

1

CASSIE'S WAR

Locals say this picturesque corner of England's green and pleasant land has only witnessed two insurrections since Magna Carta.

The first arose in 1911 when the Boughton Temperance Society marched down the village's main street in the wake of the formidably buxom Mabel Blake, their self-appointed president. The Dowager Lady Blake's bosomy prow loomed no less impressive than her transom; both flared to bursting in a tightly laced whalebone girdle. A step behind strode the black-suited parson, the sepulchral Reverend Twyford, his eyebrows hornlike over pince-nez spectacles, propping up a bowler hat.

Adding a battle cry to the occasion, the Band of Hope's deep-toned brass instruments *oompahed* a bountiful harvest of raspberries to their anthem, *Sound the Loud Timbrel*, and Mabel's fleet of acolytes, resplendent in their ostentatious bonnets and corseted finery, sang in full voice under their banner while children skittered between their ranks in knickerbockers and flat caps. A half-dozen men marched too, either husbands kept firmly under the thumbs of their God-fearing wives or teetotallers lathered with self-righteous indignation.

Besieged locals, and a dozen cows taking a shortcut to a new pasture on the other side of the village, paused to watch the procession. The cows got their rumps smacked with sticks, moving them aside so Mabel Blake's

armada could sail past unhindered. A few flicked their tails while their brown eyes contemplated the scene, bemused, offering the odd *moo* and a cowpat to the refrain. Locals' rumps needed no such encouragement to yield right of way.

The fleet dropped anchor on the gravelled village square to be harangued by the Reverend Twyford from a makeshift pulpit—the bench usually attended by passengers as they waited for the twice-daily Andover motor bus service. The pious congregation responded with an energetic appeal to a higher authority that the new tavern, The Fox and Hounds, be cast to rubble by a divinely inspired thunderbolt. In an affront to God, or at least to godliness, the new pub stood shamelessly across the village square from St Mary's Church, their Norman bastion of rectitude, which had presided over village sobriety for a thousand years.

The looming sacrilege of The Fox and Hounds offering sanctuary (and beer) to dissolute men recovering from Reverend Twyford's fire-and-brimstone Sunday sermons marked a bridge too far for the Boughton Temperance Society. 'What next?' thundered the good reverend. 'Guzzling the demon drink *inside* the Lord's house like the Catholics!'

Their pleas to the Almighty went unanswered. As it happened, another pub, The Greyhound, opened five years later with no protest. By then, the hosannas of the Temperance Society had changed to *Onward Christian Soldiers* as The Great War swept up the patriotic men of the village, dissolute and devout alike, into its horrors—even the Reverend Twyford, summoned to meet his maker from the muddy carnage of Passchendaele.

Boughton's second insurrection arose a hundred years later, led by another woman. This one less Rubenesque, yet her fiery passion more than made up for what she lacked in Mabel Blake's voluptuous majesty. She was Cassandra Spencer, the 21-year-old daughter of Emily and granddaughter of General John and Elizabeth Spencer—Jack and Liz to their many friends among Hampshire's county order.

A rabid environmentalist and equally enthusiastic feminist, Cassandra, or Cassie, as she preferred, earned her degree in community law and a left-wing, take-no-prisoners attitude from the Panthéon-Sorbonne in Paris. She loved the vibrancy of the *rive gauche*, the jazz bars, the Latin quarter, and the bohemian writers, artists, and student philosophers who still inhabited the area long after Sartre, Gertrude Stein, Joan Miró, and a host of others of the Lost Generation left their indelible marks. She said the southern bank of the Seine taught Paris and Cassie Spencer how to think.

An early foray into the protest movement also began at the Panthéon-Sorbonne. There, she joined other resolute women to send a message of solidarity to their Muslim sisters after the “burkini bans”, calling out Islamophobia and demanding the French authorities respect the right of every woman to wear whatever she chose to the beach. Not a popular stand at the time following a spate of jihadi terrorist attacks, which had left officials xenophobic and panicky. Even so, not even the threat of being labelled a terrorist sympathiser deterred Cassie Spencer.

