



COMING HOME

**Mildred Ethel Lindsay
1881 - 1948**

Edited by Paul Middleton

Written by Mildred Lindsay of 24 Stoa's Nest Road, Coulsdon, Surrey
between 1919 and 1921

Edited and Published by Paul Middleton

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Dedication

I decided to transcribe this story in September 2002, after finding the typewritten manuscript stored away in the Lindsay family chest. In the preceding years I had never taken the trouble to decipher properly the 148 odd pages of typescript, but then I decided it would make a grand Christmas present for the family.

Mildred Ethel Lindsay must have written this story soon after the Great War maybe starting about 1919 and completing it in 1921. The telling of the tale evokes a strong atmosphere of the lives of a section of south English society just recovering from the ravages of war. Mildred drew on her own feelings and experiences as her husband John Seymour Lindsay DCM was sixteen months in the front line trenches, and wounded at the Second Battle of Ypres. She knew full well the emotional stress of uncertainty. But the story revolves around familiarity - with a country parsonage in Devon and life in a London flat. The story therefore feels very autobiographical.

She wrote this story possibly for publication, possibly for future generations of the family. The manuscript bears three titles: 'What every woman wants', 'Mother' and 'Jill' and is 33,000 words in length. I have chosen a new title more fitting to the subject matter. I hope she would have approved!

It is only appropriate to dedicate my work on this to Mildred's daughter Margaret, or 'Bumper Moose' as she is affectionately known, and to John and Pippa her grandchildren.

Paul Middleton 2014

Chapter 1

*'Absence, hear thou my protestation
Against thy strength,
Distance and length:
Do what thou canst for alteration,
For hearts of truest mettle
Absence doth join and Time doth settle.'
John Donne*

It had come. Poor Jill! All her dreams and visions of the future had vanished into thin air. There was nothing left but the blank drear loneliness of an empty life. Tearlessly and stonily she sank down by the side of the fireplace, her head against the warm blue tiles, while the slip of paper, which has brought her the cruel tidings was escaping from the nerveless fingers.

More than three years ago Jill had been a happy war bride, happy for the moment that was, trusting and hoping that the future held all her present joys with glorious additions besides. There had been that wonderful day when Phil came home from the front for the first time, the day before they were married. Happy light-hearted Phil who suddenly appeared before her looking like a young god despite his war stained khaki and all the impedimenta attached to a Tommy home on leave. A young god he was, lately come through the fires of the Second Battle of Ypres with the light of immortality shining in his face. Ten days of bliss and sweet responsibility and then goodbye again. Mrs Philip MacBride, her heart full to overflowing, turned away from Victoria Station and walked back to her little flat, while the inexorable khaki laden train swiftly bore her husband towards

the field of action and the uncertain future.

Then Jill had sat down and written a letter to her husband telling him how much easier it was to bear everything now that they were married. She wanted to be brave and to let him know that she was trying to be. And then she had given the order for her new cards to be engraved. They formed another small link in her short marriage chain. Her bright new ring, of course, was the most precious and important of all but it would be encouraging to look upon the words 'Mrs Philip MacBride' rising so neatly out of the smooth white card.

Weary days and nights had followed, and sometimes at the close of a long day at the War Office where Jill went regularly to do her 'bit', her pent-up feelings could not be held in check. She would be grateful to the kind darkness of the streets, which hid her tear-wet face from the gaze of the passers-by. And the nights when one's imagination ran riot, and took one to grim battlefields, muddy and dark and strewn with bodies of the slain! But many were the blessed letters from France, cheery letters, which warmed Jill's heart and gave her strength to face her days. She had her visions to help her too. One especially was a favourite. The vision of a place bathed in glorious sunshine where a sparkling sea meets red cliffs and green woods, and coming from the sea is a young god who answers to the name of Daddy. High up on his shoulders rides a fairy princess, and running by his side is his counterpart in miniature. And with joyous shouts and laughter they are all hastening to a happy woman who watches them from the beach, a woman with love in her heart and comforts in her hands. And the woman's name is Jill, of course.

