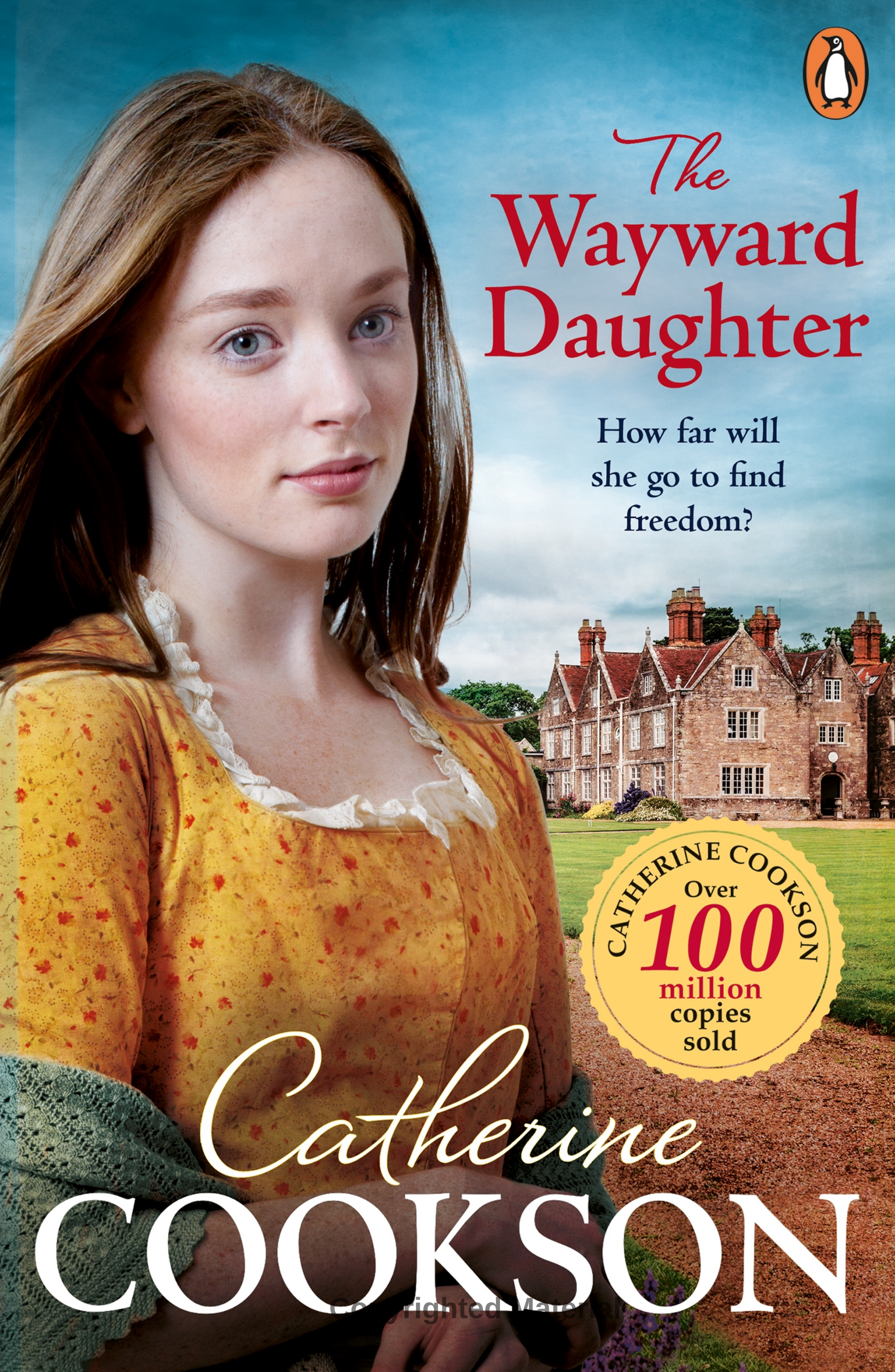

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Dame Catherine Cookson was born in 1906. From an early age Catherine was determined to become a writer. She wrote her first short story when she was eleven, sending it off to the *South Shields Gazette*.

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.

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PART ONE

1

Marie Anne could not believe what her eyes were seeing. From where she stood in the deep shadow of the yew hedge, looking across the narrow sward to where the high summer moon illuminated the two figures leaning against the old willow tree, its ridged bark standing out as if it had been scoured by a penknife, she knew the woman to be her sister Evelyn. She not only knew her, she knew that she disliked her intensely and, too, that Evelyn returned the feeling twofold. And that man with her . . . that man. Oh! no. That was Roger Cranford. He was from The Grange; Mrs Cranford's second cousin, it was said. He had been abroad and was recuperating from a fever and he was so wonderful to look at and to listen to. She had looked at him and had spoken to him and he had been so nice to her. She had thought about him at nights. Oh yes, she had thought about him at nights. More so since last Saturday at the family picnic in The Grange grounds – he had touched her hair and said it was the colour of burnished brass. Evelyn had been there and he had hardly spoken to Evelyn, and yet . . . and yet – the words were ringing loud in her head – they had used her, both of them. Evelyn had told her mother it wasn't safe for her to wander beyond the grounds and by the river because there were gypsies settled in Farmer Harding's field.

On three occasions lately, while out with Evelyn, Roger Cranford had appeared; and once, after she had run to the wall to look over to where the gypsies were encamped, she recalled that when she returned they were standing quite close and laughing.

Her mouth now fell into a gape as she saw her sister's hands go out and cup the man's face. Then her own body jerked as he pulled Evelyn towards him and held her tightly. And when their faces merged she closed her eyes. She couldn't bear it. She couldn't. She couldn't. He had been so nice to her and Evelyn. Oh, how she hated and loathed Evelyn; Evelyn, whom their mother held up to her as a model of decorum.

When she opened her eyes again they were no longer standing against the tree but away from it, and Evelyn's head was strained back as if she were pushing away from him; but she was letting him handle her. Oh Lord! Lord! She couldn't bear it, she couldn't. What should she do? Jump out on them? . . . He . . . he mustn't do that! It was bad, bad: he had his hands inside her summer blouse, which was wide open. She again closed her eyes and now she gripped handfuls of the yew hedge until the crushed leaves stung her palm. She must get away, run back home and tell somebody.

Don't be silly. Don't be silly. This was the feeling that often checked her wild running, especially when she was tired and she still had the urge to rush here and there. Only in The Little Manor, close by, where her grandfather lived, was she allowed uninhibited freedom.

When she next opened her eyes and again made out the pair of them, they were no longer on their feet, and what she witnessed next, but only for a minute or so, was the man without his underclothes and her sister's legs bare up to the thighs, and they were acting like the animals in the fields, like the dogs in the yard.

Picking up the front of her own dress, she turned and ran down the short yew walk into the wood.

She did not, however, make for the house gardens, but cut through a break in the boundary wall and over fields until she came to the river. Here, her first impulse was to plunge in and wash herself clean all over, although without looking at her body. She never wanted to look at her body again, ever, not ever. She stood gasping for air; there was a pain in her chest. Another thing she was certain of, she would never visit the tree-house patch again. At one time there had been a good house up in the branches, that was until Pat fell and broke his arm and Vincent had carried her up the ladder and from there pushed her along a branch. She was six years old then, and he was sixteen, and she always seemed to be wrestling with him. He would start by tickling her, then holding her down on the ground and staring into her face, and always he would call her a brat. But on that particular day she had screamed the wood down and her grandfather had ordered that the tree-house be demolished.

From then on, no-one except herself seemed to visit the small patch of sward and the lone tree. Whenever she went missing it would be assumed she was running wild round the grounds, whereas generally she could have been found sitting with her back against the tree and drawing odd-looking sketches of birds and animals.

Later, when she was sent away to Miss Taggart's school in Hexham, that period too ended with her running away. She hadn't actually run, she had simply caught a train and returned home.

