Chapter 1

Laura, July 1879: Oxfordshire

When she heard the cry from the hall, she was, in a sense, prepared—having read the report in the Times the previous day. But nothing could have prepared her for the way she felt then, or was to feel in the hours and days that followed. She had never been struck; but it felt as if she had received a blow to the stomach. She had never been hurt; but it was as if she herself had suffered a mortal wound. Had she been older, or the mother of sons, she might have been familiar with such shocks.

From the moment when she heard the crunch of the gravel under the messenger's foot, to the moment when Mrs Reynolds screamed, can have been no more than a minute. She was already out of her seat, the work fallen from her lap, when the sound came; a confirmation of her own worst fears. She had crossed the room at a run; flung open the door upon the terrible scene. Mrs Reynolds, pale as death, collapsed on the stairs, with the telegram in her hand; Lily raising a tear-streaked face.

'Oh, Miss…'

Even then, knowing the worst had happened, she had done what she had to do; going straight to the fainting woman's side, and sending the servant for *sal volatile*. The telegram had fallen from Mrs Reynolds' limp fingers. Laura had not permitted herself to read it; although no one would have reproached her, had she done so.

To have seen the words would have been, in any case, superfluous.

So she had averted her eyes from the terrible thing, as she sat there on the stairs, directing her mind instead towards what was most pressing. This was to restore the unconscious woman to her senses—a cruelty, but it had to be done. Seeing the papery closed eyelids flicker, then open; feeling the weight of the older

woman's body against hers; smelling the sourish odour arising from beneath the arms of the latter's heavy woollen dress—a smell not quite overlaid by the scent of lavender soap—was more than enough to fill the moment.

And yet all the time she was aware of it—that little slip of buff-coloured paper—lying there on the black-and-white tiles with its freight of despair.

There was a good deal more to do—sending Lily for water; calling for John to come and assist her in getting Mrs Reynolds upstairs; writing a note to the doctor for John to take—before she could think of herself. She picked up the telegram from where it had fallen only after Doctor McKendrick's arrival, and put it on the hall table.

As she did this, she was faced with her image in the looking-glass, and did not known herself for a moment: the fresh colour entirely drained from her face, so that it resembled that of an old woman—or a corpse, she thought. Her hand flew up to touch the locket at her throat, and, for an instant, she felt the choking sensation that was the prelude to tears.

But she did not weep; not then.

Only when she was alone at last—after the doctor had gone, and Mrs Reynolds was asleep—did the realisation of what had happened overwhelm her. Standing there in the now-deserted hall, she felt her legs give way beneath her, so that she was obliged to cling to the banister to keep from falling.

She had climbed the stairs, thinking she would go to her room—although what she would do when she got there she did not know. But when she reached the landing, she turned not in the direction of her room, but towards his. She knew which one it was, even though she had never set foot there.

It did not have the smell of a room left long unused. The bed was made up, and the fire laid, as if in readiness for a homecoming. She stood for a moment on the threshold. To cross it seemed a kind of transgression—yet who, now, would reproach her for entering that place?

It was a plainly furnished apartment: the bed, a chest of drawers, a wardrobe, a chair, a desk, were the only things in it—all of them of the same old-fashioned design as in the rest of the house.

There was a view of the park from the two tall windows, through which a cold light came filtering. So he must once have stood, looking out, as she was looking out, at the wet green lawns and the dripping trees, on which a few blackened leaves still shivered in the icy wind.

Her mind was as blank as the sky. He is dead, was all she could think.

She had never been much of a reader of newspapers; now she cared to read little else. Where it had once been her father who drew her attention to this paragraph in the *Times* or that, now it was she who read the reports aloud to him: the appalling defeats at Ntombi River and Hlobane Mountain, of which the news had reached them in March, and which threatened to eclipse news of the heroic defence of Rorke's Drift; the victories at Khambula and Gingindlovu, and the relief of Eshowe.

In May, almost five months after that terrible battle, had come reports of the burial of the dead at Isandhlwana: these she had had to force herself to read. The thought of those poor broken bodies being left for so long at the mercy of the elements was hideous; worse was the knowledge that Theo's corpse had been among them.

