

MISS PALTRY'S BABY SWAP

by Jennifer Ryan

I was the only midwife for miles around our village during the Second World War, and any midwife worth her salt was bound to find herself embroiled in new lines of business. Chilbury, nestling in the Kent hills just south of London, was filling up with new residents: evacuees, house guests fleeing the Blitz, land girls, and the air force crew from the nearby barracks. The church was packed on a Sunday and the village square and shop were rife with gossip. Sex, sex, sex was all that was on people's minds. With husbands off to fight, food and clothes rationed, and so many people away from home, it was considered only reasonable that people should be able to slacken their morals, enjoy themselves in any way they could, before it may be too late. There had to be some escape from all this bad news and having to make do.

And there were plenty of consequences of this slackening of morals, which is where I came into the picture. Babies, wanted or unwanted, legitimate or illegitimate, secret or scandalous, all passed through my hands. Special favors began coming my way, as well as gifts: sugar, bacon, a length of silk, a joint of lamb, and my favorite melt-in-the-mouth chocolates. Dr. Hammond was called to help out in London in the Blitz of

1940, and I became the only person with medical knowledge in the neighborhood. I soon came to realize that the war held much more for me than just babies. I was finally being appreciated for my services and hard work.

I opened a makeshift surgery in my back parlor so that I could act like a doctor, helping people with small problems. Some mornings there was a line waiting in my kitchen, with all sorts of spots and coughs and infections. There was also a lot of another type of disease; funny how quickly a dose of gonorrhea can get around a small village in war time. When Mrs. Weybridge came into my parlor I knew what she'd been doing, and who with. I cautiously mentioned:

"Do you see a lot of Captain Evans then?"

She blushed and said that she didn't know my meaning. I smiled and asked her if she had any spare clothing coupons for the month, and she hurriedly passed them over to me.

"Your secret's safe with me." I smiled, thinking about the lovely dark green coat I'd seen in town.

Some nights as I lay in bed I felt pleased about what I was doing. "I am making the immoral people pay for their sins," I would think. "They deserve to give me something. If they didn't have anything to hide, I would never ask for such favors. They are giving me the opportunity. I am only doing what is right." I went to church every Sunday to pray for their sins, adorning myself with a new coat and a hat with a feather,

more suited to my new standing. I am a stout, short woman and always felt I needed extra style to make people notice me, to make them see me as an important person and not just the little woman who helps at births. I had my hair done too, like Lady Derwent has hers.

At first I was reluctant to deal with fostering babies, but soon it became a great source of extra provisions and side income. The first unwanted pregnancy was with Doreen Tomkins from one of the farms. She was only 16 and her parents had worked hard at hiding her away for the last few months. I dragged the boy from her clutching arms and hurried away, praying she would realize the error of her ways and stop howling as if the world were coming to an end. I got a side of the pig the Tompkins had been secretly fattening for Christmas.

The vicarage took the first few babies, but then I had to start looking further afield for new homes. I knew how to read the women who would take them. They usually had some older children themselves and a kindly look, perhaps a little brow beaten. They always said no, but if I were to take round a little nipper in a shawl they simply couldn't help themselves. Tears dripping down their faces, they'd nod their heads while trying to work out how to feed an extra mouth. Boys were easier to get rid of than girls as they were potential workers, farm hands, and heirs, important things to have if your only son is being shot at in the Mediterranean.

And that's how it all happened at Chilbury Hall. Poor Lady Derwent was pregnant in the autumn of her life with her third child and no one at home. Lord Derwent was in North Africa with the troops, doing his duty. Lizzie, the unruly daughter, was training to be a nurse in Portsmouth. And Charles, the beloved eldest son and heir, was Missing Presumed Dead after Dunkirk. Lady Derwent had been so devastated by the news of dear Charles that she had almost lost the baby. But with my help and under the constant care of her lady's maid, Margaret, she continued through, determined to have a boy. They needed an heir, a replacement for Charles and a man to keep on the family name. She sent letters to Lord Derwent, and they settled on the name James William, and aimed to have him christened when Lord Derwent came home in September.

As the birth approached, I became a little apprehensive about it all. I hoped that Lord and Lady Derwent would not blame me if the child was not a boy. From my experience it seemed that older parents tend to have girls. Then one morning the devoted Margaret came to see me. She made what seemed an extraordinary suggestion. She asked if there were any other women in the village about to give birth. She wondered if they would be having a boy or a girl. She wondered if it would be possible to pop out for a few minutes after the birth, to meet her outside the building. She wondered if I would enjoy a large amount of money. What she was proposing of course was to swap babies should Lady Derwent's baby turn out to be a girl, and that I would be paid very handsome for my trouble.

There were two other mothers-to-be in the village at the time: the wife of a blacksmith who already had a large brood, and the doctor's wife who was pregnant for the first time. They both had potential, and were due to give birth around the same time. I hoped it was the blacksmith's wife as we had been through many births together and I knew that sneaking the baby outside wouldn't be hard. But as I watched over Mrs. Hammond, the doctor's wife, struggling through the beginning of her first labor, a messenger came to tell me that Lady Derwent was also in labor, and I knew how it had to be. I left the doctor's wife to it as she still had a long time to go and hurried off to Chilbury Hall.