Now they were about to send her away again, but they were still debating as to where. Her mother was for Aunt Martha's in London, there to continue her musical education, because one thing she was good at was playing the piano. From a small child she had picked out tunes without music.

She was about to sit down on the river bank when she was startled by a rustle in the undergrowth somewhere behind her. When she heard actual footsteps, then saw a tall figure slowly loom out of the scrub into a patch of moonlight and move in her direction, she let out a cry that sounded like the squeal of a trapped animal as again she took to her heels and, head down, ran blindly on.

She was not aware that she had tripped, only of being hit on the head by something.

When she came up out of the blackness she did not immediately open her eyes. She was aware only that she was lying on the hard ground. When she attempted to move she groaned aloud from the pain in her foot, but it was when the weird face hung over her that she screamed; and when it spoke to her she sank into the blackness again.

The next thing of which she was conscious was being swung gently from side to side. It would have been a nice sensation, she told herself, if it wasn't for the pain in her head that had moved down to her foot . . .

It was near ten o'clock and the house was still astir when Robert Green, the footman-cum-valet, told Fanny Carter, the second housemaid, that he had been crossing the hall when the knock came on the front door; and that when he opened it there was no-one there. But there was a sheet of paper on the step. The drive seemed to be as bright as day, but he could see no-one; whoever had delivered the note had probably skidded into the bushes. 'Well, there was scribbling on the paper,' he said; 'but . . . well, I couldn't make it out in that light.' He didn't admit that he couldn't read. 'Mr Pickford,' he went on, 'was already in bed, it being his monthly day off, but nevertheless I had to wake him. He wasn't pleased. Well, he wouldn't be, would he? because he'd had a load on. He always does on his day off. Anyway he said he couldn't make out the writing. Well, he would say that, wouldn't he?'

'Yes, of course,' put in Fanny now, and she added pertly, 'I can tell you what you had to do next, Robert, and that was to go out and wake up Peter Crouch to read it. When you think of it, it's funny, you know, isn't it? that there's a yard man, the only one among us who can really read.'

'Well,' said Robert Green, 'that's only because he had it knocked into him in a home which was one step down from the workhouse, if you ask me.'

'Aye, I suppose so; and that's why you all try to take it out of him. But go on, tell me what happened next.'

'Well, he read the note and we couldn't believe it. It said: "Your daughter is lying injured under the wall near the river. She needs help."

Robert was afraid to take it in to the master,' he went on. 'We had to get Mrs Piggott to go quietly upstairs to find out which of the daughters was in. Miss Evelyn was undressing for bed, but Miss Marie Anne's room was empty. I thought the master would have a seizure. I did. I did. As for the mistress, I only heard her speak to him once. "This is final," she said; "something's going to be done this time, d'you hear? Not must be done, but *is* going to be." And I heard him say under his breath, "What about Father?" and her answer to this was, "Father or no Father she's going to be restrained."'

'Poor Miss Mary Anne.'

'You'd better watch out with your *Mary* Anne. You know what the mistress thinks about *Mary* Anne.'

'Yes, I do, and I know what I think about her.'

'Shut your mouth! You know what'll happen one day when it drops open too often.'

'Well, this isn't the end of the world, and if you had any sense you would know it.'

'And if you had any sense, miss, you would realise you won't get better anywhere else: food, togs, leave or anything else.'

'Leave? Talk about leave! One day a month and that starts about one o'clock and you must be back before dark. Don't talk to me about leave.'

He pushed her now, saying, 'Get yourself back into your quarters.'

For answer she snapped at him, 'Don't push me, Robert Green,' before turning and flouncing away.

He stood watching her for a moment the while shaking his head and wondering why he fancied her for, after all, she was only second housemaid and not likely to rise as long as Carrie Jones was about.

Mrs Lena Piggott, the housekeeper, was saying to Carrie Jones, 'Get yourself downstairs quick and tell Bill Winter the doctor wants splints.'

'Splints?' questioned Carrie.

'Yes, I said splints.'

'Well, what size, Mrs Piggot? There's splints of all sizes.'

'Well' – the housekeeper paused, her head bobbing all the while – 'tell him it's for a broken ankle. Get on with you, quick!'

Back in the bedroom, the bustling small body of the housekeeper changed to one of deferential submission as she stood by her mistress and whispered, 'It's being seen to, madam.'

Veronica Lawson made no reply. She was staring at the doctor as he hovered over her troublesome and nerve-aggravating daughter, and she demanded, though quietly now, 'What does she say?'

Doctor John Ridley straightened his back but did not take his eyes off the young girl in the bed as he answered the woman, saying tartly, 'I can't make it out,' yet at the same time he was wondering who it was this young girl thought was filthy, so filthy that she hated her. 'I hate you. You're filthy . . . filthy!' is what she was muttering.

'What is the matter with her . . . I mean, besides her ankle?'

He now turned fully towards the mistress of the house. He didn't like the woman. He was glad she wasn't his patient. This had been an emergency call; he himself usually dealt with the old gentleman at The Little Manor at the far end of the grounds. He got on all right with him, an altogether different person from his son's family who peopled The Manor itself, although he understood the old gentleman was certainly the power behind the throne. 'She has concussion,' he said. 'There is a large lump on the side of her head. She will sleep on and off for the next two or three days, but she'll be in quite a lot of pain from her ankle. It will take some time to heal, and I would advise –' here he paused and looked straight into Mrs Lawson's eyes as he said, 'that she is troubled in no way, I mean that she should be left to rest.'

Veronica Lawson stared back at this young doctor and repeated to herself, Let her rest. Oh yes, she would let her rest. But she herself would be hard at work making arrangements for the bone of contention to be taken out of her life. It was odd, she admitted, that from the day the child was born she had disliked it, and that her dislike had grown with the years. What was more, she could claim that it had been well founded, for if ever there was a changeling in this world it was her daughter . . . her last daughter, her last child, one that was begot through a struggle. She had fought him off before, but never as she had done that night. To give him five live children and two miscarriages was enough payment for being mistress of his house, surely; but then he had to give her the sixth. After the twins went to Canada she had felt that part of the load had been taken from her back, because they too had been a rowdy couple, and if she had been left with only Vincent, Pat and Evelyn, life would have been tolerable. And, indeed, it had been tolerable for a time. Invitations to The Grange had become more frequent, and, of late, to The Hall itself. And these had raised her hopes for Evelyn's future.

Oh, what had gone wrong with Evelyn? It had started when she was eighteen and had become enamoured of that poverty-stricken young lieutenant. She had put a stop to that. But now, at twenty-five, she was still unmarried. Then there was Vincent. Oh, Vincent was a law unto himself. She wondered if Vincent would ever marry. She hoped he would, because the line should go on. The old man was anxious for it; not that he liked Vincent. No. Only too plainly he showed his feelings with regard to Vincent. Now if it had been Pat . . . everybody seemed to like Pat; he had a way with him. She turned and looked at the white face on the pillow. To her it was a strange face. The features were all too large, the eyes, the mouth, even the nose. But the skin was creamy, yet not of the thick kind that would have made the face look heavy; it was more elfin perhaps, strangely elfin, brought about by the shape of the eye sockets. She would have lived outside, if that had been possible. She was never content in the house except, she must admit, when she was at the piano. And wasn't it strange that she was able to play as she did? Even when she got bad reports from the school, they would nevertheless state that she excelled in music. But then, perhaps the piano could be her own salvation if she could persuade Martha in London to take her, which was more than likely, she knew, because Martha would do anything for money.

What a relief her going would be, because no longer would she have to suffer her temper. Oh, that ferocious temper . . .

The doctor startled both the housekeeper and her mistress by first addressing the housekeeper, saying, 'Did you send for those splints? I only require short pieces of wood, not a tree.' Then to Veronica Lawson, and in much the same tone, he said, 'Will you please fetch your husband? I shall need his assistance!'

Whatever answer Veronica Lawson was about to give was checked by a short fit of coughing caused by the warning inside her, which told her not to bandy words with this man, but to make a complaint to Doctor Sutton-Moore about him. In her opinion he was no fit man to be a doctor: apart from lacking in respect towards her, his voice was coarse. He was coarse altogether, with not a single trait of a gentleman about him . . .