Now, at least, he and all his dead comrades had been laid to rest: 'embraced by the stony soil of a far-distant land, of which their blood and bone is now evermore a part, and of whose history their noble deeds will remain the chief glory', as the writer of one such article put it. She was grateful to this unknown scribe, identified only as 'S.D.', for the sentiment, however floridly expressed.

Seeing it in black-and-white made what had happened seem both more real and more unreal—as if it were the stuff of fiction, not of life. Unpalatable facts had been omitted, she supposed; discrepancies smoothed out. What remained was a story for reading aloud at the breakfast table; a page to be clipped from the newspaper, and pasted into a scrap-book, with other memorabilia—letters, photographs, a pressed flower.

Theodore Charles Reynolds, who died at Isandhlwana on

22nd January 1879, was the second son of the late Colonel Frederick Charles Reynolds, of Hartwood Manor, Shropshire, by his marriage with Emiline Esther, daughter of the late Sir Henry Thomas Godfrey K.C.B. (Peninsula, Waterloo) of the 3rd regiment (the Buffs). He was born on 12th August 1854, and was educated at Rugby and Oxford. In 1875 he obtained a commission in the Royal Surrey Militia, exchanging into the 2nd battalion of the 24th Foot in 1877. He proceeded with that corps to the Cape, serving throughout the Kaffir war of 1878, before proceeding with the 24th to Natal to join the force being prepared to act against the Zulus in the event of their refusing to comply with the terms of Sir Bartle Frere's ultimatum. He took part with that regiment in the subsequent advance of Colonel Glyn's column into the enemy's country in January 1879; and was present at the storming of Sirayo's stronghold in the Bashee Valley.

On the fatal 22nd January, the day on which he met with his death, Second Lieutenant Reynolds wrote the following in his diary—which, kept up to the very hour of his death, speaks for his cool self-possession: 'At 4pm N.N.C. mounted troops and 4 guns off. Great firing—believed to be by 1/24th. Alarm sounded. Three columns Zulus and mounted men on the hill, E. Turn out! 7,000 men E.N.E., 4,000 of whom go round Lion's Kop. Durnford's Basutos arrive and pursue with rocket battery. Zulus retire everywhere. Men fall out for dinner.'

And while the men fell out for dinner, the right horn of the Zulu army, 7,000 strong, crept around the Kop, and the 'three columns' swarmed down the face of it. Another officer, who escaped the massacre, wrote the following in a private letter to his father: 'The men were laughing and chatting, and thought they were giving the blacks an awful hammering, when suddenly the enemy came down in irresistible numbers from the rear; the left and right flanks came in with a rush, and in a few moments all was over.'

Second Lieutenant Reynolds fell whilst in the thick of

the fighting; an assegai entered his breast. He succeeded in pulling it out, but later died of his wound, and lies buried where he fell, along with other gallant officers and men who lost their lives in that fateful encounter.

Second Lieutenant Reynolds was, in the opinion of all who knew him, a most promising young officer. 'He was beloved by all,' wrote one of his comrades; 'and was as gallant an officer as ever fought: in him the regiment has lost one of its brightest hopes.' By others, besides the sadly diminished roll of his comrades, his loss is keenly felt and deeply deplored.

In June, there had been the news of the death of the Prince Imperial—surprised by a war party of Zulus while on reconnaissance. He, too, it was said, had died a hero's death: the spears that had slain him having entered his breast, as he faced the foe...

A message of condolence was sent from the parish to the Empress Eugenie. '*Mon pauvre fils, seulement 23 ans!*' she was said to have exclaimed, on receiving news of the Prince's death. When the body was brought home for burial, enormous crowds waited in silence on the quayside at Woolwich.

Laura was sorry for the poor exiled Empress, now alone in her Chislehurst mansion. She had not wanted her son to go to Africa, it was said—but, with the impetuosity of youth, he had insisted.

When news of the victory at Ulundi came in July, Laura's father ordered the church bells to be rung. 'It was not in vain, the sacrifice,' he said, and she knew she should take comfort from that. Those who had slain Theo and so many of his comrades were now humbled in the dust; their king, Cetshwayo, forced to sue for mercy from his prison cell.

