

The White Elephant

by Rosalyn Hurst

The women crowded into Mrs Simmons' sitting room. For some it was their first visit to a house, which though not large was very old, a remnant of a Surrey cottage that had a history before the developments that followed the railway line down from Waterloo. As they entered, one by one, the girl took their coats. Strangely all wore coats despite the sudden change in weather from freezing to blazing sunshine in a matter of days. The women looked around the room trying to disguise their curiosity, for such a show of interest would be considered common.

Mrs Simmons did not offer a warm welcome, for it was against her wish that the meeting for the first church fete was to be held at her house. She was unhappy Mrs Hart had come, she had a dubious reputation during the war years and now there were rumours that her returning husband might divorce her. And then there was Gladys, sitting there in her sitting room and Gladys a cleaner and only invited because she led the flower arranging in church.

She directed people to the chairs, the most comfortable was not taken, each woman hoping it would be offered to her. No, this was kept for Lady Cash, there was a tremor among the group, so Lady Cash was coming, now that was something, only Mrs Simmons silently resented the power of that woman,

"Only you Phyllis," Lady Cash had purred after church on Sunday, "only you have enough space in your beautiful home," a small pause for breath and then, "sadly I live too far out from the village and even the bus is at the top of the drive, too long a walk I fear for our helpers."

Mrs Hill and Miss Manning had only recently moved into the village. And were late but they both had a long walk to get to the meeting. Neither would grumble they were both used to long walks. I was only for this event that they wore in their best dresses, coats and shoes that had high heels not pretty, but of utilitarian war standard. They were young and they had had a good war.

As they walked in, they realised that nearly everyone was sitting down waiting for the meeting to begin,

“My goodness it’s hot,” said Miss Manning, “who would have believed it after the winter we’ve had?” she looked around, “how do you keep this old place warm Mrs Simmons?” she asked unaware of the gasps around her.

Mrs Simmons smiled a thin-lipped smile and said, “well you know...” and turned around without any intention of answering such an impertinent question. She had heard stories of Miss Manning and the Canadian soldiers camped nearby, ‘too much freedom for these young girls, and look at their manners now,’ she thought.

There was still no appearance by Lady Cash, the girl was ordered to carry in a large tray with small squares of cake.

“Cake,” murmured Mrs Hill, “where did you get the flour, powdered eggs or real?”

Mrs Simmons was aghast what a question to ask, no one ever shared that information, all pretended they could do without the imported powdered milk, the powdered eggs the orange squash.

“Lots of it comes from Canada, that’s what my boyfriend Pierre says, he’s Canadian you know,” offered Miss Manning and suddenly noticed the sneer on her hostess’ face.

An attack was launched, so well struck.

“Is this your daughter? Isn’t she sweet? Will your husband be back soon?”

And truly it was a deadly attack for the whole village knew that Mr Simmons was long gone, declared missing not long after the war started a long eight years ago, and this girl was only six at most, though difficult to judge these days with all the shortages and the never ending rationing.

“Do you go to school? What class are you in?” persisted Mrs Hill. The rest of the group looked on in amazement, never would they have dared to be so bold.

Tense, taut, totally rigid, Mrs Simmons muttered, “a refugee, dumped on me in 1942, dropped off here, said she had been found in a bombed house in south London. Spoke French when she came would you believe, and no, she doesn’t go to school, too slow I think, doesn’t speak. She helps me here.”

“What’s your name?” Mrs Hill asked kindly, then Miss Manning said “*Qu’est ce que ton nomme cherie?*”

The girl started, “Margarite,” she muttered.

“No,” snapped Mrs Simmons, her teeth clashing together like a crocodile who had just missed a fleeing buffalo, “we don’t have those foreign names here, she’s Daisy until someone comes to collect her, but who would want her?”

A silence fell on the room broken by the dramatic entrance of Lady Cash.

“I see you have started without me. So glad you are getting organised, just what we want. Now, we will all try to have some tea, and oh Mrs Simmons is that one of your famous cakes, you must give my cook the recipe,”

The women watched.

With effort Mrs Simmons began, “I thought we might have a bric a brac stall. With all the moves and some having to clear out damaged houses, it might be fun, things that your Granny might have liked but you don’t want. You know things that just take up space.”

Lady Cash spoke, “you mean something like that old clock on your mantelpiece, my goodness that must take up a lot of room and its stopped, never worked since I first came here.”

Mrs Simmons choked, “that’s a priceless antique, but I could find something else I am sure.”

And at that very moment a tea tray went crashing on the kitchen floor.