James Lawson and the splints arrived almost simultaneously in the bedroom.

As the young doctor examined the flat pieces of wood he did not seem to be listening to the terse tones of the master of the house as he demanded to know why he was needed, yet the answer came firmly and was accompanied by a straight look into the overfed face of James Lawson, 'I am going to give her a drop of chloroform and I'll need help,' said young John Ridley.

'Chloroform? Why chloroform? I thought these splints were for a sprained ankle.'

'Then if you thought that, sir, you've been misinformed. What your daughter is suffering from is a Pott's fracture.'

'A what?' James Lawson's face was screwed up and he repeated, 'A what?'

'I said it is what is known as a Pott's fracture. To put it plainly, it is a very bad break and, as you can imagine, it will be most painful for her when I try to manipulate the bones into place. And by the way' – he now turned to the housekeeper – 'I haven't enough bandages with me. Tear up some linen into two-inch-wide pieces and do it quickly, please.'

James Lawson stared at this young prig of a doctor: who did he think he was talking to, throwing his orders about? Veronica had been right about him: he didn't know his place; and now when he almost barked at his housekeeper as she was about to leave the room, 'Use fresh linen from the bales in the sewing room,' he decided that it was he who should give orders in this house, and be seen giving them. Then making an obeisance with his head towards John Ridley, he said, 'Well! What are you waiting for? Let's get on with it.'

It was a good half hour later when the young doctor stood washing his hands in a bowl of warm water that stood on the wash-hand stand in the corner of the room.

Patrick Lawson was sitting by the head of the bed and gently stroking the limp white hand of his sister where it lay on the top of the eiderdown, while he stared at what to him was a beautiful face, a child-like angelic face. Even so he knew that her character held little of the suggested qualities, for he was aware she was an imp at heart. And he smiled to himself as he thought, that's all she is, an impish young girl. Why can't they see her like that? He turned to the doctor, who was now putting on his coat, for he was saying, 'I've left some laudanum drops there,' and he pointed to a bottle on the side table. 'She'll be in a great deal of pain when she wakes, which won't be until early in the morning, but nevertheless she will need something. Who will be attending her?'

'Oh' – Pat shook his head – 'I don't know as yet, but one of the maids, probably,' and he looked more intently at the young man, who was now picking up his bag as he said, 'Yes, surely.'

It was as if there were doubt in his words that his sister would be seen to, and so he was quick to reassure the young doctor by adding, 'There are plenty of servants in the house. There'll be someone with her night and day.'

'You'll see to it?'

'No.' Pat's tone was high now and a bit stiff. 'The housekeeper will. She'll take her orders from my parents. What makes you think she'll lack the attendance?'

'Nothing. Nothing. Only I wanted to make sure. Anyway, I'll be round some time in the morning. Goodnight to you.'

'Good-night.' Pat's tone had been curt, and he now stared towards the closed door as he thought, he was actually intimating that she would be left unattended. What had given him that idea? Oh, well. He again looked towards the face on the pillow. If his mother had been on her high horse and his father not far behind, they certainly wouldn't have given that young man the impression of parental care. Likely that was it.

When the door opened again, there stood his mother, and she did not speak in a lowered voice as she said, 'You're late in getting back. The trap was sent to the station over an hour ago.'

'There was a hold-up on the line, Mother. The train was late getting in.'

She now walked to the foot of the bed, and her hand gripped the brass knob as she looked up the bed towards her daughter, saying, 'Nice kettle of fish. Another escapade. They've got to stop.' Then, without hesitating, she said to her son, 'How did things go in London?'

'Very well, both with business and socially.'

'Socially? What d'you mean, socially?'

'Just what I say, Mother. I was invited to a garden party at Lord Dilly's; then to a house dance at the Admiral's.'

'Oh.'

'Yes, oh, Mother. I thought about you on both occasions: you'd have been very impressed.'

Her momentary relaxed countenance stiffened again as she said, 'Are you trying to be nasty?'

'I had no intention of being nasty, Mother, but I know how you like these affairs, what stock you set by them; if Evelyn had been there you would've been planning wedding bells. As it was—' he smiled now as he added, 'I could hear them for myself, but they came from so many quarters it was difficult to choose.'

His mother turned from the bed, saying, 'You always had a humble opinion of yourself, Patrick,' and she almost added, And you're getting more like your grandfather every day, which, she hoped, did not augur that she would grow to dislike him too.

'Who's going to look after her?' Pat said.

'What d'you mean?'

'Just what I say, Mother. That young doctor challenged me with the same question that I'm putting to you: who's going to look after her?'

'That young man doesn't know his place. I'm going to report him.'

Pat gave a short laugh now as he said, 'From what I gathered of his personality, that'll be like water off a duck's back to him. Anyway, who are you allotting to her?'

He watched her thinking for a moment, and then she said, 'She won't need anyone at nights, she'll be asleep. I'll inform Mrs Piggot to let the second housemaid, Fanny Carter, take over during the day. That's for the time she'll be in bed.'

'Well, that'll be some time, don't you think?'

'What d'you mean, some time?'

'Well, that doctor said it would be a three-month job.'

'What!' The exclamation was so loud he hissed a warning at her, saying, 'Quiet! Mother. You could waken her, and she'll be in a great deal of pain.' He pointed to a table: 'He's left laudanum for her. Didn't you see him before he left?'

'No, I didn't; and I haven't any wish to see him again.'

He now watched her grip the brass rail of the bed with both hands as she repeated, 'Three months! Three months!'

He said sharply, 'How often should she need those drops?' and nodded to the table.

'I don't know, but Mrs Piggot will know. I understand he spoke to her before he left.'

'By the way,' Pat said, 'where's Evelyn in all this? She should be the one sitting with her.'

'Don't be silly, Pat. You know they spark off each other like tinder. The greater the distance between them the better it is for them both. It always has been that way, you know that.'

'I don't know it, not as you mean it; I only know that Evelyn is ten years older than this child here and in a way has brayed her back as much as you have, Mother.'

'Patrick! How dare you! How dare you say that to me!' The words had come out on a hissed whisper, and now making swiftly for the door, she said, 'I'll talk to your father about your attitude.'

'Oh, don't be silly, Mother. You talk as if you were dealing with a boy. I'm a man and twenty-six years old. Don't forget it, Mother.' And now he moved closer to her and his words were low but definite: 'And remember this: Grandfather still rules the roost here. Father may act as the head of the family firm with Vincent playing the great I am, and then comes me, but I'm the one who keeps that business going, because neither of them have ever conducted one business meeting successfully. They don't know how to handle the staff, never mind competitors. I've wanted to say that for a long time, and this is' – he looked towards the bed now – 'a most awful place to come clean, but there you have it. In future, Mother, remember my age. And now you can go and tell Father, and Vincent too, exactly what I have said, and if they deny it, I'll let them go on the next assignment and see what happens. It's happened before, hasn't it? The trouble with this house, Mother, is that its main purpose is prestige. You and Vincent are breaking your necks every minute of the day to keep it up. And for what? . . . One last thing I'll say, and I'm sorry I have to say this to you: remember that Grandfather isn't dead yet and he's a man capable of making changes. Big changes. Changes that would rock this God-appointed house to its foundations.'

When he turned from her and went to the bed again, she did not move. One hand was clutching the front of her dress, the other was across the lower part of her face and gripping her jaw as if to stop it trembling. As she stared at the back of this handsome son she knew that at this moment she hated him much more than she did her father-in-law, because her father-in-law had never spoken openly to her in this manner. He might have indicated what he thought by loud asides, but not even he had ever probed the core of her before. She almost staggered from the room.

At nine o'clock the next morning Emanuel Latvig Lawson actually burst into Marie Anne's bedroom, only to stop short at the sight of her deadly pale face with the tears streaming down it and her breath coming in gasps as she made an effort to speak to him, saying, 'Oh! Grandpa. Grandpa.'

