A HOUSE DIVIDED

CATHERINE COOKSON
Over 100 million copies sold

Catherine COOKSON

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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.

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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Tilly Trotter Wed
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PART ONE

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1

Elizabeth Ducksworth walked quickly and quietly along the dimly lit corridor. She had passed four closed doors and was making for the last of the seven when it was thrust open quickly and there came to meet her a figure in a dressing gown. The head was bandaged, covering one eye; the lid of the other was blinking rapidly, and the patient turned his head to one side as he addressed her, saying, 'I was just coming for you, Ducks – I mean, Nurse. I think the captain needs attention. Well, what I mean is . . .'

'Yes . . . yes.' The night nurse turned him gently about, saying, 'You should have rung the bell, Lieutenant.'

But the answer she got was, 'He always seems to know when I do that and starts his growling.'

'Has he spoken?'

'No; no . . . not a word. Just those sounds.'

She opened the door of the end room, at the same time taking his arm and steadying him as she said,

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'You shouldn't get out of bed; I've told you.'

'I'm all right. I only wish he felt half as good.'

'Get back into bed; I'll see to him. Would you like a drink?'

'Later. Later, thank you.'

She now went quickly to the end bed where, to her surprise, she found the patient's head buried under the clothes and the whole of the large form shaking so much that the bed itself quaked.

In a way she was pleased at what she saw and heard, for generally she would find him sitting up at all hours of the night, staring into a blackness that he couldn't accept . . . wouldn't accept. Not since the great outburst of rage that had filled this particular section of the hospital and beyond it with his shouting, raving and blasphemy had he uttered one word, nor had he made any movement towards anyone. Not even to his mother and members of his family had he given a sign of recognition.

What would have happened if he had been able to get out of bed was another question, but the blast that had deprived him of sight had also stripped off the skin and some flesh of his left calf and hip. By rights he should have been on the surgical ward, but because of his unpredictable behaviour it was considered advisable to leave him in the eye section and near his friend, although since that same outburst he had refused to recognise even Lt Fulton.

She knew it had been suggested that as soon as his wounds would allow he should be moved to a

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psychiatric ward. There was one thing sure in her own mind now: he needed help of some sort, poor devil.

Gently she touched his shoulder and attempted to draw the bedclothes back, and at this Matthew Wallingham's body became still for a second before he buried his head further under the covers.

Nurse Ducksworth sat down slowly on the edge of the bed. Then, her hand going out to the thick tumbled hair showing above the bedclothes, she stroked it softly, saying, 'It's all right. It's all right. It's the best thing that could have happened. Cry it out. There's nobody here but me and your friend. Don't worry. Nobody'll know.'

She paused a moment and bit on her lip. That's what they were all afraid of, anyone knowing they couldn't take it.

'There now . . . there now.' She had her hand on the top of the bedclothes again, and there was no resistance to her turning these slightly back, so revealing his face. The unmarred face. No sign of an injury on it. There had been a deep cut on the other side of his skull but that had healed. There was even hair beginning to grow around the scar.

In the dim green glow from the light on the wall above the bed she saw he was gripping the pillow and thrusting the edge of it into his mouth.

When her hand covered his fist and pulled it gently away from his mouth his sobbing became more audible, and quickly now she bent her face down to his, whispering, 'There now . . . there now. You're all right. I'm with you.'

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She put her arm about his shoulders, and at this he started visibly. Leaning on one elbow, he edged himself onto his side and the next moment, it seemed, both his arms were about her and his face was buried in her neck.

She felt she was about to slide from the bed, but his grip kept her there. Then she found herself holding him and patting his back while she whispered, 'There now . . . there now. No more . . . no more. You've done enough. Come along. Come along. You'll be all right now. Believe me, you will . . . you'll be all right now.'

'Oh, Mama.' His grip tightened on her and his wet face moved against her chin and she felt the movement of his lips on the edge of hers as he said, 'It was a dream. It was a dream. I thought it was, and then I knew. Oh! Mama, I'm sorry . . . I'm sorry . . . I mean . . .'

'It's all right. It's all right. I know what you mean. I'll be your mama for tonight.'

'No . . . no . . . I need . . .'

'Please! Please! Now listen to me. I have to do one of two things: either send for Sister – and you know what happens: she'll give you a needle. Believe me, she gives *me* the needle, but in a different way.' She gave a small laugh and patted the cheek close to hers, then said, 'The alternative is two sleeping tablets. Now I know your old trick: you keep them under your tongue, don't you? Oh now, you can't say you don't because I've found them in the bed.'