Then news had come of Phil's promotion in the Field, which did away with the hope that he would come home to get his commission. That had been

a great disappointment to Jill who nevertheless was proud of the honour done to her husband. She longed to see him in his new uniform but as a matter of fact the only addition to his apparel then was the star for each shoulder, which had been sent to him in the trenches by his colonel.

And then at last had come the wound, which temporarily placed Phil out of action, and brought him home to England followed by six most wonderful months at Farham where he and Jill kept house in the cutest of little cottages. The regiment's home battalion was stationed at Farham and many of the officers were fortunate enough to arrange for accommodation of some kind for their wives. Nothing mattered in those days so long as husband and wife were together and that time at Farham was for Jill the nearest representation of Heaven she ever hoped to attain on earth. Just three days ago at Farham Jill had said goodbye once more and now

A flaming piece of coal fell from the fire to the hearth with a crash rousing Jill from her stupor. Slowly and mechanically she rose and replaced the burning mass, then glanced around the cosy room. The November afternoon had crept on until it was nearly four o'clock, and in the half darkness Jill watched the firelight's spasmodic flashes playing about her treasures, hers and Phil's, quaint old bits of furniture and cherished pieces of brass and pewter which they had discovered together. When Jill's gaze met the large portrait of her husband she looked at it earnestly and long. Then 'It's all right Belovedest' she murmured 'I can live for you still and I will.'

While Jill was thus occupied a little red cinder was eating into a slip of paper which was lying neglected on the hearth, and for the space of about three seconds one could have read on it the words '..... husband Lieutenant Philip

MacBride was killed in action on the 2nd instant’ and then nothing of it remained but a black shred of carbon.

Chapter 2

'O heart, be brave!

And, though thy dearest, fairest hopes decay

Hopes all fulfilled shall crown another day:

Thou shalt not always grieve beside a grave.'

Absence doth join and Time doth settle.'

J. G. Whittier

It was characteristic of Jill as a rule to think and act quickly. She must go away to the one place where she knew she would find the sympathy and love and peace that she needed - and Peter - yes she wanted Peter badly now. So she would go to Peter and his father and mother, her brother-in-law and sister, who lived in a dear old country vicar age in one of the most beautiful and peaceful spots in Devon. A short letter telling just so much as was necessary was soon written and Jill went out to post it.

Her flat was in a quiet backwater of the King's Road, Chelsea, where squalid homes of the poor lie close to luxurious homes of the rich. Jill was neither rich nor poor as far as worldly goods count but the locality of her home in Chelsea brought her into touch with both the cultured and the seamy side of life.

She was passing by some gaunt looking houses when she saw a tiny figure clinging to the railings, a poor little bundle of rags it looked, out of which peeped a grimy face, and Jill saw that the child was crying silently.

'What's the matter, dear?' Jill asked.

'I've got a splinter in me foot an' it hurts like 'ell' was the reply.

'Poor little mite, let's have a look. Mmmmmmm where's your home - a

long was away? Well come along to my home and I'll soon have it out for you.' So with Jill's arm round her wee form, the child, she wasn't more than six, managed to hop along until they reached the flat.

'Here we are' said Jill as she opened the door with her latch key. She led the child into the sitting room and lifter her into Phil's great armchair.

'And now tell me your name chicken' she said.

'Nelly Bligh' replied the child. 'Mother's only got me an' I ain't never 'ad no father, an' mother goes to work every day, rag-picking for the Jews, miss, an' I must get 'ome before she comes. Seven o'clock's her time an' I 'as the kettle boiling when the penny ain't run out an' the tea made an' all,' and this said she lay back wearily into the depths of the chair.

'Now then Nelly, we'll get the stocking off and I'll try very hard not to hurt. Oh what grubby feet it is' Jill added as she lay the much worn stocking down.

'Never mind it's very hard to get hot water and soap these days' she said and she left the room to fetch such necessary things. With the cleansing preliminaries over she proceeded to inspect the foot and after many interruptions caused by little starts from Nelly the operation was brought to a successful finish. The child looked down at her little bare leg where a great high-watermark showed and then raised her eyes shyly to Jill's face.

