

LADY COPPERS

By

Clare Langley-Hawthorne

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O Thou, Mother of the Universe, vouchsafe manliness unto me!

O Thou, Mother of Strength, take away my weakness

Take away my unmanliness and make me a man!

Swami Vivekananda, Hindu Spiritual Leader and Indian Nationalist

“In the coming days the Women Police Service will send two of their recruits up to Yorkshire for what is sure to be a most exciting adventure for all concerned. Established in 1914, the WPS have already proven themselves in London, Grantham and Hull and now Inspector Hilda Buxton and Constable Norah Tennant take on the mantle so ably held by Commandant Margaret Damer Dawson (whom everyone calls The Chief) and her Sub-Commandant, Mary Allen. Already both recruits have received an intensive one month’s training in London that included police court procedures, signaling, first aid and jujitsu and they are fully prepared for the challenges ahead. Constable Norah Tennant, daughter of Viscount and Lady Tennant and Inspector Hilda Buxton, daughter of the eminent judge Lord Neville Buxton, were both educated at the distinguished Cheltenham Ladies College and, as Misses Damer Dawson and Allen explain, are “precisely the sort of women we need on the home front, protecting our country against the moral threats of war.” It is impossible to exaggerate the courage and fortitude shown by such women who fly in the face of public drunkenness and disorder to ensure the reputation and honour of the good women of England endure. Twenty-six year old Norah Tennant and thirty-year old Hilda Buxton, both unmarried, are due to leave for Yorkshire on Wednesday and we at *Woman’s World*, salute them!”

**‘Our Girls in Blue’ by Amelia Chandler, *Woman’s World* magazine. No.1,020.
March 1915**

PART I

Thou terrible dark Night!
Thou the Night of Delusion!
Thou the Night of Death
To thee our salutation!
Thee we salute! Thee we salute!
Thee we salute!

An Indian Story of Love and Death,
Sister Nivedita of Ramakrishna Vivekananda, 1908

CHAPTER ONE

Shorebridge, North Riding, Yorkshire

Lammas, Sunday August 1st, 1915

“Instantly I pricked up my ears. What! A woman’s organization to work with the police! Splendid!”

Commandant Mary S. Allen. O.B.E. *The Pioneer Policewoman, 1925.*

They found the body in the middle of an air raid, as the night sky erupted into flames over Shorebridge.

Constable Norah Tennant was the first to arrive that night at the Women Police Service’s makeshift headquarters - a wooden cabin they called ‘the Hut.’ It was little bigger than a shed with no running water, electricity or gas connection but, as she propped up her bicycle alongside, she regarded it with relief. Although it was first day of August, there was little evidence of summer tonight and Norah braced herself against the wind. Having gained momentum over the North Sea, gusts now buffeted the Hut as it stood, exposed to the elements, on a bleak patch of land at the back of the Shorebridge police station. Norah pulled out her key, opened the door, and hurried inside. There was just enough room for a wooden desk, two high-backed chairs, a pair of kerosene lamps, and a bulletin board which swung precariously from an iron hook as the wind followed Norah in through the doorway.

“Lord, if this is summer I hate to think what winter’s going to be like!” Norah said with a shiver, as she threw her satchel on the table, unbuttoned her dark uniform coat with its lettered armbands, and sat down with a thud. After a quick hunt for the matches in the desk drawer, Norah reached over and turned on the portable kerosene lamp which fired up with a hiss. As she did, the contents of her satchel spilled across the table, threatening to mar the scrupulous neatness that Norah’s superior officer, Inspector Hilda Buxton, insisted upon. “Clumsy oaf!” Norah reproached herself as she gathered up the charcoal pencils and sketch book she always carried with her, the blue and silver tin of Farrah’s Harrogate Toffee and her copy of W. Somerset Maugham’s *Of Human Bondage*. The latter would be sure to raise an eyebrow and Norah caught an involuntary glimpse of the photograph of Commandant Margaret Damer Dawson, head of the WPS, which was affixed to the bulletin board by four brass thumbtacks. In the flickering half light, the indomitable ‘Chief,’ with her wire rimmed spectacles and intense gaze, looked even more imposing than usual. Norah had to resist the urge to turn the picture around.