And yet it was a matter of indifference to her: she was as impervious to the nation's rejoicing as to its grief. All that mattered lay buried with her beloved, in a stony field far away. All this talk of honour and glory would not bring him back, nor any of those who had died with him.

She had written, twice, to Mrs Reynolds, in the weeks after Theo's death, but there had been no reply. Hartwood Manor was

closed up; its windows shuttered and all but a few of its servants dismissed. When she called by, she had been told that the mistress was gone up to London, to stay with Mr Fred.

Life settled back into what it had been before—or at least, into a simulacrum of that state. No one observing Laura during this time would have known that anything untoward had happened. She was quiet—but then, she had always been quiet.

Bessie was the only one in the family prone to chattering, and even she had grown thoughtful of late, perhaps as a consequence of having turned eighteen. Bob's return from Oxford that summer might also have had something to do with this. For Bob had been accompanied by his friend Harold, a fellow theology student. Harold was handsome, a head taller than Bessie, and his father was a bishop.

Bob's return—and latterly, Teddy's, from school—provided diversions of a different kind for Laura. Bob's library, lately removed from its Balliol home, needed cataloguing and re-shelving. Teddy, who seemed to have had grown several inches since she had last set eyes on him, needed every item of clothing he possessed altered accordingly.

Nor were the demands Laura's father made upon her time diminishing. 'I do not know,' he had fallen into the habit of saying, 'how I would ever have managed without you, my dear...'. Laura knew that it was so; and that it was meant to be some consolation to her for everything that she had lost; yet she could not but wish that he had had less occasion to say it.

Sundays—at least, the hours between Matins and Evensong—were necessarily idle, and therefore offered fewer distractions from darker thoughts. The nights were also bad; then she had nothing to stop her thinking about Theo. The smallest details—a fragment of conversation or a remembered glance—rose up out of nothing to torment her.

That night in the garden. His hands trembling as he'd lit his cigarette. What a beast I am... No, she would not think of it, she would not.

Their conversation in the library, that first Christmas. Yes, that was better...

He had been reading the Idylls, he said.

'*So all day long the noise of battle rolled against the mountains, by the shining sea...* Like a kettle-drum, do you see? I call that splendid, don't you?'

'It is certainly very stirring.'

'You are laughing at me, and that is not kind of you, Miss Brooke. I had hoped for much greater enthusiasm.'

'I can see that I must endeavour to improve...'

'No, no. You are perfection itself.'

'Now it is you who is laughing at me,' she said.

'I assure you, I am quite serious,' said Theo, with a look that made her catch her breath.

Yes, that was better, she thought. Since she could not stop thinking about him, she could at least choose what thoughts to have...

In the drawing-room there had been a fall of soot; a bird in the chimney, she guessed. She was reaching for the bell to summon Alice, when her eye fell on the book. Thoughtlessly set down, months ago, it had been put back in the wrong place. She pulled it from the shelf, feeling its familiar weight in her hand. It fell open at once at the place she had left off reading. '*The stars, "she whispers," blindly run; A web is wov'n across the sky: From our waste places comes a cry And murmurs from the dying sun….'*

This had been a present from Theo—'to persuade you of the superiority of the great Lord Alfred,' he had said, when he gave it to her; although she had not needed persuading. Now she could not read a line without wanting to weep.

She was standing with the book open in her hand, when she heard the carriage draw up in the lane. There came the crunch of gravel as the visitor walked up to the house; then the sound of the doorbell, followed by that of hurried footsteps—she must tell Alice not to run—and the murmur of voices.

'Gentleman to see you, Miss,' said Alice.

'Tell him the vicar's not at home. He may wait, if he wishes...'

'He says it's you he wants to speak to particular, Miss,' said Alice, with a stubborn lift of the chin.

'Did the gentleman give his name?'

'Yes, Miss. It's Reynolds, Miss.'

'But that cannot be,' she said; then realized her mistake. 'Yes. Thank you, Alice. Ask him to come in.'

A moment later, Frederick Reynolds walked into the room.

'Miss Brooke,' he said. 'My apologies.' His tone of voice was anything but apologetic, however. 'I would have written,' he went on. 'But it seemed expedient to come in person.'

A dreadful thought struck her.

