

# Kinnoull Gardens

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## Noblesse Oblige

Sergeant John MacEwan parked the Bentley outside the huge red sandstone building. The soldier swivelled his body stiffly to his right to examine a shiny new motorbike and sidecar parked discretely near the flowering rhododendrons at the far corner of the gravelled driveway. Viewed from his left, MacEwan face was hard to look at, disfigured by an explosion and sepsis caused by shrapnel and mud in a wound which had not been dealt with quickly enough, adding to the damage.

By late May 1928 *Kinnoull School for Young Ladies* was winding down for the summer break. It was a time of renewal when older teachers retired, ambitious younger teachers moved on to more prestigious postings and candidates for replacements were interviewed. With a staff of 23 and a school role of 395 it was still thriving, despite recent problems and the rash of withdrawals as concerned parents moved their daughters to other schools.

Colonel Samuel Murdoch-Morton, known locally as "Colonel Kinnoull" after his estate, had served as Chairman of its Board of Governors since the death of his father, two years before the War, when life had been settled, comprehensible, and in the main, predictable.

MacEwan swivelled again, this time to his left, catching his passenger off guard. Once more he saw a face filled with tension from chronic pain and frustration.

'Sur, will Ah get the wheelchair oot?' he said in his Glasgow twang. He had been a career soldier in the *Highland Light Infantry* before the War, a piper and instructor.

'No, John. Only eleven steps to the landing and three more at the door. Let's give it a go, shall we?'

'Yessur!'

Although only thirty-nine, Colonel Samuel Murdoch-Morton seemed twenty-years older. His once strong face was now pale and strained, eyes sunken with a familiar glisten of sweat on his forehead. At the outbreak of the War, he had marched to Perth Railway Station at the head of his Territorial Battalion, towering over his men at 6 ft 3 ". Broad shouldered, well-made with a ruddy countryman's energy, he had been a good, brave leader, clear, decisive, compassionate and well respected by his men. Back then in 1914, the carnage which was to follow was unknown and unimaginable.

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Ten years on from the Great War, John MacEwan was still on the books at the Perth Territorial Regiment. His left ear deafness and a weakness in his left eye meant he was no longer fit for active service and had been transferred from the Regulars. His posting as Batman to Colonel Samuel Murdoch-Morton DSO and Bar was unusual, a sinecure given partly as a reward for his own bravery but mainly as compensation for his officer. Among those who knew the details, it was widely held that both men should have received the award of a Victoria Cross.

At thirty-two, MacEwan the small, slightly built soldier was otherwise fit and strong, in his prime, married to Isobel, a local girl, a tall, strongly built farm lass, newly twenty-four. The couple had three sons. John (8), Samuel (5) and Andrew (3) with another child on the way. MacEwan knew he was lucky to have the lodge house on the Kinnoull Estate. This had been offered rent free in return for what was loosely described as 'domestic' duties provided by himself and Isobel in support of Louisa, the Colonel's wife. Louisa Tavistock's marriage to Samuel Murdoch-Morton had been that of a war hero to his nurse, a common occurrence when so few men of marriageable age had survived.

Although lifting his employer for bathing and toileting was strenuous and other personal attendance requirements were harrowing, John and Isobel were content. Settled for the time being at least, John was saving carefully for the future, aware his employer must be on his final years, if not months. When Colonel Kinnoull's time ran out, and since there could be no children to inherit, spurious tittle-tattle suggested Louisa was biding her time, waiting to sell up and move back to her family in Hampshire. The truth was, at twenty-seven and having 'escaped' from her Cinderella role, Louisa had no wish to return to her adoptive aunt, an officious widow whose four daughters led a life of intrigues and deceptions, chasing men they did not really want, vying with each other constantly to be top of the heap.

