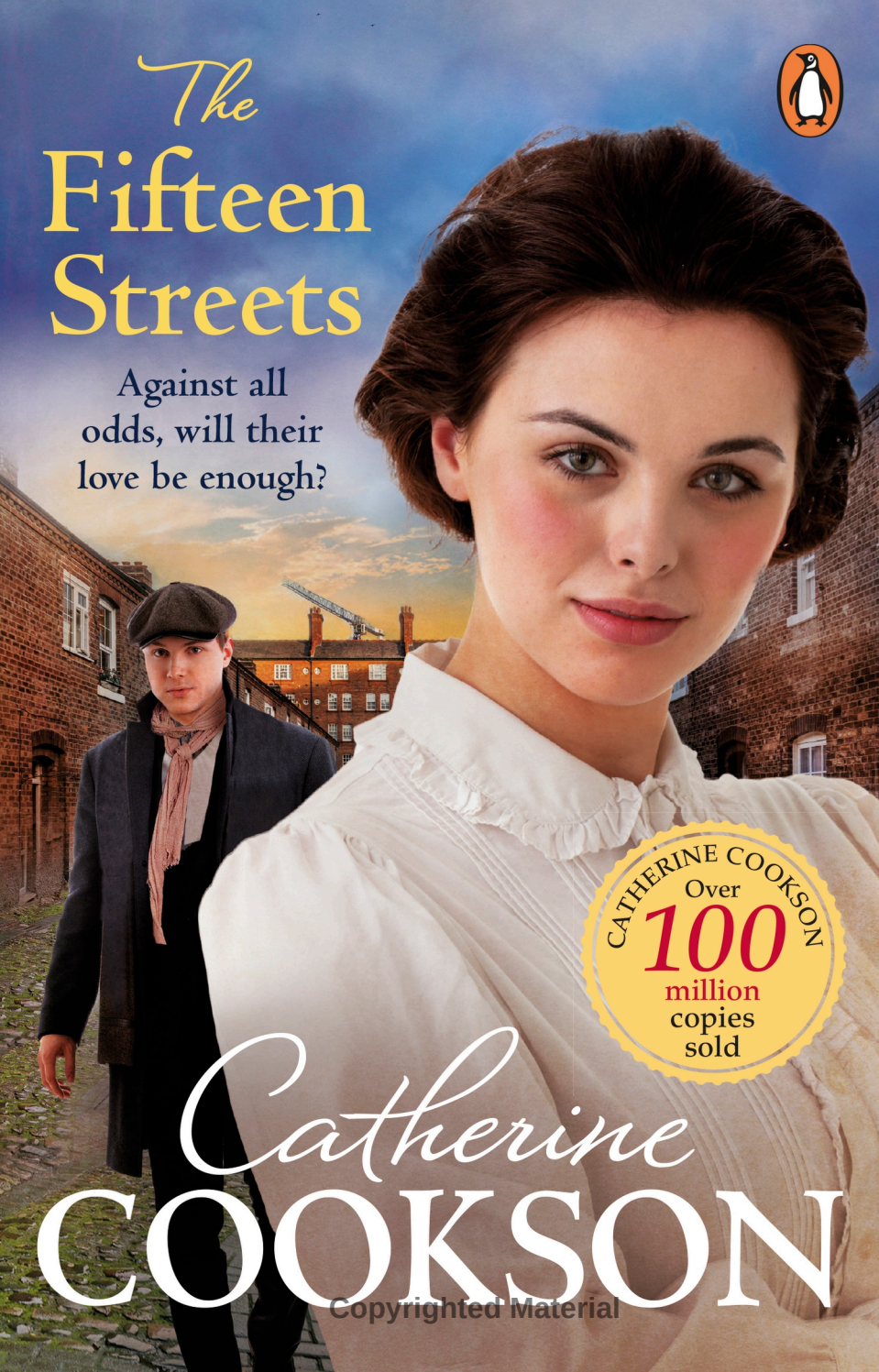

Dame Catherine Cookson was born in 1906. From an early age Catherine was determined to become a writer. She wrote her first short story when she was eleven, sending it off to the *South Shields Gazette*.

