THE BINGLES, AND *LIFE IN AN ENGLISH VALLEY 1870* by Alice Bingle

I, Muriel Brooks writing in 2023, hope to be able to add to this Eastcombe Archive a little about some of the families who lived around here long enough to be well known. As with a lot of other material, the basis of my notes will often have come from Dr Malcolm Lambert's work – and the first family to be treated this way are the Bingles. I don't know much!

When we arrived here in 1986 the site now occupied by Aberlink near the top of The Vatch was Bingles' woodyard, and Bob Bingle was well established as a local guru on the subject of wood. I mentioned him in *What I Know About Bismore* as the man Dr Shelley called out to pronounce on the state of the ancient ash tree at the top of his garden (it had to go). And in *Oil Lamp and Candle* Phyllis Gaston reports that it was to Bingles' that her young self was sent for ropes when a beloved old horse needed winching out the swamp above Toadsmoor lake. The other encounter I had was with Olive Bingle, Bob's sister, who was married to Denis Gardiner. John Lane, aka Jackie Ramsbottom the Barnado's boy, used to stay with them in Stroud when on visits from Australia. His unpublished autobiography, *An Illegitimate Life*, appears in full on the Eastcombe Archive but a different version is available as a secondhand book called *Fairbridge Kid*.

Now, however, I need to present a synopsis of an earlier work, written by Alice Bingle who was brought up at Toadsmoor. Paul Beer kindly lent a photocopy of the whole work (there is another among Dr Lambert's papers), and perhaps at some point I shall have time to transcribe the whole thing for the archive. The photocopy was made from a printed and bound version (though it looks typed) signed by Alice Bingle and later dated 1959 in a different hand. There is also a photocopy of a card headed *The Rose. Symbol of Love, Symbol of Silence.* There is a verse: '*When we reach God's garden Through toil and strife and woes Only the souls who wear love here Shall wear the Heavenly Rose.'* And there is a signature, perhaps of the first owner: Emily E. Lee. 1 / 4 / 09. Oh! The title of the book is *Life in an English Valley. 1870* and seemingly the book was put together by Thomas B Merrett, Bookbinder and Leatherworker, Guild of Gloucestershire Craftsmen – he lived in Thrupp Lane. How tantalizing: I do not know who has this book, nor who made the old photocopies that circulate round here.

The dedication is to Benjamin Orndoff MD and Perino Wingfield MD and the clue to the medical connection is given in an anonymous and undated introduction that I shall give in full here.

Miss Alice Bingle, affectionately known by generations of Antioch College students as 'Lady Alice', was Head Nurse at the Antioch College Clinic for many years until her retirement. She was born over eighty years ago in the Cotswolds in England, one of six daughters of a worker in a stick mill (or saw-mill). Because she belonged to the working class, she was unable to get into the teaching profession; and she managed to be accepted for nurse's training only with great perseverance, patience, and devotion. In England she gained very broad experience as a school nurse, district nurse, private nurse, and special therapist. She headed the wards of several large hospitals, including one in Birmingham turned over to the soldiers from all the Allied countries during World War I. She liked the people she met from the United States – both her fellow nurses and the soldiers, and, after the war, came to Cleveland, Ohio, at the invitation of one of the United States nurses. She remained in this country for several years, working in Cleveland and Chicago, and finally in a tuberculosis hospital in Maryland. Just as she had made up her mind to return to her own country, she

was offered a position by the director of the Antioch Clinic, as head nurse there. She did return to England, however, but after several months in England found that she was homesick for the United States. She returned to this country, took the job at Antioch College, and became an American citizen.

This book, in fictionalized form, tells of many of Miss Bingle's experiences as a child of the Cotswolds before the turn of the century, and as a young woman beginning what was to be a long and brilliant nursing career.

Well! Goodness me! That would still count as an outstanding and unusual *curriculum vitae* or whatever the current expression is – but Alice certainly must have astonished society here back in the day. In her first chapter she jumps straight into a narrative – marred for me throughout by too much conversation that intends to paint a rustic picture of country people with a broad dialect – 'Eh Mrs Rutter, somebody 'as boughten the girt old stune 'ouse.' As with all such attempts, it slows things down too much for a reader in the 21st century, but I expect it charmed readers originally. Well, I hope it did.

In *Chapter 1* we learn that in 1870 Toadsmoor had six cottages (about the same as now), people had been there intermarrying for generations, school and church were up a steep hill, and it was three miles to a shop. Someone with six girls was moving into a big estate cottage there. The scene is set for an impoverished hardworking community – with plenty of children. We meet Mrs Rutter, the Shingles (**I will use Bingle**), Tom Fisher, Sam Wall, the Eddles, Mrs Boulton, Sam Seville... These are, mainly, familiar names still around here, but a family of six girls would turn heads nowadays. **Throughout Alice refers to herself as Agnes**... *Chapter II* points out that the newcomers were at first viewed as intruders (not a lot changes) but gradually they are accepted. They get the garden into order to make sure they are well supplied with fruit and vegetables, and Mrs Rutter approves the flowers planted in the borders: lilies of the valley, wallflowers, narcissus, daffodils, and snow-upon-the-mountain in the rockery – 'She baint as standoffish as I thought.'