I arrived just in time to see Margaret helping out a little head, then body, but alas no boy parts.

"It's a boy!" I cried. "But wait, he is struggling with his breath. I have to take him quick as I can to my surgery." I think the words came out very awkwardly, but Lady Derwent only murmured, "A boy. I so wanted a boy."

The devoted Margaret had to wait an hour outside the doctor's house with the baby girl – soon to be called Julia – until Mrs. Hammond finally pushed out James and the babies were quickly swapped on the back doorstep. The doctor's wife had always wanted a girl, which made things nice and easy. In fact, I congratulated myself on a good day's work. I had made four women happy: the two mothers, the devoted Margaret, and myself. A few days later a large quantity of money was handed over to

me in a sewing basket by Margaret. I never knew if the money came from Lady Derwent or whether Margaret somehow scraped it together without her knowing about the swap. That woman so adores her Ladyship, always worrying and fussing behind her, that I really wouldn't have been surprised at anything. But regardless, at the end of the day, the babies were doing well, no one suspected a thing, and life went on as usual for everyone.

Except that now I was rich. I thought about giving up work, taking the sewing basket and disappearing one dark night. I thought of going to Cornwall. I have relatives there and I'd heard it's very picturesque. I could have given up work perhaps. I sometimes wonder why I became a midwife. I liked it well enough for the first few years, but since Gordon broke off our engagement I've grown to thoroughly loath it.

But I decided to stay put in Chilbury. The war had brought with it the extra benefits, and I was enjoying my new prestige. It wasn't only the money and the food. It was the power. People in high up places came to say hello. Lady Derwent invited me to tea. Ladies smiled when they saw me coming into the shop. Everyone realized that I might be needed for a medical emergency at some point. And the others knew that I had their secrets to keep.

"Gossip breaks a community's backbone," I'd always say whenever people tried to get information out of me, or when I heard people talking behind their hands. I wasn't willing to share my secrets; they were far too valuable.

My reputation grew as a moral guardian of the village, a loyal protector of people's privacy, and a source of medical knowledge and wisdom. I was asked onto the village wartime committee and began a campaign to bring a proper surgery into the area (a popular cause which I had no intention of completing). Old Colonel Hodges proposed to me, which was rather unnecessary but flattering nonetheless. And the corner shop started to keep chocolate especially for me. They were foolish, selfish people looking after their own interests. It was a comfortable life.

But all good things come to an end, and so the war drew to a close. Dr. Hammond returned from London and expanded his surgery himself. The wartime committee was quickly disbanded by the returning members of the usual committee, who thanked us graciously and then complained that we hadn't done anything.

At first I simply went back to being Miss Paltry the midwife, but it soon became clear that people were avoiding me, calling me names. They were scared. I knew too many secrets about too many people. With the return of the men and life back to normal, the moral indecencies of the war years suddenly seemed appalling. I received a few threatening letters, and Mrs. Weybridge invited me to tea to inform me that she would simply refute any allegations made and that her husband would have me struck off.

After six months of torment (which began to feel a bit like a witch hunt), I took a trip to Cornwall to see my relatives. The sea air was refreshing and I decided to stay,

going back only to clear my rented cottage. I moved to a town not far from a cousin and settled back into being a normal midwife, a little woman who helps with births. Life was quiet and boring, and I could never quite forget my elevated position in Chilbury, that thrill of having the village in the palm of my hand. I was bitter about the way the community turned on me. I'd kept all their sordid secrets through the war, dealt with their diseased privates and unwanted babies, given them a shoulder to cry on. Why should I be treated like a villain and forced to flee?

Many years passed and then one day I was prompted to return. I received a letter from Lady Derwent explaining that Margaret was on her deathbed and wished to see me regarding an urgent and important matter. I remembered the high standing I had in the village as Margaret had begged for my help, and the vast sum that had long since dwindled away. Perhaps more respect would be in store for me, a final recognition of my ability to keep Chilbury Hall in the family. My name would at last be vindicated.

I had been invited to stay at Chilbury Hall, an honor that made me wonder if Lady Derwent knew about the swap and was preparing to offer me more money. I rubbed my hands with glee as the train drew into the station on that crisp winter evening. A driver had been sent to meet me, and as he led me through the station to the car I spotted Mrs. Hammond, the doctor's wife. She was laughing with a young woman who looked quite like her. I went to say hello.

"Why, Miss Paltry. You've returned. This is my daughter Julia." She then turned to the young woman. "Julia, Miss Paltry was the midwife who helped at your birth."

I shuddered at their likeness: perhaps I'd made a mistake and the babies had not been swapped after all? But then Julia blushed and gave me a big smile and I realized that the two women didn't actually look very similar at all. They wore similar, modish clothes and had the same curled hairstyle, and Julia had picked up Mrs. Hammond's jolly countenance and quick smile. They looked so happy together. No one would have guessed they were quite unrelated.