It was also rumoured, this time accurately, that Colonel Kinnoull's manhood had been excised by the exploding grenade thrown from the German trenches. In such circumstances, who could blame her for taking the opportunity to better herself and as a rich and attractive widow, possibly find love. However, to be fair, as witnessed daily by John and Isobel, Louisa was a loving and dedicated wife and well liked by all who worked on the Kinnoull Estate.

Reduced by the mutilation of his lower torso, with his right leg gone from just above the knee and his left arm limp and useless, Samuel was a ghost of his former self. Unwilling to give up and languish in self-pity, Colonel Kinnoull had accepted the role as Minister of Kinnoull Parish Church, one of the largest in Perth with a congregation hovering around 2,000 souls. In the mid-nineteenth century, the church building and its extensive halls had been gifted by the original Samuel Morton, the grandson of a Glasgow Tobacco Lord. Unlike his forebears, Samuel was a deeply religious man but also a sharp businessman who had moved to Perth, buying up vast tracks of the surrounding countryside from those

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leaving Scotland to start afresh in Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and South America.

Due to his lack of mobility and energy, Kinnoull was in fact only the titular head, assisted by the Reverend Doctor James Johnston, now eighty-three but forced out of retirement due to lack of other candidates. The real work of the parish ministry was being done by his assistant, Major Norman Stillie MA, LLB (Hons), an earnest, dedicated and assiduous thirty-four-year-old who had served as a junior officer under Kinnoull, one of very few who had returned from the War physically intact although mentally scarred by what he had been through. Prior to the War, Stillie had been a newly fledged lawyer and was not yet an ordained Church of Scotland minister. A bachelor, he lived with his widowed mother and two older, unmarried sisters.

Marianne Stillie taught Music at Kinnoull School for Girls and, in addition, served as Bursar. As House Mother, Deborah Stillie ran the Girls' Hostel attached to the school, caring for up to fifty girls aged seven to seventeen, girls whose family homes were too remote to permit daily travel. Most of the others lived within walking distance, while a scattering were delivered by car or taxi from outlying estates and farms.

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## The Board

The Governor's Board Room was hot and stuffy, blue with cigar and pipe smoke. Those present were drowsy, slightly bored, checking their watches, willing the meeting to end to set them free. The proceedings were being dominated by the caustic drone from Henry Colbeck, Secretary and Treasurer, *de facto* Deputy Chairman, a man who liked to have the final say on every detail.

The next item on the agenda was 'Recruitment'. Heads rose and looked expectantly to the Colonel, who had refused to answer when asked why the Head Teacher was absent.

It would turn out to be a morning of surprises.

Almost exactly two years earlier, the appointment of Dr Victor Hammel as Head Teacher had been contentious. When appointed, he had been forty-six with a good *curriculum vitae* and a glowing letter of recommendation from his previous employers, a prestigious and much larger establishment in Edinburgh, a school for boys only. It was this letter which had made Kinnoull very uneasy. It had described a man which did not fit well with his physical presence as a nervous and evasive individual who presented himself as weak, indecisive, a man who answered in platitudes. Sadly, on that day there had been no other external candidates.

During the post-interview discussion, Samuel had lobbied to have Mary Sanderson the Senior Woman promoted to become Head Teacher. The other Governors, all men, had been unwilling to put a woman in charge when all the other teachers at the school were also women.

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When the meeting was called to order, Mary Sanderson asked permission to speak, to impart important news.

'Colonel Kinnoull, Gentlemen, I regret to inform you that Dr Hamell has resigned. He left today, before breakfast, posting this letter under my door. It is addressed to you as Governors. In a separate note to me, he advised he has had to go to Edinburgh urgently to attend an appointment with his heart specialist. I was unaware until that moment that he had a heart condition.'

Samuel opened and read the short letter from Hammel.