When he put his arms about her shoulders in order to comfort her he was checked when she let out a high scream.

'She's in great pain, sir.'

He looked across the bed at Fanny Carter and said, 'Has the doctor been?'

'Not this morning, but he's coming later, sir. He was here till late. It's in splints.' She pointed to where a stool had been placed in the bed to keep the clothes off the injured leg, and she added, 'That isn't much good, sir. She should have a wire cage.'

'Yes. Yes, girl, yes. It'll be done. But my pet . . . oh! my pet.' He was stroking the wet face now. 'The things that happen to you. What caused this? They should have let me know last night.'

'No, Grandpa; no. I fell. I was running. I was frightened. I saw someone. I thought they were coming at me and I ran and fell.'

'But you were right down near the river against the wall.'

'Yes. Yes. And I was so frightened, Grandpa; I . . . I must have dreamt there was an ogre after me.'

'An ogre?'

'Yes, because when I recovered from bumping my head I saw this face. It was an ogre's face. But I must have imagined it. They say I've got concussion. What is that, Grandpa?'

'Oh, it just means you've got to lie quiet for a day or two. It's caused by having a bump on the head. But you're not bleeding.' He ran his fingers through the back of her hair and gently stroked her scalp, then repeated, 'No, you're not bleeding.'

'Grandpa.'

'Yes, my child? Yes?'

'It's awful – the pain. I . . . I can't help crying and they say it'll make me stay in bed for a long time. I'll die, Grandpa. I'll die.'

'No, you won't, my dear. No, you won't. I'll be with you as much as I can, and this nice girl will be with you too. Won't you, my dear?'

Fanny hesitated for a moment before answering: she had been pleasantly shocked by being addressed as 'my dear' by the old master, who was known to be a tyrant. 'I could look after her, sir; I looked after my mother for years. She had dropsy. And . . . and may I speak, sir?'

'Yes, girl, go on.'

'Well, they were talking about getting a nurse, but I could nurse her, because I nursed my mother and I was very young then and she was in bed with dropsy for a long time, and there was only me to see to her. You see, my father and the two lads were down the pit and they got killed. There was one other boy, but he died at home, and I saw to her for years before I came here, so I could nurse miss quite well, sir. Yes, I could.'

Fanny's tragic little story told with lightness had stopped Marie Anne's flow of tears. She said between gasps, 'Oh! you poor thing, Fanny. You poor thing.'

'Oh no, miss' – Fanny was smiling broadly now – 'that's all in the past, anyway. I'm glad to be where I am and –' She glanced at the old man as if about to speak, but simply added, 'I'll look after you.'

'There now. There now, my pet. Isn't that good news? You not only have a nurse, you have a storyteller too, one who can compile her life's tragedies into a story. That is an art.'

Fanny didn't know exactly what the old gentleman meant, but she knew it was a compliment. She smiled at him and, tactfully now, she said, 'I'll leave you, sir, for the present. I'll just be in the next room. You can call me if you need me.'

'I'll do that, girl. I'll do that. Thank you.' He nodded, smiling towards her, and when the door had closed on her he looked down at his grand-daughter and said, 'Now there, my dear, is what I would call a non-servant; a servant who could become a good friend, when one is in need.'

'Yes, Grandpa. I've always liked Fanny. She's always been nice to me. But oh, Grandpa, I feel so bad now, sort of ill, and I'm frightened. They say I've got to be here for weeks. I'll die. Yes, I will.'

'Now, stop that. You won't die, and when you're able and get a bit stronger we'll have you out on the long cane chair and pushed through the grounds. You'd like that, wouldn't you?'

She made an effort to smile as she said, 'No, Grandpa; I'd hate it. You know what I'm like when I get into the grounds; I can't walk; I must run.'

'Yes, my dear; you must run. Now why must you always run? This is when the trouble starts. You must run. Anything that happens and you don't like it you run. Are you running away from something?'

She thought a moment, then sniffed loudly as she said, 'I suppose so, Grandpa. I . . . I run because I want to get away from people, people who don't like me.'

'Oh now, now! That's silly . . . to say people don't like you. Everybody—'

'Please! Grandpa, don't. You know and I know – well, we've talked about it, haven't we? – that everybody can't be liked by everybody, or something like that.'

His hand was again on her hair stroking it from her brow, and he said gently, 'Yes, you are right. I yammer on at you as if you were a silly child, and you're not. You're a very wise young girl. But can you tell me why you were running at that time of night as far away as the river bank and Harding's wall?'

She turned her gaze from him now and looked down the bed to where the bedclothes rose to a peak, and her voice was a low mutter as she said, 'No, Grandpa.'

'No? But something made you run that far. Did something make you run right down there?'

'Yes, Grandpa.' It was another whisper.

'And you can't tell me what it was? Answer me one thing. Does it concern someone in this household?'

She hesitated before she said, 'Yes, Grandpa.'

He wanted to ask: a man? or a woman? but there was only one woman who would be outside at night, perhaps taking a stroll, and that would be Evelyn, and she certainly wasn't a girl for taking strolls, not Evelyn. She would get her feet dirty. Perhaps one of the servants? But she wouldn't be so secretive about what had happened, he was sure, if it had been just one of the servants. Could it have been Vincent? He'd had to put a stop to that young man's horseplay many years ago, when he had detected something in it and behind it that both angered and shocked him. It could have been Vincent. But from what he understood, he'd had his friend Harry Stocksfield here last night and they had played tennis earlier in the evening, then a game of billiards. Well, there was no doubt but that he would get to the bottom of it one day, for he had been her confidant since she could crawl onto his knees, seeking love, perhaps to counteract the hate her mother bore her. He had loved her and petted her for all her young life. But why had he imagined that Veronica hated her own daughter? Perhaps that was too strong a word; 'disliked' would have been more fitting – at least, he hoped so. Yet dislike was a first cousin to hate. The awful thing about it was that the child must have recognised the feeling when her mother first pushed her away from her knee. He himself had witnessed it, and it hadn't been a gentle push, but a thrust that had knocked the three-year-old child on to her bottom and made her cry.

She was crying again now, and he took his large silk handkerchief from his breast pocket and gently dried her tears; while doing so he received the answer to the question that he had imagined would take him a long time to discover. It came when he said, 'Has Evelyn been in to see—?' but did not manage to get out 'you?' before her whole body jerked and she let out a cry of pain, exclaiming loudly, 'No! and I don't want to see her. No!'

'All right, my dear. All right. If you don't want to see her, you won't.'

Ah! Evelyn. Evelyn. And out at night. Now why would she have been out at night, and what could she have done to cause this young sprite to run so fast that she went headlong into a wall? Well, well. Here was something that he would ferret out, but quietly. Yes, very quietly. Who was Evelyn seeing now? Since that business some years ago, when she was breaking her neck to be married and her mother put a stop to it, she'd had one or two men in her sights, but each had come to nothing. She had a very off-putting manner: played the grand dame too much, very like her mother. Oh yes, a strong pattern of her mother. As was Vincent, only more so. The three of them, he would say, formed a close triangle both in personality and ambition. But what about his own son, their father? Oh, he'd had to admit a long time ago that he had bred a man full of pomp and no guts. Yet, through him, Pat had come into existence and Pat was as near himself as you could ever hope any man to be. And then there was this little sprite. The unwanted one, the changeling. She was like himself, in both the values she held and her temper. Her temper, like his own, came in spurts, reached ignition point and set the sparks flying. And her values? Well, she had shown she possessed a few of his: she liked fair play, for both animals and men. This she had shown when she horsewhipped Simon Pinner for beating one of the dogs. The dog's sin had been to rake up a whole row of freshly set seeds and Pinner had brought a whip across its hind quarters, making it yelp. So what had she done? Run into the tack room, got another whip and, as it wouldn't have been much use bringing it across the fellow's legs, because he had gaiters and corduroy trousers on, she aimed for his arms where his sleeves were rolled up to the elbow, and he knew about it. He had complained to the house and she had been put on a meagre diet and kept in her room for three days. She had divided the staff fifty-fifty. Then there was Peter Crouch and the horse trough. The voting that time had been ninety in her favour, for Crouch was known to have a hard hand with the horses, especially when breaking one in. On this day, in the yard, she had seen him use a whip on a horse's hindquarters and bring the animal on to its hind legs in protest. The horse had protested and neighed loudly when pulled past the horse trough and was not allowed to drink, so she had yelled at the man. Unfortunately, he had turned towards her with his back towards the trough, and what was easier than to make a rush at him and topple him backwards into it? They had said in the yard that even the horse laughed, but this time it was a black mark against her and she was sent away to school. That had been when the real trouble started. How many times had she run away? and how many times had he secretly welcomed her back? He supposed that at bottom he was to blame for a lot of her unruliness, because she could always come to him and find understanding and sympathy. He said now, 'Is it paining badly, dear?'

