All the Nice Girls

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virago

Author's Note

This is a novel grounded in fact. In the 1940s I was a schoolgirl at Stockport High School for Girls when it joined the Ship Adoption Scheme and adopted a merchant ship. Its captain and his wife became great benefactors of the school during the war and beyond. I have drawn on my memories of those years to construct a fiction: there is no connection whatever between the lives I have given the characters in my book and the headmistress and staff of my school, either in the 1940s or its successor school thereafter. Nor is there any connection with the master and crew of the ships we adopted. Staveley is the fictional name I have given to an imaginary town between Manchester and Liverpool.

The School

1942

The shuffling of shoes, identical pairs of shiny black shoes. The murmur of young voices, words inaudible, the scraping of rush-seated upright chairs on the polished parquet floor. The pupils of Ashworth Grammar School for Girls were arriving in the echoing hall for their daily nine o'clock assembly. Unlike the girls, the teachers were not in uniform, but there was a sameness to the sensible shapeless skirts, hand-knit jumpers and peach-coloured lisle stockings. Each group was ushered in by its form mistress, who had already marked the register that recorded their attendance. That morning one of the girls in the lower sixth was not yet present: her brother had been reported missing in action. She would be in later, when her aunt had arrived to comfort her mother. So, all was normal.

Miss Maitland, the tall, straightbacked headmistress, mounted the rostrum, announced the opening hymn. She surveyed her school with quiet satisfaction, knowing each girl by name and watchful for any fidgeting. Despite

wartime shortages of cloth and clothing, she was almost elegant, arriving at school each morning in a pert little hat, with matching bag and gloves, leather when everyone else had knitted theirs. She had harvested her clothing coupons and managed with some deft home dress-making to set her own style of fashion and appearance. Her taste ran to Gor-Ray suits, whose box pleats she ironed each morning with a damp cloth.

She lived with her widowed mother but wouldn't acknowledge how sad this was – after all, there were plenty like her. Rather, she had an aura of purposeful achievement. In later decades she might be described as having a career, but no one spoke like that in 1942. It was enough to have a life.

The removal of the pert little hat had left the fine golden hair flat on top of her head, but it curled towards her collar in a hint of Veronica Lake. Like the rest of the school, she went regularly to the cinema and was not immune to its glamour. Her porcelain skin she treated each night with Pond's Cold Cream, and by day with a dusting of Bourjois face powder.

That early-March morning she looked at her girls with particular pleasure. Her pale blue eyes were set wide above high cheekbones, a neat straight nose and wide but thin lips. She might once have been marked out as a beauty, but her concern was with her school, and beyond it, of course, with the country and the war. This, though, was her domain. She sang the hymn in a warm contralto, while the girls, absolved from the rules of silence applying in classrooms and corridors, threw themselves vigorously into the familiar phrases. The major chords

and their own voices gave several a private rush of pleasure. And today Miss Maitland had another delight in store for them. She had an announcement to make.

From her position on the platform she surveyed the assembled ranks: navy gymslips, white blouses, prefects distinguished by badges of office, sporting heroines in their yellow plaited girdles. At the back of her mind she was aware that the sixth-formers were restless. They were starting to look like young women. They wore skirts and shirts and the school tie, a status symbol that confirmed their authority when they disciplined the younger girls. More importantly, it made them the equivalent of the grammar-school boys they eyed furtively on street corners when school had finished for the day.

Ashworth Grammar School for Girls in Staveley, one of the thriving industrial towns that circle Manchester, ran smoothly on strictly conventional lines. Girls had circumscribed contact with the opposite sex because boys were a different breed, destined for a different way of life. Nice girls must be kept apart and safe. But Miss Maitland knew that social controls were breaking down. The bolder girls shared the back-row seats at the cinema with schoolboys of their own age and indulged in exploratory fumbling, which, given the limited space and their heavy clothes, never found much flesh. Nonetheless she was reassured that within the school childish innocence persisted. The girls would grow slowly into their adult selves.

'The school is going to adopt a ship.'