"My dear Samuel,

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*"Regrettably, I find I must resign due to ill-health. My heart has been acting up and, to add to my personal woes, my dear Mamma is becoming increasingly dotty, in need of constant supervision. Sarah, her companion, who is my widowed sister-in-law, says she can no longer cope alone.*

*"In my personal view, if it is worth anything after so short a time in post, I believe Mary Sanderson should be given the post of Head Teacher now that it is again available. Perhaps it would have been better for all parties if I had never been here at all.*

*"And, yes, please do read this note to the Board of Governors, if you feel it appropriate.*

*"Finally, thank you for all your help and support during my difficult two years at Kinnoull. I'm afraid I am just not cut out for this sort of pressure.*

*Victor Bernard Denholm Hammel, MA (Hons), BSc (Hons), PhD."*

Samuel glanced to his left where Victor would have been seated, a chair which Mary had claimed. In that instant he caught the hint of a triumphant smile at the corner of her eyes on a face masked stoically to conceal her excitement.

Henry Colbeck was the first to speak.

'Heaven forfend! We already have five resignations from junior staff and two early retrials and now this to boot! No harm to Victor but it is clear as day he has been a disaster waiting to happen. That business of the Biology lessons, with dogs mating in the classroom, what did he think he was playing at! I mean, I'm all for Science, of course I am but, well . . .'

While Henry was speaking, Mary slipped a hand-written note to Samuel who scanned it quickly then checked. Mary nodded and smiled.

'Thank you, Henry. However, Mary advises that our situation is not so dire as we might imagine. Fortunately for us, last night Victor hinted to Mary of his intention to resign. This morning, as soon as she had his resignation letter, she met with Miss Campbell, Miss Woodward, Miss Greene, and Miss Foley and I am able to report they have all withdrawn their resignations and that Miss Witherspoon has agreed to another year as Deputy Senior Woman. Sadly, Miss Guthrie could not be persuaded to remain as she had already committed herself to move back to Aberdeen to help her niece with her veterinary practice. Thank you for taking this initiative, Miss Sanderson.'

Henry rose to his feet and bowed theatrically towards Mary.

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'Well done, Miss Mary Sanderson, very well done indeed! Samuel, I apologise wholeheartedly to you and to Mary and now propose we ask her to be our Head Teacher, as clearly we should have done, two years ago.'

The five other Governors signified their agreement by drumming their clenched fists vigorously on the long table while stamping their feet.

'That leaves us one vacancy to replace Miss Guthrie as Head of Physics and Chemistry. Miss Sanderson, tell us about our candidates, please,' said Kinnoull.

'Well, as you will be aware from earlier communications, we had only two candidates. It seems the word was out on our situation with dear Victor. Yesterday afternoon I had a telephone call from a Miss Welsh to say she wished to withdraw her candidature as she had been offered a place at Mary Erskine's in Edinburgh. That leaves us with Miss McKinstry, the young woman from Glasgow. She is waiting downstairs. Shall I call her up?'

'Not so fast, Miss Sanderson, please,' interjected Henry Colbeck, fixing his monocle into his right eye. 'I see this Miss McKinstry has a BSc but no MA. Surely that can't be acceptable? We must maintain standards, Mary, our parents will not stand for less.'

'However, Mr Colbeck, you will see from her *curriculum vitae* she also has a nursing qualification **and** a commendation for her wartime service in the trenches, service which interrupted her studies. After the War, before going up to St Andrews, she travelled widely in Europe before enrolling for her Bachelors, gaining a first-class honours degree, the first woman ever to do so in Biology. Then, after graduating, she travelled overland to India and China and has only recently returned to Britain.'

'But it's not a **Geography** teacher we need, it's a replacement for Sadie Guthrie in Physics and Chemistry.'

'Yes, Mr Colbeck, but surely having a *wide* experience of the world is a good thing? I regret my own circumstances did not allow overseas travel. Be that as it may. As you might expect, since St Andrews is my *alma mater*, I made a telephone call to Emeritus Professor George Hinton, my former tutor. It seems Miss Elizabeth McKinstry, generally known as Biffy, is considered one of the sharpest minds of her generation. A very singular and determined young lady. My old professor was surprised she has applied to us. He thought she might have gone on to Oxford University who, he said, were very keen to have her.'