'Awful, Grandpa. Awful. I've never had pains like this before, never.'

'Well, that doctor should be here soon and he will give you some medicine to ease the pain. In the meantime, shall I read to you?'

'No, Grandpa.'

'No?'

'No. Just sit with me and hold my hand.'

'I'll do that gladly, dear. I'll do that.'

'I . . . I still feel sleepy. I . . . I might go off to sleep, mind.'

'Well, that would be the best thing, my dear. I'll hold your hand until you do go off to sleep and I'll tell you a funny story that I read the other day. It's about a kangaroo that lost its jump and it had a baby in its pouch, you know, like we've seen in the picture books. Well, the baby had to teach its mother how to jump again. Now you go to sleep and I'll tell you how it began and how it ended.'

And he did, and she went to sleep. All the while he was making up the story about the kangaroo learning to jump, part of his mind was asking, What would Evelyn be doing outside at that time of night? And what had she done that had frightened this child?

2

Ten days later Marie Anne was sitting propped up in bed. Fanny had just removed her breakfast tray and she remarked, ‘By! you look better this morning, miss. More like your old self. Has the pain gone down?’

‘Yes, Fanny. Oh yes, it’s lessened. That’s as long as I don’t move my leg.’ She smiled at the girl, saying, ‘You must have got tired of my screaming, but I couldn’t help it.’

‘Of course not, miss. I bet I’d have beat you at screaming if I’d been in your place. Oh, I would. Oh’ – she straightened the bib of her dress as the door opened – ‘here’s Master Patrick.’

‘Good morning, Fanny.’

‘Good morning, sir.’

‘How’s the patient?’ He had purposely not looked at Marie Anne, but went on, ‘Has she been behaving herself?’

‘Oh yes. She’s been very good, very good indeed.’

Pat then turned a laughing face on Marie Anne, saying, ‘What d’you think of that? Very good indeed. That’s the first time I’ve ever heard anybody say you were very good indeed. Anyway, how goes it?’

‘Oh, I feel better, Pat. My head no longer aches and it’s stopped being muzzy, so I’m going to do some drawing today.’

‘Good for you.’

‘Fanny was going to slip up and get my diary and drawing box from the cupboard in the schoolroom.’

'Will I go now, miss?'

'If you would, please, Fanny.'

'Yes. Yes, I'll do that.'

When they had the room to themselves Marie Anne said excitedly, 'Sit down a minute, Pat. Well . . . I mean, have you got time? I want to hear about the new ship leaving.'

'Oh, you mean the new second-hand one.'

'Is she going out today?'

'Yes, on the three o'clock tide.'

'And she's called *Annabella*?'

'Yes, she's called *Annabella*. And between you and me she looks a picture.'

'What cargo are you sending out?'

'Oh, very little cargo this time. Just bales of linen and lace and stuff that she'll drop off at the islands. It's the live cargo she's taking out and, I hope, she'll bring back that is important.'

'Yes' – she nodded at him – 'the guests. It must be wonderful for them.'

'Well, it is as long as the ship's at the quay. What bothers me is if they hit a storm, for three of the couples have never been to sea before. All I can say about them is poor souls, because I myself have experienced seasickness and prayed to die.'

'Grandpa said it was your idea. He was very funny about it. He says it's a cargo you haven't got to shovel in and it pays you for giving it a rough time. Are they coming back with you? I mean, are they going to make the round voyage?'

'I hope so, dear. Yes I hope that they're all alive to do so.' He laughed gently now as he added, 'Oh, they'll be well looked after. Captain Armitage is a fine man and he has two equally good officers under him, and the crew are mostly old hands and have been with our firm for many years. One of them has been made a steward and another an assistant cook-cum-waiter. It's been great fun arranging it all.'

'You like looking after the ships, don't you, Pat?'

'Yes, dear. But between you and me' – he leant close to her now – 'I should hate to have to go to sea.'

'Really?'

'Really. As I said, I'm always seasick; yet' – he wagged his head now – 'there's nothing I don't know about a ship. I seem to have spent the last seven years – and even before that during my holiday breaks from school, climbing perpendicular ladders, iron ones, mostly – checking the bilges; going over the engine room, the holds, the crew's quarters and, of course, not forgetting the Captain's quarters. Oh yes, one must see that the Captain's quarters has the best chairs, the thickest carpets, and a bunk that induces sleep.'

Marie Anne was laughing now as she said, 'What about the sailing ships? You still have one, haven't you? Have you been up the mast?'

'Oh, that isn't fair of you, Marie Anne, to mention the sailing ships and masts, because next you'll be asking if I have ever been in the crow's nest.'

'Yes' – she bounced her head at him and laughed out loud – 'that's just what I was going to ask.'

'Well' – he flapped his hand impatiently at her – 'you've got me there.'

'Not even when the ship was in harbour?'

'Not even when the ship was in harbour could I have attempted that. How those youngsters hang on to those masts when they're in rough seas, God alone knows. And I mean that when I say God alone knows, because it must be a terrible job, and there's some that take pride in it. Yet, I'm forgetting . . . good gracious I'm forgetting that Grandpa has been in the crow's nest, and at sea too. His own father sent him to sea for three years. Hasn't he told you about that?'

She shook her head.

'Well, his father told him – that's our great-grandfather – that if he wanted to make his living by ships then he should know how to sail them. However, three years was enough, but he certainly learned all right, because he doubled the business.' He could have added here, It must be a great disappointment to him now when his own son is being carried by the old hands of the firm.

When Fanny entered the room Marie Anne noticed she wasn't carrying the box and asked quickly, 'You couldn't find it? It was on the top shelf.'

'Yes. Yes, miss, I found it all right and I . . . I was bringing it downstairs when I met the mistress and she asked me what I had there, and I told her it was your diary and drawing-box, and she told me to take it back.'

Pat was on his feet now. 'Don't worry,' he said; 'I'll go and fetch it. Is it locked?'

'Yes, but the key is over there.' She pointed to the dressing-table. 'It's . . . it's in my handkerchief drawer, the little one at the top.'

As Fanny went towards the dressing-table Pat said, 'Don't bother, Fanny; I'll bring it down and she can unlock it herself. Anyway,' he turned and looked at Marie Anne, saying in a loud whisper, 'you wouldn't want me to read all your secrets, would you?' And she answered in an equally loud whisper, 'I wouldn't mind, not in the least, not you; and I'll tell you what: when you bring the box down I'll open it and let you into one of my secrets; in fact, my only secret.'

'You will? A secret in your box?'

'Yes. And it *is* a secret.'

'Something that you have done?'

'Yes, something I have done.'

'Are you proud of this something?'

'Well' – she turned her head away from him – 'in a way; yes, in one way, and in another I . . . I feel it's cruel.'

'Cruel? You're going to show me a cruel secret? I am intrigued, really I am. Here I go, hying for Pandora's box.' He did a side-step that was part of a jig and caused Fanny to giggle, and when the door closed after him she exclaimed to Marie Anne, 'He's a lad and a half is Master Patrick. Well, I mean, miss, he's . . . oh' – she tossed her head – 'I can say it to you, I think he's the best of the bunch.'