'At the entrance to Toadsmoor woods was a lovely lake fringed with trees and mossy banks. Swans and duck sailed the clear water. Peacocks strutted around and fowls scratched in leaf mould of generations. The wood and land belonged to Sir John; public paths led to isolated farms and cottages; a four mile walk through the woods and fields was the way to the town of Stroud. Mr Macowan, the keeper, lived in a rose-covered cottage just above the lake...'

Oddments of scene-setting are less familiar, unexpected. Mr Bingle is known to the men of the neighbourhood as the one literate man available to read aloud the newspaper to the others at The Ram. Coal arrives by the ton in a cart from Brimscombe station. Envious Mrs Rutter consoles herself with a nip of gin... The amount of furniture brought to the cottage is sensational. Mr Boulton rides a 'tall, one-wheeled bicycle' to his allotment. The Bingles bring a sack of cats with them. They earn extra money by keeping pigs. Mr Bingle sometimes passes out drunk. He won't go to church, but the girls enjoy Sunday school. On Sunday evenings, while Father is at The Ram, Mother holds a little service at home with Clare reading a story, a prayer, or a chapter of the Bible – and Emmeline accompanies hymns on an accordion. After the girls have gone to bed Mother retrieves Father from the roadside ditch where he is sleeping off his beer – and by five o'clock next morning he is on his way to work.

Chapter III describes Christmas 1880. The weather is crisp and cold and the quiet valley is full of 'bright good fellowship.' Mrs Rutter can't believe Mrs Bingle is going to make 12 plum puddings! School life is cheered by sewing cambric frocks, extra singing and

learning lines for a play, learning a few dance steps... Not only the local children but also the neighbours come to stir the great pudding mixture, and make a wish. One is toothless Annie Phipps – and in the account of St Elizabeth's orphanage in this Eastcombe Archive, a Mr Phipps is the first handyman – and the girls thought she would never leave. Their mother reproves them because *'Her life has been very, very drab. She has worked in the rag mill since she was seven, and she still does. She lives in a rickety two-room cottage with her mother, who is bedridden.'* I wonder whether 'the rag mill' refers to Toadsmoor Mill, which I believe was a flock mill...

There is to be a two-week school holiday, and a stage is being built in the big schoolroom. [Presumably this would be the old Bussage school, just above the church.] The girls go in search of the keeper and he provides them with armsful of holly to decorate the school, promising them some for their cottage too. The whole neighbourhood looks forward to the school entertainment, and everyone wears Sunday best. *'The Christmas tree reaching to the ceiling was all aglow with hundreds of candles, stars and bells, toys and sweets.'* There were playlets, tableaux, soloists, carols, presents for all the children...

On Christmas morning the girls find an orange, nuts, sweets, small gifts in their Christmas stockings. The girls go to church for morning service where there are carols, and the altar is covered with Christmas roses. *'Fat Joe was pumping air for the organ. Gertie Davis was sitting in the wings with her saintly father.'* And at home Mother was cooking the Christmas dinner.

'Papa looked on while Mother carved the sirloin and cut big helpings of Yorkshire pudding, and served brussels sprouts, fresh from the garden a short time ago. But oh, oh! They were all looking for that plum pudding! And soon it comes, decorated with holly and all ablaze.' Each piece has a little trinket in it...

In the parlour with its blazing fire there is a wonderful Christmas tree, a great surprise, beautifully trimmed, with presents below. A wax doll, a Noah's ark, the annual 'Chatterbox', crackers – chestnuts are roasted, stories read. Boys (Jack Winstone, Lance Smith, Harry French) call round with presents for the girls – and stay for a massive tea. Pretty soon they hear 'the waits' outside – the carol singers, who also come in for a piece of Christmas cake and a glass of ginger wine. *'In top hats, red wigs and beards the waits sang their carols. Jack Bird accompanied them with a concertina which he opened and closed with vigour.'* Then they went on their way, but not before much kissing under the mistletoe.

Chapter IV continues with signs of spring despite the wintry weather, and Agnes picks white violets in Frith Wood and calls on the Beavis family before going home – forgetting that the children had not been seen in school for some time. Within days Agnes, and then her sisters one by one, fell ill and their parents agreed they would have to summon the doctor – who lived in Brownshill. Mrs Bingle decided to enlist the aid of shoemaker Sam Seville, who worked from home. He doesn't mind the long walk, even though he has to be a pallbearer at a Munden funeral that afternoon... The doctor calls every day as the girls have scarlet fever and the cottage is put into isolation. Sam fetched milk and butter, the vicar and Papa's boss sent delicacies, other people left little offerings at the gate. Six weeks passed with no deaths, but the girls were very concerned at having missed so much school but eventually they return.

Mrs Bingle relished a little time for herself and walked to Stroud – past Nether Lypiatt and Daisy Bank – to call on her old employers the Gardiners. Cook sits her down in the servants' hall till Mrs Gardiner enters. *'The line of mistress and maid had never been crossed, but there was mutual love and respect.'* Lavinia Bingle is sent up to see Mr Gardiner, who has been unusually depressed since his daughter Julie left for New Zealand.