'But her degree is in Biology! We cannot have another Biologist and mating dogs to demonstrate the reproductive cycle. I for one will not have it!'

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'No, I agree, no more mating dogs. As she has explained in her covering letter, Miss McKinstry is a Botanist. Her reason for applying to us is her interest in our gardens and in our rather special collection of rhododendrons and azaleas. Did you not read her proposal for its development?'

'Yes, yes, of course. Look, that's all well enough, but is she not originally from Glasgow? And from humble roots, no pun intended, Ha, Ha!'

'Yes, like many of us who teach here, Mr Colbeck, and like many of our parents too, Biffy McKinstry is from an ordinary background. Although she is well-educated, she is not pretentious or highfalutin. Her father is on the staff at Pollok House under Sir John Stirling Maxwell, as his personal secretary. Sir John spotted Elizabeth's talents and paid for her education at Hutchison Grammar School where she became Girls' Dux. From there she won a bursary to read Theology at Oxford but that was derailed by the War. She volunteered to train as a nurse when her twin brother died in the first month of conflict. He was in the *Highland Light Infantry*, fighting alongside Colonel Kinnoull's men, she told me earlier. After Hostilities ended, she won a War Bursary to St Andrews then, after graduating and with support from Sir John, she set off on her plant hunting travels. If you care to check the summary which I sent with the candidates' papers last week, this detail is available. Now, Colonel, please, if I may venture my own opinion, having met her briefly for the first time this morning, I suggest we should consider ourselves lucky to have her as a candidate, given our recent experiences. Shall I call her up? I think when you meet her, you will be impressed.'

'Yes, Mary, please do call our candidate for interview,' said Samuel Murdoch-Morton.

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## Biffy

Miss Biffy McKinstry entered the room behind Mary Sanderson who showed her to the candidates' seat at the far end of the table. She was dressed in a pale mauve day outfit with matching hat and gloves and carried a bulging, well-worn briefcase. As she sat, she lifted her chin, flashed her bright green eyes over a long thin nose and offered an engaging, open smile with a mouth which revealed widely spaced teeth framed by fulsome lips. Her fair pink skin was radiant and her dark frizzy auburn hair was shining, swept back and held in a large, severe bun held in place with two red combs and a small army of hairpins, revealing her largish ears. She wore no earrings or other jewellery. It was a face which most would characterise as distinctive, strong and very slightly mannish.

Tall, slim flat chested and bony, she was poised, confident and slightly dismissive in her manner, peering regally at each face in turn, as if granting an audience to her underlings. This was a ploy which Biffy McKinstry had used with success on previous, similar occasions when interviewed for bursaries and other grants-in-aid. She removed her gloves slowly to reveal an emerald ring set in diamonds, displayed on the third finger of her left hand, drawing attention to it by deliberately and carefully lowering it onto her right hand, looking down and sighing under her breath. Closing her eyes, her lips moved slightly, as she offered a silent prayer.

After this short pause, she lifted her head to smile again, raising her slightly unkempt eyebrows in query, as if giving permission for the Governors to open the batting.

This was an apt metaphor. Among her many talents, Biffy was an accomplished cricketer. Aged sixteen, dressed as a man, she had scored a century for *Clydesdale Cricket Club*, posing as her twin brother Ronald who had been confined to home by a bout of summer diarrhoea. When the opposition were sent in to bat, she then took over as a spin bowler to good effect, claiming 6 wickets in 8 overs before the other side capitulated.

The Colonel said, 'Miss McKinstry, thank you for coming to see us this morning. Shall we begin by asking you to tell us a little about yourself, please?'

