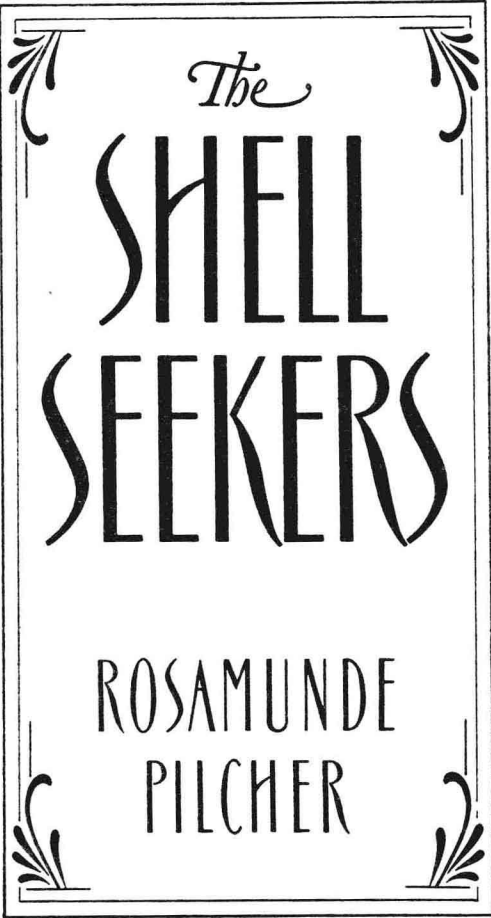


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and their children.*



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# Prologue

The taxi, an old Rover smelling of old cigarette smoke, trundled along the empty, country road at an unhurried pace. It was early afternoon at the very end of February, a magic winter day of bitter cold, frost, and pale, cloudless skies. The sun shone, sending long shadows, but there was little warmth in it, and the ploughed fields lay hard as iron. From the chimneys of scattered farmhouses and small stone cottages, smoke rose, straight as columns, up into the still air, and flocks of sheep, heavy with wool and incipient pregnancy, gathered around feeding troughs, stuffed with fresh hay.

Sitting in the back of the taxi, gazing through the dusty window, Penelope Keeling decided that she had never seen the familiar countryside look so beautiful.

The road curved steeply; ahead stood the wooden signpost marking the lane that led to Temple Pudley. The driver slowed and with a painful change of gear, turned, bumping downhill between high and blinding hedges. Moments later they were in the village, with its golden Cotswold stone houses, newsagent, butcher, The Sudeley Arms, and the church—set back from the street behind an ancient graveyard and the dark foliage of some suitably gloomy yews. There were few people about. The children were all in school, and the bitter weather kept others indoors. Only an old man, mittened and scarved, walked his ancient dog.

“Which house is it?” the taxi driver inquired over his shoulder.

She leaned forward, ridiculously excited and expectant. “Just a little way on. Through the village. The white gates on the right. They’re open. There! Here we are.”

He turned in through the gates and the car drew up at the back of the house.

She opened the door and got out, drawing her dark blue cape around her against the cold. She opened her bag and found her key, went to unlock the door. Behind her, the taxi driver manhandled open the boot of the car and lifted out her small suitcase. She turned to take it from him, but he held on to it, somewhat concerned.

"Is there nobody here to meet you?"

"No. Nobody. I live alone, and everybody thinks I'm still in the hospital."

"Be all right, will you?"

She smiled into his kindly face. He was quite young, with fair bushy hair. "Of course."

He hesitated, not wishing to presume. "If you want, I'll carry the case in. Carry it upstairs, if needs be."

"Oh, that's kind of you. But I can easily manage . . ."

"No bother," he told her, and followed her into the kitchen. She opened a door, and led him up the narrow, cottage stairs. Everything smelt clinically clean. Mrs. Plackett, bless her heart, had not been wasting time during the few days of Penelope's absence. She quite liked it when Penelope went away, because then she could do things like wash the white paint of the bannisters, and boil dusters, and buff up the brass and silver.

Her bedroom door stood ajar. She went in, and the young man followed her, setting her case on the floor.

"Anything else I can do?" he asked.

"Not a thing. Now, how much do I owe you?"

He told her, looking shamefaced, as though it were an embarrassment to him. She paid him, and told him to keep the change. He thanked her, and they went back down the stairs.

But still he hung about, seeming reluctant to leave. He probably, she told herself, had some old granny of his own, for whom he felt the same sort of responsibility.

"You'll be all right, then?"

"I promise you. And tomorrow my friend Mrs. Plackett will come. So then I won't be alone any more."

This, for some reason, reassured him. "I'll be off then."

"Goodbye. And thank you."

"No trouble."