Meanwhile Mrs Gardiner, aware of the seven-week hiatus in Mrs Bingle's working life, made up a big bundle of frocks and hats for Mrs Bingle to carry home. *'On Good Friday the schools, shops and mills were closed. People went to church for part or all of the three-hour passion service. Papa, not over-burdened with sacred thoughts, worked in the garden.'*

He paid attention when it seemed as though his wife had been on an Easter-hat-buying spree, but subsided when he learned that the girls had been supplied by Mrs Gardiner. Paying the doctor's bill had not been imperilled.

Chapter V starts again with Agnes, who has not recovered fully. She collapses at school and Seth Davis stops his cart and takes her home. Whooping cough follows, another great worry. Agnes, ploughing through *Fox's Book of Martyrs*, gets on Mother's nerves and *'thin and slightly stooped'* has to return to school. Word comes that Mr Bingle is taunted at work about having six daughters and no son, but pretty soon the neighbours are spying on baby clothes being freshened up on the washing line.

'Mrs Brown was known to all as "Grandma Rose." Whenever she appeared people nodded knowingly to each other. "It ain't gawing to be long," they said. Grandma Rose came slowly down the Eastcombe hill, a big brown feather bambalming in her bonnet, her long full skirt tucked up in an elastic belt.'

An eight-pound boy was the welcomed product, and the whole family and neighbourhood celebrated. Mr B was pleased with Mrs B.

'Papa took a lot of joshing from the men who wandered down to have a chat of a Sunday morning. Mother wondered how much longer he would stay away from the Ram Inn where over copious mugs of beer they talked of weather, the farms, the cattle and politics. Those unlearned men knew little of politics. The conservative party, to which the clergy and landed gentry belonged, expected their employees and parishioners to be for them. The only help the poor received was from the clergy and their employers. Papa was a liberal. He was for Gladstone and his government, who were working for better conditions, free education for the working class. The clergy and landed gentry were very much opposed to the liberal government, and considered the liberals dangerous radicals... At this time class distinction was deeply rooted and most folk died in the station in which they were born.'

Trouble loomed in the Bingle household when the vicar called for a cup of tea, and a nudge in the direction of the baby's christening. Mrs Bingle was hoping to get her husband to church for the first time since their wedding, so she promised the vicar they would turn up with the baby in two weeks' time. As they did. The service was well attended, even the baby's father being there, and heard the vicar have to name the child William Ewart after Mr Gladstone.

Chapter VI starts with the drama of a chimney fire at the Bingles, always a very serious matter and in this the whole house would have been lost if Messrs Bingle and Boulton hadn't knocked out a side wall to get at the fire – the large range blocked access to the chimney inside the house. As was not uncommon the large beam across the chimney breast had possibly been smouldering for weeks... A chain of helpers headed by Mrs Boulton passed buckets of water from the stream. It was very exciting for everyone, and the girls were frightened when they found out about it – but Mrs Bingle preserved her exemplary calm.

When Ewart was just a year old Clare happily announced she could leave school and get a job that summer. She was only eleven, and her mother wanted her to have more schooling – but her father said she must leave. The following year the leaving age would be raised to 14, and he needed more money coming in.

Mother had always told the girls they would go into service, and Clare was looking

forward to leaving home. She left the children with Mrs Boulton keeping an eye on them, and set off up the hill to Bussage. She looked at the lovely church and school in passing, thinking how she wished she could read and write herself. Calling in on her Aunt Sally, she asked her to come down for a day the following week so that she could get to town to consult her old mistress. Cook said that Clare wouldn't be needed in that house, but Mrs Gardiner was ready to listen to Mrs Bingle. She suggested she went across the road straight away to talk to Mrs Parks opposite. The interview went well.

'Mother was shown up a flight of steep stairs to a flat over a drapery shop. Mrs Park was a pleasant plump woman who dimpled when she smiled.

"Yes," she said, in answer to Mother's inquiry, "I am looking for a young girl to take charge of my two children. How old is your daughter? Is she fond of children? Is she good tempered and honest? What is your religion?"

Mother answered all the questions and the answers seemed satisfactory,

"Tell me the address of your vicar, and if her character is all right, I will let you know when she is to come," Mrs Park said at last.

"You will find her very willing. She is used to children, being the eldest of my family," Mother said.

Mr Bingle never noticed what was going on at home, but the rest of the neighbourhood was well aware. Cotton fabric arrived for frocks and aprons, and Mother and all the girls sat outside sewing. Mrs Park's letter arrived, Clare's little tin box was packed and taken to Brimscombe station, and finally at Sunday morning breakfast the news was broken to Mr Bingle. He said nothing.

Clare's hair was pinned up. Her black frock reached her ankles. She hugged and kissed her siblings and she and Mother walked down to the Bourne to catch the bus. The Park children were aged three, and six months – and after a month's trial Clare's wage was to be a shilling a week, with one Sunday afternoon off each month.

Mother cried all the way home – where everything was a sixes and sevens, lacking Clare's supervision. Mother knew how much she would miss her *' "But Clare is better off. She will have a good home and learn better ways." '* Thus she consoled herself for the loss of her firstborn.