'Good morning. Thank you for the opportunity to present myself to you. Most people call me Biffy, which I prefer to Elizabeth. You have my CV and my covering letter. I expect you will have studied these documents closely as I am your only candidate today, it seems. There is nothing else I wish to add but do ask away. I promise to answer truly and openly.'

The Colonel said, 'Miss McKinstry would you care to say a few words about your War Service, please?'

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'There was almost nothing glorious in it, not from where I served. Four years of horrendous waste of manpower compounded by equal incompetence on both sides. For me it was transformative as I witnessed wonderful bravery and compassion, again on both sides. We cannot and must not forget what happened and must learn to live with the consequences. None of us who were there will ever be the same again.'

'You were a nurse, Miss McKinstry?' asked John Fowler, a local GP whose two older sons had been lost at Ypres.

'Yes, I did do some nursing but almost from the outset I was tasked with organising nursing supplies, attempting to make sure that the meagre rations were fairly deployed. I was also responsible for recording deaths of victims and, in the absence of an officer who knew the victims, writing to the families.'

'Oh, how did that work, please?' asked Walter Edmunds, whose only son had been lost at the battle of The Somme.

'I was given an ancient typewriter and a supply of war department letter-headings. Initially I had no typewriting skills but sadly, by the end, seventeen hundred and seventy-two letters later, I was highly proficient. After a few months, due to the chaos and the absence of suitable officers to sign my letters, I was authorised to use a *nom de plume*. Look, I know this was a subterfuge, but it was authorised and done from the best of motives. In every case, I tried my best to capture the essence of the person who had gone, tried to keep faith with those who would read what I wrote. To this end, before committing my condolences to paper, I read through the deceased personal details and, whenever possible, spoke to their friends.'

John Fowler responded, 'May I know how you signed these letters?'

'As Lieutenant-Colonel Hamish Black.'

After a short delay to blow his nose, Fowler replied, 'Thank you for your kindnesses, Miss McKinstry. My wife and I have one of your letters at home. We read it often, it has given us great comfort over the years. And yes, it was as if you knew our son.'

'What was his name, please?'

'Major James Walter Fowler, we called him Jamie.'

'Yes. Jamie. His fiancé was a girl called Evelyn Springfield whose father was a solicitor. She worked for him as his Cashier. Jamie and Evelyn shared a passion for horses. Your Jamie died a brave death, rescuing a man from beyond the wire. A man called MacEwan, as I recall. Yes, Sergeant John MacEwan of the HLI, a man I did not ever meet. I

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understand MacEwan had himself been involved in many similar rescues until he was very severely injured. He had already been shipped out when I was tasked with writing to you about Jamie. I do hope MacEwan survived. So many of the braver men like him and Jamie did not.'

The Colonel said, 'How remarkable that you can recall such detail! Thank you for caring.'

'Ah, yes, my rather odd memory for detail is both a blessing and a curse, I'm afraid.'

Samuel Murdoch-Morton closed his eyes and tried to remember the incident without success. Jamie Fowler had been his Adjutant. They had been separated by an explosion after which his only memory was of pain, searing pain which blocked out every detail. Perhaps the incident with John MacEwan and Jamie Fowler had happened after he had been shipped back to Glasgow to recuperate and fitted with his new leg.

Henry Colbeck had been staring hard at the ring on Elizabeth McKinstry's finger, waiting his chance to pounce.

'Miss McKinstry, I see you are engaged. Surely you must be aware we do not employ married women here, with all the complications that would bring?'

'Ah, sadly, no, Mr Colbeck, I am no longer engaged if I ever was. Rowan died in the final weeks of the War, of dysentery, like so many others in the Medical Corps. I wear this dress ring of hers only on formal occasions, as a mark of our undying love. Rowan Murray was so very special to me, a love that comes along only once in a lifetime. No, I cannot imagine another could ever fill the void she left in my life. Rest easy, please. I doubt I shall ever marry'

Henry pitched again. 'Just for clarification, may I ask if you have or intend to have in future any pets, animals at stud?'