The youthful firebrand had inherited her mother’s English-rose looks and grace, though she did her best to hide her privileged background behind an anorak, flashing blue eyes and a mop of long sandy-blond hair. If you claimed her friendship, you knew a different Cassie, one with a sunny disposition and a brand of satirical humour unique to the well-educated English that made her popular with those who got past the rapier tongue. Being at least halfway intelligent helped to cross that bridge, as did finding yourself among the downtrodden.

What aroused Cassie’s insurrectionist ire and sparked Boughton’s second mutiny followed the Hampshire Council’s decision to lease her cherished Boughton Down to wealthy county landowners, the Hanfords, who’d won grazing rights for their cattle and sheep. Cassie favoured skulduggery better described their victory. The South Downs, or Boughton’s end of them, preserved the last natural woodlands and

rolling hills not yet leased to farmers where she'd roamed and played in her childhood, as had generations of villagers.

For the outraged Cassie Spencer, enough was enough. She rounded up five Sorbonne anarchist-inspired friends and descended on the village, setting up camp at the Spencers' country estate, Boughton Manor, where they plotted their militancy. On the morning of battle, they dispatched their lawyer to the Winchester courthouse to obtain an injunction against the "rape of the downs" while Cassie and her partisans prepared to blockade the only access road to the woods.

'I'll come along,' said her grandmother in a show of solidarity.

'My God, Gran, you can't come. You're much too... *um...*'

'Let's just say a senior citizen, shall we, Cassandra? And please try not to be blasphemous, dear. Besides, I didn't realise there's an age limit for chaining oneself to a tree and having a cup of tea. I love those downs as much as anyone. Not to mention, I've called a few of my friends; they're going to meet us there, and they're bringing sandwiches. What's the dress code for a protest, dear? Che Guevara t-shirts?'

'Your usual tweeds will do, Gran.'

'I'm going too,' said her mother, Emily. 'Someone who's not barking mad ought to be there.'

'Well, the more, the merrier.' Cassie rolled her eyes and laughed. 'Good grief, I can't believe I'm going to war with a PC version of *Dad's Army*.'

The protest turned out to be the most excitement Boughton had experienced since VE Day. Rumours about the general's granddaughter and her planned blockade became the gossip on everyone's lips. Surprisingly, twenty or so men, women and children even turned up with placards to join Cassie and her friends. Newspaper reporters and photographers also converged on the downs, eager to cover something more enthralling than church fêtes or the parish cricket team's customary hiding on the village green.

Cassie told her story to the reporters, then she and her co-conspirators chained themselves to large beech trees and sat on the track. Linking arms, they blocked the way of the expected vehicles, their spirits shored up by John Lennon and Alessia Cara's Earth Day songs. Having dipped their beaks in civil disobedience, they waited for the consequences.

An hour later, two police vehicles bounced up the rutted track, followed by a pick-up with a gang of labourers aboard, ready to begin fencing and clearing works in the woods. Bringing up the rear drove a council vehicle, which disgorged an officious-looking sheriff. Four burly policemen from the nearby towns of Andover and Romsey stepped from the police vehicles, dressed in overalls and army boots, accompanied by the village policeman. All six lined up facing the protesters, unsmiling, showing a version of persuasion that looked a lot like intimidation and brute force. Meanwhile, the workers in the pick-up lit cigarettes and sat back, waiting for the entertainment to begin.

The village policeman stepped forward, painfully aware he would have to live with the consequences of today. Despite having lived in Boughton for five years, he lacked the generations of residence necessary ever to be regarded as a local. He hoped an appeal to the protesters' better judgement would work before reinforcements became necessary. Surveying the now slightly nervous group, he singled out their ringleader.

'Good morning, Miss Spencer. Cassandra, I know you and your family well, and you all know me. I'm here this morning officially and must ask you and your friends to move along peacefully so these workers can access the woods.'

'Good morning, Constable Lesley. Am I to assume your pleasant greeting is intended as an official move-on order?'

