



The remarkable  
story of Australia's  
greatest imposter

**THE  
AMAZING  
MRS LIVESEY**

FREDA MARNIE NICHOLLS

**By the same author**

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*Love, Sweat and Tears*  
*Back of Beyond*

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# THE AMAZING MRS LIVESEY

The remarkable story of  
Australia's greatest imposter

FREDA MARNIE NICHOLLS

  
ALLEN & UNWIN  
SYDNEY • MELBOURNE • AUCKLAND • LONDON

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*Dedicated to Frank George Bolan*

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# PROLOGUE

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My name is Luita Aichinger, and I am the granddaughter of Florence Elizabeth Ethel Livesey, or ‘The Amazing Mrs Livesey’ as she became known in newspapers in the 1940s and 1950s.

Unfortunately I never met my grandmother, but I feel I have a reasonably good insight into her life as my father, Frank, left me a number of precious audiotapes, describing his journey throughout these years, with and without her. It was a journey of heartache, sorrow and an unlikely upbringing.

My father passed away in 2005, at the age of 82. He always said he would not have traded his life for quids, and lived by the saying ‘Don’t Fence Me In’, a song we played at his funeral at his request. We had many talks around the kitchen table over the years, him sitting there with a cigarette in one hand and a beer in the other, telling me about his younger years and his younger brother, Basil. My father’s chats always intrigued me.

My father lost contact with his brother Basil. It was only about ten years before my father died that they found each other again, two old men by then—how sad, I thought, that these two brothers had lost so much of their time together. My father had a tough exterior, but beneath it all was a man who had felt hurt and rejected by a mother who was absent from his life at a time when a young boy was in need of a mother’s love.

Dad led an adventurous life, with my mother by his side and eight children at foot, me being number five. He managed to teach himself the art of signwriting, and passed down his trade to three of my brothers and his grandsons, who to this day are still signwriters. My father told me I had a beautiful hand, and persuaded me to take up this art, and at nineteen I came second in the state as an accomplished ticketwriter.

For many years my father held an understandable degree of bitterness towards his mother Ethel, stating he never wanted to see her again. But, years later he needed to find his birth certificate to find out more about himself, something he tried to do right up until he died. Sadly, his death certificate is only half complete; his birth details were unknown.

My sister June and I first became interested in finding out more about our family after June visited a dentist over eighteen years ago. He told June she had particularly dark gums and asked about her family history, but she had no answer to give him on our father’s side. So she started to delve a little deeper into dad’s past, writing to the Department for Child Welfare in South Australia.

My own research into my grandmother’s activities started not long after, when the Child Welfare Department replied to June’s letter. An astonishingly large amount of paperwork followed, which June handed over to me.

In 2011, my research took me to the State Library of New South Wales, where I punched my grandmother’s name into their search engine, and spent most of the day printing out a trail of newspaper clippings, all on the ‘Amazing Mrs Livesey’. I was absolutely astounded, and excited, to finally start putting some answers together. My daughter Jessica also found a video of my grandmother speaking of her innocence on a British Pathé newsreel. I was so excited to hear her speak—this was my father’s mother, at last.

In 2013, when I caught up with an old friend, author Freda Nicholls, I told her what I’d learnt about my grandmother, and mentioned that we still couldn’t find my father’s birth certificate. Freda became as caught up as I was in researching this remarkable woman, and two long years later, she finally found dad’s birth certificate, uncovering along the way many other incredible facts.

Ethel Livesey’s crime sheet is hard to defend, given the number of cases made against her, and an



unbelievable list of aliases she invented for herself over a 30-year period. But this all has to be taken into context. The world in the 1930s was in the midst of a global Depression, and many people, including my grandmother, resorted to desperate measures in order to make ends meet. Being a single mother with two young boys would have compounded this. My grandmother made some bad choices in men throughout her life, and I can't justify her leaving her children while she lived the high life, but I was not in her shoes at the time, so I cannot judge.

Her life seemed to be one that was deceitful, as she fed off other people's generosity and trustfulness. How could anyone do this and have a conscience? I will never know the answer.

Our family line continues in Australia through her two sons and their descendants, and I am grateful that I had a father who loved and cared for all of his children, and for the life and adventures he gave us. Thankfully the saying 'The apples don't fall far from the tree' didn't apply here.

Luita Aiching

My mother was quite a woman.

~~The day after Ethel got out of going to gaol, she sat us down, my brother Basil and me, and told us~~ few things. She would have been in her late forties about then, and was looking knackered after months of scrutiny by the cops, the media and the courts.

Over a couple of hot, dry, stifling summer days in 1946, we sat in my brother's house in Adelaide while his wife fussed over us; both Basil and me had plenty of questions for our mother. She told us her version of events, trying to justify herself I reckon, but you never knew whether to believe her or not. She never let the truth get in the way of a good story.