'I do have a pet canary, inherited from my widowed mother when she passed two years ago. Fifi is about twelve years old, well past breeding age, I imagine. Does that cause you concern?'

'No, Ha, Ha! No, not at all, thank you. No more questions from me. Very good, Miss McKinstry, you have answered well. Yes, Samuel, yes, very satisfactory!'

Samuel Morton glanced at Mary Sanderson who nodded and allowed herself a small smile.

'Miss, McKinstry, we understand you are keen on helping at Kinnoull Gardens. Would you care to say a few words on that subject, please?'

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'I believe it is as well to be entirely open. Yes, be assured I want very much to teach here at the school, of course I do. However, I must also admit that I have an ambition. If you will allow me, support me, I would like to make Kinnoull Gardens as famous as the Botanical Gardens in Edinburgh and Kew Gardens in London. My primary interest is in breeding hybrid rhododendrons and azaleas, to build on Kinnoull's already strong reputation. As you will know from my application, I have travelled widely in search of plants, following in the footsteps of plant hunters like David Douglas and George Forrest. In this endeavour I was enabled by a substantial legacy I received from the estate of my dear friend Dr Rowan Murray. It was a trip we had promised ourselves when the War was over. This income allowed me to continue my studies and then, when I was sure of my grounding, to make my journeys. The endowment from Rowan has been well invested and the annual drawdown allows me to live independently such that I intend to donate my salary to build up Kinnoull Gardens as a memorial to Rowan and all who suffered in the War.'

'Was Dr Murray from Perth? I seem to know that name?' asked Colbeck.

'Not actually Perth, no. She was from Auchterarder, originally. Her people were beef farmers. She was a pupil here at Kinnoull before going on to St Andrews and, like me in my turn, she studied Biology, specialising in Botany, specialising in rhododendrons and azaleas. I see a wonderful opportunity to make Kinnoull a centre of excellence. I predict that within a decade, we shall make the gardens self-funding, selling our hybrids throughout Britain and Europe and indeed further afield, perhaps to America and Canada.'

'Is there money to be made selling plants?' asked Henry Colbeck.

'Yes, most certainly, if it is done correctly.'

'Really?'

'Yes, and I see other benefits for Perth as a community. With the wonderful legacy we have here at Kinnoull and at Scone Palace with its world renown tree collection, I believe we can again put Perth on the world map and bring hundreds of visitors to our gardens and help us pay our way.'

Henry Colbeck could not let it pass.

'But Miss McKinstry, this is an interview for a position as a *teacher*, not a landscape gardener or plant sales entrepreneur. Surely that much is plain!'

'Yes, sir, I fully understand your concern. But to me, the fortunes of the School and the Gardens are as one. I foresee a day when Kinnoull School will grow and expand to become a centre of excellence in teaching plant husbandry and horticulture and that we should look forward to a time when our young women will be the most sought-after plant

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breeders in the world, becoming university professors and plant scientists of renown. The skills they will learn here with our rhododendrons and azaleas are merely a starting point, a basis for learning to develop food plants which are hardy and disease resistant.'

'You continually mention *hybrids*. Is that entirely ethical?'

'Yes, Mr Colbeck. Entirely and completely ethical. As I understand our Christian Theology, mankind has been given dominion over the Earth, its animals, its plants, its fish and its birds. Indeed, I contend we have a sacred duty to use our minds to harness these resources. For example, as you will know, plants are a major source of the ingredients of medications, a fact well-known from Biblical times.'

'Yes, yes, but surely not for ornamental plants and suchlike which are non-native to Scotland. Is it not wrong to encourage such experimentation with Nature and her ways?'