There was an immediate tremor of excitement. Then as the significance of what she had said sank in, there were

shrill cries of surprise and girls whispered behind their hands. Now they had the prospect of one-to-one contact with boys older than themselves, who were serving in the war, 'the hand of friendship' meant contact with serving sailors in uniform, officers with gold braid on cuffs and shoulders, men who'd seen the enemy, even been in battle. Letters. Meetings. No wonder the hall was swept with whispers.

Even the teachers, sitting neatly, hands clasping hymn books, leaned forward to catch each other's eye and raise enquiring eyebrows. Their minds were spinning, too, trying to work out what might be involved.

Miss Maitland brandished a letter. An outbreak of hushing restored the now electric silence.

'I have this morning received a communication from her master, Captain Josh Percival. Because of wartime regulations, I can't tell you her name: for the time being we are asked to refer to her only as "our ship". And the scheme is already afloat.' The nautical reference added a flash of jaunty gaiety, quite unlike her usual tone. She allowed herself to smile, and her girls listened.

'This is another of our contributions to the war. I'm already proud of the trouble each class is taking with its collections of used wool and aluminium pans – and paper seems to be piling up everywhere! But, as you know, I can put up with a little untidiness in the interest of victory.'

The other teachers seized the chance for a covert smile of their own: Miss Maitland was always scathing about the mess in the staffroom.

'But this new effort involves the entire school coming together to forge personal links with one of our valiant

merchant ships. I shall ask form mistresses to arrange letter-writing to different members of the crew. We shall make comforts for them, too, and despatch parcels to cheer them up. The collectors among you can look forward to stamps from exotic places. Most of all, we shall be welcoming them here whenever they're docked in Liverpool. Later, when it's considered safe enough, there may be visits to the ship.' By now Miss Maitland was almost laughing, enjoying the girls' hum of interest.

The previous week, concerned by the bad news from the front, she had written to the British Ship Adoption Society in London and asked for the school to be involved. She assumed the project was seen as a way of boosting morale on board the merchant fleet, which was battling to get food supplies through the German blockade. It would boost patriotism at home, too, and, perhaps, Miss Maitland thought, a taste for geography, among the girls. A telegram had arrived the day before, informing her that a formal bond had been registered by the authorities.

More than whispers had broken out at the back during assembly: a bout of serious giggling among the lower sixth. The rustle of interest that Miss Maitland could tolerate was being overwhelmed by snorts of laughter she could not. Echoes of her younger self stirred. But she knew the rules. She disciplined herself and would not allow standards to slacken among the girls.

Hastening to quell the outbreak she announced the next music: 'Jesu Joy of Man's Desiring'. It set off more squeals. The senior girls were now engulfed in a wave of hysteria, cotton hankies stuffed into mouths, hands held

over eyes. The delicious pleasures of transgression were beyond control. Knowing there would be a price to pay, the two who had started it coughed and struggled to straighten their faces. Slowly the surge of spontaneity subsided.

Back in their form room it wasn't long before Polly and Jen were summoned. Grace Bunting, the secretary, conducted the administration of the school's affairs from a neat little sentry-box of a room adjoining Miss Maitland's study. This was her first job since secretarial college and she had a girlish adoration of her superior. She was readily at her command and, when not actually needed, fussed around in her room, freshening the flowers, setting out the *Manchester Guardian*, filling the cigarette box, little tasks she took pleasure in fulfilling. She knew when to take a wet umbrella and set it to dry alongside Miss Maitland's galoshes. She was watchful for books out of place, even enjoyed the intimacy of mentioning, were it to happen, that the headmistress's petticoat hem was showing. Miss Maitland indulged her, even leaving an odd glove or an opened book to be retrieved, her thanks making Grace glow with pride.

Grace identified with the girls. Some were not much younger than her but she was already earning money. A favoured few had been shown the sapphire and diamond ring that went with the recent newspaper announcement of her engagement – little flicks of her left hand had become an instinctive mannerism. She waved it at Polly and Jen now, and made a *moue* of disapproval as she fetched the naughty girls.

'Margaret and Jennifer are here, Miss Maitland.' And to them a conspiratorial 'She's in one of her moods, so don't provoke her.' As if they would.