Chapter VII announces that another son was born when Ewart was 17 months old. Another christening was planned and achieved without the baby's father's assistance. Mrs Bingle was very worn down, but Mrs Park refused to let Clare return home without serving a month's notice...

Agnes was the next to leave school, and she was very unhappy not to be able to stay on and become a student teacher. Mother insisted that a good place in service was what was needed.

'Agnes had won a silver medal with the Lord's Prayer inscribed on it, an award for excellent writing and good behaviour. She had been put in charge of the infants while Miss Hook was away ill. This, as Mother said, had given her ideas, and day after day Agnes kept bothering about not wanting to leave school and Mother. Knowing her dislike of housework, Mother decided to call on the head governess and find out if there was any possibility of Agnes doing as she wished.

"If so, I might be able to persuade Papa to allow her to stay in school," she told Miss Sweeting.

Miss Sweeting had listened politely to what Mother had to say. Then she said, "Agnes has done so well and has been such a help with the infants, I would be only too glad to have her stay. But no one from the working class is allowed to enter the teaching

profession. Anyway, there is no pay during the first years." She thought the latter information would soften the blow.'

So Agnes had to go into service after all. As a maid of all work in a lodging house, Agnes found the work beyond her. The landlady was not unkind, but herself found it hard to make ends meet and Agnes was often hungry. She was homesick, tearful, and was despatched home after a month's trial with a very terse note. To compensate she made herself very useful at home, but a new place was soon found and the story was repeated – sent home after a month's trial. After the sixth attempt, a curate turned up at the Bingle house.

He was in search of a girl to sit with his invalid sister, to stay until the evening meal was over and help the lady to bed, then return to sleep at home. There was very little pay involved, but Agnes took up the post with enthusiasm and blossomed there. The curate noticed her poor sight and got her to the eye hospital in Gloucester. After that, spectacles cured her headaches – and everyone was happy.

Catastrophically, after two years Agnes noticed the curate lingering around her, till one day he made passionate advances and she bolted home, crying her heart out and finally telling her mother all about it – but agreeing not to tell her father. She was to walk to Stroud with Emmeline the next day, ostensibly to visit Grandmother Witts in the workhouse but also to get her name on to the servants' register. At the servants' registry office Agnes was immediately given an address to apply to. Ten children in the household – but a sweet-faced lady who agreed to give two shillings and sixpence a week! She was not at all pleased, however, when Agnes suggested she asked Mrs Gardiner for a reference, rather than the vicar. All turned out well, though, after a nerve-wracking wait...

Chapter VIII commences with Agnes – and her tin box – leaving home to begin work in town (excited, but worrying about the month-long trial period. On her arrival she is swamped with introductions to the children who appear home from school one after the other. It was a very busy household, though Agnes had to get used to the idea that the master of the house could be at home all day. Mr Chello was the parish church organist, and a music teacher. Mrs Chello worked alongside Agnes and gave her confidence. The first month passed quickly, her staying on was approved, and her wage was raised to three shillings a week.

It was a treat for country girl Agnes to be able to stroll around Stroud in her time off. The shopkeepers were friendly, and the rise in her wages emboldened her to go to the bookshop in search of a subscription to *The Girls' Friendly.* On her monthly Sunday off, however, as she tripped happily along on the walk home she was attacked by *'a group of ragamuffins'* as she left the main road. Luckily she was rescued by a passerby who saw her up the valley till she was past the mills. It was fun to be with her sisters, and the centre of the family's attention during dinner. Local boys called round in the afternoon, and all the young people went out for a stroll. Tea was organized in the garden, and still Agnes said nothing about her bad experience on the way home. When her mother proposed accompanying her part of the way home, the boys said firmly that they would escort Agnes and make sure she got back to Stroud safely...

One of the daughters of Mr Lee the bookbinder and stationer made friends with Agnes, which lessened the loneliness of both of them. He also had a son, Sydney, who was smitten with Agnes.

'Now an epidemic of smallpox swept over the County of Gloucestershire. Sandwich men paraded the streets; the news caused quite a panic. Health authorities urged all to be vaccinated, but to many vaccination was a death blow.

"It's strange to me," said Mr Chello in Agnes's hearing. "that Edward Jenner who discovered vaccination was born in Gloucestershire, and in no other county are they so opposed to vaccination as they are here."

Agnes never worried about illness, but because everyone in the Chello family was vaccinated, she was too. Agnes and Frank-the-bootboy had severe reactions – Frank so seriously that he was sent to the hospital. Mother came to take Agnes home, but she was too ill to walk and she had to leave her in the Cellos' care.

"Don't worry," said Mrs Cello who was always kind to Mrs Bingle. "We will have our doctor to see Agnes, and send a note on the bus to her father at the mill every day. You had better stay away from Stroud till the epidemic is over." '

After two weeks Agnes could use her arm again, and when she went to get the back copies of her periodical the Smiths welcomed her back – but were horrified to hear what had been going on. They did not believe in vaccination... However, she was invited to tea on Sunday and she dressed in her best.