She left school at thirteen and worked in domestic service and in a workhouse before moving to Hastings. At thirty-four she married Tom Cookson, a local grammar-school master. In the years that followed Catherine suffered several miscarriages and fell into a depression. She returned to writing to recover and joined the local writers' group for encouragement. Her first book, *Kate Hannigan* (1950), was partly autobiographical.

Although she was originally acclaimed as a regional writer, Catherine's readership soon began to spread around the world. Catherine's novels have been translated into more than twenty languages and over 100 million copies of her books have been sold. Catherine died shortly before her ninety-second birthday in June 1998 having completed 104 works, nine of which were published posthumously.

By the time of her death Catherine Cookson had received an OBE, the Freedom of the Borough of South Tyneside, an honorary degree from the University of Newcastle and the Royal Society of Literature's award for Best Regional Novel of the Year.

Catherine Cookson was the most borrowed author in UK public libraries for twenty years – a sure testament to the ongoing popularity of her stirring, timeless novels.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

The characters in this book are entirely fictitious and have no relation to any living person.
Although the setting is Tyneside and several place names have been used, 'The Fifteen Streets' are imaginary.
Owing to difficulty in comprehension by the uninitiated, I have not adhered to the Tyneside dialect.

CHAPTER ONE

THE BROTHERS

'HANNAH, drop that an' come an' see. The O'Briens are at it again . . . blue murder! Come on. Come upstairs, you can see better from our top window.'

Wiping the soap suds from her arms. Hannah Kelly hastily lifted the lid of the wash-house boiler, scooped off the grey scum with an enamel mug, dabbed the contents of the boiler with a stick, then ran out of the wash-house and across the back-yard, thinking as she did so, 'Eeh, I haven't got time for this. . . . And our Joe warned me.'

She caught up with her neighbour as she was opening the stair door.

'Who is it this time? The old man?'

'Yes.'

'Who's he at? Dominic?'

'Aye.'

'Are they drunk?'

'Are they ever owt else!'

They scurried across the kitchen to the front room, and automatically took up their stations, one at each side of the window, bodies close to the wall, heads held slightly to the side against the mesh of the Nottingham lace curtains, their arms wound tightly in their aprons.

'My God, what a mess, Bella!'

'He must have thrown them two pictures out since I came down for you.'

'Eeh, God Almighty! It's a shame. Just as Mary Ellen was getting things pulled together again.'

'Look' – there was glee in Bella's voice – 'there they are at

the window throttling each other. Christ!' she exclaimed as something came hurtling through the window into the street, 'which one missed that, I wonder?'

'Eeh! he's thrown the pot through the window. Oh, Bella, that'll bring the pollis. God Almighty, it's awful! It's enough to bring on the bairn ... she's at the worst time, on eight months.'

'Best thing that could happen. Who wants a bairn at forty-five, I ask you? She should have been more cute. Anyway, she wouldn't listen to me. I told her I could get her a bottle of white mixture from our Harry's Emma, who scrubs the wards up at the grubber; the nurses would have given it to her. It would have skited everything out of her.'

'Well, you know she wouldn't do that, she's a Catholic, Bella.'

'Catholic, be damned! They tell 'em to have bairns, but do they bloody well keep them? I'd like to see any priest tell me I must have bairns. Do you know what I'd say?'

Hannah chuckled. 'I've a pretty good idea. ... Look, there she is, there's Mary Ellen. She looks like death.'

They both became silent and watched the woman below picking up the two picture frames from the road. The loose glass splintered about her feet as she shook the frames, and as she shooed some children away from the broken chamber, Hannah remarked, regretfully, 'Pity about that. It was a boody one, too.'