'Is it about Mrs Reynolds?'

'Has she written to you?'

'Why, no.'

'Ah,' said Frederick Reynolds.

'Her illness is not worse, I hope?'

He shook his head. 'No. Not worse. Indeed,' he went on, 'my mother's improvement these past few weeks has been remarkable. Remarkable,' he repeated.

'Thank God,' said Laura.

'Aye, thank Him by all means,' said Frederick Reynolds, with what seemed a certain irony. 'My mother speaks of you often, Miss Brooke. Indeed, she speaks of little else. You are quite a favourite, you understand...'

'Oh.' She was at a loss as to how to reply. 'I am very fond of her,' she said.

'I believe you are,' he said. 'Well, you may have a chance to prove it...'

'I don't understand.'

Her visitor sighed. 'I don't suppose you do.'

When she said nothing, he continued:

'My mother has got it into her head that she wishes to go to Africa. Her intention is to visit my brother's grave. It has become an *idée fixe* with her. One might almost call it an obsession, Miss Brooke.'

'I see,' said Laura.

'Do you?' he replied, throwing her a sharp look. 'Perhaps you do. It seems a strange notion to me. Firstly, because my brother is dead; therefore, what earthly difference can it make to him? Secondly, because, to the best of my knowledge, there is no grave to visit.'

She had not thought to ask him to sit down; now she became conscious of this omission.

'Please,' she said, gesturing towards a chair.

'Oh, I won't stay long, Miss Brooke. My wife expects me. I will just say what I have come to say...'

She bowed her head.

'I have, as you might imagine, tried my utmost to dissuade my mother from what I feel—from what we both feel, my wife and I—to be a foolish and ill-considered scheme.' Frederick Reynolds gave a short, un-amused laugh. 'But my mother, if you will forgive the expression, will not be 'budged' on this. She will go to Africa. More than this, Miss Brooke,' he said, directing another of his penetrating looks at her, 'she will take you with her. There!' He smiled. 'Did I not tell you that it was a foolish scheme?'

She was silent for so long that, as he later said to his wife, he wondered if she had heard him—standing, still as a marble image, in her dark dress; her face, which until then he had thought unremarkable, quite beautiful in its momentary abstraction.

'When does she wish to go?' said Laura at last.

He gave an impatient shrug. 'I really cannot say. At once, I suppose. Is it of any consequence?'

She said nothing for a moment, but held his gaze. As cool as you like, he said afterwards to Laetitia.

'It is, if I am to accompany her,' she said at last.

He stared at her.

'Miss Brooke, you cannot—surely—be thinking of agreeing to my mother's plan? I have already said that I consider the idea quite out of the question. For a woman in frail health, as my mother is, to make such a journey...'

'She would not be alone,' Laura replied. 'And you said yourself that her health is much improved.'

There was nothing he disliked so much as having his own words flung back in his face.

'I did not say that she is as she was before her illness,' he said coldly. 'She is not a young woman. That is the fact of it. Even for someone half her age, the journey would be arduous. For someone of her years, and in poor health, too, to even consider such a plan is, in my view, little short of madness...'

'It is surely for Mrs Reynolds to decide,' said Laura. There was a steeliness about her of which he had been previously unaware. 'Please tell her that I am at her disposal—subject to my father's agreement, of course.'

'I feel sure that your father will think as I do in this matter.'

'You forget,' said Laura calmly. 'My father also knows what it is to lose a loved one.'

She was in the garden, picking peas, when a shadow fell across the path.

'There you are, my dear,' said her father, taking the colander from her hands. For a while they worked in silence, dropping the pods in handfuls into the enamel bowl. It was a job Laura liked: the snap as integument separated from stem was pleasing, as was the scent of peas-blossom—pearly flowers coming again on the vine where the fruit had been harvested.

It was not unusual for the Reverend Brooke to join her as she worked; although he generally preferred to sit in the shade of the plum-tree and watch her as she went about her tasks, sometimes reading out passages from a sermon he was working on, for her to comment upon.

This was Laura's favourite time: late afternoon in midsummer, with hours still to go before dark. A slight chill was in the air, underlying the warmth of the sunshine. In the long beds, wallflowers blazed like heatless fires. From the plum-tree overhead, a blackbird called, its notes cool and liquid.

