the same, although the Australian money was much prettier than the English.

The dock was full of people waiting, waving, laughing and shouting. She searched the faces of the men – why wouldn't they take off their hats so she could see properly! Frank was tall; but all these Australian men seemed to be tall. There weren't *that* many younger men. Mostly older people and younger – parents, sisters and brothers, she supposed. A man in a flat cap held up a brace of beer bottles, and one of the NCOs further along the rail yelled, 'You bloody beauty, Micko!' Micko made the bottles dance in the air, and everyone laughed in sheer good spirits.

Where was he? For a moment her gaze was caught by a tall man, but he was in uniform; an Army sergeant with a sheaf of paperwork. She kept looking, face after face, none of them Frank's.

She held back once the gangplank was set up. Let the families with babies go first, she told herself, but knew she was hoping that as the crowd thinned she would be able to see better, to

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find Frank. Setting foot on Australian soil without Frank waiting for her wasn't right. Just wasn't right.

The families left, then the couples; not all of them were greeted by friends or relations. Some of them had hundreds of miles to go still before they were home. Each was checked off a list by the tall sergeant and collected their trunks, caught taxis from the line at the dock gates, and left. The wharf emptied of everyone except the Army personnel. The band began to pack up.

The sergeant checked his list and looked up, straight at her. Nothing for it, then. She had to move. Of course, this man would know. There would be a message for her. How silly she'd been. She walked briskly down the echoing plank and smiled at him as confidently as she could.

He blinked and smiled back; a redheaded man, pleasant to look at despite a tight white scar on one cheek, going as high as the corner of his eye.

'You'll be Mrs Dalton, then?' he asked, checking his list. 'I'm Sergeant McBride.'

'Yes.' She swallowed. 'Have you a message from my husband?'

He shook his head. 'No, sorry. But don't worry. Things happen. It'd be a bad boss who wouldn't give a man the day off to meet his wife, but some bosses are like that. I'm sure he'll turn up.' His voice was reassuring, yet he wouldn't quite meet her eye. 'Best for you to come up to the barracks and I'll check his contact details, send a messenger. He might have had the day wrong.'

He saw her into a taxi and got in after her, settling his long legs with difficulty in the cramped car. 'Victoria Barracks,' he told the driver.

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Victoria Barracks was surrounded by a wall of the same golden stone as the Harbour headlands, and inside the compound the long Georgian-style buildings were a matching colour.

Troops were drilling on the parade ground in front of the main building, but Sergeant McBride directed the cab up the hill to the left, to a smaller building in a more colonial style, a bit like the government buildings she had seen in Colombo on the journey out, with a verandah along the front.

‘Headquarters,’ he said as he ushered her into a surprisingly well furnished waiting room. Mahogany table, upholstered chairs. Aspidistras. It smelled of furniture polish. The building blocked the heat, and she shivered with a sudden chill. But that wasn’t a goose walking over her grave. No. All she had to do was wait and this competent man would sort things out for her.

‘I’ll check his records,’ McBride said. ‘Would you like a cup of tea while you’re waiting?’

Margaret didn’t know what to say. Tea. Yes, of course she would like tea. She was English. That’s what you did in a moment of crisis. You had tea.

‘Thank you.’

She was conscious of trying to sound posh, as though that could change the outcome. An old habit; it was certainly true in England that you were treated better by officialdom if you sounded educated – that was why her mother had scraped and saved to send both Margaret and her brother to elocution lessons. During the war, she’d been grateful not to sound like a hick from the Black Country; but when she went back there, when her parents fell ill, it had stamped her as an outsider and made it harder to find work. Who knew how people were supposed to speak in Australia? Any way she spoke would mark her as a real outsider here.



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There were typewriters clacking and doors opening and closing, the sound of men's voices, someone shouting orders on the parade ground. The armchairs were deep and looked comfortable, but she didn't want to be comfortable. She paced, still clutching her purse, with its passport and papers tucked safely inside.

A young private – surely only a schoolboy? – brought her a tray of tea, so she sat on a hard chair near the side table. Silver tray, just like on the ship. A silver pot, heavily polished. She was glad the boy had left because her hand shook as she poured and the tea spilled onto the tray, dulling its shine. Panic struck her, unreasoning panic. She grabbed her handkerchief from her purse and mopped it up and then didn't know what to do with the dripping linen. In the end she stuck it into one of the aspidistra pots. It was a good hankie, too.

This was ridiculous. She was overreacting. Sit still, she told herself. Drink your tea.