Years later I decided to do a bit of digging, not like you can on computers like now. I wrote letters lots of letters. I had to find out about my family, and I needed to find my birth certificate. I found all sorts of weird and wonderful things about her instead, facts she wouldn't have been able to dispute even if she was still here.

This is her story.

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## MISS SWINDELLS

Florence Elizabeth Ethel Swindells was born in Manchester on 24 September 1897, that much is true.

The Swindells were originally farmers from Lancashire, but it was two brothers, Francis and Martin, who in the early 1800s branched out into milling cotton. They must have been a game lot, and tough. The family story goes that Francis ran away from home and his very strict father when he was about sixteen. He made it down to London and went into service, as they called it back then, as a groom to a gentleman.

Late one night Francis was sitting up next to the coachman taking his master's family home over Hounslow Heath, a hangout of bandits and footpads (robbers on foot), when two highwaymen bailed them up.

Francis grabbed the reins from the terrified coachman, ducking the highwaymen's fire, and drove the horses furiously through the night, eventually getting the relieved family safely back home. His master rewarded him with a wad of cash, and not long afterwards he married his sweetheart Mary, a servant in the same household. They moved up to Manchester to raise a family, where his brother Martin joined them.

Manchester back then was known as 'Cottonopolis', on account of its massive textile industry, and Francis and Martin got in on the act, building seven large cotton mills over the years. By the time they were middle aged they were extremely well off, and at the height of the Industrial Revolution even bought and restored a 16th-century three-storey manor house.

It wasn't from these Swindells that Ethel was apparently descended. Rather, Francis and his brother Martin supposedly had an illegitimate cousin James—who they employed as a cotton spinner, and then a cotton buyer. He must have been pretty good at it because the job was handed down to his son, and then his grandson, Frank Swindells—Ethel's father. Frank's family never owned a mill, but he was certainly involved with the business and held plenty of coin, just not in the same league as Francis and Martin's families.

The Swindells brothers were apparently good-looking as well as rich. When they built Clough Mill, their first cotton mill, the local papers said they were two of the finest-looking men to ever come to the town, but maybe that was the money talking. The press often remarked on the striking good looks and engaging personalities of the Swindells family, something that was certainly carried down to Ethel.

Tall for a girl back then, standing nearly five foot seven, Ethel had long brown hair and big blue eyes that held your attention even when you didn't want them to. Her mother Elizabeth was a stickler for manners and made sure Ethel spoke the Queen's English, rather than picking up the broad accent of the town, and she always insisted her girls were well 'turned out', looking their best. Ethel always loved to look her best, wearing the most expensive clothes and jewellery she could get her hands on.

She was the only child in her family for eleven years, until her little sister Mabel came along. Her father had always doted on her, and she adored him, but suddenly she was no longer the centre of attention, and had to share his affection. How could she be her father's special girl when there was another?

Her father would often take her to the theatre, opera and vaudeville shows in the busy Manchester

town centre, to get her out of her mother's hair, and Ethel loved the excitement, the fantasy. But it was the first silent film she remembered seeing at the Oxford Picture House on a cold winter's evening in 1911 that she would talk about the most. Watching that short black-and-white film on Captain Scott's expedition to the South Pole, she was spellbound, taken into a whole other world. Her vivid imagination ran riot: that was *her* up there on screen with Scott, facing danger, triumphing over extremes, all to the accompaniment of loud, dramatic music pumped out on an upright piano.

As more movies were released and more picture houses opened, Ethel would sneak out whenever she could. A trip to the movies didn't come cheap, so she funded her trips with change she'd purloin from her father's pockets or mother's purse, but it was never enough. She learnt to sneak in, attaching herself to a group of people, often starting a casual conversation with one of them as they made their way into the theatre. That way she could often avoid the ticket collector and usher, sitting just separate from the group, alone in the dark, imagining herself up there with the main movie star.

Her parents sent Ethel to an exclusive girls' school, but she didn't focus much on her education. Instead she would egg her friends into all sorts of scrapes or take on dares—swimming the big water canals that ran beside the mills, or meeting boys from the nearby Manchester Grammar School. Anything for a bit of attention. Ethel completed the school work, but she was going to be a movie star up there on the big screen—she was going to have a life of adventure and live the high life, the papers would write about how much money she had, what clothes she wore and how fabulous she was; she would be famous.

It was probably about this time that Ethel learnt the power of a name. The Swindells held plenty of status and power in the town, and she took advantage of her surname to get what she wanted, or to get out of trouble.

And there was plenty of trouble ahead. It was 1914, and the fun-loving Ethel was turning seventeen

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## MRS CARTER

Ethel was three months short of eighteen when she married Alexander ‘Alec’ Carter, against her father’s wishes.