Unblinkingly they watched the woman edge her way indoors, with neither a glance upwards nor to the right or left, although as they knew, she was fully aware of the watchers. Only the children were on the street, staring silently until the door closed, when they drew nearer, and some daring spirits, braving the glass, hitched themselves up on to the high window sill to get their faces level with the hole. But as they did so the blind was dropped, and Hannah exclaimed, clicking her tongue. 'She shouldn't have done that – dropping the blind right down before dark – it's the sign of a death. It'll be the bairn, likely.'

'Damn good job too. Better if it was her old man though, in case he lands her with another.'

They turned slowly from the window, and Hannah said, 'By, that wouldn't have happened if John had been in; he'd have put a stop to that. . . . Funny, isn't it, Bella, that the old man doesn't go for John.'

'Not funny a bit. He's afraid of him, if the truth was known. Old O'Brien and Dominic are both alike, full of wind and water. That's why they fight. . . . By God! I wish I was in Mary Ellen's place for five minutes. I'd lay those two sods out with the poker! She's soft, that's what she is, soft as clarts. . . . Are you going to stay for a cup of tea?' she added. 'I'll put the kettle on, it won't be a minute.'

'No, lass, I'm not half through, and it's getting on for dark.'

Bella glanced sideways at Hannah. 'Should you come across Mary Ellen – you see her more than I do – and she tells you what it was all about, knock up.'

'Aye, I will. But there's small chance. She's close, is Mary Ellen. You know that.'

'I know she doesn't like me. Thinks I can't mind me own business.'

And she's right there, thought Hannah.

'And anyway, I'm not the same colour as them,' went on Bella nodding her long horse-face. 'Me St. Patrick's Day's colour's blue. Wait until next Thursday week when Dominic's wearing his shamrock. There'll be skull and hair flying then. The fifteen streets won't hold him. . . . My God, remember last St. Patrick's Day? That was a do, eh?' She laughed at the memory.

'Eeh, Bella, I must be off.' Hannah unwrapped her mottled arms, and banged out the creases in her coarse apron.

'Well don't forget to knock up if you hear owt.'

'I won't.'

Hannah went down the stairs, walking sideways in case she slipped, as the stairs were too narrow for her feet encased in an old pair of men's boots. By the time she reached the bottom she had also reached a decision: she wouldn't tell Bella Bradley what she heard, if she heard owt at all. Too nosey was Bella, by half. She'd rather keep in with Mary Ellen, narrow as she was. At least, she minded her own business. And her Joe

warned her only last night against Bella Bradley. He said he'd bash her face in if he found her upstairs again – he was nettled after hearing what she said about their Nancy not being all there. He knew Nancy wasn't all there, but it maddened him to hear any one say it. More so now that Nancy was growing up. . . . Hannah sighed. What would become of Nancy? She didn't know. And anyway, there was no time to think now, the washing had to be finished.

Across the road, in number 10 Fadden Street, Mary Ellen O'Brien worked in the semi-darkness behind the drawn blind. She adjusted the block of wood under the chest of drawers – the leg had been kicked off during the last row – and screwed in the knob of the top drawer. She picked up the grey blanket and patchwork quilt from the floor and spread them again over the lumpy bare mattress on the iron bed. She pushed the wicker table back into the centre of the room, and stood leaning on its weak support, breathing heavily. Her eyes, dry with the pricking dryness of sand, looked round the walls. They were quite bare. . . . Well, they would remain so. The only two pictures in the house were now gone. Never again would she try to build up. She had told herself, if they went this time it would be the last.

She looked towards the closed door, which led into the kitchen. She knew that beyond, on either side of the fireplace, they'd be sitting, spent. Their rage and passion flown, they would be like the two halves of one body, accepting each other now that the conflict was over for a time.

She lifted her apron and wiped the sweat from her forehead. If only they weren't so big . . . like giants. She hadn't dared go between them this time because of the bairn. . . . She put her hand on the raised globe of her stomach and felt a movement. It brought no sense of feeling to her other than that of apprehension. Why, oh why was she to have this all over again? Hadn't she been through enough in her time? During the twenty-six years of her married life she had given birth to eleven bairns, and only five were alive, for which she thanked God. What she would have done with thirteen in these three rooms only the Almighty knew.