When he was gone, she went back indoors, and closed the door. She was alone. The relief of it. Home. Her own house, her own possessions, her own kitchen. The Aga, oil-fired, simmered peacefully to itself, and all was blissfully warm. She loosened the fastening of her cape, and dropped it across the back of a chair. A pile of mail lay on the scrubbed table, and she leafed through it, but there seemed to be nothing there either vital or interesting, so she let it lie, and crossed the kitchen, opening the glass door that led into her conservatory. The thought of her precious plants, possibly dying of cold or thirst, had bothered her somewhat during the last few days, but Mrs. Plackett had taken care of them, as well as everything else. The earth in the pots was moist and loamy and the leaves were crisp and green. An early geranium wore a crown of tiny buds, and the hyacinths had grown at least three inches. Beyond the glass her garden lay winter-bound, the leafless trees black lace against the pale sky, but there were snowdrops thrusting through the mossy turf beneath the chestnut, and the first butter gold petals of the aconites.

She left the conservatory and made her way upstairs, intending to unpack, but instead allowed herself to be diverted by the sheer delight of being home again. And so meandered about, opening doors, inspecting every bedroom, to gaze from each window, to touch furniture, to straighten a curtain. Nothing was out of place. Nothing had changed. Finally downstairs again, and in the kitchen, she picked up her letters, and went through the dining room, and then into her sitting room. Here were her most precious possessions; her desk, her flowers, her pictures. The fire was laid. She struck a match, and knelt to touch it to newspaper. The flame flickered, the dry kindling flared and crackled. She piled on logs and the flames rose high in the chimney. The house, now, was alive again, and with this pleasurable little task out of the way, there could be no further excuse for not ringing up one of her children and telling them what she had done.

But which child? She sat in her chair to consider the alternatives. It should be Nancy, of course, because she was the eldest and the one who liked to think that she was totally responsible for her mother. But Nancy would be appalled, panic-stricken, and loud with recrimination. Penelope did not think that she felt quite strong enough to cope with Nancy quite yet.

Noel, then? Perhaps, as the man of the family, Noel should

be spoken to. But the notion of expecting any sort of practical help or advice from Noel was so ludicrous that she found herself smiling. "Noel, I have discharged myself from hospital and come home." To which piece of information, his reply would, in all likelihood, be, "Oh?"

And so Penelope did what she had known all along that she would do. She reached for the telephone and dialled the number of Olivia's London office.

"*Ve-nus.*" The girl on the switchboard sounded as though she were singing the name of the magazine.

"Could you put me through to Olivia Keeling, please?"

"Just a mo-ment."

Penelope waited.

"Miss Keeling's secretary."

Getting to speak to Olivia was a little like trying to have a chat with the President of the United States.

"Could I talk to Miss Keeling, please?"

"I'm sorry, Miss Keeling is in conference."

"Does that mean she's sitting round a boardroom table, or is she in her office?"

"She is in her office . . ." The secretary sounded disconcerted, as well she might, ". . . but she has someone with her."

"Well, interrupt her please. This is her mother speaking, and it's very important."

"It . . . can't wait?"

"Not for a moment," said Penelope firmly. "And I shan't keep her long."

"Very well."

Another wait. And then, at last, Olivia.

"Mumma!"

"I'm sorry to disturb you . . ."

"Mumma, is anything wrong?"

"No, nothing is wrong."

"Thank heavens for that. Are you ringing from the hospital?"

"No, I'm ringing from home."

"*Home?* When did you get *home?*"

"At about half past two this afternoon."

"But I thought they were going to keep you in for at least a week."

"That's what they intended, but I got so bored and so exhausted. I never slept a wink at nights, and there was an old lady in the bed next to mine who never stopped talking. No, not talking. Raving, poor old soul. So I just told the doctor I couldn't stand another moment of it, and packed my bags and left."

"You discharged yourself," Olivia said, flatly, sounding resigned, but not in the least surprised.

"Exactly so. There's not a thing wrong with me. And I got a nice taxi with a dear driver and he brought me back."

"But didn't the doctor protest?"

"Loudly. But there wasn't much he could do about it."

"Oh, *Mumma*," There was laughter in Olivia's voice. "You are wicked. I was going to come down this weekend and hospital visit. You know, bring you pounds of grapes and then eat them all myself."

"You could come here," Penelope said, and then wished that she hadn't, in case she sounded wistful and lonely; in case it sounded as though she needed Olivia for company.

"Well . . . if you're really all right, I might put it off for a bit. I'm actually frightfully busy this weekend. *Mumma*, have you spoken to Nancy yet?"

"No. I did think about it, and then I chickened out. You know how she fusses. I'll call tomorrow morning, when Mrs. Plackett's here, and I'm safely dug in and can't possibly be budged."

"How are you feeling? Truthfully, now."