She lied about her age at the registry office, left school and home, and moved to the town of Eccles to the north of Manchester, where her new husband was working as a stationer with his father.

The Great War had started in August the previous year, and Ethel later recalled big parties in the street, and how the boys from the Manchester Grammar School talked of nothing else except fighting for King and Country, with large numbers of boys and men signing up. They thought the war would last no more than a few months—that it would all be over by Christmas—and they were keen to be a part of it. But after a few months, the reality of war began filtering back, together with the lists of dead and wounded. The Manchester Regiment, where most of the local boys had ended up, were pinned down by the Turks at Gallipoli, and then the lists of the dead appeared in the papers, and included names of boys Ethel knew. Some of the young men had married their sweethearts just weeks or even days before heading off to war, never to return.

Alec was five years older than Ethel. It isn’t really clear how they met, or why Ethel married him. Perhaps she was after a sense of security, but then she always did seem to like older men.

Alec didn’t immediately enlist, as he was classed ‘unfit for active service’ when he first applied to join up with his father at the beginning of the war. By 1916, however, men were falling like flies, and the War Office began calling up those who had been rejected at the start. They were also having trouble getting labour to build roads, unload ships and carry supplies around the Western Front, so a Labour Corps was established, and this was where they sent Alec. He was trained as a gunner, to operate and load the howitzer heavy field guns, and was then sent to the Western Front in June 1916, leaving Ethel, four months pregnant, with his family.

Alec’s father was recruited a few months later, so Ethel was then left with her mother-in-law and sisters-in-law, Doris and Gladys. None of the Carter women liked her, and she didn’t think much of them either. Gladys was the same age as Ethel, and Doris two years older, and both of the daughters went off each morning and worked in their father’s shop with their mother, keeping the shop going, leaving the pregnant young Ethel at home alone.

Ethel, like her mother-in-law, received money—a pension from the Ministry of Pensions in the War Office—which could be accessed once a week at the post office via a ‘ring paper’. From October 1914, ring papers were issued to the wives and children of soldiers and sailors sent off on active duty. The names of dependants were given to the War Office by each serviceman; a numbered ring paper was then issued to the dependant, with wives receiving a bit over six pounds a week. Instead of having to wait a month for money to survive on from the serviceman’s wage, all they had to do was go to the nominated post office, hand over the numbered ring paper that showed their name, this was checked off an enormous ledger, the ring paper holder would then sign in that same ledger and receive the money.

But Ethel was bored and lonely. Stuck in Eccles, she kept herself amused by going to the shops and spending her husband’s money—it kept her happy as her belly grew. Rather than hand the money to her mother-in-law to help with living expenses, Ethel spent all of it on clothes, shoes and going to the

movies, which led to some pretty heated disagreements. So Ethel moved back into her father's home, where she wasn't questioned about her spending habits—her father even gave her more money to spend.

She did her best to ignore the fact there was a war on—but that wasn't to last long. In early November 1916 a letter arrived from the War Office: Alec was missing in action, presumed dead.

Ethel's world crumbled. Fearing the worst, her head filled with dramatic images of Alec's body lying out on a battlefield; she took to her bed and refused to leave. Her mother tried to coax her to eat for the sake of the baby, but all Ethel could do was cry, falling into an exhausted sleep each night.

Frank Alexander Carter was born on 26 November 1916, but Ethel couldn't even look at her newborn baby. Her parents decided to take baby Frank away and care for him in another part of the house, thinking their daughter would recover and love her baby when she was better.

Instead, Ethel woke one night to the sound of her baby crying, got up, packed a few things, and quietly left her parents' home.

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## MRS TAYLOR

Ethel went out into the street, and walked. She didn't care which direction she went, she just walked the cool air as briskly as she could. It felt good after being cooped up in her room all that time. At first in the light she slowed and pulled up at the first open café she came across, collapsed into a chair and ordered a cup of tea.

She had never felt so directionless. All her energy seemed to have gone; all she felt was sadness. She had lost her husband, she didn't want to go back to her parents and face her baby, and she certainly couldn't go to her in-laws.

She sat quietly with her hands around the cup of tea on the table, having to lift it to her mouth with both hands because they were shaking so badly. The tea revived her, but when she'd finished and pulled out her purse to pay, she realised she didn't have much money, and no way of getting any more until the post office opened. Then the realisation hit: her husband was dead—would she still get his pension?

Rising from the table, she straightened her coat and went to the counter to hand over the coins for her tea. The lady behind the counter looked as tired as she herself felt.

'Are you alright?' the lady asked.