'Bear with me, sir, please. Now, my research tells me you are an arable farmer, mainly potatoes. As such, I suggest there is not a single crop you grow which is not a hybrid of some kind. Indeed, as you will know, potatoes are native to Peru, brought originally to Europe by the Spanish in the sixteenth century and later by Sir Walter Raleigh to Ireland where it became the predominant food crop. Then, when blight struck causing famine, the way ahead was to develop new strains which were disease resistant. How else would your modern potatoes withstand the rigours of our wet summers and sudden late spring frost here in Scotland? Do you agree?'

'Ah, yes, well, I suppose you are correct. However, that is the sort of detail I leave to my tenants to decide for themselves. Best to leave it to the specialist I always say, yes? Good. Good. Well done. Yes, very well done indeed, Miss McKinstry. *Excellent!*'

In the silence which followed, Samuel Morton scanned the nodding heads then tapped the butt of his pencil on the glass cover which protected the fine walnut surface below.

'Thank you, Miss McKinstry. As Henry said, very well done indeed. Now, if you would care to withdraw while we review your candidacy, I expect to be able to give you our decision very soon. Miss Sanderson will show you to the waiting room.'

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Around twenty minutes later, Elizabeth McKinstry was shown back into the Board Room. The room was now empty except for the Colonel and a smiling Henry Colbeck.

The Colonel said, 'Miss McKinstry, let me say at once that we are most pleased to offer you a position at Kinnoull School for Young Ladies. At Miss Sanderson's suggestion, we

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have retitled this post as "Head of Sciences" a title which would allow you to develop teaching in Botany. Are you of a mind to accept this offer?'

'Yes, thank you.'

Henry Colbeck added, 'For a trial period of a year, we would like you to also accept the post of 'Acting' Senior Woman, to be supported by Miss Witherspoon as your Deputy and serve under Mary here as our incoming Head Teacher. What do you say to that?'

Samuel, glanced again at Mary Sanderson who dipped her head to conceal her smile.

'Thant would be a singular honour.'

'Good, good. Well, Miss Biffy McKinstry, may I also share an important piece of good news with you. We, the Board of Governors have at last accepted what Mary has been saying to us for several years now. I confess at once that I was most reluctant to listen to what she was saying but now, with you on board, I believe we now have a wonderful opportunity to modernise our curriculum and teaching methods to find a better way to release the potential of our young ladies. Well, Miss Biffy McKinstry, are you willing to also accept this challenge?'

'Most certainly but, please, I must sound a note of caution. In the first year or so, this must be done very slowly, one careful step at a time. There must be no 'new broom sweeping away the old'. That would never work to our advantage. From what I have heard and read, there are many good things already in place here. In a sense, our School is like our Garden, both will need tender and loving care to make them flourish. We must take the whole of the staff with us, lead by example, not by command from on high. The secret, I believe, will be to create a more open family ethos. Rome, as you know, was not built in a day, my dear Henry.'

'Well said, Biffy, well said.'

Samuel chimed his support: 'Exactly! Very well said, Henry and very well said Biffy. Mary and I have been pressing for this day for over a decade. Together, let us make Kinnoull famous again, both for its School and its Gardens. To this end, I am pleased to advise that Henry, as the co-signatory of the account has today agreed to release the substantial monies held in the Kinnoull Estate Development Trust established by my grandfather. This means we can now undertake a complete refurbishment of our School and our Gardens. Today, Friday 25<sup>th</sup> May 1928 is an auspicious day and I intend to propose to the Board when we next convene that we name the last Friday in May each year as "Henry Colbeck Day"!'

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## March 1938

It was a fresh spring morning, dry and bright with scudding clouds.

Three coaches from Colbeck's Leisure Travel waited at Perth Station. Their drivers wore dark maroon jackets, grey flannels, cream shirts and green ties, to match the livery of the new coaches.

A crowd of well-dressed ladies and gentlemen alighted from the Edinburgh train to the strains of John MacEwan Jnr and his brother Samuel playing *Heilan' Laddie* on their bagpipes, accompanied by their brothers, Andrew, David and little Matthew playing snare drums.