With a quick glance at her gold bracelet watch and a final arched look at the ‘Chief’, Norah popped a toffee in her mouth and leaned back in her chair, book in hand. She had ten minutes remaining before Inspector Buxton was due to arrive and she was desperate to finish the chapter she had started earlier that afternoon. She pulled out her much loathed reading glasses from the top pocket of her uniform jacket and, with a complete disregard for propriety, propped her feet up on the desk to reveal a pair of lace up boots, black woolen stockings and, incongruously, the edge of a delicate pink crepe-de-chine petticoat. She put on her glasses and within minutes was lost in her reading, demonstrating a ‘bookishness’ unexpected and, no doubt, unbecoming in the still-unmarried daughter of a Viscount.

The familiar splutter and cough of Inspector Buxton's motorized bicycle intruded all too soon but Norah was used to trying to snatch these moments of quietude. Her time in Ceylon had taught her how to block out all distraction when the outside world, with all its pain and loss, was too much to bear.

Swallowing the remnants of her toffee, Norah swung her legs back round, replaced her book in her satchel and, pulling the leather bound ledger book out of the top drawer, signed herself in for duty.

No sooner had she set down her fountain pen than the door flung open and Inspector Hilda Buxton marched in, pulling off her driving goggles and unbuttoning her oilskin coat. A stickler for protocol, procedure, and discipline, the inspector was immaculate, despite her mode of travel.

Hilda unbuttoned her coat and smoothed down her uniform. From her blue naval-peaked cap and serge tunic with epaulettes to the gleaming buttons and rank-insignia badges on her jacket, Inspector Hilda Buxton was the model Woman Police Service volunteer. Norah glanced down ruefully at the black ink stain she had already managed to leave on her index finger.

"Ready?" inquired Inspector Buxton. Not waiting for Norah's reply, she pulled out the fob watch she carried, gentleman style, in her jacket pocket and flipped it open.

"Sign me in," she instructed. "And note that our patrol commenced at eight thirty-seven."

Norah stood up and took off her glasses before straightening the diagonal strap that went over the right shoulder of her Sam Browne belt. She tucked an errant lock of her dark chestnut hair behind her ear and repositioned her hat. Norah waited for the inevitable remark about 'vain

nonsense' but Hilda simply raised one eyebrow, unlocked the bottom desk drawer, and handed Norah her truncheon and electric torch without comment.

Like many in the WPS leadership, Hilda had adopted a cropped, mannish hairstyle. Norah preferred to keep her long, 'straight as a barge pole' brown hair coiled at the nape of her neck in a stylish chignon. Hilda's own pepper-black curls were stiff and wiry and Norah reflected that even when they were at school and Hilda had worn her hair long, it was still never thick enough to hide the smallpox scars on her cheeks and neck. Hilda's current hairstyle, like her uniform, made her features seem all the more inflexible and coarse – a rigid combination of bristle, sinew and solid mass.

As they headed out the door, Hilda unhooked the bulls-eye lamp from the wall as she passed. "Looks like it's going to be a bit nippy tonight, Constable," Hilda said in her distinctively clipped, masculine tones. "I hope you have taken my advice and worn sensible stockings this time." The previous night Norah had imprudently decided to wear the French silk stockings her mother had sent for her birthday, despite the weather in Yorkshire.

"Yes, sir," Norah replied barely repressing a grin. The WPS required that Norah address her superior officer as 'sir', despite them all being women. After having the formalities drilled into her by Hilda, Norah used it instinctively, though saying it still made her laugh.

As Norah closed the door to the Hut behind them, she saw the lights on at the Shorebridge police station. Chief Constable Lyttelton was working late and Norah could see his silhouette framed against the glass as he sat at the desk in his office. No doubt he had heard Inspector Buxton's motorbike but he made no move to turn or acknowledge them. Despite being

impressed by Norah's aristocratic family connections, the Chief Constable had made it clear that he wanted as little to do with the 'interfering' women of the WPS as possible.

Hilda and Norah passed the front entrance to the red brick police station with its distinctive blue lamps and, at a brisk pace, started their nightly patrol of the streets of Shorebridge.

"Come along, Constable!" Hilda said as she crossed the street with long strides. "No dawdling. We're not at school anymore!"

