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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- Colour Blind
- Maggie Rowan
- Rooney
- The Menagerie
- Slinky Jane
- Fanny McBride
- Fenwick Houses
- Heritage of Folly
- The Garment
- The Fen Tiger
- A Wife's Devotion (previously *The Blind Miller*)
- House of Men
- Hannah Massey
- The Long Corridor
- The Unbaited Trap
- Katie Mullholland's Journey (previously *Katie Mullholland*)
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- Tilly Trotter Wed
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- The Whip
- Hamilton
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Catherine Cookson

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For Mr R. G. Wilson
Another nice bloke

CONTENTS

Dig in the soil of a quiet
man and you unearth the savage.

BOOK ONE

HARRY BLENHEIM

He sat encased in frozen terror aware of people passing him and the looks they cast on him as they went into the Court. The terror had been rising in him since he awoke at four o'clock this morning. It had brought him out in sweats, hot and blush-making like a woman in the menopause; it had dropped him into baths of cold perspiration where his teeth chattered and he had to grip the bed head to steady himself. But now all his fear was at a standstill; it had frozen during this waiting period and he was grateful even for this respite because, gathering force as it had done since he entered the Court-house, he knew that if it rose just a little further he would go berserk.

His eyes unblinking, he stared before him and again asked himself why he was here, how had it come about? How had it happened to him, Harry Blenheim? He was a nice man, was Harry Blenheim. He didn't have to be big-headed to know that was the general opinion of him. It had been his own opinion up till a few months ago, at which time he had been full of self-respect.

When he looked in the mirror he liked what he saw; not exactly a good-looking fellow, but, as his wife had once said in her far back loving, laughing days, his was a face full of character, with the kindest brown eyes God ever made. And then there was his voice, deep, what they called musical. And it was musical, because he could sing. It was the singing that had made him a successful business man. It was odd when you came to think about it, but it was true. They had taken him out of the Sunday school and put him in the choir because of his voice, and in the choir he had chummed up with Tony Rippon, and that was something, because the Rippons were

from the top end of Fellburn and he was from the bottom end.

When his voice broke, it broke well and he became a tenor. It was after he had sung solo with the church choir on the television that Esther Rippon had singled him out. He hadn't taken to her very much at first and nothing might have come of it, but Tony died and she seemed inconsolable.

Mr and Mrs Rippon hadn't been elated when he and Esther became engaged. He was working then as a junior clerk in the Rates Department and his prospects, although secure, were very, very dull. And that was how Mr Rippon saw them too, and, as he said, something would have to be done. And he did something; he got him set on in the firm of Peamarsh, of which he was then a junior director.

On the face of it Peamarsh's was a small wholesale chemists firm, but once Harry entered it he realised it had a finger in every pie in Fellburn. There were five directors, and they were all out to monopolise, most of all their youngest director, Mr Rippon.

Harry had never really liked Mr Rippon, even before he married his daughter. As for Mrs Rippon, he whole-heartedly disliked her. He saw her as a psalm-singing, sanctimonious prig, and he only hoped Esther wouldn't take after her. Esther didn't; at least not altogether.

Esther was nineteen and he was twenty when they were married and life, even with its pinpricks in the form of Mr Rippon, promised good. And for sixteen years it kept its promise, more or less, until hell had opened and swallowed him. But hell had been a private hell. The public had only got wind of it a month ago when he had tried to kill his father-in-law. He hadn't quite succeeded. He wished he had. Knowing what the consequences would be, he still wished he had.

He blinked once and looked around the wide corridor as if in search of a friendly face. Even at this moment he would have been glad to see Esther, but Esther was the last person he was likely to see. Nor would he be likely to see his sons, John and Terry. Then there was Gail . . . Oh! Oh, Gail.

He hadn't seen his daughter for weeks. Esther had packed her off somewhere, and she said that if it lay with her he would never clap eyes on Gail again.

Esther blamed him; she blamed him for it all, not her father, oh no, not her father, that dirty old licentious beast . . . But that was exactly what Esther had called him, himself, wasn't it? Not a dirty old licentious beast, just a dirty licentious beast. Well, he wouldn't have that. He told her he wouldn't have that; what he had done didn't deserve that title. He had made a mistake as many a man before him. He had been weak, and he had paid for his weakness. He was paying for his weakness at this moment as he waited for his name to be called to be brought to justice for what, as one paper stated, was the worst case of its kind Fellburn had ever known.

'It shouldn't be long now.'

He looked at his solicitor who had just moved away from the barrister. His face wasn't friendly. A month ago he had called him Peter and he had been Harry to him. They were both members of the Round Table; they played golf together, and it was they who saw to the organising, each Christmas, of some stunt for bringing in money for parcels for the old folks. They had been buddies, Peter Thompson and he, yet when the balloon went up Peter had been reluctant to have anything to do with the case.