It was the start of the second year of organised tours at Kinnoull Gardens. During the previous experimental year, the word had spread and the season ahead was well-booked by groups of gardening enthusiasts from all over Scotland. Like previous groups, these visitors were a mixed bunch, some ardent enthusiasts, a few academics, others attending as companions to husbands, wives and elderly relatives. There had been no need for expensive advertising.

Biffy McKinstry stepped up onto the step of the leading bus and opened her address.

'Ladies and Gentlemen, my name is Biffy McKinstry the Head Teacher of Kinnoull School. It is my pleasure and great honour to welcome you this fine morning to our first Friday tour of the 1938 season, our fifth year of welcoming visitors to Kinnoull Gardens. As you will see very shortly, we have a fine visitor centre newly completed last year where you will be welcomed with tea, coffee, home made scones and muffins and may wish to take opportunity to freshen up. Everything is included in the price of your entry pass.'

Biffy smiled broadly then continued.

'You will then be allocated into groups of around ten for the introductory and orientation tour. Your guides will be our own senior girls who, as you will discover, are already well-versed in every aspect of our work here. After your introductory tour, we will serve you a light lunch and then, for those who wish to visit Scone Place Gardens, a bus or buses will take you. Those wishing to remain at Kinnoull will be free to inspect our handiwork at your own pace. Our girls will be on hand to answer your questions under the guidance of our Head Gardener, John MacEwan. Please do visit our nursery where you will have the opportunity to either purchase or pre-order our plants, which of course will include our new season hybrids, all of which come with a money back or replacement guarantee. So,

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without further ado, please board now. We shall arrive at Kinnoull Gardens in about fifteen minutes.'

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## Hallelujah!

The two women stood side by side, alone in the dining room of the Mary Sanderson Visitor Centre, watching as the coaches disappeared down the steep slope, heading for Perth and the early evening train to Edinburgh.

Louisa slipped her arm around Biffy's waist and pulled gently, resting her head against a bony shoulder.

'Oh Biffy, Samuel and Mary would have been so proud. Rowan too. Are you pleased with yourself?'

'Louisa, my dearest darling, you know I could not have done it without you. And John MacEwan and his Isobel of course. Who would have guessed he had such talent for nurturing plants? And he is such an inspiring teacher too, with his Kinnoull Pipes and Drums competing all over Scotland and winning their fair share of prizes. It all helps spread the word. And Isobel and her catering team are quite amazing too, in their own way. And to have over three hundred signed-up members of the Friends of Kinnoull Gardens all paying for the privilege of helping us, well, really, it's beyond my wildest dreams. And dearest Mary, God rest her soul, leaving us her hoard of precious stamps and asking that we sell them to fund the Visitor Centre.'

'Do you know, I had no idea that stamps could be so valuable. I suppose it was her way of travelling the world. But to think they would be so sought after that people would come from all over the world to participate in the auction in London, it was breath taking, almost surreal.'

'Yes, Louisa, I am happy, truly happy. God has answered our prayers. We make a great team. And we must give Henry his due. When Samuel died so soon after I was appointed, he was our stalwart. I think of him as a bulldog, gruff, growly and tenacious but a softy at heart and like the rest of us deeply committed to doing the right thing by everyone.'

'What will happen with Hitler and his gang of thugs?'

'I do not know. I fear another even bloodier conflict will soon be upon us. I just hope that somehow, by God's grace, we can shield our people from the worst of it. But, for today, we must live in the sun. Shall we go and visit our Thanksgiving Garden and say a prayer for Samuel, Mary and Rowan and tell them all about today?'

'Yes. Let's do that. And after tea we shall ride in that awful motorbike of yours down to the choir practice at Norman's church and submit ourselves to the tyranny of Marianne's

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conducting and Deborah's plinky-plonky piano. Do you realise it is only ten weeks until we put on our *Messiah* performance at the Town Hall?

*'Hallelujah!'*