The girls edged into the inner sanctum, and drank in its splendour. The richness of polished wood glowed from panelled walls and floor, while the bookcases held impressive volumes with tooled leather bindings. Bright splashes of colour – an Indian rug, a run of silk cushions on a small sofa – gave the room, with its tall windows, a faint hint of the exotic.

So far the war had made one conspicuous difference to the school building. To guard against the effect of bombing, its corridors and stairwells had been strengthened by sturdy wooden scaffolding. Chunky timbers lined corridors and stairs, cloakrooms and gymnasium. When the younger girls swung on them, hooting like monkeys, they got splinters in their hands. 'Serves them right,' said the staff, who grudgingly administered first aid.

None of this disfigured the headmistress's enclave. She had preserved its pre-war state to remind them all of the school's Edwardian elegance. The main business of the room was in the centre: the desk, of solid burnished oak, its roll top displaying a nest of shelves and, below, a neat settlement of documents, a glass paperweight, a bottle of Quink and a small lacquer tray that held Miss Maitland's three fountain pens. A silver photograph frame held a picture of a young man. The girls knew not to look at it and they never saw Miss Maitland do so either. So much not-looking made it the most powerful object in the room.

'Margaret and Jennifer, there's no excuse for your behaviour, but I'm prepared to hear what you have to say.' Miss Maitland stared at them hard. Using their Christian names in full carried authority and disapproval. Polly, a tall willowy blonde, slouched on one leg. Jen, with red cheeks and bright black eyes, stood foursquare, compact but intense. Miss Maitland tried to recall whether she herself had been like this when she was young: bold and awkward, bright but chastened. She rather feared she had been lanky and dull. Neither girl looked at her, suddenly taken with the state of their shoes.

'Well?'

'We're sorry, Miss Maitland.'

This was Polly, who hated to be in the wrong. Miss Maitland, knowing as much, kept her thoughts to herself and acted out her disapproval. 'What caused such hilarity? Tell me.'

Clearly, Polly felt the weariness of guilt. She gave a wretched, helpless shrug.

'Don't shrug your shoulders, Margaret, and stand up straight. Jennifer, what have you to say?' For a moment she delighted in her power.

'Nothing, Miss Maitland. We were just laughing at . . . you know . . . the news of the ship, sailors . . . er . . .' She glanced helplessly at the panelling, the leather books, the distant unused sofa.

Miss Maitland held all the cards. She could afford to mellow, and she did. She crossed her legs in their fine silk stockings.

'Now, you are usually intelligent, polite girls. I have

high hopes of your doing well, and I look to you to be an example to the school.'

Polly let out a long sigh.

'And I don't want any insolence.' Suddenly she sat up and gave way to a passion that came from somewhere she hardly knew. 'I spoke to you of how we can support the brave men of our services, some of them still boys, who face danger and death every day. They are out there enduring brutal conditions, confronting the enemy, surrounded by the turmoil and fear of war. Do you know what that means? Can you begin to *imagine* what that means? For them, for their families, and . . .' she paused '. . . for those they love, those they leave behind. Many heroes will make the final sacrifice so that our lives might be safe. They lay down their young and beautiful lives – but all you can do is disrupt and sneer. You're despicable with your cheap behaviour.'

This was now well beyond any routine telling-off. Polly and Jen were transfixed.

Miss Maitland was silent, breathless, seeking to calm herself. She stood up and turned away from them, brushing non-existent fluff from a pleat of her skirt.

Now she turned back. 'I look to senior girls like you to set an example, to show patriotism and pride in our country and its serving men. Now, leave this room and never let me hear that you have been disrespectful or dismissive of this enterprise again. Is that understood?'

Polly and Jen were shocked. There was an intimacy about their headmistress's manner that discomfited them. They saw her as vulnerable and didn't want her to be.

'Yes, Miss Maitland.' Jen nodded vigorously. 'Understood.'

And Polly, tugging at the tail of her sixth-form tie, added, 'Sorry, Miss Maitland,' and meant it.

As they filed out through the heavy oak door, they didn't look towards the sepia photograph on the desk. It showed a young man in First World War uniform smiling breezily at the camera, and, scrawled along the bottom, 'To Cynthia'.

On the way back to the classroom, Polly broke away and ran off. Jen returned to the lesson, sidling into her desk and refusing to meet the others' questioning eyes, or answer the hissed enquiry, 'Where's Polly?'