A pain through her breast made her gasp, and she covered it with her hand, lifting up its weight. Last year this time they'd been flat . . . flat for all time she'd thought, for it was ten years since Katie was born. Practically every year since she was married she'd been dropped, but from Katie there'd been nothing. The pain shot through her again, and she remembered such a pain from the past. It was before John was born. She was as strong as a horse then, as small as she was, and she enjoyed the feeling of the pain, anticipating the tugging of the young mouth on the nipples . . . if it lived. It did live, and it was John . . . John, who had never given her any trouble. Oh, if they were all like John, and, at the other end of the scale, Katie. Funny that these two should be alike and the others so different from them. Dominic was different from the day he was born, the year after John. She had always been slightly afraid of Dominic, even when he was a child. It wasn't that he alone suffered from the O'Brien rages, for they all did, except Katie. It was rather that there was something fiendish about Dominic. It showed in everything he did, in his teasing, in his laughter, and especially in his good-looking face. Like John and Mick, he took after his da for his looks. But although they all took after their da Dominic and Mick were better looking than John. When she looked at her eldest son she had the feeling that the features which made the other two good looking made him ugly, and in some strange way this pleased her. To her mind it separated him entirely from them. It was his nose that made the difference, she supposed, with that funny little nob on the side of the nostril. He got that when he climbed the dock wall to get some coal that bad winter. He slipped and his nose was cut on the broken glass set in the top of the wall. The cut did not join properly and gave his face a quaint look from the side. But it wasn't only his nose; John's eyes were different from the others. They were large and brown too, but a different brown . . . dark and kind. That was it, they were kind, like Katie's.

She sighed and rubbed her hand gently round and round her breast. Then, hearing a shout coming through the kitchen from the back-yard, she moved her head impatiently – she

never thought of Molly unless the girl made herself felt by sight or sound. Molly was . . . well, she couldn't place Molly. She was of a too apparent mixture of them all, and so had no individuality of her own. She was swayed, first one way and then the other; even her rages could be deflected by a stronger will. No, Molly would be no heartache, for she aroused no feeling.

Mary Ellen straightened her shoulders and refastened the top button of her blouse over her straining breasts before walking towards the kitchen door. It was no use standing here thinking; thinking got you nowhere. It was close on five o'clock, and John would be in at half past. She'd have to get on with the tea. . . . Thank God they fought in here and not in the kitchen. They might have knocked the pan of broth off the hob, and there was nearly fourpennorth of vegetables in besides a twopenny scrag end. . . . Well, if you searched hard enough there was always something to be thankful for.

As she expected, her husband and son were sitting one each side of the fireplace, their brows puckered over half-closed eyes. Shane's grey hair was standing up straight in tufts; there was blood on the hair near his temple, and his high cheek bones were showing blue under the tightened skin. At the first glance she saw that his rage wasn't entirely spent, for the muscle was moving in his cheek as he clenched and unclenched his teeth, and his limbs, as always, were jerking with the nerve tick. His knees, in their reddened moleskin trousers, were wide apart, and his feet were crossed below his hands, which were gripping the seat of the wooden armchair. His body looked as if it was still ready to spring. . . . No, his rage wasn't spent yet, because he was sober. He'd had only two shifts in this week and had tipped the money up. But Dominic had a full week. For three weeks now he'd worked full weeks. Not that it made much difference to her – she was lucky if she got ten shillings out of him. She often had to meet him at the dock gates to get even that . . . or send Katie. But Dominic's rage was spent because he was drunk and happy.

She took Dominic by the shoulder and shook him. 'Here! Get yourself to bed.'

He lifted his head and smiled crookedly at her, cracking the

dried blood on his mouth as he did so. He looked at her out of one merry, brown eye, the other being hidden behind a curling lock of light brown, youthful hair.