Ethel looked towards her, and then started to sway. 'Yes,' she replied, trying to clear her throat, 'I, uh, I ...' When she couldn't get the words out, the lady looked at her in genuine concern. 'No, no, I'm not,' Ethel corrected herself quietly, and the lady's tired eyes softened. 'My husband is dead. I don't, don't know what to do.' She was holding back tears now. 'And I, I, don't have much money, I ...' and the tears fell.

The woman came out from behind the counter and placed her arms around Ethel. 'There, there love,' she said, gently holding her. 'It'll be alright.' As she held Ethel and wiped away her tears with the edge of her stained apron, she said with a smile, 'Tell you what love, the tea's on me—you just go home and look after yourself, eh?'

Ethel nodded and looked down at the faded lino floor. 'Thank you,' she said quietly. She pulled back her shoulders and looked at the kind woman, 'Thank you.'

Going back out into the cool morning air, Ethel felt momentarily elated. The woman had given her the cup of tea for free, it hadn't cost her a penny. Her mood changed when she thought about her lack of cash. She still had money, but not much. Where was she going? What was she going to do? How could she get money to live on? In the early morning light she stood on the pavement and twirled the thin gold wedding band on her ring finger, unsure what to do. She heard a train in the distance and just headed towards the sound; trains had always been linked with fun and adventure ever since she was a little girl, when her parents would take her to Blackpool for a week's break each year. The sound drew her like a magnet.

The railway station was on the Manchester–Liverpool line. Using the same skills she had picked up when sneaking into movie theatres, she avoided buying a ticket by attaching herself to a group of three women and their combined brood of young children as they moved onto the train. The women sat down and fussed over their kids and Ethel sat a couple of seats away. But she found she couldn't look at the kids, and when one of the babies began grizzling and then started to cry, she got up and walked

to the other end of the carriage and leant against the window, closing her eyes in exhaustion.

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‘Tickets!’ The command woke her with a start. Ethel looked up to see a conductor entering from the front carriage. It took a moment for her to figure out where she was; her brain felt like it was filled with glue, slowing everything down.

Hearing the screech of the train’s brakes being applied, Ethel grabbed her bag and made her way to the door. Out of the corner of her eye she saw the conductor punching one of the mothers’ tickets and looking at her as he continued making his way down the carriage. She opened the door as the train slowed and halted, and stepped out into the cool air.

Standing on the platform for a moment, she watched as the train pull away. She felt herself sway, and felt hot despite the cool air, but knew she had to keep moving. She had to get away, from everything. She stumbled towards the raised walkway over the tracks. Each step was tough, the stairs felt so steep. Weak and out of breath, she stopped at the top of the stairs and steadied herself as she again felt herself sway.

‘You right, love?’ a voice asked. She looked up and saw a bloke in an army uniform leaning against the rail, watching her. ‘Are you alright?’ he asked her again; moving towards her as she half fell onto the railing.

The sight of the uniform, and the feeling of being unwell, made her want to cry. ‘I, I ... no I don’t feel well,’ she blurted.

He came up beside her and grabbed her as her knees buckled. ‘Whoa there!’ he laughed. ‘Come on there’s a seat this way. Think you’d better sit down for a while.’ He steered her off the walkway, then helped ease her down onto a bench.

Ethel looked down at the ground and thanked him. She couldn’t help but feel his eyes roaming over her.

‘What’s your name?’ he asked.

‘Ethel,’ she replied, ‘Ethel ... Smith.’ She didn’t know why she didn’t give him her real name. This way just felt right.

‘Pleased to meet you, Ethel. I’m Billy—Billy Taylor. You from around here?’

Ethel shook her head as tears escaped and fell to the ground.

‘There, there, love. Come on—tell Billy what’s wrong,’ he said, gently gripping her hand.

Still looking down she stifled a sob, not trusting her voice. She looked up, but the sight of his uniform once again made her cry. ‘My husband, my ... he’s dead,’ was all she could get out before her head fell against his shoulder in sorrow.

Billy patted her shoulder and held her for a moment before she pulled herself away, took a deep breath and wiped the tears from her eyes.

He looked at her for a moment, then stood and pulled her to her feet. ‘Come on Ethel, let’s go get a drink. We could both do with one, there’s a pub up the way.’ He gave her a smile and she nodded her head in reply—maybe a drink would help. They walked slowly up the street, Ethel leaning on Billy, who hobbled along.

She suddenly stopped and looked down at his legs. ‘You’re hurt!’ she said quietly.

‘A bit. Getting better. I’m up at that convalescent camp, at Knowsley. Decided to go out for an explore, exercise this gammy leg of mine—and look what I found!’ he grinned. ‘Come on, let’s get that drink,’ he said, leading her up the road.

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Ethel woke with a thumping head and dry mouth, the light through the window hurting her eyes.

‘Good morning, Mrs Taylor.’