'Sunday afternoon with the dinner dishes washed, Agnes put on her best frock, a black serge with satin collar and cuffs, leg o' mutton sleeves and ribbon velvet bows, and went to the Lees. Uppermost in her mind as she wended her way to the High Street was Sydney's "must".' There had been an ultimatum. The shop was shuttered and barred but Sydney opened the door to her knock and showed her up the narrow stairs to a large room overlooking the street. He took her hat and coat and another young man handed her to a chair. Agnes was introduced to all the family and then Mr Lee got on with his Bible reading. Afterwards there was a simple tea, but Agnes noticed that there was not much pleasure taken over it. She helped Emily wash up while Sydney stood by. In her bedroom Emily confided that she had a book that she kept hidden as her parents would disapprove of its content. She was *'trying to find out about life.'* Agnes left as the family got ready for chapel, taking herself to church for the service there, walking home with the Chellos after his duties were finished. She liked their domesticity, and began to think of the warm feeling Sydney's attention gave her.

As Christmas approached she embroidered a sampler to give Mrs Chello, and she also bought some cards bearing Mr Lee's verses. Later she posted some of these to her Mother and sisters.

'Christmas Eve, Miss May invited her to the music room, where they all sang carols. "It's wonderful," thought Agnes, "to see the master playing and singing with us. I have never heard him say a cross word." With a whole heart and a loud voice she sang the well known carols. Christmas day Agnes went with the Chellos to the morning service. After dinner Agnes was called to the dining room. The family gathered round the candle-lighted tree and sang "Hark the Herald Angels Sing." Then Mr Chello gave out the presents.'

The presents were lovely, and Agnes was given a pinafore edged with lace, and a box of writing paper. She gave Mr and Mrs Chello the colourful sampler she had embroidered for them: the Lord's Prayer, 'To Mr and Mrs Chello. A Merry Christmas. 1890.' They said they would always treasure it.

Spring was coming, and Valentine's Day loomed. Agnes received three cards – which gave her pause for happy thought . She was distracted by her mother calling in after visiting her own old employers. She had found Mr Gardiner very depressed... The news from home was all as usual – except Ewart had been ill after accompanying their father to town on a Saturday night. All the men gave him a sip of their beer, so their father and the keeper had had to carry Ewart all the way home! As *Chapter IX* begins Agnes is scandalized at the idea that Ewart was given beer: *'He will grow up a drunkard!'* but Mother

with all her experience seems a bit more phlegmatic... She makes Agnes pull herself together so that the Chellos do not seek to know what is wrong. Agnes bothered about it for days. *'She decided that she would get him to sign the pledge as soon as he could write.'*

She continued her visits to the Lees. She was constantly astonished by what she found there as the Lees were deeply observant of the Lord's day – but did not hesitate to beat their retarded daughter Elsie. *The Lees kept the Sabbath holy day. They did not travel on Sunday, or cook or open letters. The established church to which Agnes belonged was not so rigid. The Lees had nothing but contempt for the church. Mrs Lee did not like to see Emily and Sydney especially so friendly to Agnes, and she let it be known to Agnes not so much in words as by her mannerisms. It seemed to Agnes that Emily did not feel so sure of herself or she would not hide novels under the mattress. She thought Sydney so calm and self-possessed that nothing escaped his notice, no sign of pain or worry in his mother or Emily, yet he never noticed that his mother frowned when he hovered about Agnes.'*

Things progressed with Sydney's courtship – and Agnes continued to be distressed by the beatings the younger children received from their mother. One day he admitted that he had had a lecture from his mother – but he said to Agnes he had done nothing to be ashamed of. Then he kissed her. And promised her a trip in his cart when he delivered goods to Bisley. Mother hastily decided to make the trip as well – but Sydney held Agnes's hand under the rug on the way home.

Agnes continued to prepare for confirmation in the Church of England, but occasionally accompanied the Lees to chapel. One day she announced to Mrs Lee – to her consternation and displeasure – that after reading religious stories in books sold in the Lees' shop she had been converted. Mrs Lee told her husband – but on Easter Saturday Agnes went to her confirmation class in the church vestry...

'The Bishop of Gloucester was at the altar. Agnes was delighted with the beautiful service. "I'll never forget the holy feeling that overcame me when the bishop laid his hand on my head ..." she told Mother later. The service ended with the hymn "Oh Jesus I have promised to serve Thee to the end." Agnes sang those words from her heart.'

And next day she received her first communion. Agnes and Emily continued as friends and Mrs Lee disapproved of their long walks up to Rodborough Fort. Agnes paid some kind attention to little Elsie, washing her, but the evening was interrupted by Mr Lee, furious, coming in with a newspaper that said Britain had declared war in South Africa. As the war proceeded with reversals for Britain, the Lee sons were among the few who did not volunteer, and Mr Lee's thunderings from the pulpit roused public feeling against the family. A mob attacked the shop, and Mr Lee sent his wife with the three youngest children to her sister in Bridport.

'The war news did not penetrate the minds of people in the remote villages. Sydney and Albert did their usual travelling and business went on as usual. Mr Lee kept the shop open for any customer, and he was glad to talk to anyone who had the courage to deal with him. Agnes continued her visits and helped Emily as much as she could.'

When the war entered the third year patriotic fervour was somewhat dimmed, and life returned to something more normal as customers trickled back to the Lees' shop. The shutters were taken down at last. In 1900 the war ended and peace was concluded in 1902. The Lees would not join in celebrations. Many thousands had been killed.