Miss Jessop was analysing Lamartine's 'Le Lac', and Jen gave herself up to the intensity of the poem.

Aimons donc, aimons donc! de l'heure fugitive,
Hâtons nous, jouissons!
L'homme n'a point de port, le temps n'a point de rive;
Il coule, et nous passons.

Yes. 'Let us love, let us love . . . let us be happy, time is fleeting': wasn't that exactly right? That was what they all wanted to do, to love and live to the very limit before this terrible war took away every chance of happiness. That was what the poem was telling them, and what the teacher was urging them to do. How odd that a long-dead French poet should know exactly how they felt right now.

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Polly had fled to the cloakrooms, where Jen found her at break, hunched over, her shoulders bent almost to her knees, surrounded by the smells of shoes and coats, the stuffiness of young bodies that, in line with some government ruling, had just one bath each week. Polly hugged her knees, finding comfort in her body's heat. Jen's arrival brought on the tears again and she reached into her pocket for her handkerchief, already damp, and screwed it into a ball. She rocked to and fro.

'She wants us to be happy about the ship – she does, Polly. It's because she cares that she gets so upset. Please . . .' Jen took Polly's hand and squeezed it.

The roar of girls released from classrooms swept round them. Glass bottles of milk rattled in the crates as girls snatched them and grabbed at the rows of currant buns. Polly stood up and allowed her friend to lead her outdoors to join the others. Quiet, subdued, she resumed her place at the centre of their little group as they hung around, gossiping.

Jen quietly explained Polly's tears. 'Her brother Gerald's with the Atlantic convoys.'

Every Friday Jen went to the cinema with her mother, Ruby. It was part of the routine. Two years ago, in 1940, when she'd sat round the wireless with the rest of the family and heard Mr Churchill declare he had 'nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat' it had sounded as though, with one big combined effort, a colossal tug-of-war, they'd have the Germans beaten and return to the lives they knew. But it hadn't been like that. Six months later they had stood in the back garden and watched in

the distance the great orange glow that didn't flicker or change, just held fast throughout the night. Miles away Manchester was burning, like a huge sun in the sky. Jen's parents had worried silently about what had happened to aunts and uncles in places like Stretford and Gorton. They had no telephone so they'd only find out if someone in uniform appeared the next day. They had come up from the Anderson shelter in the garden, among the spiders and damp soil, and were grateful to feel safe. Liverpool was further away but they knew it was hit all the time because of the docks.

The war had been going on for two and a half years and it felt now as though they were losing. Some of the soldiers who had survived Dunkirk had come back silent and staring. Jen remembered a stranger taken in by her aunt sitting in a deck-chair in the garden. She was hoping for stories of derring-do and heroics but her aunt had shooed her away. 'Take him a syrup sandwich, if you must,' she'd said and Jen had carried the plate to the cramped little square of grass that hadn't yet been dug for vegetables.

Since then things had got even worse. Jen looked at her parents, whose grim, expressionless faces showed no hope, little good humour. Her dad, usually her ally, had become moody and sullen. Her mother was withered and worn-out, her hands lined and dry from cleaning other people's homes. Out of doors, she wore the same shapeless black felt hat pulled over hair held perpetually in place by a net, and a pair of brightly striped knitted gloves, a present from Auntie Vera last Christmas and so much worn that the tips of the fingers had had to be

darned. The wool didn't match, and the patches resembled an animal's paws. Ruby clung to her daughter for comfort and reassurance.

It was amazing how quickly Jen's routine had been set with those early raids: German bombs by night; everyone into the shelters; clear up in the early hours; have a cup of tea and go to school. There were modest pleasures in the evening once homework was done – *ITMA* on the wireless, choir practice, Guides – but she was in bed by ten to get some sleep before the sirens sounded. Once the Blitz was over, the routine cinema trip was back.

A fine rain blew into their faces as they hurried to the bus stop. Mr Leather, the newsagent, was among those waiting with his son. They must have been there for some time because the rain had soaked darkly into the shoulders of his gabardine.

'Let's hope the queue's not too long.'