Her father drew his thumbnail along the length of the pod he had just picked, revealing the glistening green spheres within. 'I have received a letter from Mr Reynolds,' he said. Absent-mindedly, he began to eat the fresh-picked peas, one by one.

Laura paused a moment, before continuing with what she was doing. Higher up, the plants were heavier-laden, their burden of pods half-concealed by leaves and flowers. She had to stretch in order to reach them; if she did not, the birds would get them.

'He is concerned about his mother,' the Reverend Brooke went on. 'Her state of health is not good, he tells me...'

'Her state of health is no worse than it was before,' said Laura. 'He does not want her to go to Africa, that is all.'

'I was coming to that, my dear,' said her father, with an expression of mild reproof. 'I gather, then, that you already know of this plan?'

'Only from Mr Reynolds,' she said.

'I see.' He allowed a pause to elapse. 'And when was this?'

Laura felt her face grow hot. 'Last Sunday. He called while you were at church.'

The Reverend Brooke was silent once more. When he spoke at last, it was with an air of perplexity. 'I think, my dear, that you might have mentioned it.'

It was as near to a rebuke as he would ever get. She felt the sting of it, and hung her head.

'Mr Reynolds does not wish his mother, whether in good health or not, to go to Africa,' her father continued. 'Nor do I wish you to go. Does that seem so very unreasonable?'

'No, Father.'

'Good.' He smiled at her. 'Well, then...' He turned to go.

'She has lost her son,' said Laura, astonished at her own temerity. 'That is why she feels that she must go.'

'My dear. I really feel...'

She chose her words with care.

'I was a widow, before I was ever a wife. What she has lost, I have also lost. If she asks this of me, how can I refuse her?'

There was a letter, by the morning's post. She knew the hand straight away.

Eaton Square
15th July 1879

My dearest Laura

The swiftness of your answer delights, but does not surprise, me. My darling Theodore always used to say that you were a young woman who knew her own mind. That you intend to join me in this adventure—and it will be an adventure, of that I feel sure—strikes me as entirely appropriate. Dearest Theodore could not have wished for two more devoted mourners to bear witness to his last resting-place.

If you are agreeable, my idea is that we should leave

for Africa in six weeks' time, in order to arrive in early September (we shall be three weeks at sea!), when I understand that the weather in the Cape will be better than it is at present, it being their winter, and very wet, by all accounts.

But I will write again when the arrangements have been made. All that remains is for me to add my heartfelt thanks—for as you know, this plan of mine could not be enacted without you.

I am, your devoted Mother (for as such I have long regarded you, dear child),

Emiline E Reynolds

Frederick Reynolds was unceasing in his efforts to point out the folly of his mother's plan. True, the Zulu army had been crushed, its warrior *impis* scattered—but there remained pockets of resistance. Someone in the know had said something to a chap at his club, who'd passed it on to him, about the conflict being certain to last ten years. Here was a leading article in the Times, in which the South African situation was described as 'contained': 'Contained'—but not completely secure.

'There is a difference, you'll agree,' he said to his mother, with the unfortunate note of triumph he was wont to adopt in arguments of this kind.

To Laura he did not speak. Since their conversation of a few weeks past, he had behaved as if she did not exist. Now, as she stood there, folding clothes into a box, she might have been a piece of the furniture, so resolutely did he seem not to register her presence.

'Contained' seems to me to do very well,' Mrs Reynolds said. 'Better, certainly, than 'uncontained'.'

He did not smile at that.

'It means that things are still unsettled there,' he said. 'Volatile, and far from safe...'

'Dear Fred.' Her drawn features softened into a smile. 'You are anxious, I know. But pray do not be. No one is going to be interested in an old woman like me. I am of no use to anyone. And I will have dear Laura with me, of course...'

Frederick Reynolds frowned.

'I had not thought you a fool, Mother,' he said. 'But you must see that this is a foolish enterprise.'

She bowed her head.

'I have never pretended to be clever,' she said, continuing with her task. 'I leave that to you men.'

Bessie had been furious when she heard.