She looked over at Billy in surprise: he was leaning beside her on one elbow, grinning. ‘Wh-at?’ she asked him, taking in the room and the bed, in which the two of them were lying.

He laughed. ‘Just kiddin’, love, but that’s what I told the landlady when I knew you couldn’t go anywhere. You’re Mrs Billy Taylor while you’re here.’

Ethel looked around her—at the dirty curtains, the paint peeling off the ceiling. She had no idea where she was and she had to ask.

‘The Black Horse Inn,’ Billy stated. ‘In Rainhill. You don’t remember?’

She felt ill, and it wasn’t just the fever. She looked up at Billy and slowly shook her head from side to side.

‘Not surprised,’ he replied, reaching across to push some damp hair from her face. He looked at her with concern. ‘You do have a bit of a fever—I’ll go downstairs and see if I can get us some food and drink, eh? That’ll perk you up.’

She looked at him and nodded. As he climbed out of bed and started to dress back into his uniform she scrutinised him carefully. Down his right leg was a series of big, red, raw scars, with smaller ones peppering his left leg.

Ethel closed her eyes. What had she done?

She heard the door close and tried to sit up, but a wave of nausea hit her; she pulled the duvet up around her head and felt herself shiver. She was in no state to go anywhere.

She must have nodded off, because she woke to the sound of a tray clattering.

‘Sorry, didn’t mean to wake you,’ Billy said as he limped towards her.

She hadn’t realised she was so thirsty. Reaching up to the glass of water on the tray, she grabbed it and unsteadily brought it to her mouth, took a gulp, and then another. Concentrating on drinking the water meant she didn’t have to look at Billy.

He placed the tray down and sat on the bed beside her, stroking her arm. ‘Better?’ he asked. Ethel nodded in reply, still not wanting to look at him.

She leant back against the pillow and closed her eyes, but the bed seemed to sway beneath her and she quickly opened them again.

Billy was looking at her with such concern that she started to cry. He scooped her up and held her against his chest, gently rocking her backwards and forwards. Despite the nausea and dread, she liked being held close when everything seemed to be going so wrong.

She wasn’t sure how many nights they stayed in that room, but after horror sweats on the first couple of days, she felt her strength starting to return. Billy wiped her fevered body down with a towel; fed her, held her, cared for her and helped her across the hallway to the bathroom whenever she asked. In between he held her close, kissed her and looked after her. She was dependent on him, but didn’t care. He had swept her away from the pain of losing her husband, of leaving her baby.

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On what was to be their last day at the Black Horse, they lay together on the bed and Billy turned to her.

‘I have to go back,’ he began, stroking her arm. ‘I’m absent without leave. I need to go back,’ he repeated, looking down at her arm. ‘But I didn’t want to leave you when you were so ill,’ he added quietly.

Ethel looked at him expectantly—there were plans to make, things to organise.

But before she could reply, there was a knock at the door. They looked at each other in surprise, and

then to the wooden door as it opened. When two policemen and the smirking manageress walked into the room, Ethel shrieked.

---

‘You’re both under arrest,’ the older officer stated.

‘What for?’ Billy asked, sitting up.

‘You’re not married are you?’ he stated, looking at them as Ethel tried to hide under the duvet.

‘You’re both under arrest for giving false information to a lodging-house keeper.’

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## MRS SMITH

It was the first time Ethel was to appear in a newspaper, and she was glad she hadn't given her real name—there'd be time to explain all of that to Billy later. She felt sure no one would recognise her as 'Ethel Smith' when that name was printed in the paper.

She and Billy were taken to the police lock-up at nearby Preston. Ethel complained to them of a fever, which she still had a touch of, so they packed her off to hospital, where she was admitted. Two days later she was discharged from hospital and told to appear at the Preston Petty Sessions. She thought about not going—there were no police around to make her—but she wanted to see Billy again. They hadn't even talked about what was going to happen next ... maybe he could get a ring paper she could use.

Arriving at the courthouse, she went into the office. There, behind a big wooden counter, stood an elderly man carefully filling out a ledger. Several other people waited patiently on her side of the counter until the old clerk told them what to do and where to go. She leant against the wall as she waited, until the clerk looked up at her expectantly.

'My name is Ethel Smith—I, I had to come here,' she said uncertainly.

The clerk looked at her, then referred to the ledger in front of him.

'You're not a witness—you're a defendant!' he exclaimed. She looked back at him in surprise, not knowing what that meant. 'You're supposed to be out the back!' He looked at her sternly.

Ethel didn't know what she was supposed to do. 'Come with me,' he ordered, raising one section of the counter and beckoning for her to come through. 'Didn't they tell you?' he demanded before turning away. 'John? John, I got one for you,' he called out down the hallway that loomed behind them.