'I do too, Fanny. Yes, I do too.'

The best of the bunch was running up the back stairs now and he was still running when he crossed the landing and thrust open the schoolroom door, there to startle his mother, who was standing by the long ink-stained table with the open brown box in front of her and to the side a scattered number of drawings, and in her hand an open diary. This she immediately closed and held tightly to her breast as she demanded, 'What d'you want?'

Pat moved slowly towards her. He looked at the box before bringing down the open lid and fingering the broken lock; then he looked at his mother and said, 'You couldn't wait. You had to force it.'

He glanced along the table now to where the small, worn, sharp-edged poker was lying, and he asked a simple question. 'Why? It held only a child's diary and apparently—' he now flicked the number of drawings to one side, then hesitated and picked one up and stared at it for a moment before looking at her, and she answered his look with, 'Yes. Yes, you might well stare. Did you ever see anything so inhuman?'

He now spread out the rest of the sheets of paper and, after scanning them, he turned to her again, saying, 'Inhuman? D'you realise what these are?'

'Yes, I realise what they are. They're drawings of us, hideous drawings of us.'

'Mother . . . they are caricatures. Really splendid drawings. She has caught us all with a few strokes. An artist would say they're a work of genius for a fourteen-year-old girl.'

'A work of genius!' Her hand went out and grabbed up a sheet, which she thrust at him, saying, 'Look at that! That is supposed to be me!'

The woman depicted was definitely his mother, but she was really grotesque. The body was long and thin; the face was long and thin, but it was the pencilled features that showed the hard ugliness of the woman as he knew Marie Anne must see her: the eyes were like pinpoints; the nose like a snout; the mouth like a snarling dog's. It was really a terrible portrayal. He was silent for a moment before he turned to her again, saying quietly, 'You have only yourself to blame for making her see you in this light.' She made no answer, and he added, 'Why do you feel like you do about her?'

She now fingered the book she was holding in her hands. The action looked as if she wanted to crush it; and then she muttered, 'I can't help it. She . . . she was never like an ordinary child. Not . . . not quite human. Wild. You know she was wild, running here and there. The looks of her.'

'Well, everyone in the family says she resembles the twins, and from what I remember of them they were wild enough. Mad Hatters. But they got on your nerves, didn't they? And you must admit, Mother, you were very glad when they decided they were going to try their luck in Canada. It came as a bombshell to Father, and to Grandfather too; but you took it in your stride, didn't you, because you were glad to be rid of them. Their escapades were too much for you. And of course there were two of them and you had always found them difficult to handle. But she is different; she was a little girl, a baby.'

She rounded on him now and her words came from between her teeth as she cried, 'A baby I never wanted!

A baby that came through a physical fight. I had five children growing up fast and I'd had two miscarriages. I was having no more; and Evelyn was ten at the time, remember. Begetting was over and done with as far as I was concerned and he knew this, yet he still came to my bed. That was why I had our rooms moved to the east wing so that you children would not hear the narration that went on from time to time when he couldn't have his way.'

Rather sadly, Pat put in, 'Oh, we heard all right, Mother, at least the shouting, but we couldn't make out what was being said, though Marie Anne did.'

'She couldn't have; she was in the other wing.'

'Not always. Remember the fracas on the night she was found sitting at the top of the lime tree?' He pointed to the window. 'After she was house-bound on your orders for some misdemeanour, she would come up here at all hours, climb through the window and on to a branch and sit in the fork at the top of the trunk. That was until Vincent discovered her escapade and shook a branch so violently that she had to cling on for dear life, and she used her lungs to such an extent that her screams carried to The Little Manor and brought Grandfather post-haste. Then you ordered the windows to be fastened, and as a further punishment she was sent off to school again. But did you do anything to Vincent? No, you didn't; but Grandpa did: he put the fear of God into him. Threatened to send him to sea. Of course, you did something then. You actually pleaded your son's cause. It was only a bit of fun, you said. But all this did not stop Marie Anne, whenever she was home, from coming up here and doing her drawings in secret.

'One night she heard voices coming from there.' He now pointed to the empty fireplace with its high iron grate, and when his mother turned and looked at it she said, 'Coming from where?'

'The fireplace, Mother, the fireplace. You didn't know that this chimney was a branch off the one in your bedroom, did you? All the chimneys in this house branch, you know. The tale of a boy-sweep being stuck up one and dying there is really true. Anyway she heard you and Father going at it quite clearly. I heard you myself.'

He saw that her mouth had dropped into a gape, and he nodded at her, saying, 'I knew of her night visits to the schoolroom, and I also knew that her loving brother Vincent had found out and would do something to get her into trouble. So I came up this night, and there she was sitting on the fender listening. And I sat with her, and I listened too, at least for a minute or so. Then I pulled her away and took her down to my room, where she cried her eyes out. I tried to tell her it was nothing, that fathers and mothers always fought; but that wasn't what had made her cry. It was the fact that you had been talking about her and called her a mad thing and that she was a misery to you. And she repeated practically your own words of a moment ago, that she was born in struggle and bitterness and that she had caused nothing but trouble since she had been born.'

'Oh, dear God.' The words came as a murmur, and because he seemed to recognise a softening, he said quietly, 'Can't you try to love her? At least be affectionate to her in some small way?' And then he was saddened still further with her reply, for, shaking her head slowly, she said, 'I can't. I can't. Because there's something about her. The very look of her repels me. I can't imagine that I gave birth to her. I've tried. Yes, believe me, Pat, I've tried. Years ago I tried. But then I found it was hopeless. She seemed to oppose me at every turn. We were enemies, as it were, from the beginning.'

'Oh, Mother.' He went to her now and put his arm around her shoulders. 'I'm sorry, dead sorry that you feel this way, because if you had got to know the other side of her, and there is another side . . . she's a sweet child really—'

'Oh, Pat!' The words were derisive. 'Sweet, d'you say, and drawing things like that?' She pointed to the papers on the table.

He now picked up another drawing which caused him to laugh and say, 'Well, look at that! That's me. My hair's standing on end because I always run my fingers through it; my eyes are closed, my mouth wide agape, all my teeth showing. That's how I must look when I'm laughing, probably when I'm having a great belly laugh, I should say. Don't you see?'

'No, I don't.' She shrugged. Then opening the book that was still in her hands, she said, 'These writings, they're like her, they're wild. This should be burned. I'll burn it.'

'You'll do nothing of the sort, Mother.' He was actually struggling with her. 'Give me it here!'

They were standing apart now, the book in his hands, and he said, 'If there's anything bad in it, all right, I'll destroy it myself, but meanwhile she must have some pastime, such as her drawing and writing, because she's going to be in that bed for some weeks still.'

She stared at him and there was no softening of her gaze; then she turned and was halfway towards the door when, swinging round, she said, 'Well, the minute she's out of that bed she's for London and Aunt Martha's. I'm arranging it.'

'What!'

'I said, she's for London and Aunt Martha's. She can have a musical career up there. I admit she's good at that. Aunt Martha wants a companion and she's agreed to talk it over. I'm going up there next week.'

He said nothing. What was there to say? Aunt Martha's. That gloomy house in one of the dead areas of London. He had called on Aunt Martha during one of his visits to

London, but only the once. Poor Marie Anne. But yet, if she was going to have a musical career she wouldn't spend much time in that house; she'd be at a school of sorts. And anything would be preferable to the life she had to lead here. Poor Marie Anne.

As he gathered up the drawings he became more amazed at the expertness of the resemblances. It proved one thing to him: she knew people. She could get behind their façade. There was a frightful drawing of Vincent. His face really looked evil but, almost obliterating it, were two hands, the fingers thick and podgy, but all ending in vicious looking claws. He shook his head in amazement. She knew all about Vincent's hands: he was forever pawing her, and not only pawing but punching, all under the guise of playing with her. At times he thought that if anybody's character needed clarifying it was Vincent's.