Norah had an unwanted flashback to their days at Cheltenham Ladies College when Hilda had been prefect of their boarding house, Glenlee. Despite Norah's total lack of athletic ability, Hilda, known for her competitiveness on the tennis court and hockey field, had been determined to take the younger girl 'under her wing.' For Norah this had meant two winters standing despondently in her green bloomers, drenched by the rain, on a muddy hockey field listening to Hilda scream herself hoarse. Despite the passage of time, Norah half expected to hear Hilda do the same tonight.

Norah hurried to catch up as they made their way past the iron and glass Victorian railway station up to the square that had once been the thriving center of the old market town of Shorebridge. With its quaint cobblestones and the imposing town hall built in the Italian renaissance style, the market square was still dominated by an intricately carved stone cross dating back to the fifteenth century. The square was lined with shops, many of which retained their wooden beam and white plaster frontages. Remnants of today's fish market were still evident in the crates stacked up outside Pickerings, the fishmongers and the stench of rotting fish from the rubbish that had yet to be removed. The windows of Hoffman's pork butchers remained

boarded up - victims of the surge of anti-German feeling after the sinking of the *Lusitania* in May.

Norah hugged her arms in close as a fresh gust of air sent sheets of newspaper scurrying across the now deserted square. A recruitment poster, *Remember Belgium – Enlist Today!* – tore from the door of Rounthwaites' bakery and was whisked away by the wind. After three years with her family in Ceylon, Norah felt a stranger to England sometimes. She had certainly yet to reacclimatize to its weather.

As the hazy summer twilight drew out the shadows, Hilda and Norah turned down Salter's Lane, past the Labour Exchange, whose boards were filled with vacancies, and the customs house which now operated as a recruitment depot. They were entering the Ginnells, so named for the warren of cobbled lanes and alleyways that radiated southwards from the market square. This was where they usually spent most of their nightly patrols, among the pubs, tenements and lodging houses that had sprung up since war was declared.

A young woman staggered from a doorway, reeking of Woodbines and cheap bitter ale. Her face was streaked with tears and grime. Norah recognized the woman as Iris Penrith, a scullery maid who had recently been dismissed from service at the local Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD) hospital, Agnes Hall, after it was discovered she was pregnant.

As Norah and Hilda approached, she turned away, holding on to the wooden beams supporting the entranceway to the squalid *Anchor & Whistle* public house.

“Get on home, before you really get into trouble!” Hilda instructed harshly, keeping her distance as Norah went over and knelt beside the sobbing woman.

“Are you all right?” Norah asked, but Iris, like many of the women they encountered in the Ginnells, refused to acknowledge her presence. She merely continued to look away, crying “what am I going to do, what am I going to do...” between wretched sobs. Norah placed her arm around Iris and used her other hand to try and smooth the hair back from Iris’s face. It looked as if Iris had just received bad news regarding the father of her baby.

“Leave her be, Constable!” Hilda commanded with pursed lips. “She just needs to sober up.”

Norah eyed Hilda sharply. Although Iris was clearly drunk, did Hilda not also recognize grief when she saw it? But Norah also knew that, despite war-time liquor restrictions, drunkenness in this part of Shorebridge was rife. Hilda was not about to permit public displays of intoxication no matter the circumstances.

From the top storey window of the *Anchor & Whistle* Norah caught sight of a face, framed in black taffeta and lace and steeled herself. Madam Urzica was a woman of both formidable girth and reputation. She operated at least three boarding houses in the Ginnells, which, Hilda was convinced, were little more than doss-houses and brothels. If Iris was under Madam Urzica’s care, there was likely to be a very unpleasant scene if Norah or Hilda tried to offer any further assistance.

Madam Urzica prized open the casement window and yelled “leave her to us!” in the peculiar accent of hers – part Romanian inflexion, part Yorkshire brogue. “No need for you lot to get involved!” Before either Hilda or Norah could reply, two elderly men, in flat caps and braces, their faces puffy and florid from drink, hauled Iris to her feet and dragged her unceremoniously back inside the *Rose & Thorn*.

“Are you sure we can’t help get her home?” Norah called out and immediately chided herself – her well-bred Sussex accent sounded stilted and affected – a further reminder that they were outsiders here. The door closed quickly and Norah murmured “I suppose that means no...” under her breath.