'If you insist. Yes, Miss Spencer, I'm instructing you and your friends to remove yourselves from the area. I'm in possession of a council order and a reasonable belief you are likely to exercise a breach of the peace.'

Constable Lesley glanced at Emily and the ageing Elizabeth Spencer in what he hoped they would interpret as a plea for help. Their cool

stares offered nothing. He swallowed, feeling his collar chafing against his throat, and turned back to face Cassie.

‘Please, Cassie, none of us wants any unpleasantness in the village. However, I have a job to do, and I am obliged to do it according to the law if you refuse to move.’

‘Constable, my friends and I do not have the remotest intention of obeying a move-on order. We are lawfully protesting the council’s wilful decision to allow the destruction of protected wildlife in this public space. The *Wildlife and Countryside Act* protects the critically endangered flora growing in these woods from damage by heavy vehicles, domesticated animals and those questionably domesticated workmen over there. Do your duty as our local police officer—inform that bumptious toad hiding behind you about the law!’

Constable Lesley exhaled, finding himself in the last place he wanted to be. He turned to the sheriff, who removed some papers from his jacket and stepped forward. Puffing out his chest, challenging the shirt buttons around his ample stomach, the sheriff read the council edict aloud but was swiftly drowned out by the protesters’ repetitive chanting of slogans. Their voices swelled, along with their confidence, under Cassie’s combative leadership.

The sheriff glowered at Cassie after completing the formalities. ‘Young lady, no representations have been made to Council about endangered flora, and the time for such submissions passed two weeks ago. Therefore, you are legally obliged to let these vehicles pass, or you and your posh bolshie chums will be arrested and charged.’

Incensed, Cassie stared down the sheriff, shouting over the raucous taunts of her companions, ‘Listen to me, you obnoxious little man, I’m not your or anyone else’s “young lady”—I’m telling you again, we’re here in a peaceful protest defending critically endangered flora, which English law allows. We *bolshies* will resist any effort to remove us from the woods. We’ll fight to keep the downs free for people to enjoy, and you can be

sure we won't be touching our forelocks to the loutish tyranny of council flunkeys!

'Officer, you are instructed to do your duty,' bellowed the sheriff, battling to be heard over the protesters' whistles and handclapping.

Constable Lesley gave a resigned nod, and one of the policemen came forward with bolt cutters and severed Cassie's chain, freeing her from the tree. 'Cassandra Spencer, I'm arresting you for failing to obey a lawful order to move on from this public place. You aren't obliged to say anything, and I warn you to be careful what you do say. You will be charged with an offence against public order.'

Cassie immediately sat down again. Her friends surged forward, jeering and mocking the police who moved in to arrest and handcuff her. Three brawny officers dragged Cassie roughly to her feet and carried her to the police wagon, kicking, struggling and protesting lustily.

Incandescent with maternal fury, Emily charged forward, hurling abuse like red graffiti at her daughter's assailants. 'What bloody heroes you are! So it takes three of your Gestapo to arrest one young woman!' Then her belligerent eyes fixed inches from Lesley's. 'Are you proud of your bloody self, Constable! You cowards wouldn't be so brave if my father were here, would you! If any of your thugs harm even as much as a hair on my daughter's head, I'll chase you through every damn court in England.'

'Mrs Spencer, I strongly advise you to be careful about_'

'Emily, dear, don't say anything else to get yourself into trouble,' advised her mother, stepping between them and gently squeezing Emily's arm. 'Come away, dear. Cassie will be fine. Honestly, I'd be more worried about the officers. Go home and let Jack know what's happened. He'll know what to do.'

Elizabeth Spencer turned to Constable Lesley.

'It's David, isn't it?'

'Yes, Mrs Spencer.'

She smiled disarmingly. ‘David, as you’ve arrested my granddaughter, I’m afraid you must now arrest me. Do you intend to set your bullyboys on me as well? I’m sure all these nice reporters and photographers will be happy to record you—now, what’s the word—“strongarming” an eighty-year-old woman.’