Nor had he any hope of leniency from the judge. Callow was one of the old school. He wasn't nicknamed Horse-whip Callow for nothing. At a talk he had given to the Round Table dinner he had indicated that a great deal of crime was due to people moving out of their class. 'And don't let us forget it,' he had said; 'there is as much class distinction today as there ever was, and rightly so.' As one member had remarked later, old Callow was a ghetto-minded old sod, and if he had his way no one would be let out of his district.

Harry knew that he himself had been let out of his district so to speak. Let out from the bottom end of the town and into the top end, and that people were remembering. It didn't do, you see; leopards didn't change their spots. And it wasn't only the people from the top end who were remembering, those from the bottom end were, too. That's what you got for being an upstart and trying to climb; they said, 'But it wasn't really his fault, it was his grannie's. Mary O'Toole was a pusher. She had pushed him into the choir and then into the rate office,

and he should have had the sense to be grateful and not try his luck.'

But there were two from Bog's End who didn't think like this: Janet Dunn and her son, Robbie. And, as if his thoughts had conjured them up out of the air, he saw them standing before him. They said nothing, neither of them, they just stared at him. And he returned their stare, his gratitude for their presence making him speechless. When young Robbie put his hand out and touched his shoulder he wanted to grab it and hold it, as he would have held John's or Terry's had they been there with him at this moment, but he resisted the impulse and just continued to stare gratefully at Janet as her eyes asked, 'How did this happen to you, how?' And as if she had spoken aloud he shook his head slowly. He didn't know, he didn't know, it was just one of those things that started at an office party.

ONE

It was snowing heavily when he reached home. At the top of the drive the house greeted him with lights in all the downstairs windows. He could see the Christmas tree in the drawing-room. It was bare yet; they would start decorating it tomorrow.

The snow excited him. He hoped it would lie over Christmas; it was some years since they had had a real white Christmas. He went to the boot and took out a largish parcel and wondered if he would get it into the house without Gail spotting him.

When he opened the front door he was met by warmth and the sound of voices coming from different directions, Janet's from the kitchen raised in protest against Terry—he must be pinching something again—John's voice from somewhere in the cellar, yelling, 'Mother! Mother! I can't find them. What did you say they were in?' Then Esther coming from the morning-room and looking towards him, and lifting her hand in greeting before she shouted down to the floor, 'The old green box in the corner, the right hand side of the boiler.'

He was about to slip into the cloakroom and deposit the parcel until he could take it upstairs when a cry from the landing brought his gaze upwards, and there stood Gail. She stood poised for a moment; then, taking the stairs two at a time, she was in front of him before he could escape. 'Hold on! Hold on! You'll have me over, you big horse.'

As she reached up and kissed him she cried, 'It's snowing, it's snowing and it's going to lie.'

'All right, all right. It's snowing and it's going to lie. Let me get my things off.'

'What's that?' she was whispering. 'Coo. It's a big parcel. Who's it for? Me?' She dug her finger between her small

breasts, and he said, 'You! Of course not.' Then bending his head quickly down to her he whispered, 'Your mother.'

'Oh, what is it?'

'I'm not telling you; you'll give the show away.'

'Honest, I won't, I won't.'

'It's a set of frying pans.'

'Oh, Dad!' She pushed him, and he drew her to the side of the curtain that bordered the passage leading to the loggia and, his voice low, he said, 'Do you think you could get it up into the attic without her seeing?'

'Leave it to me,' she said. 'You do an evasive tactic and leave it to me.'

He left it to her to see that she hid her own Christmas box. He could imagine her reactions on Christmas morning when she saw the fitted dressing case that she had admired in Pomphreys months ago. Esther had been against him getting it. She considered it too sophisticated for a girl of fifteen, but he considered that Gail needed something sophisticated to help her over her present stage of plumpness. His daughter couldn't as yet see her plumpness as a prelude to beauty, but he could. He knew that in two or three years' time she'd be breath-taking. In a strange way she had inherited all the good points from Esther and himself; Esther's height, her pale complexion, his own brown eyes and his hair, but whereas his hair was a sandy nondescript colour, hers, though of the same thick strong texture, was a tawny shade.

If he had been asked what made life worth living for him he would have answered airily, 'Oh, a number of things'; his wife, his home, his family. But deep in his being, where no question penetrated, the truth lay, and the truth was that it was his daughter and she alone that answered that question.

He had been proud when his first child was born and that a boy, but he had experienced no feeling of wonder until Gail had been put into his arms, and then it was as if a miracle had been performed for him alone. He had no longer believed in miracles. He had sung of miracles in choirs and concerts for years; miracles had been ten a penny. And then Gail happened to him.