'No, not in this weather. I've lost my brolly.' He gave a snuffle of pleasure as the dimmed lights of the bus loomed out of the dark, and they embarked. This week there was special excitement; everyone had known what was coming from the trailers. And there was indeed a queue outside the Essoldo: the whole neighbourhood was turning out. Tickets were first come first served – you could only book seats on Saturday night – it was as well they were early. Jen saw Miss Fletcher, form mistress of Three B, right at the front, holding a man's arm. That would be worth reporting back. They must have come out straight after their tea. The queue moved slowly towards the darkened door, the rain seeping into their shabby clothes.

Inside there was a comforting fug. Cinemas had rare permission to light their foyers and were the most glamorous places Jen knew. The style and the sudden brightness after the dark and rain made her gasp. The walls bore reliefs of swooping couples dancing, a little like Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. The damp steamed off everyone's clothes and some people even took off their macs to stand around the ticket booth in their cardigans. They looked almost naked, unseemly somehow. Jen and her mother took their tickets from the girl in the booth – Peggy, Mrs Johnson's daughter, from along their street. She'd left school only the previous year and already had this responsible job. She had painted nails too. Ruby frowned at that.

They got to their seats while the organ was playing. It was floodlit and set on a platform that rose and fell in the pit before the screen where a dot bounced along the top of the words so the audience could join in the songs. Mr Leather and his son, Miss Fletcher and her man – everyone was swaying and singing, all made one by the good humour. Jen and her mother's voices, sweet and piping, swelled with the rest. The final song in the medley changed the mood from cheery to something more thoughtful: 'We'll meet again' they sang, knowing that some of them might not meet again the husbands and boyfriends fighting in North Africa or Singapore. They sang as though it was a hymn.

Then they were agog for the newsreel: Gaumont British. A week ago the news that Singapore had fallen to the Japanese had stunned them into horrified silence. Now the news told how some hundred thousand

Japanese Americans were being rounded up and sent to a special area. That seemed fair enough and there were murmurs of approval. Jen thought she heard, 'Quite right too,' from her mother. Then, thankfully, the commentator's voice switched from solemn to bright: the Board of Trade had said skirts must be shorter, women's shoes must have lower heels and men would not be allowed double-breasted suits or turn-ups on their trousers. They showed the new dresses, skirts reaching only to the knee. Jen's mother was a bit tight-lipped. But if the government had decreed it, it would be so. Finally sixteen-year-old Princess Elizabeth was seen registering for war service, smiling and confident. It was a tonic for them all.

Then, at last, what they'd all been waiting for: the big picture. There was a buzz of pleasure as the smoke from a multitude of cigarettes curled into the light from the projector and people settled down for *In Which We Serve*. They watched in tense silence. The film told of a ship serving in the war, its captain and crew, how the ship sank and some of the sailors survived in an open boat. The one played by Bernard Miles died, but Richard Attenborough's character, who'd been a coward at first, was brave by the end and died a hero's death. It was so sad and heroic. They were spellbound by how real it was, how like the life they were living. And Noël Coward, who played the captain, and Celia Johnson, as his lovely wife, well, they were just like the posh people whose homes Jen's mother cleaned. And Celia Johnson wore such lovely clothes. Jen wasn't the only girl in the audience to be envious.

At the end, when a voice paid tribute to the sailors of the Royal Navy, 'above all victories, beyond all loss . . . they give us, their countrymen, eternal and indomitable pride', everyone stood and cheered, and remained standing, in silence, while the organ boomed the national anthem.

As they trooped out it was clear that lots of people had been crying. One woman was still sobbing uncontrollably. The murmur went round that her son had been drowned in an Atlantic convoy last autumn, but no one liked to intrude. It didn't seem polite. Her friend handed her a hanky and steered her to the door. 'She needs to pull herself together,' Jen's mum whispered. She'd be better once she got home. You had to keep going. They all knew that.

But Jen was thinking about the ship and the sailors, not the ones in the film but the ones they would get to know at school. The ship they were adopting. She would be in touch with the war she'd seen on the screen; she would meet heroes. She would be like their girlfriends and families in the story – she could even pretend her teachers were like Celia Johnson. It was all going to be so exciting.