‘Mrs Spencer, please don’t put me in an impossible position. At worst, Cassie is only likely to receive a small fine and a warning. I’ll even do my best to ensure it’s just a warning. Leave the woods peacefully, and we’ll say no more.’

‘David, you’re missing the point entirely. You are our local policeman; frankly, you should be ashamed of yourself. You know this village and the people who live here. It would be best if you also understood these downs are part of Boughton’s heritage, from when the Celts lived here centuries ago, even before the Romans came. My granddaughter doesn’t care a hoot about the fine. Neither do I. However, we do care passionately about our countryside and our history_’

‘Mrs Spencer, please don’t mak_’

‘Oh, do be quiet, David. There comes a time when resisting officious bureaucrats and their high-handed edicts is morally the right thing to do. And this is one of those times. We’re all disappointed you chose not to use your authority to support the village in this fight, and I’m sorry you have put yourself in an awkward position. Now, you will find out I am a determined old woman in full support of my granddaughter, and I’m quite prepared to be clapped in irons.’

With the protesters’ enthusiastic cheers ringing in her ears (and with some help from Emily), the old woman lowered herself onto the track and folded her arms. Her implacable expression left no doubt this situation would unlikely turn out well for David Lesley.

Faced with his duty of arresting the elderly wife of the village’s most distinguished citizen, retired General John Spencer DSO MC, after just taking his beloved granddaughter into custody, Constable Lesley swallowed hard before taking centre stage in his personal Waterloo.

‘Elizabeth Spencer, I am arresting you for disobeying a lawful order to move on and hindering the passage of traffic.’

He turned to his colleagues and shouted over the jeers of the rowdy mob and the flash of cameras, ‘Help Mrs Spencer to her feet and escort her to the wagon; there’s no need to handcuff her. Please come along quietly, Mrs Spencer.’

The woods echoed with the sarcastic applause of the protesters and the workers, thoroughly enjoying their ringside seats. The Spencer matriarch shrugged off her escorts, gave them a withering look and walked with head high towards the paddy wagon. There, to hearty British cheers, she joined Cassie on the austere bench seating. She waved to the other protesters as the door clanged shut behind her, then gave her granddaughter a self-satisfied smile. Courtesy of the cameras, Cassie’s War would be on the front pages of tomorrow’s morning papers. Before long, Cassie’s five boisterous friends joined them, a little the worse for wear after determinedly resisting arrest. The officers drove the newly ordained “Boughton Seven” away to the police station.

Believing the worst to be over, Constable Lesley turned away from the departing vehicle, only to see twenty locals seated mutinously on the track, inviting their own arrests. He absorbed his abrupt elevation to pariah and pondered the world’s great injustices.

Within minutes, the village grapevine spread the news that “outsider” policemen had arrested General Spencer’s wife and granddaughter on Boughton Down. Within a quarter of an hour, dozens of parochial villagers began arriving in support, offended enough by the foreign assault on their rural bulwark to ensure no one would pass into the woods that day. David Lesley’s fate became sealed as the new chant seemed to imply his manhood may be questionable, even in jeopardy.

Mercifully, as verbal exchanges threatened to descend into internecine warfare, Cassie’s lawyer friend, regrettably delayed by a pedantic magistrate, turned up with an injunction moments before Constable Lesley’s requested police reinforcements. The order stated the chalky

woodlands were claimed to contain colonies of rare orchids and were thus protected, *pro tempore*, under the *Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981*. The order banned any development, alteration, or vehicle access to the downs habitats, pending further investigation, and finished with an appendix detailing the penalties for “knowingly causing, permitting or engaging in actions likely to damage protected flora”.

To the cheers and applause of the protestors, Cassie’s War was over. For now.

Emily found her father sitting under the foliage of a shady alder next to the river. He’d dozed off in the afternoon sunshine with an open book on his lap, its pages flipping over in the light breeze. He opened his eyes as she adjusted the rug over his legs.

‘How did the protest go, Emily?’

‘Daddy, I need to have a word.’