'All right, old girl.'

He rose obediently to his feet, and some detached part of her marvelled for the countless time at his docility towards her when he was in drink. Why was it she could manage him when he was drunk? She even found herself liking him in this state. She had no fear of him in drink, when he spoke civilly to her, often with a touch of affection. But it was strange that even in drink she could have any affection for him now, for she remembered the look in his eyes during these past weeks when they lit on her stomach . . . ridicule, scorn, and something else . . . a something for which she could find no word. She pushed him before her into the bedroom, her head coming just to the bottom of his shoulder blades. She always wondered, when close to them, how she gave birth to such great men.

Dominic sat down with a plop on the side of his bed and began to laugh. 'If he wasn't my old man I'd have knocked him stiff. But I'll break his bloody neck the next time he interferes with me. I didn't ask to be set on the ore boat – they want the young 'uns down the holds.'

He fell back on the bed and lifted up his legs, and Mary Ellen immediately swung them down again. She took off his boots and loosened his belt, then unbuttoned his trousers and tugged them off his legs, leaving these looking particularly ludicrous in their tight long pants. Never in all the many times she had pulled trousers off them had she yet been able to conquer the feeling of revulsion. Husband or son, it was the same.

She heaved him up by the shirt front and dragged off his coat. Then she let him fall back on to the bed. She threw the quilt over him and put his coat on top of it, and lifting his trousers quietly from the floor, she put them across her arm and went out, through the kitchen, past her husband, who now sat hunched up over the fire, and into the front room, where she turned out the contents of the trousers pockets on to the table.

There was a half-sovereign, two two-shilling pieces, and four pennies. The half-sovereign he would have to stump up for his

board, so she put that back into the pocket again, together with a two-shilling piece. The other two-shilling piece and the coppers went into a little cloth bag that dangled from a pin fastened to the inside of her skirt. It already held tenpence. She had taken to this device of the bag when Shane came back from the Boer War, because he lifted every penny he could get his fingers on for drink.

She went back to the bedroom and quietly placed the trousers over the bed rail, and as she returned to the kitchen the window was darkened by a distorted bulk, and a gentle tap-tap came on the door.

Mary Ellen sighed. As inevitably as the calm which followed the storm would come this tap-tap on the door after any disturbance in the house. She often thanked God for an upstairs neighbour such as Peggy Flaherty. Many a one, placed as she was above the noise and fighting that was almost part of the weekly routine, would have done more than object, she would have brought the pollis; and after a number of such visits they would have been in court and likely turned out of the house. Peggy was a bit queer; still, as God knew, there were worse states than being queer. But today, Mary Ellen felt tired, and even Peggy's well-meant sympathy was an irritant. She opened the door, and would have smiled, if she could, at the quaint tact of this fat, dirty woman.

'I was after warming meself up with a mouthful of stew, Mary Ellen, an' I said to meself, "I'll take a drop below, it'll stick to Mary Ellen's ribs." ' She proffered the basin, full of a lead-coloured liquid, with darker pieces of matter floating about on its surface. 'Are you all right, lass?' She peered at Mary Ellen through her short-sighted eyes, looking for a black eye or other evidence of the fight.

'Yes, I'm all right, Peggy. And thanks for the soup.'

'Oh, that's all right, Mary Ellen. . . . You'll drink it, now, won't you?'

'Yes, yes,' Mary Ellen hastily assured her, wondering whether Peggy was suspicious of the fate of her proffered balms. She would have to be very hungry, she thought, before she ate anything made by Peggy's hands in that menagerie up-