Esther had, at first, been jealous of his feeling for the child; then the next year Terry had come, and things balanced them-

selves out. She had John and Terry, and he had Gail. Sometimes he had felt guilty about his almost utter lack of feeling for the boys and had tried to rectify this by being more friendly towards them. Yet with the insight of children they had gauged the parental balance of his affections. That was why, he had surmised, they had teased and tormented Gail until she was able to stand up for herself.

His wife came towards him now. 'I thought it would hold you up,' she said.

'Another hour and the way it's coming down and it might have.'

When he shivered slightly she said, 'Go in the drawing-room, the meal won't be more than fifteen minutes.'

As he went into the room John's voice came up through the floor again, bawling, 'I can't find it, Mother.' And he heard Esther exclaiming impatiently, 'Leave it! Leave it! That'll be the day when you're able to find anything without it jumping up and hitting you.'

There was a big fire roaring in the open grate. The room looked comfortable, colourful and lived in. He sat down on the couch and stretched out his feet, and all of a sudden he had a longing for a drink. That was the only thing that was lacking in his home life . . . well, perhaps not the only thing, but something that became an irritation at a moment like this, a moment when he wanted to relax. But Esther was firm that no intoxicating drink of any kind should enter the house. This was one of the standards she had brought over from her mother.

He often wondered how his father-in-law had managed over the years to cover up the smell of liquor on his breath. He didn't do it with scented cachous or mints; he must have had some special formula because he had come into this very house, his eyes hazy with whisky yet not a smell from him, and Esther had never suspected a thing. When her father was gay and he talked loudly and laughed a lot, she put it down to a business success. In a moment of weakness, once she had admitted that his manner embarrassed her at such times. He had, on this occasion, stared at her amazed, wondering how such an astute woman could be hoodwinked. But there were none so blind as those who did not wish to see. It would have been unthinkable

to Esther that her father should take intoxicating liquor on a Saturday night, then on Sunday walk with stately step up the aisle to his pew, not paid for any longer but definitely reserved for himself and his family.

The sound of congenial commotion now came to him from the hall and he heard Esther say, 'Why, Robbie, it's beautiful, but you shouldn't, you know you shouldn't,' and a thick voice answered in airy tones. 'Why shouldn't I, Mrs Blenheim? Why shouldn't I?'

'Harry!' He hitched himself up straight on the couch and looked towards the door where Esther was entering the room carrying a square box. 'Look what Robbie's brought me for a Christmas present. It's too much I'm telling him.'

He got to his feet as she came towards him and looked down at the highly polished foot square box inlaid with mother-of-pearl. 'What is it?' he said.

'A workbox. Look at it.' She lifted the lid to disclose a tray of small compartments with inlaid tops and pearl knobs, holding strands of coloured silks and boot buttons studded with coloured glass. 'It's got everything,' she said. 'Look!' She put it down on the couch and lifted out a tray to disclose beneath more compartments holding small bobbins of thread, needles, pins and all the accoutrements necessary for a Victorian lady's needlework.

Harry lifted his eyes to the young man standing by Esther's side. 'It's an exquisite job, Robbie,' he said 'Where did you pick it up?'

'Oh, you know . . . I get around.' Robbie laughed and his thin parted lips showed a wide set of blunt looking white teeth.

Harry laughed back into the face before him, the face that yelled out its inheritance.

Some Jewish faces were distinguished only by the shape of the nose but every feature of Robbie Dunn's face proclaimed him to be a Jew. His skin was thick and of a slightly greasy texture; his eyes were round, keen looking and black; and his hair was thick, straight and black. His face was long and if it had followed its structural design would have ended in a pointed chin, but here it levelled itself out, leaving the jaw square, which in a subtle way emphasised the whole.

Robbie Dunn, at nineteen, was only five foot six and a half, but he was thick set, and if when he spoke, he had hunched his shoulders and stretched out his hands, the onlooker wouldn't have been surprised; but when he did speak his voice surprised most people because he spoke with the idiom of the working-class Tynesider.

Robbie Dunn, like most of his race, had a business head on his shoulders and was out to make money. He was both calculating and discerning. There were in him two strong and overpowering emotions: one was gratitude even for the smallest kindness, the other was hate for even the smallest insult. He had brought Esther Blenheim a present but it was out of gratitude to her husband, because it was Harry Blenheim who had helped his mother when she had needed help most, at the time when she was left without a husband, mother or father, all three being killed in an old car that should never have been on the road. And it was this man who had given him ten pounds to get started. He hadn't loaned him ten pounds, he had given it to him.