'I guess me other foot's dirty too' she said.

Jill took the gentle hint. 'Oh Nelly would you like to be clean all over?' she asked, longing to suit action to her words. She glanced at the clock and saw that it was just after five. There would be time to give the child a bath and take her home before she could be missed. Nelly's eager little face plainly gave consent.

'I 'ad a bath once, Miss, when I were at the children's country 'olerday an'

it were lovely' she gravely informed Jill.

The next moment the geyser was pouring forth hot water into the spotless bath while Nelly was feverishly stripping off her clothes. A few seconds more and her thin little body was giving itself up to the delights of the warm water while Jill stood looking on, her arms bare and the shadow of a smile in her eyes. Then Jill fell to and presently a reluctant little Nelly stepped out of the bath with skin glistening and eyes shining, for a final rub down in a large soft towel. She looked ruefully at her soiled garments.

'I wish I could have washed those too' said Jill 'but there you shan't put them all on', and she ran off to her bedroom and came back with a clean woolen vest and stockings.

'Here's a little present from me to you' she said; 'the vest will fit almost and the stockings won't at all but they'll do for now'.

It was nearly six o'clock when Nelly, a thick slice of bread and butter in one hand and the other in one of Jill's, was ready to leave the flat. This time Nelly led Jill and hurried her along in and out of the dark streets. When they had been walking for nearly ten minutes the child stood still.

'There's where I live' she said pointing towards an archway through which was a narrow alley where a street lamp dimly lit up a row of wretched looking houses. Jill stooped and kissed the child.

'Then good-bye little one' she said. 'I hope you'll have the kettle boiling all right.' She felt in her pocket for a penny and while she drew one out her hand brushed against the letter she had neglected to post. 'For the gas' she added, 'in case the penny has run out. I'll come and see your mother some day but now I must be quick and catch the post.'

Jill posted her letter and as she found her way back to the flat a deep sense of loneliness overcame her. Her flat seemed more desolate than ever now that the child was no longer there. She busied herself with some packing and wrote out some instructions for the woman who came daily to 'do' for her. She had been handed down to Jill when she and Phil had taken the flat and was of the Belcher type exactly. Jill had noticed the resemblance at once and could never reconcile herself to the incongruity of the woman's name, which was Margaret, her favourite name representing to her all that was fair and stately. Margaret was a great talker and punctuated all her remarks with sniffs. Phil had once said of her 'she sniffs continually but always too late.' But she was an honest woman with a good heart and a lonely one withal. Poor lonely souls, how many of them there were.

While Jill was busy a loud knock came at the door. She opened the door and there stood an angry woman with a little girl by her side and Jill saw that the little girl was Nelly.

'Are you the young person what's had the impidence to wash my chiel?' the woman demanded.

'I'm sorry' said Jill 'I don't quite understand. 'Yes, I did give Nelly a bath, but I do hope you don't mind. I'm afraid I hadn't thought of that.'

'Imperance I calls it. When I wants my chiel washed I washes en and don't want no strange bodies a interferin.' I don't say as how it wasn't kind of yer to look after 'er bad foot but when it comes to washin' of 'er it ain't none o' your business and you can take back the stockins an' vest what you give 'er - you don't come no charity on me'; and with that the woman thrust into Jill's hands the garments she had so recently bestowed on Nelly who, poor little soul, looked up

at her with tearful apologetic eyes. The next minute Nelly's mother had turned away taking her child with her, leaving Jill to ponder over the situation.

Left to herself once more Jill finished her preparations for the morrow, moving like one in a dream. Slowly she prepared herself for the night, and it was not until she knelt to say the familiar prayers that her courage forsook her and she broke down utterly, her whole being overwhelmed in a cataclysm of grief.

At length worn out she crept into bed. 'Oh Phil' she moaned 'if only you had left me a wee bairnie to care for!' But soon kind sleep came and gently touched her aching brows and brought her peace.