stairs. Before he died, Charlie Flaherty earned his living in many ways. At one time, he worked for himself as a tally man, and when payment was not forthcoming, took the equivalent in kind; so two of the three rooms upstairs were stacked from floor to ceiling with an odd assortment of things, not one of which Peggy would part with, ranging from a stuffed baby crocodile to a collection of books, out of which Peggy was wont to say 'she got the extinsive iducation' she possessed. She spread more false knowledge round the fifteen streets than it was possible to imagine. Many of the inhabitants would have sworn that Henry VIII was Queen Elizabeth's husband, and that England once belonged to the Irish before William the Conqueror came over and took it from them. For the sum of a penny she would write a letter; for a little more, give advice on how to deal with a summons, or a case of defamation of character, or assault. Often this advice, if faithfully carried out, would have got the worried seeker a sojourn in jail. It was strange, that although she was said to be odd and barmy, her advice was still sought. Perhaps it was because it was known that on these pennies she mainly relied for her existence. There was an unspoken feeling in these streets, which, if translated, would have implied ... you save someone the workhouse and you'll never land there yourself.

'God and His Holy Mother preserve us this day, the trials we have! Is there anything more I can do for you, Mary Ellen?' went on Peggy.

'No, I'm all right, Peggy, thanks.' Mary Ellen looked at the basin in her hands, hoping to convey a hint that she would like to go in and make a start on the soup.

But Peggy did not notice this move; or if she did, she refused to take the hint; for she had something weighty to say. Leaning forward, she whispered, 'Did I ever tell you, Mary Ellen, Mr. Flaherty's cure for all this?' She nodded towards the closed scullery door.

Mary Ellen, suppressing another sigh, said, 'No, Peggy.'

'Iducation! No man would fight, he said, once he had iducation. And he knew what he was talking about, for he got about among the gentry, you know, Mary Ellen. It was his theory

that once a man got iducation he wouldn't raise a hand to his wife. He might, being a human being, get a bit irritated and say, "Retire to your room before I kick your backside!" or some such thing, but to lift his hand . . . no!'

'There may be something in it.' Mary Ellen again looked at the basin. 'Sure you haven't left yourself short, Peggy?'

'Not at all. Not at all. Away you go now inside, and don't talk anymore; and get that down you, it'll put a lining on your stomach. And remember, if you want any advice you know where to come.'

She shuffled away, and Mary Ellen closed the door. . . . Don't talk anymore, and, Retire to your room before I kick your backside! If there was a laugh left in her she would have laughed; but she would remember them, and some night by the fire she would tell them to John, and they would laugh together.

John came in at half-past five. He hung his cap and coat, together with his black neckerchief on the back of the kitchen door, then sat down on a box in the tiny square of scullery and loosened the yorks that bound his trousers below the knee. Before washing his hands in the tin dish that was standing on another box he looked into the lighted kitchen and smiled towards the three children sitting at the table. Only Katie returned his smile, her round, blue eyes sending him a greeting.

Mick called, 'Got anything, John? Any bananas or anything?'

And he answered, 'Not tonight; we're still on the grain boat.'

When John came to the table, his mother set a plate of broth before him, out of which a series of bare ribs stuck up, like the skeleton of a hulk. The smell was appetizing, and the eyes of the three children focused on the plate.

Mary Ellen exclaimed harshly, 'Get on with your bread and dripping!' and almost simultaneously each bit into his own inch-thick slice of bread.

She placed another plate on the table and said to her husband, 'Your tea's out.'

Shane turned from the fire and stared at the plate, and from there to his son and the other three. His body started to jerk,

first his head, then his arms, and lastly his right leg. His words too, when they came, were spasmodic and heavy with bitterness: 'Served last now, am I? It's a difference when you're not bringing it in. You've got to work or you don't eat . . . not till everybody else is finished.'

John put his spoon down and stared at his father: 'I'll wait until you're done.'

His mother signalled wildly to him from behind her husband, and pointed to the bedroom. John read her signal, but continued to stare at his father, until Shane's eyes dropped away and he growled, 'It's them young 'uns – I was never set down before me father.'

His head jerked to one side as if he were straining at a bit, and Mary Ellen said quietly, 'Don't be a fool! Get your tea.'

'You want to start, you do!' Shane sprang up from his chair, kicking it to one side as he did so. 'It only needs you to start. Belittling me before the bairns! That's a new tack.' He towered like a swaying mountain of rage over the short unwieldy figure of his wife.