I smiled back, explaining that I was only there for a few nights, and wished them well. As I got into the car I saw Mrs. Weybridge in the streetlight across the road and started to feel slightly uneasy. I looked back at the station as it fell back into the night.

On the way to the hall the driver told me that his Lordship had passed away last year, leaving the estate in the very capable hands of James, the new Lord Derwent. The older daughter had married a wealthy businessman and moved to Hampshire, and poor Lady Derwent was not in good health and depended greatly on her son, who was now in his early twenties.

I was greeted by the butler who told me to wait in the hall, and was surprised to see a tall, impeccably dressed young man coming toward me. As he came into the light I knew that he must be James. He looked remarkably like his father, who was in fact Dr. Hammond and not, as they thought, Lord Derwent, although he had the condescending

attitude of wealth, education and nobility about him. An aristocratic air. The Derwents had always been a little stupid; the villagers used to say they were inbred. But this man was quite the opposite, sharp witted with a cold determination in the eyes.

After a polite enquiry about my journey he led me to an upstairs chamber where I found Lady Derwent beside the bed of a very frail Margaret. Lady Derwent didn't look in great health. Her hair had greyed and she looked tired of life. She raised her eyes to me and then quickly looked at James.

Margaret took my hand as I sat next to the bed. "Thank you for coming, Miss Paltry. Thank you from my heart, which is so weary for the years I have carried this awful secret."

I glanced at Lady Derwent, who was still looking fearfully up at her son who now stood beside her chair. They didn't know, but could have guessed? Why bring a midwife back when she'd been away since James was a young child?

"What is it, Margaret?" James spoke firmly, holding his temper in check.

"I'm so ashamed to admit it now. I'm so very sorry. But we swapped the babies."

She broke into a quiet whimper.

"What was that? Tell me what happened." Lady Derwent calmly asked me.

"Margaret knew that you wanted a boy so very desperately and asked me to help.

There were other babies being born at the same time, and so I swapped your baby girl for a boy at birth."

"Are you trying to say—? So who am I then?" James's voice was rising.

"We swapped the girl with a boy of Mrs. Hammond, the doctor's wife."

Lady Derwent began to cry. "That dear girl Julia Hammond? She is my child?"

"And I am the son of a country doctor?" James shouted. "This is unbelievable.

Two stupid pathetic women think they have the right to dabble in affairs that are not their own."

"I did it for you, m' lady," Margaret stammered through her tears. "You were so very sad after Master Charles went missing. I could feel how it broke your heart, as you sat gazing at his photograph every day, imagining him to walk into the room as if it had all been a mistake. I just wanted to bring some joy back into the hall."

"But Margaret how could you? I was miserable, but I never wanted you to do this." Her countenance was calm, and I wondered if the thought had indeed crossed her mind. "You can't play God with these things. You can't mess with nature. I loved Charles, but you could never replace him with another son. It's so much more complicated than that."

"Now it all fits into place." James strode around the room, his mind whirring like clockwork. "I've never felt like I was part of this family." He stopped by me and looked down into my eyes. "But I was raised to be a lord, and a lord I shall be."

"No one's saying you shouldn't be, dear," Lady Derwent said quickly. She was scared of him. I could see how she had spoiled and praised him, but had she really loved him?

Margaret let out a thick gasp, as if it were all too much for her, and Lady Derwent hurried out to get the nurse. Lord Derwent glared at me.

"You're a parasite, living off the misfortunes of others and turning them into your petty gains."

"I thought that you of all people would be grateful to me."

"Grateful? For ruining my reputation, questioning my relationship with my mother, reducing me to the role of an impostor?" He pulled open the door and stood on the verge of leaving. "I'd rather have been a doctor's son from the outset." He turned and strode into the corridor.

A vague vision crossed my mind of the jolly Mrs. Hammond bustling him through medical school, and I felt a real remorse for what I'd done. The pretty Julia would have been a perfect daughter to Lady Derwent, who would never have gotten over Charles, and the monster James would have been a cleverly skilled doctor putting his energy into saving lives.

I was holding Margaret's hand as Lady Derwent arrived back with the nurse. We sat watching as she breathed her last, and then Lady Derwent said quiet prayers. Forty years of devoted service had ended with hardly a glimmer of recognition. It was late,

and Lady Derwent directed me to go to my room where a small supper would be brought to me. We would let Margaret die in peace and continue to discuss the larger issue the next day.

And so I sit here in the sparse guest room writing everything to you, my dearest cousin. It is well past midnight now, and although I am resigned to my situation, I cannot help thinking that I deserve better than this. I deserved a better life. My mind goes back to Gordon, and I remember how he'd hold my hand as we walked under the weeping willows on the river path, the sunshine speckling through the leaves. He'd gently stroke the palm of my hand with his forefinger. I know he had to leave me and marry that dreadful Eileen who claimed to be pregnant with his baby. And I know he still thinks of me in his heart of hearts. It's not much compensation, but it's the best I can do right now in the dim candlelight.

Now I'd better draw this letter to a close, my dear. The candle is flickering with a draft from the window, and I can hear the door handle slowly turning.