"Perfectly all right. Except, as I told you, a bit short of sleep."

"You won't do too much, will you? I mean, you won't plunge out into the garden and start digging trenches or moving trees?"

"No, I won't. I promise. Anyway, everything's hard as iron. You couldn't get a spade into the earth."

"Well, thank God for small mercies. *Mumma*, I must go, I've got a colleague here in the office with me . . ."

"I know. Your secretary told me. I'm sorry I disturbed you, but I wanted you to know what was happening."

"I'm glad you did. Keep in touch, *Mumma*, and cherish yourself a little."

"I will. Goodbye, my darling."

"Goodbye, Mumma."

She rang off, put the telephone back on the table, and leaned back in her chair.

Now, there was nothing more to be done. She discovered that she was very tired, but it was a gentle tiredness, assuaged and comforted by her surroundings, as though her house were a kindly person, and she was being embraced by loving arms. In the warm and firelit room and the deep familiar armchair, she found herself surprised by, filled by, the sort of reasonless happiness she had not experienced for years. It is because I am alive. I am sixty-four, and I have suffered, if those idiot doctors are to be believed, a heart attack. Whatever. I have survived it, and I shall put it behind me, and not talk nor think about it, ever again. Because I am alive. I can feel, touch, see, hear, smell; look after myself; discharge myself from the hospital; find a taxi, and get myself home. There are snowdrops coming out in the garden, and spring is on the way. I shall see it. Watch the yearly miracle, and feel the sun grow warmer as the weeks slip by. And because I am alive, I shall watch it all happen and be part of that miracle.

She remembered the story of dear Maurice Chevalier. How does it feel to be seventy? they had asked him. Not too bad, he had replied. When you consider the alternative.

But for Penelope Keeling it felt a thousand times better than just not too bad. Living, now, had become not simple existence that one took for granted, but a bonus, a gift, with every day that lay ahead an experience to be savoured. Time did not last forever. I shall not waste a single moment, she promised herself. She had never felt so strong, so optimistic. As though she was young once more, starting out, and something marvellous was just about to happen.

I



# NANCY

She sometimes thought that for her, Nancy Chamberlain, the most straightforward or innocent occupation was doomed to become, inevitably, fraught with tedious complication.

Take this morning. A dull day in the middle of March. All she was doing . . . all she planned to do . . . was to catch the 9:15 from Cheltenham to London, have lunch with her sister Olivia, perhaps pop into Harrods, and then return home. There was nothing, after all, particularly heinous about this proposal. She was not about to indulge in a wild orgy of extravagance, nor meet a lover; in fact, it was a duty visit more than anything else, with responsibilities to be discussed and decisions made, and yet as soon as the plan was voiced to her household, circumstances seemed to close ranks, and she was faced with objections, or, worse, indifference, and left feeling as though she were fighting for her life.

Yesterday evening, having made the arrangement with Olivia over the phone, she had gone in search of her children. She



found them in the small living room, which Nancy euphemistically thought of as the library, sprawled on the sofa in front of the fire, watching television. They had a playroom and a television of their own, but the playroom had no fireplace and was deathly cold, and the television was an old black-and-white, so it was no wonder they spent most of their time in here.

"Darlings, I have to go to London tomorrow to meet Aunt Olivia and have a talk about Granny Pen . . ."

"If you're going to be in London, then who's going to take Lightning to the blacksmith to be shod?"

That was Melanie. As she spoke, Melanie chewed the end of her pigtail and kept one baleful eye glued to the manic rock singer whose image filled the screen. She was fourteen and was going through, as her mother kept telling herself, that awkward age.

Nancy had expected this question and had her answer ready.

"I'll ask Croftway to deal with that. He ought to be able to manage on his own."

Croftway was the surly gardener-handyman who lived with his wife in a flat over the stables. He hated the horses and constantly spooked them into a frenzy with his loud voice and uncouth ways, but part of his job was helping to cope with them, and this he grudgingly did, manhandling the poor lathered creatures into the horse-box, and then driving this unwieldy vehicle across country to various Pony Club events. On these occasions Nancy always referred to him as "the groom."

Rupert, who was eleven, caught the tail end of this exchange, and came up with his own objection. "I've said I'll have tea with Tommy Robson tomorrow. He's got some football mags he said I could borrow. How'm I going to get home?"

This was the first that Nancy had heard of the arrangement. Refusing to lose her cool, knowing that to suggest that he change the day would instantly bring on a high-pitched flood of argument and wails of "It's not fair," she swallowed her irritation and said, as smoothly as she could, that perhaps he could catch the bus home.

"But that means I've got to walk from the village."

"Oh well, it's only a quarter of a mile." She smiled, making the best of the situation. "Just for once it won't kill you." She