Mary Ellen took no notice, but went on cutting bread on the corner of the oil cloth which covered the table, and the children continued to eat, their eyes fixed on their plates. Only John kept his eyes on his father, and Shane lifted his bloodshot gaze from the top of his wife's head to meet John's again. He stared at his son for a moment, his compressed lips moving in and out. Then he swung round, grabbed his cap from the back of the door and went to go out: but as he reached the back door he paused and cast his infuriated glance back into the kitchen again: 'The next bloody thing'll be: There's the door. . . . Get out!'

He kicked savagely at the box holding the dish of water. There was a clatter and a splash; the door opened and banged, and only the clink of his heel plates becoming fainter down the yard broke the silence in the kitchen.

When they could be heard no more, Mary Ellen moved. She went into the scullery and, bending down with difficulty, began to sop up the water from the hollowed stones.

Dimly, with a mixture of pity and understanding, her thoughts followed her husband . . . Dominic getting drunk on his earnings. . . John coming in from work. Both of them on full time, and him with only two shifts in. He was getting on and he couldn't work like he used to, and the gaffer picked the young and strong 'uns. His strength was failing – she'd noticed that. Drink and hard work and wet clothes that were often frozen to his skin were at last taking their toll. He seemed to retain his strength for one thing alone . . . if only that would slacken with the rest. It must sometime. Then God, let it be soon.

'I'll help you, ma.' Katie was on her knees by the side of her mother.

'No! Get up out of that. That's the only clean pinny you've got!'

'Well I haven't got to go to school the morrer.'

'Doesn't matter. Get up out of that.'

'Here!' – John stood above her – 'let's have it.' He held out his hand for the cloth.

'Oh get out of me road, the both of you!' Her voice pushed them back into the kitchen, and she went on bending and wringing out the cloth. Who did they think did all the other work, the washing, the cooking, the scouring, the humping of the coal, bucket by bucket from the back lane into the coal house because now she couldn't throw the shovelfuls through the hatch?

She partly soothed her irritation by saying to herself: 'You know John's always telling you to leave the coal until he comes in. Yes, but how can I' – her irritation refused to be soothed – 'with people waiting to get their washing out!' She flung the cloth into the bucket. Oh, she felt so tired. If only she could see a way out of all this . . . if only the bairn was born! Yes, that was the main stumbling block. Once that was over everything would be all right; she would cope, as always.

She went into the kitchen again and said to Mick, 'Go and empty the bucket and wash it out, and bring some clean water. . . . See you wash it out, mind!'

Mick's mouth dropped, and he muttered, 'Aw! Why can't she do it?'

He dug Molly in the side, and she cried, 'Look at him, ma! Stop it, our Mick!'

John took the rib of bones from his mouth: 'Your mother spoke to you.'

'Me ear's bad' – Mick placed his hand over the side of his head – 'it's been running all day.'

'You going out to play the night?' John asked.

'Yes.' Mick scowled at the table.

'Then empty the bucket.'

John went on picking his bone, and Mick clattered from the table, while Molly sniggered into her pinny.

'You'll laugh the other side of your face in a minute, my girl,' said Mary Ellen. 'Get those dishes washed.'

'Then can I go out to play?'

'Who you going out to play with in the dark, you're not going to run the streets?'

'We're going in Annie Kelly's wash-house; her ma's had the pot on, and it's warm. Annie has some bits of candle, and we're going to put them in bottles and play houses and dress up.'

'Play houses and dress up,' Mary Ellen muttered to herself. Aloud, she said, 'And burn yourselves to death! ... Well, and only half an hour, mind. And you can take Katie with you.'

'I don't want to go, ma; I've got to do some homework.'

'What!' the mother and John lifted their heads and stared at Katie.

'You got your sums wrong?' asked John, in surprise.

'No.' Katie shook her head and tried to repress a smile, but her eyes grew rounder and her dimples deeper as she looked at their straight faces.