But it's so unfair...' Her blue eyes filled with tears that only magnified their blueness. She was looking her prettiest that day, in a new gown of white organdie, with a row of tiny buttons running from throat to waist. The dress was being worn for a reason. Robert was bringing his friend back for tea, after their bicycling expedition. 'You know perfectly well how things stand between me and Harold...'

'I'm afraid I don't,' said Laura.

Her sister glared at her, her face flushing with temper.

'Well, if you don't, then you ought to! He's been here every day for the past fortnight. Who do you think he comes to see?'

'Bob, I suppose,' said Laura.

'Oh, you're quite impossible!' Bessie's face took on the sulky look it always wore when she failed to get her way. 'I'll be nineteen next birthday,' she said. 'If I lose this chance, who knows when another will come along?'

There was no denying the truth of this.

'I'm sorry.'

Bessie's reply was a wordless shrug.

'It's only for a few months,' said Laura. 'Perhaps a year...'

'A year!' Bessie's tone was one of bitterest scorn. 'I'll be an old maid by then...'

Laura's wardrobe was not extensive, and yet it filled a steamer trunk; Mrs Reynolds's, as befitted a Colonel's widow, required two, and several suitcases besides. In addition, there were the clothes belonging to Mrs Reynolds's Scotch maid, Elspeth, who was to travel with them as far as Durban, where the young man she was to marry was stationed with the 90th. After that, the plan was to engage a local girl.

It was with some amazement that Laura regarded their assembled luggage. However were they to transport so much stuff? It seemed enough for an army. One trunk—the smaller—held her things, which was everything she owned: two woollen dresses and four summer frocks; one tweed skirt and one linen—and four blouses.

Added to this were six petticoats—two flannel and four cotton—four pairs of stays and a dozen pairs of drawers. A dozen pairs of stockings, four cotton chemises, four nightgowns and two shawls made up the sum total of her undergarments. A warm cloak, two pairs of boots, two pairs of shoes, six pairs of gloves and two bonnets—one straw and one silk—were her outerwear.

There were also two sashes—one of which was a parting gift from Bessie ('I don't suppose I shall want it,' she had said. 'So you might as well have it.'); a travelling canteen in polished walnut, complete with cutlery, plates, glasses and corkscrew, had been a present from her brothers.

Her father's gift was a miniature writing desk. This last, with its glass phials of ink, its steel-tipped pens, its stock of smooth white paper and envelopes, had taken up the most space of any of the things in her trunk.

'You know my feelings on this subject, my dear,' he had said. 'On that matter, we will say no more. But even if we are divided in this, we need not be so in other things. Write to me as often as you can, dear child, and our separation will seem the shorter.'

She would miss her brothers of course; although the boys had been often away these past few years, and so the bond had necessarily weakened. Bessie, she was sure, would not miss her; nor she Bessie, if the truth were told, which it could never be. It was little Violet she would miss: a year without her would seem long indeed. To be away from her father, too, would be hard to bear.

A smaller box contained other essentials. Books: a Bible, the *Idylls of the King*; Keats's *Poems*; *Men and Women*. This last had been another of Theo's gifts. A new edition of *The Return of the Native*, its pages uncut, was also to be found; as were the *Sonnets* of Mrs Browning, the *Letters* of Mr Macaulay and a *Guide to the Flora and Fauna of Southern Africa* (with illustrations).

Last of all was a volume bound in red morocco, whose pages

were blank. This had been Mrs Reynolds's gift. 'I don't know if you keep a journal, my dear,' she had said. 'But this will at least enable you to do so.' She had been reading Theodore's journal—returned with his things by the War Office—and it had given her the idea. 'It is so full of interesting observations about all sorts of things,' she said. 'I never knew until now how hard it must be to be a soldier.'

An entire box was given over to Mrs Reynolds's medicines, since these would be hard to come by in the place that they were going. Laura herself had packed only the usual remedies: sal volatile for headaches and tincture of laudanum, for menstrual cramps. Other necessities were contained in her travelling bag: documents necessary for travel; a pocket knife, a hairbrush, and a toothbrush.

A silver propelling-pencil and a magnifying glass were also to be found; so, too, was a handkerchief—one of the two dozen she had packed; and two bundles of letters, tied with black ribbon.