He paused as he picked up the last drawing. It was a caricature of his grandfather. She had given him a small body with an impish face, but the main feature of the drawing was the two arms outstretched as if to embrace. Oh yes, that child - or young girl as she was now - was, he must admit, as his mother plainly said, possessed of some unusual quality - and it could create love or hate. He imagined that the *Spectator* or *Punch* would jump at sketches like these. There were some prominent caricaturists with whose work these sketches could surely hold their own. They needed only sharp captions. Dear, dear, what was to become of her.

He pressed the drawings gently into the bottom of the box, put the diary on top, then closed the lid; he did not immediately lift up the box, but stood looking at it. How was he going to get over the lock being wrenched open? All he could do was say he found it like that. Of course, she would know immediately who had done it, her mother having stopped Fanny from bringing it downstairs. Well, he had to get to work.

He picked up the box and hurried from the room. In the bedroom, he handed it to Marie Anne, saying, 'That's how I found it; but I must go now; the trap's waiting.' Then he added, 'Traps wait but trains don't. Bye-bye dear.' He bent and went to kiss her on the brow, but her hand checked his face and her large dark eyes in their oval sockets stared into his before she said, 'Can't I have anything of my own?'

'It is your own, dear, all your own, and I want to talk to you, particularly about your drawings. They're marvellous.'

'You think so, Pat?'

'Yes. Yes, I do, dear. You have a great talent there. As I said, we'll talk about it when I get back.' He now kissed her brow, then patted her cheek, before hurrying from the room.

Fanny Carter was now standing by the bedside looking at the box lid, and she murmured, 'I couldn't help it, miss; I had to take it back.'

'Of course you had, Fanny. Of course you had.'

'You'll have to have a new lock on it.'

'It won't matter; I won't leave my diary in it again.'

But where would she leave it in the future? because she meant to go on writing in her diary, for it was her only means of working out troubled thoughts.

Had her mother had time to read what she had written about her? Oh, she hoped not, because, as nasty as she was, she didn't want to hurt her, and people could be hurt by words more than blows. She knew that, for she seemed to have been experiencing the pain of words all her life, and the pain of love, withheld love. Her mother had love to give, but she had given it to Evelyn and Vincent and Pat. Never to her. No, never. Nor had her father. Oh no. She couldn't remember receiving a kind word from her father. What she received from him was silence or long strange looks. He rarely spoke to her, although there was one occasion when she had been playing the piano she discovered that he had been listening, and when she had turned to him hoping for praise, his expression and the movement of his head suggested amazement. But he had only smiled at her.

She now turned the pages of her diary until she came to a page headed 'Hands', and beneath it she had written:

Hands can talk, talk in all ways.

Mr Smith in the village, he cannot hear, but he talks with his hands.

Grandpa's hands talk: when they stroke my hair or hold me close they talk loudly. Pat's hands talk. They are smiling hands, they make you laugh. But Vincent's hands are horrible, and Evelyn's are cold; Mother's hands are pushing hands, pushing me in the back, pushing my shoulders, pushing my chest; mostly with two fingers she pushes my chest. Always pushing, pushing me away, pushing and pulling. No, not pulling; she never pulls me towards her. But it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter, for when I run I forget about everything.

She stopped reading and looked down the bed to the wire cage shielding her foot and leg, and – she almost whimpered to herself – will I ever be able to run again? Doctor Sutton-Moore said I will, but . . . but, as Grandpa has said about him, he's a sweet-talk pillow doctor, made to measure for delicate ladies, but he lets the poor cure themselves.

He had made her laugh when he said that the other day. At times he said such funny things. But she knew what he meant in this case; for her grandfather had also pointed out that Doctor Ridley wasn't very popular in certain houses; he was too blunt; but give him Doctor Ridley any time.

Yes, and give her Doctor Ridley too. She liked him, even though he rarely smiled. But he had yesterday when, after straightening her foot, and she had winced without crying out, he had said, 'We're doing fine, fine.' She would have liked to have talked with him, but Mrs Piggott was in the room. Mrs Piggott was a fussy body: she straightened straight counterpanes; she rearranged the already arranged articles on the dressing-table; she dampened her finger and thumb in her mouth and ran them down the straight folds of the curtains. What she didn't do was talk to her. Somehow she felt the little woman was afraid to talk to her. That was another thing her thoughts dwelt on: some of the servants never talked to her except to repeat an order sent by their mistress. Not like Fanny or Carrie or some of the yard men; and the footman, too, was nice. He had once called her a little card. She thought that was a funny name to give her: little card. She didn't ask anyone what it meant but she knew it wasn't nasty, because he had smiled as he said it.

Fanny was speaking to her again, saying, 'I could send the box down to the carpenter, miss. I'm sure he or one of the men could fix the lock.'

She considered a moment, then said, 'Oh, it doesn't matter, Fanny; I'll not be needing it any more.'

'But where will you put your diary, miss?' There was a note of conspiracy in Fanny's voice. 'There's no place here you can hide it.'

She answered quietly, 'It's all right, Fanny; I know what I'm going to do. I'll give it to my grandpa and he'll put it in his safe.' She was sure he wouldn't mind it taking up space in his safe, not after she had explained to him there were lots of things she might forget as she grew older. And she didn't want ever to forget them, because what she had said in this book had been about her life among the people of this house. This house that she should have looked upon as her home but which was, at times, more like a cage. And, as she had already written somewhere in the book, it was indeed a cage filled with different birds, with the big ones mostly cruel.

3

'You must go in and see her; I understand the servants are talking. If Vincent can go in, you can.'

'What did she say to Vincent?'

'She was very civil, very proper. He asked her how she was and she said very well. He asked if her leg was painful, and she answered, "Not any more unless I jerk it." And not even when he said, "It's taken a broken leg to clip your wings," did she round on him as she would have done at one time. And yes, she was indeed civil to him. We must face up to the fact that he has teased her unmercifully for years. I won't have it said that he was rough with her. More likely she was rough with him.'

'Yes, I can well believe that' – Evelyn nodded at her mother – 'because he didn't get the two scratches on his face from the cat, as he made out at the time.'

'Well, yes; but all that has long passed now. None of you are children any more. Not even her, for she'll be fifteen shortly. Well, are you coming? You just need to ask her how she is and it will stop those imbecile tongues wagging below stairs. So come along with you, let's get it over.'

But here Veronica paused and, turning back to her daughter, she said, 'While I'm on, I may as well tell you your father is annoyed at your being late down for breakfast so often now. Three times last week you were late.'

'I had a cold, Mother. You know I had.'

'You hadn't a cold on Sunday when you missed the service, nor the Sunday before. It isn't very much he asks of you; you could please him in this one thing, surely.'

Evelyn Lawson stared at her mother, thinking, as she often did, that she was an incredible woman: she must never see herself as she really was. Asking her to please her father; she should ask herself if she ever did anything to please her husband. She had once heard her grandfather yell at her father, 'Why didn't you keep your mistress, man?' She did not catch her father's reply, only her grandfather's words again: 'Oh, don't give me that, bad for business if it ever came out. Flannagan and Harris have had their women on the side for years and they haven't lost the respect of the office or those on the floor. In fact they're better thought of. You're gutless, man, gutless.'

She had always been sorry for her father. More so as the years had gone on and she had become wise in the way of men and realised that he quenched his appetites through eating, and that he now had to wear a corset to keep his belly in.

Obediently, she followed her mother to Marie Anne's room. And there she was, sitting up in bed, laughing, apparently at something the maid had said.

The sisters stared at each other. From Evelyn's standing position and Marie Anne's sitting upright, their faces were almost on a level.

'Are you feeling better?' Evelyn's voice sounded toneless, and it brought no response from Marie Anne. She wasn't seeing her sister as she appeared at this moment, but lying on the ground with her thighs exposed.

'Oh, we've lost our tongue again, have we?' Evelyn turned and glanced towards her mother, as if to say, what did I tell you?

'Well, you'll likely find it, together with your legs, when you take to your mad-hare running and fighting stone walls.' There was a thin smile on Evelyn's face now as she added, 'It's a wonder you haven't broken your neck before now.'