'A few months later, Sydney and Agnes watched a parade of returning soldiers led by the town band. Men, women and children joined in the march. A young man broke into the ranks and did his best to lift a soldier high. The soldier resented his interference and struck him. Something in the war-weary men with their heavy equipment and the misplaced

homage touched Agnes and her eyes filled with tears.'

Sydney kissed her and discreetly withdrew... His mother brought back the youngest three children. Expecting obedience from all her children at all times she was distressed to find Agnes had been accompanying Sydney to chapel often. Worse: Mrs Chello challenged Agnes to explain why she had been missing church, and did not like to hear she had been attending the chapel. Agnes was very unhappy to know she had displeased her. Mrs Chello followed up her lecture next day by saying Agnes was to take two weeks' holiday *'so that you can think over what I have said and discuss it with your mother. We may have to make other arrangements when you return.'*

The unhappy Agnes went to tell the Lee family of her changed plans: Mrs Chello had arranged for her to go home the following Monday, so after saying her goodbyes to the Lees Agnes wrote to her mother to expect her home.

'Mother was waiting when Agnes, bundle in arms, descended from the top of the bus. Seeing her mother made her troubles pass from her mind. Ewart and Allan were with her in their spotlessly clean homemade knickers and coats. They hugged and kissed her, and the four of them started for home.

"We have time to go home through the fields," Mother said. "It's a stiff climb, but the view of the Golden Valley is so lovely."

"Oh yes, I would like to go home that way. The houses look as if they had been thrown against the hills higgledy-piggledy, any old way. The boys might see the donkey delivering the bread. I wonder how they can walk with those long baskets dangling on each side." '

There was great pleasure to be had spending a long evening with her mother and sisters, sleeping in a flower-scented bedroom, and being woken by girls pushing redcurrants in her mouth and bearing a cup of tea and a message from her mother to have a lie-in... Agnes, knew, however, that she would have to tell her mother what had been happening.

So *ChapterX* opens with Agnes hanging around her mother who was ironing – the iron heated on the fire and its temperature tested with a little spit – and finally daring to blurt out that she might have to leave the Chellos. Mother stayed calm, but asked why. Bit by bit Agnes explained her connection with the nonconformist Lees, and agreed that though she liked Sydney as a confidence-giving friend, she was not attracted to him. She liked going to church, and did not mind going to chapel, but Sydney did not reciprocate by going to church with her – and Mrs Chello would insist on her going to church if she were to stay with them. Her mother said that she was not going to influence Agnes's decision-making, except to point out that there would be many times in her life when Agnes would have to make up her own mind about things – and she should learn to take time over her decisions and stand on her own two feet.

Agnes decided to go for a walk around Bussage and Eastcombe, seeing old schoolfriends *'...in the little cottages with fluted tiles, neat dry walls protecting the flower borders. Agnes went in and out the little gates and knocked on cottage doors in the lanes and on the hills. Everywhere a cup of tea and a slice of cake was offered her. I'll never get home, thought Agnes, as the sixth cup of tea was placed before her. I'll have to make another afternoon of it. I just can't drink another drop of tea.'* Back home Agnes told her mother that she was going to spend a few days with the Lees. She was welcomed there as always, but Mrs Lee still did not unbend towards her. The visit went by peacefully and Agnes returned to work at the Chellos, deciding to share her Sundays alternately between church and chapel. One day she met Sydney as she approached the Lees, and he asked her to accompany him to Chalford. She was thrilled as they crossed the hills... As they rested on

a grassy slope he declared his love and asked her to marry him – but she refused to give him an answer till he had spoken to his parents... Two days later she received a letter .

'Dear Agnes, I have taken the matter up with my parents. They will not hear of it, or give their consent under any condition. You must forget all I have said to you. I am grieved that I have caused you unhappiness. I hope you will find some worthy man to make you happy, and I pray we will meet in Heaven.' Agnes was neither surprised nor disappointed, having thought of Sydney as just a friend – but she would miss that friendship very much and her misery at the thought made her ask Mrs Chello to release her so that she could go home.

'Agnes stepped off the train at Brimscombe. She noticed a group of men busy around the quiet station. "What's going on here?" she asked the porter as he lifted her box from down. "They are going to build a bridge so that people will not walk across the lines. It's a shortcut to the Hand Mills and Esther Williams was killed here last week on her way to work." "How dreadful." "Yes, it is. We have never before had an accident here. Are you going home?" "Yes. Will you put the box on Jim Peter's coal cart some time?" "Righto."

Agnes passed the George Hotel nestled on the hillside and made her way to the Bourne. After passing the pin mill and a row of cottages, it was a two-mile walk on a lonely road before she would be home. What a long way it seems today, Agnes thought, more like four miles than two. Mr Mann came into view and waved his whip as he passed in his horse and trap. He was on his way back to Chalford after getting Mother's fortnightly order for the groceries. There, at last, was the pillar box labelled Toadsmoor; just around the corner was home.'

Agnes and her mother discussed the matter of Sydney and his family, with Agnes accepting that she would not wish to drive a wedge between him and his parents – even if she could. All the Lees' adherence to very strict religious beliefs made them fear damnation if they deviated from them – which, Mother said, was carrying religion too far!