‘And where’s Cassie and your mother?’

‘That’s why I need to have a word. Mum and Cassie got arrested and taken to gaol. I’m afraid I also quite lost my temper with the constable; only Mum saved me from getting arrested, too.’

Jack Spencer burst out laughing as Emily retold the story. ‘Not a bit surprised. Those dimwits should’ve known better than to threaten any of you. Lesley’s a blithering oaf; man’s got the tactical brain of a cabbage.’

‘I’ll admit he didn’t exactly cover himself in glory this morning. I suspect Cassie’s War may have been his first. Unfortunately, the lawyer didn’t turn up in time to stop Mum, Cassie and her friends from being arrested and taken away, which might also have saved his reputation. I didn’t envy the position he found himself in, though. He reminded me of Guy Fawkes pleading for a bucket of water. The good news is Cassie got a court order stopping John Hanford and his cronies from letting their livestock loose on the downs. Seems they’re home to a rare orchid species. You learn something new every day, don’t you?’

'They're called red helleborine and are critically endangered. Only found in three places in the whole of England, so they say. Four now.'

'What! How did you—or is it better not to ask?'

'Consider it a military secret. You've done well with Cassie. We can all be proud of her.'

'*Hmm,*' muttered Emily. 'She adores you, you know. I can see why.'

Jack's eyes sparkled. 'Can't wait to read the newspapers tomorrow. First, we'd better find out where they're locked up. Then you can help me to the car and drive us there; we'll bail them out before the silly buggers get themselves charged with sedition or high treason as well. When we get home, we'll have everyone here for a celebration in the garden.'

'Marvellous idea. I'll get Mrs T to organise drinks and order some barbeque meat from Hinwoods.'

'Best have her invite that damn fool Lesley and his wife over, too—let him know there are no hard feelings. Otherwise, the poor sod will be as popular as Prohibition down at The Greyhound and Fox and Hounds tonight.'

'Well, I see you still have remnants of the benevolent conquering hero in you. As long as you live and breathe, I daresay chivalry's not lost in England.'

'Not a bit of it! Just want the buggers in range of my twelve-gauge if I find out he's hurt Cassie or your mother.'

No one remembered ever seeing red helleborine orchids in the woodlands. Still, a week later, the council's plant and wildlife officers confirmed the delicate purple-pink flowers were blooming in their now-protected glory among green wands of native grasses beneath gnarled old beech trees.

The village elders claimed the same scattered stands of beeches once concealed highwaymen lying in wait for travellers on moonlit nights two hundred years earlier—brigands who also robbed the wealthy landowners of their nefarious gains. With the aromas of vintage leather and mellow cigars in the air, descendants of the same landed gentry swirled and

sniffed their after-dinner cognacs, suspecting the muddied hands of a more gender-inclusive Dick Turpin the culprit this time, as did gossip over numerous pints in The Fox and Hounds and Greyhound's public bars.

Keen to ingratiate himself back into favour, local bobby David Lesley decided more pressing village misdeeds needed his investigative skills. And as for the Boughton Seven? The ensuing TV and newspaper coverage created such a furore the Hampshire Council abruptly decided rare orchids were far more important than minor profiteering—and voteworthy during the upcoming civic elections. At a hastily convened meeting, the council reversed the grazing decision and dropped the charges. Thus, a new tale came to be added to the oral history of Boughton, one destined to become dressed in the mists of village folklore.

Cassie became something of a local heroine for saving the downs. She went on to complete her master's degree in human rights law at the Panthéon-Sorbonne. Then, surprising no one, she joined the activist organisation Polaris International. Not long afterwards, she disappeared into the Amazon rainforests of Brazil for months at a time, then into the hills and forests of West Africa. She described her life to her friends Clara and Katy Yehonala as “confronting the grim world of human rights abuses and rainforest bastardry”.

Unknown to anyone at the time, Cassie Spencer's decision to devote her life to opposing crimes against humanity and exposing rainforest atrocities would later rock this picturesque corner of England's green and pleasant land for the third time.