Another older man, the warden in charge of the lock-up came down the dark hall towards them, looking at them questioningly. He and the clerk had a brief conversation before the warden indicated with a gesture for Ethel to follow him. They weaved their way through the back of the building and down some stairs until they came to a row of cells near the basement.

Ethel didn't want to go into one of those!

'Please,' she began. The warden stopped and turned to look at her.

'Do, do I have to go into one of *those*? I mean, I came here of my own free will. And I haven't done anything wrong,' she implored. 'Please,' she tried once more, reaching out and touching the man's upper arm.

He looked her up and down—a nicely turned-out dame, dolled up and speaking nice. 'You can sit by the door,' he suggested. 'But don't go anywhere,' he warned. 'We're full anyway,' he mumbled as he went to sit at his desk, then busied himself filling out papers that Ethel assumed were for her. As she sat quietly by the door she could hear the murmurs and movements in the dark cells and shuddered—she couldn't imagine herself in one of them.

Before long, a policeman came down from the court. 'William Taylor and Ethel Smith,' he called out in a loud, almost bored, tone. She stood and turned to watch the warden walking down towards the cells.

Down the dark hallway she heard the clunk of a key turning in its lock, followed by a shuffle of feet.

—then Billy came around the corner towards her. He looked older and seemed to limp more than she remembered. Had it only been two days since she last saw him? She wanted to go towards him, but the presence of the warden and policeman, and the warning look Billy gave her, held her back.

‘You haven’t got a lawyer?’ the policeman asked. Ethel looked at him blankly and Billy shook his head. ‘You don’t need one. Just state your case to the magistrate,’ he said gruffly to them both. ‘Follow me,’ he ordered, then headed up the stairs with his two defendants in tow.

Ethel kept trying to catch Billy’s eye, but he refused to look at her. The warden followed close behind, herding them into the court.

Those assembled inside the court looked at them with open curiosity as the policeman motioned towards the defendant’s box and told them to take a seat. Ethel scanned the scattered faces before her, surprised by the animosity behind one woman’s hateful gaze.

They had barely sat down when a door opened and the court clerk called out, ‘All rise!’ With a shuffle of feet the court rose almost as one, then watched as an elderly man dressed in a dark cloak entered and seated himself on what appeared to be a wooden throne in the middle of a raised box. He looked down at the court as the lawyers and the gallery followed his lead and sat down. Ethel was fascinated.

The clerk stood with a piece of paper in front of him. ‘Private William Taylor and Miss Ethel Smith, you are charged under the Aliens Restriction Order for giving false information to a lodging-house keeper where you resided as a married couple.’

The magistrate looked at them, before asking in an almost bored tone, ‘How do the defendants plead?’

Billy stood and said, ‘Not guilty!’ The magistrate frowned at him.

Ethel noticed the clerk motioning for her to stand, which she quickly did, loudly stating, ‘Not guilty!’

‘Do you have anything to say for yourselves? Private Taylor?’ the magistrate turned first to Billy.

Billy stood in the defendant’s box, not looking at Ethel but towards the assembled audience, watching one woman slowly weeping—the same woman who had looked at Ethel with such venom minutes before.

‘Your Honour,’ he began tentatively, ‘I’m just back from the Front, where I’ve been with the King’s Own Royal Regiment since the start of the war. I’ve been in Salonika and France, and was wounded two months back. Almost lost my leg. What I did was wrong, I shouldn’t have been absent without leave, but this girl was ill and I was looking after her. It was just a moment of weakness.’

‘Hardly a moment, Private Taylor, from what I have here,’ the magistrate said, looking down at his notes. ‘It was close to a week!’ he added, to the amusement of those watching on.

‘I couldn’t leave her,’ Billy responded, ‘she was sick!’ The magistrate raised his eyebrows.

‘She’s not *Miss* Smith either—she’s a *Mrs*,’ Billy stated, prompting murmurings in the small crowd, which was beginning to enjoy the drama.

‘The fact is, if I am not mistaken, Private, that you are also married ...’—Ethel, hearing herself gasp, looked at Billy—‘to someone else,’ the magistrate continued. ‘And I understand there are children?’

‘Yes, Your Honour—three,’ he replied meekly.

Ethel felt her face warm as she looked at him. Married? Children?

‘Be seated, Private Taylor,’ the magistrate ordered.

‘I’m sorry, Your Honour,’ he muttered. ‘I’m sorry,’ he said looking towards his sobbing wife.

‘Ethel Smith, do you have anything to say for yourself?’ the magistrate asked as Billy sat heavily down beside her.

Ethel looked at her former lover in confusion as she tried to compose herself and answer the

question, but Billy refused to return her look.

‘Your Honour,’ she started, rounding her vowels and distancing herself from Billy. ‘Your Honour, would like to state that this man took advantage of me!’