A couple of weeks later, just as Agnes was about to apply for a job in Cheltenham, awful news came in a letter from Mrs Gardiner to her mother. Mr Gardiner had hanged himself – just as his father had done – and Mrs Bingle was invited to the funeral. Mrs Bingle cried rare tears, and made a beautiful wreath with flowers from her garden. Agnes wrote a card expressing sympathy, and helped her mother dress in black for the funeral. While she was out a stranger came to the door, asking for Mrs Bingle and explaining that she was visiting her own mother, Mrs Eddles. Hearing that *'one of you girls*' was out of a place she had come to offer a job in London, as a cook. She was willing to train Agnes, and asked if Mrs Bingle would mind. Agnes explained that her mother *'would never, never stand in our light.'* Welcomed back from the funeral by her loving children, Mrs Bingle was astonished by the news but said she knew the lady – Mrs Hallett - had married a tailor and herself ran a *'West End dressmaking establishment'.* Two weeks later Agnes was to be met at Paddington, and had been promised five shillings a week.

Agnes was waved off by a posse of sisters and enjoyed the hours passing through lovely countryside. She was met by Mrs Hallett and in a hansom cab and, with luggage on the roof, made the short journey to her new home in Mayfair. It was far enough for Agnes to be utterly amazed by the traffic and the crowds. A housemaid, Ada, welcomed her into the house and made her some tea. While Ada dealt with the upstairs needs, Agnes then made tea for *'the girls'* who came trooping downstairs to the servants' dining room in the basement. A light meal was served at eight o'clock, and soon after that Agnes and Ada, sharing a bed, went to sleep on the fourth floor. Up at six, they took turns to wash in the basin, pinned up their hair, and put on print frocks and caps. A cup of tea, brass-polishing,

doorstep scrubbing, breakfast for the girls – Agnes was in at the deep end. Every morning Mrs Hallett came down to discuss the day's meals with her, and was patient as Agnes learned how to produce them.

It took Agnes quite some time to get used to the atmosphere of the busy workshop upstairs and the fact that Mrs Hallett had little time to pay attention to how the domestic side of things was run. Her husband was known to be perennially bad-tempered and convinced he was short of money. The seamstresses talked all the time not only about the tasks they were working on but also compared notes about the men they met in the park – and what their prospects were with them. *'The way they talked and what they did worried Agnes and she felt she could not stay at the Halletts'.'*

One of the women, however, Miss Greenwold, was nice to Agnes and said she would take her to the YWCA some Sunday so that she could meet some churchgoing people who were interested in religious work. *Chapter XI* therefore launches straight into Agnes's accompanying Miss Greenwold on the following Sunday and asking to walk rather than go on the Tube so that she could learn her way. They walk along Oxford Street and turn into Regent Street to the corner with Conduit Street. Agnes goes in alone and one of the superintendents immediately introduces her to a Miss Bowles – who introduces her to others at once. Everyone is very friendly, they have a Bible reading and a discussion, and Agnes feels happy and at home. Mary Bowles, a Londoner, makes sure Agnes knows her way home and on the way they come across a Salvation Army street service. They listen to the speaker, they sing the hymns, they arrive back at the Halletts', and make a date for the next Sunday: Regents Park Chapel.

Before then the work continues hard and the atmosphere difficult, but the trip to the enormous, crowded chapel in Regents Park is an amazing experience, and Agnes was introduced to a lot of Mary's friends. At Mary's place in Harley Street she introduces Agnes to the motherly cook, who herself is a Salvation Army officer. The servants' hall feels like a nice place...

'Weeks later Agnes had become an integral part of these religious young people. My life has been full, she thought, as she wended her way to call for Mary, who had become a real friend. When she met her she said, "I have charge of the meeting tonight." "What are you going to talk about?" asked Mary. "About the work I have done for the sick and needy."

This led to Agnes being given charge of a class at a Sunday School in the Ragged School Union. The children were ill-clad, dirty, beaten at home, fought among themselves, were crafty and suspicious – it was all incredibly hard, and Agnes found it difficult to gain and keep the children's attention. Some Sundays were just a 'hymn sing', with Agnes finding it almost impossible to suppress her tears. Just before Christmas, with trimmings in the shops, she had the extraordinary idea of giving a party for the children. She thought she could fund it by collecting farthings that no one wanted...

On the Sunday before Christmas she failed to get the children's attention for the Christmas story, there was the usual scuffle and punch-up, till she lost her temper and shouted that there would be a party. This was electrifying. Agnes said she would give out tickets the following Wednesday, but needed Mary's help: there would be 50 tickets, and that would be all the children that they could manage. She had collected 700 farthings! '*The day of the party, Agnes put on her red dress that Miss Greenwold had made for her. She called for Mary. It was a busy afternoon, but when the clock struck four and Agnes looked around the room, gay with holly, soft light flickering from the Japanese lanterns, she felt that all was well.'* By then the children were kicking at the door, and shouting. They rushed

to be seated, and with difficulty were supplied with a fair share of the food and mugs of tea. After eating they turned the forms round and observed an entertainment, a playlet, songs, gramophone records, recitations... In the end the children were bored and were allowed to go and *'...most of them blundered by with nothing to say. Walt Evans, who knew nothing but violence, with an old peaked hat on a mop of tangled hair, said in a voice that none could hear, "Thank you, lidy" as he shuffled away without raising his head. Agnes felt someone fingering and stroking her dress. She turned to see Emmaculate. Agnes took her hands in a loving embrace when she said "Thank you, teacher." Something in her beautiful eyes touched Agnes before she rushed away and disappeared into the night.'* When she rejoined the helpers to clear up she was told that 75 children had been counted. She didn't get home till eleven at night, to find all other than Ada had gone home for Christmas week. Her dress was ruined by the children's dirty hands but she went to bed weary – and very happy indeed.