Marie Anne's arm swung wide and the flat of her hand caught the side of Evelyn's face, causing her to emit a cry as she reeled back.

Now there was pandemonium in the room; Marie Anne's voice was screaming, 'You're filthy! You're dirty! You caused me to break my leg! I saw you—' which was cut off by her mother's even higher scream of, 'Be quiet, girl! Quiet! And *you*, get out! Get out!' This was to Fanny Carter, as she grabbed the girl and thrust her through the doorway. Then banging the door shut she turned to Evelyn, who was leaning heavily on the bottom rail of the bed, her face white, her eyes, showing something akin to terror, fixed on Marie Anne, who now was lying back on her pillows, panting as if she had indeed been running.

Veronica Lawson was also staring at Marie Anne. She had the desire to grip her shoulders and shake the life out of her; but there was something here she must get to the bottom of. Bending slightly towards Marie Anne and her voice a low hiss, she said, 'How dare you strike your sister and say such dreadful things! What did you mean? You're mad, girl, you're mad!'

Marie Anne backed away from the close proximity of the face glaring at her, and although her voice was shaking it held no fear of her mother, for she spat the words back at her: 'I am neither mad nor stupid, Mother. Ask her what I mean and ask her why you've had to force her to come and see me now. I've been in this bed for weeks and she dare not face me, for she wasn't sure whether or not I had found out, because I had kept quiet. Now I know why you hate me, and through that I have grown to hate you. D'you hear? I hate you.' She now beat her doubled fist on the eiderdown and, the tears springing from her eyes, she cried, 'She caused me to break my leg that night, but I would never have spoken of it. No, I never would if she had come in here this morning and spoken to me in a kindly fashion. But no, she spoke to me as she always has done, in that haughty tone, looking down on me as if I didn't belong here. And I don't know how many times over the years she has used your own words to me, telling me that I would end up in a home. Well, I can tell you both now,' her head nodded from one to the other, 'at times, any home would be preferable to this one; and if it hadn't been for Grandpa and Pat I might definitely have gone mad knowing that I wasn't wanted and had never been wanted. I was outside the family, something that had to be put up with, suffered.'

Veronica Lawson stared dumbfounded at her daughter. The girl had never before spoken out like this. Her response to her treatment had been tantrums and running away. Always running away. But now she had to recognise that here was someone who could think for herself, and as such she would become harder to handle in the years ahead, more so than had been the odd wayward child. She'd have to go to Aunt Martha's and get the matter settled there. Oh yes, yes. And then there was this other business with Evelyn. Dear God! what was that about? She had been up to something . . . Oh, not Evelyn, surely.

Without further words, she turned from the bed and, facing Evelyn, she said, 'Come along.'

Evelyn had a hand to her cheek. That slap had been a blow which would leave a mark. Well, what did it matter? When her mother got to the bottom of this, God knows what would happen. There was only one thing certain in her mind. If Roger could find a way to take her with him, she would go; but she hadn't seen him for nearly a week and she was becoming worried.

When her mother's hand gripped her arm, she muttered, 'All right. All right,' but as she followed her to the door she cast a look on Marie Anne, which, had it been possible, would have killed her there and then . . .

In Veronica's bedroom, her mother actually thrust her into a chair, exclaiming, 'What's all this about? She saw you with a man, didn't she? Who? Who was it? I . . . I can't believe it. To my knowledge, you haven't been out; it must have been after dark. Look. Tell me. What's it all about?'

Seeming to have recovered herself completely now, Evelyn pushed at her mother and got to her feet, saying, 'Yes, Mother; I was with a man, and it was at night because, tell me, what other time have I to meet anyone whom you would approve of and not frighten away by thrusting marriage at him before he is hardly in the door. So, yes, I have been seeing a man on my own,' and now she stressed, 'of my own choosing, d'you hear? And at night. And I am no longer a girl, Mother; I am nearly twenty-five years old and should have been married these last five years and had a family now, so don't come heavy-handed with me any more. I dislike that girl. I've never considered her to be my sister, and who's to blame for that?'

Veronica Lawson was amazed and appalled by this onslaught for, if she had shown love and affection to any of her children, it was to this daughter whom she saw as being so like herself in many ways. It did not strike her that, in fact, her daughter was taking a course of action similar to that which she herself would have taken under the circumstances, yet she came back with, 'How dare you speak to me like that, Evelyn! You, above all people. Even your father has never—'

'Oh, please! don't bring in Father, or I might say something I'll be really sorry for. Anyway, now you know. I am seeing a man—'

She got no further, for her mother came at her again, her voice a hoarse whisper now, 'To judge by what your sister spewed at you, you weren't only seeing him but lying with him.'

When this brought no response whatever from Evelyn and she had to watch her turn away disdainfully and stare out of the window, she almost whimpered, 'My God! My God! girl' – she put her hand to her head – 'that maid, she heard every word. She . . . she'll have to be stopped. Look at me. D'you hear what I said? That maid heard—'

'Yes, Mother, I heard every word you said, and the maid heard too, as well as every word that Marie Anne said and what she did, and likely she is downstairs now spreading the news.'

'Well, don't you realise what that could mean?'

'If you use your usual tactics, Mother, you will now speak to the girl, and should she repeat anything she saw or heard she'll be made out to be a liar. But not dismissed. Oh no; you won't be foolish enough to do that.'

Veronica Lawson could not believe her ears, nor could she take in the fact that this woman, because she *was* a woman, standing by the window looking at her with almost dislike, was her daughter. But she was right about the maid. My God! Yes. She must see to that. She almost ran from the room. The next minute she was pulling the cord in her own room to summon the housekeeper . . .

At that moment, Fanny Carter was standing in the butler's pantry nodding at Robert Green, as she finished, 'I tell you, those were the words she actually said, "You're filthy! You're dirty! You caused me to break my leg. I saw you." And then she took her hand and she gave her a wallop across the face that sent Miss Evelyn flying. Eeh! you should have heard them, the noise and the shouting. I knew that the mistress was terrified I should hear more, and she practically threw me out of the room. I'm telling you. Marie Anne must have seen something that shocked her and made her run, gallop, even, for her to go into a stone wall. Poor girl. I've always been sorry for that one.'

Now bending towards her, Robert Green said, 'Well, look. You'd better keep this to yourself, because if you make your mouth go you could lose your job. They're capable of doing anything to hush up a scandal. And I'll tell you this, Fanny . . . you know Katie Roberts along at The Little Manor? Well, I understand that Maggie Makepeace told her if she didn't keep her mouth shut she would be sent packing, because she had said that she saw Miss Evelyn running towards the wood twice in one week. You know, she's courting Bobby Talbot, the river man. Well, she must have been out on the sly and old Maggie Makepeace got wind of it and scudded her ears, supposedly not for being out but for saying that she had seen Miss Evelyn in the wood, and Katie came back at the old girl and dared to say she hadn't only seen her once, she had seen her twice, the second time with a man. Although she couldn't tell who it was, she said if *she* saw them, Bobby Talbot must have, an' all. Anyway, keep your mouth shut. If there's any bad news to break here, let it be from The Little Manor, not this house.'

'Don't be silly.' Fanny pushed him. 'What have I been telling you? Miss Marie Anne yelled it out.'

'Yes. Aye, well. But go on, get yourself away. I'll see you later tonight, if I can. You'd better not let the boss lady find you round here.'

Fanny had just reached the end of the staff quarters when the boss lady herself appeared, saying, 'What're you doing? You're supposed to be upstairs.'

'I . . . I was looking for . . . I was looking for Carrie, Mrs Piggott.'

'Well, you won't find Carrie down here at this time in the morning, girl. Anyway, the mistress wants to see you immediately. Not back in the bedroom, but in her office. What have you been up to?'

'Nothing, Mrs Piggott. It was the mistress who sent me out of the bedroom.'

'Why? Why did she send you out of the bedroom? You're supposed to be looking after Miss Marie Anne.'