Sergeant McBride came back and stood for a moment in the doorway, his cap gone, a paper in his hand. His face was grim, set as if for an unpleasant task.

No. No. No more death. Please God, don't let him be dead. 'Frank – is he all right?' she managed to ask.

Anything but dead, please God.

'As far as we know, he's – he's fine.'

Relief flooded her. Yet the sergeant was looking at her with such compassion.

'I checked his file. Frank Dalton, correct? Nineteenth battalion?'

'Yes.' The relief was gone. Something was wrong.

'I'm afraid . . .' He hesitated. 'I'm afraid I have some . . . difficult news.'

He proffered the paper. Enlistment papers. Australian Imperial Force. She saw Frank's name. Yes, that was him. There was a list of questions, and Sergeant McBride pointed to them:

<i>What is your age?</i>	<i>22 years, 3 months</i>
<i>What is your occupation?</i>	<i>Railway blacksmith</i>
<i>Have you ever been an apprentice?</i>	<i>Yes</i>

Some details about his apprenticeship. Then –

<i>Have you ever been married?</i>	<i>Yes.</i>
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Her mind stuttered. Of course he was married – but this was his *enlistment* paper. They hadn't been married then.

<i>Who is your next of kin?</i>	<i>(wife) Gladys Jane Mortimer</i> <i>64 Cavendish Street, Stanmore</i>
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Wife. Gladys Jane Mortimer.

Wife.

'But . . .' she said. 'But he signed the form! He signed the form to get me to come out here!' It couldn't be true. Perhaps this Gladys was dead. Dead before they'd ever met. That must be it.

'Yes,' McBride said. He sighed, and rubbed the back of his head. 'They do that.' He paused. 'I've sent a messenger to the address on this form, and another to the address we had for him after he was demobbed. They'll take a little while to get back.'

'She must have died,' Margaret said. She could hear the ridiculous certainty in her voice.

'Mrs Dalton,' he said, and then hesitated again. 'I have to tell you, I see quite a bit of this. It was lonely, being so far away

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from home, and if the marriage wasn't going well before they left, sometimes the men . . . looked for consolation.'

She didn't believe it. Couldn't.

'But . . . but why sign the request for me to come out here, then?' She clung to that. He'd signed it before he went to the front, to make sure that there could be no hold-up after the war was over, that she could get the first available ship.

'Heat of the moment, optimism that they'll be able to keep it all quiet even after they get home.' McBride shrugged. 'And then sometimes they get home, and the real wife is waiting for them, and . . .'

'He would have told me.' She couldn't imagine it, even now with the weight of McBride's experience against her. Frank couldn't have – *wouldn't have*. He was a good man. She said so. McBride looked at her with compassion and a surprising degree of understanding.

'The ones who do this, they're not villains. They're mostly just – weak. They take the path of least resistance.'

Weak. Was that possible? That Frank had been weak?

The day before their wedding, he'd taken her for a walk along the river. They'd kissed under the bare branches of an elm, and then he'd held her hands.

'Margaret, I have to tell you – I haven't been a saint.' He'd been sheepish, ashamed. She'd laughed. She was a working-class girl, not some sheltered debutante.

'You don't expect men to have been saints,' she said. 'But you'd better toe the line from here on in.'

'You betcha! I know when I'm well off.' He had kissed her again and she had never been so happy.

Not a saint. That covered a lot of possibilities, but surely not *this*?



Two hours later, *this* was looking certain.

The messenger from Frank's address was told that he had moved out without leaving a forwarding address.

The messenger from Gladys Mortimer's address said that she no longer lived there. That she'd moved back in with her fella.

Most damning of all was a copy of Frank's will, which he'd lodged with the battalion, as many soldiers had. A handwritten scrawl, it left everything he had to his daughter, Violet. The will was dated five weeks after his marriage to Margaret. The week after he'd gone to the front. He had known he had a daughter. When they got married, he had known and he had chosen to bequeath everything to her.

Margaret sat, hunched over as though recovering from a kick to the stomach. She couldn't cry. Mostly she felt dazed. It reminded her of the week after her parents died, when she had walked through the house randomly picking things up and putting them down again. Nothing had seemed to fit, to belong, even the mantelpiece clock, which had sat there her entire life.

Now she was the thing that didn't fit.

'I'm sorry,' Sergeant McBride said.

'It still doesn't make any sense to me,' she said. 'I understand why he might have married me – but why wouldn't he have told me the truth before I came out here? It – it's *bizarre*.'