‘Lying tart!’ the wronged wife yelled at her, before collapsing into sobs.

The magistrate glared at the outspoken woman as Ethel tried to ignore the interruption. Her shock hearing of the existence of Billy’s family had now changed to anger, and she was going to let him have it.

‘I was travelling by train to Liverpool to visit my dear, dear sister,’ she began, imagining an emotive scene straight out of a movie, ‘when I became ill and put myself off at the township of Rainhill. I was dizzy, sir, I had a fever and it came on me so suddenly,’ she declaimed with great emotion, enjoying the effect her words were having on her audience. They were riveted, wanting to know more.

‘I could hardly walk, Your Honour, and this man ...’ she said, looking down at Billy’s hard face, ‘*this man* walked me to the Black Horse Inn, then plied me with alcohol until I was barely conscious. There was some murmuring from the gallery. ‘I was married, Your Honour, but my husband was killed recently on the Western Front, something I told this man when we met,’ she stated loudly and clearly.

‘I was sick, Your Honour—sick with grief. I was led away, filled with alcohol and I awoke the following morning in a bed, naked, with *him* beside me!’ More gasps and murmurs from the crowd.

Ethel took a breath and felt tears of anger threatening—she let them flow.

‘I could not leave the bed for days I was so ill.’ She covered her face with her hands and gently sobbed for a moment. She looked up at the magistrate with tear-filled eyes. ‘And I *certainly* did not know he was married and had children!’ She realised a moment too late that perhaps she had no need to add that last statement if she was the wronged woman, but her words created angry murmuring from the gallery at the reminder of Billy’s behaviour.

She looked at the magistrate as earnestly as she could, and implored in her proper English: ‘I have been these last two days in hospital, sir. I came here today, still unwell, to defend myself and tell my story. I have been wronged, sir—I do not know how I will ever face my family again.’

With that she sat down, her face in her hands, and sobbed. Billy sat beside her dumbstruck.

‘Thank you Miss, eh, Mrs Smith.’ The magistrate cleared his throat, looking at the pair in the defendant’s box. After what Ethel felt was a long time, he finally declared, ‘As you are no doubt the victim in this case, Mrs Smith, and in such a precarious state of health, I find the charge against you proven, but I dismiss the charge against you. You are free to go.’

‘Private William Taylor,’ he said, turning his full attention to Billy. ‘Your conduct has been nothing short of appalling, not worthy of someone serving in the King’s Army. I sentence you to gaol for six months.’

Ethel left the courthouse as quickly as she could. She never even looked as poor Billy was led away amid howls from his wife. She was elated and relieved that she was free to go, of course, but she was also still angry with Billy. How dare he treat her like that! She had thought that they might *be* together—that he would have given her a ring paper—but he obviously had no such intentions. She was angry with herself as well—she’d been foolish letting him use her like that. She vowed it would never happen again.

Ethel took her purse from her bag and sadly counted out the few coins it contained. Clicking the catch closed, she looked into her handbag and slowly pulled her husband’s crumpled ring paper from the bottom. She read her name—Florence Elizabeth Ethel Carter—and thought of Alec. So much had happened in a short time. She thought of him lying somewhere dead, his mangled body unclaimed. Then she thought of her baby, who she had never even held. She couldn’t imagine bringing him up by

herself—he was better off without her.

~~She crumpled up the ring paper and let it drop onto the pavement, then straightened her shoulders and strode off down the street.~~

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## MRS WARD

Barely two weeks later, on 30 December 1916, Ethel married again.

Florence Elizabeth Ethel Carter married Corporal Raymond ‘Ray’ Ward at the registry office in O. Flyde, just outside Blackpool.

Corporal Ward met the attractive war widow one night in the busy resort town of Blackpool, where he was enjoying a spell of rest and recreation leave. They were married the following day, just before he was to return to the battlefield. Ethel once again had money—a ring paper that she could draw her husband’s wage on.

She politely refused Ray’s offer to live with his parents, telling him she would wait for his return to meet them. Instead, she found a cheap room in the lodging house of a Mrs Skerratt, within walking distance of the Blackpool Promenade. Mrs Skerratt was nice enough, always complimenting Ethel on how she looked, and wasn’t intrusive, so Ethel came to look upon Mrs Skerratt more as a friend than a landlady.

Ethel had wonderful memories of her childhood holidays in Blackpool. Once a year the big cotton mills in Manchester would shut down for maintenance, for what was called ‘wakes week’, and all the staff would flock to Blackpool or Southport for a holiday. Each town or mill would take a separate week off between July and September, and the seaside towns thrived. These were happy times for Ethel—even after her little sister arrived—as there was always so much to see and do.