Robbie now stood looking at Esther as she went into ecstasy over the box. Then his eyes came to rest again on Harry. He liked Harry Blenheim. He was a nice bloke, a good bloke was Harry Blenheim. If he told the truth he was the only one he liked out of the whole bunch; except perhaps Mrs O'Toole, the grannie. He wondered why he didn't cotton on to Gail because she had always been nice to him, but he had the idea she was tarred with the same brush as her brothers.

'It's a beautiful thing, Robbie,' said Harry now, 'but as Mrs Blenheim says'—he nodded towards Esther as he gave her her full title, which he always did when speaking of her to either Janet or Robbie because she had made this a stipulation of the association between them and the Dunns—'it would bring a good few pounds today. It's real Victoriana.'

'Dare say,' said Robbie nonchalantly; 'but I only paid fifteen bob for it. Honest.' He nodded. 'Fifteen bob in a village yon side of the river, down by Washington way you know. But I've cleaned it up a bit since I got it. There was a bairn playing with it on the steps of a house, pulling all the buttons out. I went straight up and knocked on the door and said, "That's too

good for a bairn to play with, Missus, I'll give you ten bob for it." Quick as lightning she said, "You'll not, you know." "All right," I said, "fifteen." "I'll take it," she said, an' whipped it up out of the bairn's hands and set it screaming, and I didn't linger to do any comforting but made off with me box, and here it is.'

They were all laughing now. Robbie could spin a yarn. He'd always had the power to make Harry laugh. His tales very seldom enhanced him, they were nearly always told against himself, which was clever Harry thought, as it tended to make people like him rather than otherwise.

Harry had not the slightest doubt that Robbie would one day get where he wanted to go, and he would take pleasure in climbing the obstacles that were set up against him. And he was aware inwardly that Robbie hadn't to go any further than this house to find barricades being erected against him. But as he had told himself before, it was as well to ignore them. Young men garnered wisdom as they garnered years, at least he hoped that this would happen to his sons, especially his eldest.

Gail came running into the room now, she rarely ever walked anywhere. She was saying loudly, 'Gran's starving, and she's not the only one.' Then she broke off and exclaimed, 'Oh, hello, Robbie . . . Coo! what's that? Who's that for?'

'It's for me, madam,' her mother said, inclining her head slowly towards her daughter. 'And remember that.'

'Oh, isn't it sweet!' Gail was fingering the tiny bobbins of thread. 'Did you bring it, Robbie?'

For reply he jerked his head, and again she said, 'It's lovely.' Then looking at her mother she remarked bluntly, 'You won't use it, Mother.'

Esther Blenheim closed her eyes and pressed her lips together and assumed annoyance before she said, 'Well, if I don't use it, Miss, I can assure you you're not going to get the chance.'

'Oh!' Gail flounced now. 'It'll be mine some day.' She grinned at her father, and as her mother exclaimed on a high note, 'Really!', Harry Blenheim burst out laughing again.

It was at this moment that John came into the room. He stopped just within the door and surveyed the group; then said sullenly, 'Gran's waiting.'

John Blenheim was seventeen, as tall as his father, and as fair as his father was dark. All his features and colouring were those of his mother. His appearance in the room changed the whole attitude of the group, even Gail stopped her chattering.

As Esther now said, 'We're coming, we're coming,' Robbie Dunn walked down the room towards John Blenheim, and the nearer he approached him the shorter he felt, but he kept his eyes on him, and the tall boy returned his stare. It wasn't until Robbie was at the room door that he said in a casual way and over his shoulder, 'I'll wait for me mother if you don't mind, Mrs Blenheim. It's pretty rough out; I had to leave the car on the main road.'

'You've got a car now?' Gail's voice was high as she pushed past him into the hall before confronting him squarely.

He looked at her for a moment in silence, then said, 'Aye, I've got a car.'

'You don't mean the van?'

'No, not the van. I've still got the van, but I've got a car an' all. And I'll tell you somethin' else.' His glance now swept from Harry Blenheim to his wife, then to their son before it returned to Gail, and again he allowed a silence to elapse before delivering his news: 'I've taken a shop the day, in Pine Street off the Market.'

The silence was engendered now by amazement. It went on and on until Harry Blenheim said quietly, 'You've taken a shop in Pine Street, Robbie?'

'Aye, Mr Blenheim, a shop, I'm goin' in for antiques.'

Harry shook his head slowly. At fifteen Robbie Dunn had started with a fruit barrow. He had given him the money to get going. He had only kept on fruit for six months, then had taken a stall in the Market, a cheap-jack stall selling tawdry souvenirs and throw-outs from the warehouses, a stall at which John had once said only mentals or dim-wits would leave their money. When he was sixteen he had gone in for second-hand clothes. But that didn't last very long; there were too many at that game, at least in the Market. And then he had taken up the white elephant trade. Going round the jumble sales he had collected enough bric-a-brac to fill his stall and when it went in almost a day he said he knew that this was the line he had to