'Yes,' he said. 'It is. But you're the third woman it's happened to in the past four months. And there've been six more just abandoned – the men don't turn up at the ship, and if we can track them down, they've joined up with some other woman, or they've gone upcountry droving, or they've dived into a bottle when they got demobbed and never climbed out again.'

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‘Will . . . will you try to track Frank down?’

‘I suppose we could try the railways, see if he’s gone back to work for them. Do you want us to?’

She thought about it. Did she want to confront him, see him shuffle and lie and look ashamed? Or worse, watch him brazen it out and laugh at her for being gullible? The very thought of it made her want to vomit.

‘No,’ she said. Panic climbed up and caught her around the throat. Alone in a foreign country. What was she to *do*?

Sergeant McBride’s voice was gently reassuring. ‘The Army has a house; a hostel. I’ll take you there.’

She let him lead her to a taxi. It was a short trip, through winding streets full of two-storey terraced houses until they stopped at a larger house and the sergeant paid the driver. At least this place had a front garden and a wall around it, and was well maintained. White cane chairs were set out on the front porch.

‘What is this place?’

‘A hostel for . . . well, for women whose husbands don’t turn up at the wharf.’

She looked around. Across the street were more terraced houses. Different from English terraces; these each had a balcony on the upper storey. She saw women sitting there, in kimonos or housecoats, legs apart and elbows on knees, faces rouged and powdered. A couple of them called out to the men who walked past below. Not a salubrious area, by the looks of it. Why did the Army put women here? Damaged goods, she thought. They think we’re damaged goods.

‘Deceived wives,’ she said, unwilling to step through the gate and brand herself one of them.

‘Not all. Sometimes the men have died. We got a lot of that in early ’nineteen with the Spanish Flu. And sometimes the bastards just abandon them.’ He didn’t apologise for his language and she didn’t blame him.

‘And the women stay here?’

‘Until we can organise a passage home for them.’

Her attention caught, she stared up at him in alarm. ‘Home? Do I have to go back to England?’

He studied her silently. ‘Mostly they want to.’

‘Not me. Not for anything.’ It was the first real feeling she’d had since she saw that will. Desperation. Frank couldn’t take this too. She wouldn’t let him steal Australia away from her. Images of grey, rainy, grimy streets filled her head. Her parents’ faces as she pulled the shrouds over them. The names on the roll of honour at their church: almost all the boys she had gone to school with, picked out in gold. Death and horror, cold and dreariness; she had no good memories of England to draw her back.

For the first time, Sergeant McBride smiled warmly, a genuine, amused, admiring smile. ‘Don’t worry,’ he said. ‘Australia’s not going to turf you out if you don’t want to go. We need girls like you.’

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The hostel was run by a middle-aged, organising woman, Mrs Pritchard.

‘Come on in, now. All your things are here.’

Margaret followed her into a small room, where her trunk sat at the foot of the single bed.

She shot back out of the room and confronted Sergeant McBride.

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'You had them bring my trunk straight here from the ship.' It hadn't even occurred to her to wonder where it was.

He looked abashed, folding his cap in his hand and fiddling with it.

'Mostly, if they haven't sent a message, and they're not there at the wharf, the women end up here.'

Humiliation burned through her; she could feel herself blushing furiously, and hated him suddenly for being the witness to it.

'Men!' Mrs Pritchard sniffed. 'Don't you worry about any of that, now. Come in and wash your face before lunch.'

'I'll check back tomorrow,' McBride said. There was too much understanding in his eyes, as though he'd seen other women react as she had.

Her emotions were up and down, all over the place. Just as suddenly, she was sorry she'd hated him. He'd been kind.

'Thank you,' she said.

He nodded and left.

'Now,' Mrs Pritchard said. 'What do we call you?'

'Margaret.' She didn't want to think about what her name really was, now. Margaret Adams, she supposed, like it had always been, but she had no documents in that name. Her passport said Margaret Dalton. Would she have to apply for a new one? She imagined explaining to someone at the British Consulate why she had to revert to her maiden name and wanted again to vomit. Bigamy. Ugly word.

'Go and wash your face,' Mrs Pritchard said again. Her tone was firm, as though she spoke to a child. 'It'll all sort itself out.'

Margaret sat on the side of the narrow bed and stared at the whitewashed wall. She unpinned her hat and laid it on

the bedside table, and then finally dragged off her gloves and threw them there too.

Her wedding band mocked her. She tugged it but her hands were swollen in the heat and it stuck on her knuckle. The fight with the inanimate object was the last straw, and she began to sob. She fell sideways onto the bed and curled up like a baby, like a hedgehog, burrowing into herself as though she could shut the entire world away if only she kept on crying.