Now, having her own room and having to feed herself, Ethel didn’t have as much money as she would have liked, but she still dolled herself up and socialised. She was restless, and didn’t like things standing still.

She decided it was time to write to her father, to let her family know she was safe, and to ask what had become of her son. She had yet to mention baby Frank to her new husband, but Ray seemed so kind, she was sure he would welcome Frank into their family. No point telling him until he returned; she’d deal with it then.

She filled her days going to the shops, the movies and the theatre. On tour in the town at that time was a popular actress who shared her new name, Ethel Ward. Curious, Ethel took in her show at the Majestic Theatre, and watched the elegantly dressed Miss Ward on stage playing the lead role in a romantic drama. Miss Ward’s hair was piled high, with lace covering her shoulders and long neck as she played the wronged woman with style and grace. Ethel felt that was *her* up on that stage; it was *her* drama she was watching unfold, an innocent woman scorned by a cruel man, in her case Billy.

From then on she avidly followed Miss Ward’s reviews and write-ups in the newspapers. She wasn’t interested in politics and politicians, intellectuals, what was happening on the Front—she preferred the papers that covered fashion and the goings-on and gossip about famous people, rich people and movie stars. She loved reading the descriptive articles, using her imagination to read between the lines. The actress Miss Ward was based in the Midlands, and Ethel would eagerly read what dramas she was headlining in, both on and off the stage.

Then Ethel started going out at night, pretending to be the young actress, dyeing her hair chestnut and wearing it in the same style as Miss Ward. She could often be found in the company of soldiers and sailors on leave, despite her husband still being at the Front. She had always preferred the

company of men, especially those who paid her a lot of attention and spent money on her.

Ethel told the men various stories about herself—she was sometimes an actress, sometimes an artist, but most often her story was that her husband had been killed at the Front and that she was there to forget; at that time Blackpool was full of people trying to forget there was a war going on.

After hearing of her husband's death, one soldier, ironically called Smith, felt sorry enough for Ethel that before returning to battle he organised a ring paper for her, stating on it that she was his wife. Ethel conveniently forgot to mention her husband, Ray Ward, to Private Jack Smith, and now she had two lots of wages to draw on, though she would have to be careful to go to the correct post office with each.

Letters would arrive from Ray and she'd send back brief replies, filled with love and stories about how wonderful life was in Blackpool, omitting the fact that she was entertaining other men. She saw it as her duty to make them feel better and forget about the war—and besides, they looked after her.

Blackpool was busy, there was always something going on. On one occasion she even watched a pilot on leave land his plane on the main beach, before walking into one of the pubs for a drink. The hotels were still running, the restaurants were full, even with war rationing; the ballrooms played music and were filled with dancers. Even the shops had stuff on offer. Exciting things were always happening. Blackpool was the perfect place to forget.

Ethel always felt better going shopping, and it helped fuel her fantasy life—and with two ring papers to draw on, she could spend a bit more on things she wanted. Rather than move to finer lodgings, her extra money was spent on more clothes, and visits to the beautician and hairdresser. After all, she needed to look like the star she was.

But it was never enough, and soon she started telling her fantastic stories to the shop owners. One of her favourite shops was behind the Promenade, near the Winter Gardens. The owner, Mrs Hall, happily listened to her regular customer Mrs Ward, a war widow who had tragically lost her first husband, but had again found happiness with her second, a wealthy decorated army officer. Mrs Ward spent up big, and Mrs Hall did not hesitate to offer her a line of credit. Ethel loved that shop and purchased numerous outfits, hats, bags, shoes and even a bright red feather boa, just like the Hollywood actresses wore. But after racking up an account close to £20 (over \$2000 in today's money), Ethel stopped going to the shop, and Mrs Hall began to wonder if the fabulous Mrs Ward was ever going to settle her account.

One Saturday evening, at one of the classier dance halls, Mr and Mrs Hall were seated at a table close to the dance floor when a flash of red whirled past. There in the arms of a uniformed sailor was laughing Mrs Ward, wearing the red feather boa she still hadn't paid for. As the dancing couple made their way past the Halls' table, Ethel gave the shop owner a quick smile. The shopkeeper glared in return and watched as the couple finished their dance and made their way to their own table, the sailor's arm slipping comfortably over Ethel's shoulders.

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The following Monday morning, Ethel woke late. The weekend had been a whirlwind of fun—she had met a charming sailor and they had laughed and danced the entire weekend. He had left with promises of seeing her again when he was next on leave. She stretched out under the bedcovers, wondering what she would do that day, when she heard the post arrive.

Dressing with her usual care and attention, she made her way downstairs to see what was in the mail. It was usually only bills, which she would ignore for as long as possible, but today a letter sat on the doormat, bearing her father's familiar handwriting. She scooped it up to open it, but a feeling of dread stopped her; this was real life.



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