After that Agnes was distracted and forgetful as she went about her daily tasks, and revealed to Ada that she no longer felt able to concentrate on household work. She told her about a Christian Endeavour Convention that would take place in a few weeks' time, and said she would like to go to the Albert Hall to hear the visiting American evangelist speak. She got her wish, and accompanied by Mary Bowles she attended the service with thousands of others. Mary encouraged her in the idea of handing in her notice so that she could concentrate on religious work – so she did that the following morning.

Mrs Hallett objected that she was planning to give Agnes a fortnight's holiday, and raise her wages... and in the days that followed Mary and Agnes toured London visiting all kinds of missionary societies, religious groups, philanthropic organizations, without finding any opening for someone without special training. In the East End, volunteering to help nurses in the missionary field, Agnes was advised to undergo nursing training before she could expect to be useful in the field.

It happened that a letter had arrived from home – or, at least, from Gertie Davis's stepmother with the news that Gertie was now companion to a lady at 'the Holborn' in Highgate and would like to see Agnes. She put the letter aside while she tried hard to gain admission to a hospital to undergo three years' nurse training. She met the same sad fact that had stopped her teaching: she was from the wrong social class.

Eventually Agnes found herself in the vicinity of Highgate and she found the big institution – looking like a workhouse – where Gertie worked. Inside she found Gertie happily established in what was actually the Holborn Infirmary, where the charming matron told Agnes that she could receive excellent training there – and there was to be a vacancy shortly. Luckily the letter coincided exactly with Agnes having to vacate her room at the Halletts'. *'Agnes Bingle is accepted for training at the Holborn Infirmary. Please report Sept 31. Signed Gertrude Wylde (Matron) Nightingale nurse.'*

Agnes tore home to Gloucestershire in a very happy frame of mind. She was met by sisters grown much taller, and welcoming parents – and the little brothers. Happy to be home for six weeks, she enjoyed her supper and listened to the family's news. Clare had married a station master and gone to live in Didcot. Emmeline was cook for a family in Brighton. Caroline, determined not to go into service, went to work at the rag mill but was bullied horribly. She chose instead to go as a general servant to Ramsgate, where she was well treated in a good house overlooking the sea. Connie reported that she was apprenticed at Hill Paul tailoring factory in Stroud – unpaid as yet, but able to earn a little by sewing in the evenings. Then it was Agnes's turn to be questioned.

Everyone was astonished at the turn Agnes was taking in her life, and she became an object of interest in the neighbourhood. In Stroud while looking for fabric for her uniform

Agnes came face to face with her friend Emily Lee, who took her home to see the family. They also were impressed by her news – and Mrs Lee admitted not only to having missed Agnes but also reported that Sydney, before his marriage, named Agnes as the one he had really wanted... and Mrs Lee regretted having stopped his marrying her. *'Mrs Lee's admission surprised and touched Agnes. The knowledge of Sydney's love added to her happiness as a fuller and richer life was opening up before her.'* This is where the reminiscence stops dead despite Agnes/Alice going on to have an amazing career. This charming book ends with a handwritten page illustrated by a drawing of a behatted lady framed in an oval decorated with streaming ribbons – and at the foot there is a sketch of a cross-legged pensive chap in an armchair. The tiny handwriting says

This little book, with here and there a thought
From some valued acquaintance; how it seems
To speak to me, to fill my heart with dreams
Sweet as spring flowers, with radiant perfume wrought.
And here, her name – and as I breathe the sweet
Familiar sounds, a presence in the room
Sheds a light of love – but I may not look
The treasured leaves are fluttering at my feet;
The light is gone – and I lost in the gloom
Ponder for ever – o'er this little book.
William Frederick Lee June 25th 1909

Oh DEAR! There is another verse, in a very different hand, that is partly illegible. The initials may be SL. I think it goes:

'*In age and feebleness extreme*
Who shall a helpless worm redeem?
Jesus, my only hope Thou art,
Strength of my failing flesh and heart,
O could I catch one smile from Thee
And drop into eternity.'

And finally there is a page on which there is an unskilled sketch of flowers – perhaps primroses – and the name Edward W.M.Revell. Enderley. June 1908. For what it is worth: I think there is a house called Enderley on the hillside below Amberley overlooking the Woodchester valley – connected to Mrs Craik as she wrote *John Halifax Gentleman* – a Victorian runaway bestseller. Well, that's a bit random; but it is a reminder that Alice's early life and education took place at a time of rampant sentimentality and extremes of emotion!

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