'Then why have you to do homework?' John asked; 'you never have before.'

'I've got to learn something. Miss Llewellyn asked me to . . .'

'She's Miss Llewellyn's pet, everybody says she is.... I hated Miss Llewellyn. I was glad when I was moved up.' Molly wet the tip of her finger on her tongue, and in this way she secured a number of crumbs from the table. When she had put them in her mouth, she swung round on Katie, saying, 'You didn't tell me ma Miss Llewellyn gave you a penny the

day for learning your poetry first, did you? Nelly Crane told me . . . so!'

The smile vanished from Katie's face, and Mary Ellen looked down on her daughter in surprise, the daughter who was the only one of the family to take after her. She could see this child, as she herself once was, plump and bonnie and open-handed. It was unusual for Katie to keep anything.

'Did she give you a penny?' she asked.

Katie neither moved nor spoke, but her eyes, as they looked back into her mother's, became glazed, and she cried out within herself, 'Oh, our Molly! Our Molly!' Now it was all spoilt – the wonderful, wonderful thing she was going to do was spoilt. The Easter egg . . . the real Easter egg in a real box, tied up with a real silk ribbon, was lying in fragments about her! And the picture of herself handing it to Miss Llewellyn was lying with it.

That penny had brought her secret hoard to fivepence. For three weeks she had kept John's Saturday penny and the two halfpennies her mother had given her. Today's surprise penny had meant such a lot, for she had only another month or so during which to get the remainder of the shilling.

Her mother became blotted out by a mist; then she felt John's big hands drawing her to him and pressing her against his knees.

When he bent and whispered in her ear, 'Are you saving up to buy a present?' she experienced the feeling she had felt before that John was in some way connected with God and the priests, because he knew everything.

She nodded her head against the bottom of his waistcoat, and he whispered again, 'Your teacher?'

At this she gasped and pressed her face tightly against him. John exchanged a glance with his mother, and a smile flickered for an instant across her face.

'I think you must be the cleverest lass in the school,' John went on.

Katie brought her head up swiftly and stared at him. 'Why, that's what Miss Llewellyn says! She says . . . she says I'm advanced and I must work at nights and . . . and read a lot.'

'There you are. There you are. Miss Llewellyn knows. She knows when she's on a good thing. What have you got to learn the night?'

'Oh, I already know some of it, the end bit,' she laughed. 'Listen. A man named Shakespeare did it.' She stood back from his knee, threw her long black plaits over her shoulder, joined her hands behind her back, and said:

'There take an inventory of all I have,
To the last penny; 'tis the king's: my role,
And my integrity to heaven is all
I dare now call my own. O Cromwell, Cromwell!
Had I but serv'd my God with half the zeal
I serv'd my king, he would not in mine age
Have left me naked to mine enemies.'

John stared down on her face, which was illuminated by the feel of the strange words on her tongue, and Mary Ellen stared at the back of her dark head. Then their eyes met, reflecting the glow of her words, which were unintelligible to both of them. . . . But Katie had said them . . . their Katie . . . the only one of them who had ever wanted to learn. With a swoop, John lifted her up and held her on his upstretched hands. Her head was within a few inches of the ceiling, and he laughed up at her: 'Will I push you through to Mrs. Flaherty?'

'Eeh! No, John. Eeh, our John, let me down.'

She wriggled on his hands, anxious to get away from the ceiling and the proximity of Mrs. Flaherty and her weird house.

As he lowered her to the floor John laughed, 'You'll soon be cleverer than Mrs. Flaherty, and then everybody will be coming here and saying, "Please, Katie O'Brien, will you write me a letter?" and you'll say, "Yes, if you give me sixpence." '

'Oh, our John, I wouldn't! I wouldn't ask for sixpence.'

He bent down to her and whispered hoarsely, 'Oh yes you would, if it would get your teacher a present.'

She slapped his knee playfully, then turned her face away to hide the tell-tale glow.