Hilda flipped open her fob watch and her tongue clicked impatiently. “Let’s just get on; we’ve wasted enough time already on the likes of Iris Penrith!” Norah could tell Hilda was seething over Madam Urzica’s presence – Hilda had recently failed to manage to convince the local Magistrate to pursue a case against the infamous Madam.

“I’m going to demand the Chief Constable rethink imposing a nightly curfew!” Hilda continued with barely restrained irritation. “God only knows it would help keep some of these girls out of her establishments!”

Norah shook her head in disbelief. Did Hilda not have any compassion for a woman like Iris, who desperate and alone, probably had no one else to turn to but Madam Urzica?

“There are many who have lost ones they love...” Hilda began to say defensively, as if sensing Norah’s disapproval. “She just has to learn to bear it as we all must.” Hilda adjusted the collar of her shirt as her own emotions caught in her throat.

Norah’s expression quickly softened. Hilda’s eldest brother, Maurice, a captain with the Coldstream Guards, had been listed as ‘missing, presumed dead’ after the battle at Ypres last November and her two younger brothers, Simms and Tibby, were en route to fight in France. Norah reached out to clasp Hilda’s arm, but Hilda shrugged the gesture aside, composing herself after a quick wipe of her eyes with her crisp white handkerchief.

Hilda and Norah retraced their steps back to the market square in silence before heading northwards to reach the foot of the stone staircase that led up Shorebridge Hill. Tonight they had to include an additional route to their patrol due to rumors of ‘illicit liaisons’ in the Imperial Botanic Gardens. The gardens bordered the genteel and fashionable suburb of North Hill and the VAD hospital, Agnes Hall.

Hilda paused before climbing the stairs and waited for Norah to join her. As Norah gripped the iron railing, her blue speckled eyes, like plover’s eggs, caught the glow of the yellow gas light as the streetlamps flickered to life. The long days of summer were drawing to a close. From here they could hear the waves battering against the sea wall. The wind may have abated, and the clouds may have lifted, but the sea was still venting its pent up rage.

They had just reached the top of the ridge and were making their way along the leafy street to the top of Shorebridge hill, when the air raid klaxons sounded. By now darkness had fallen and the wind, with its last dying gasps, sent the clouds scurrying across the sky. The moon was rising and from their vantage point Norah could just make out the grey stone row houses and the curve of the harbor below. A row of fishing boats bobbed and bucked in the swell, illuminated by the streetlamps that lined the seawall, promenade and pier.

“Not again,” Hilda grumbled as the klaxons continued to wail. For three nights running, rumors and phantom sightings had fueled false alarms of an impending attack. Since the bombardments of Scarborough and Whitby last December, and the zeppelin raids in May on Kent and London, Shorebridge had finally established contingency plans but the air raid system remained rudimentary and across the town little more than hand-powered klaxons and whistles sounded the initial air raid warning.

“Better get back to the Hut, Lady Coppers!” a Boy Scout called out to them as he cycled past. He grinned as he pulled on his armband and helmet.

“Not likely,” Hilda sniffed. “We’re finishing patrol duty, aren’t we Constable?” Since they arrived two months ago Norah and Hilda clocked in every night and at every point on their patrol route. Hilda was obviously not about to shirk her duty now.

Norah opened her mouth to reply when the sound of a zeppelin, like a roll of thunder, stopped her cold.

The gas lamps that lined the street brightened for a moment and then dimmed. It was the only formal warning they would ever receive of an imminent German air attack. Then the lights across Shorebridge went out until there was only darkness and a cacophony of calls, bells and whistles rising up from the town below.

“Lights out! Zeps about!” The call rang out. “Zeps! Zeps! Take cover!”

Hilda quickly extinguished the Bulls-Eye lamp.

“No false alarm this time,” she said grimly.

Norah could hear in the distance the pathetic ‘putt-putt’ of the lone anti-aircraft gun positioned out near McMurty’s farm. The gun batteries planned for the Shorebridge headland had yet to be installed and McMurty’s gun was too far away to pose any real threat to the German airship. Norah and Hilda could only look on in horror as the moonlight revealed the zeppelin descending beneath the clouds out over the sea, the lights of its open bomb bay clearly visible.

“Oh, God,” Norah whispered.