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The sobbing had ceased, as had his crying, but now, his head raised, he was taking in great gulps of air, while he still held her closely; and so, taking her arms from around him, she pulled them behind her, bringing him slowly forward; and then, gently laying him back on the pillow, she cupped his face for a moment while peering down into the sightless eyes and saying, 'It's to be sleeping tablets then, yes?'

He made no movement in response; but as she made to rise from the bed he said something, and she put her head down to him again and said, 'What's that?'

'I'm sorry.'

'Oh, my dear boy, you have no need to say you're sorry to me. But I'm going to say something to you: you've turned the corner. You're back on the road. You'll be all right, you'll see.'

She paused, her thoughts racing. You'll see, she says. Do people ever think what they're saying? You'll see . . . and, he's back on the road. What road? She had held his face, she had held him close. He had thought she was his mama – but that was just for a moment – and she had called him boy. Twenty-four! and she had called him boy.

'Open your mouth, and don't try the tongue trick; I'm going to hold your nose.'

After this operation was over and she had returned to her uniform pocket the small box in which she always kept two sleeping tablets, she looked down at him as his head drooped to the side

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away from her and he said quietly but clearly, ‘Please don’t report this.’

‘I had no intention of reporting anything, except that you didn’t get to sleep till about one o’clock.’

‘What’s your name?’ This question came in a whisper, and it was some seconds before she answered, ‘Well, in these distinguished rooms I’m generally addressed as Ducks or Ducky . . . that is when Sister isn’t about, but my birth certificate states that I am one Elizabeth Jane Ducksworth. Now I don’t especially like the name of Elizabeth, nor Jane, but I’m not averse to being called Liz by my family and friends.’

There was another pause. ‘How old are you?’

‘Old?’ Her voice sounded surprised. ‘Well now, some say I’d be in my fifties, but I’m not, I’m merely forty-nine.’ As she finished speaking she thrust her arm out and back, towards the bed on her left, and a sound like a hiccup came from there as she went on, ‘And now you’ve got the picture of me, I’m what you would call a motherly-looking type. Go to sleep now. I’ll see you in the morning before I go off duty – that’s if you’re awake. Good night.’ She pulled the clothes up about his shoulders and for a moment allowed her fingers to rest on his cheek.

As she quietly moved away she bent low down over the other bed and whispered, ‘Leave it like that. You understand?’

‘Yes, Ducks,’ the voice came in a low whisper. ‘But what about giving *me* a bit of your motherly attention?’

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Her answer to this was to straighten up and give the bed's occupant a playful slap on the face as she said, 'Get to sleep. Good night.'

'Good night, Ducky.' The name came soft and endearing from his tongue.

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2

Three weeks later Matthew was sitting up in bed. The orderly had just finished with him. He was washed and shaved and his hair was combed and, as had been usual for some days now, he was sitting waiting. Then there she was, he smelt her. She wore some special kind of scent, a perfume that was warm, elusive; and yet there was nothing elusive about the warmth of her personality. He didn't know how he would have carried on without her, especially at night, although she had never held him since that one occasion. But there had always been her hand to hold, and sometimes grip, as she soothed him out of a nightmare.

Now here she was. He heard her talking to the new fellow in the end bed. He had come in only yesterday.

Now she was talking to Jerry. Laughing with him. Jerry was leaving today. Oh, he'd miss Jerry! Yes . . . Jerry knew so much about him, and he about Jerry. And there was a third party in the know. Fox. Corporal Charlie Fox. He'd have

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to find out where Charlie was, because neither of them would be here today if it hadn't been for old Foxy.

She was walking again; he knew her step.

'Good morning. By! you do look spruce. You've got new pyjamas on. Blue suits you.'

'What colour blouse have you got on?' He knew she was dressed for off-duty. But why, he asked himself, couldn't he speak pleasantly? Why did he always have to use a gruff tone towards her? She had been so wonderfully kind to him, and he didn't think of her as an older woman – her tone was so light, her step was so light. She brought a kind of lightness . . .

Something inside him snapped off the word and a portion of his mind yelled, *Light . . . light . . . light*. It was like when Jerry would persistently say, 'You see what I mean.' He knew he was only meaning to be careful, but it annoyed him. You see what I mean. If only he *could* see what they meant.

'You'll be having your family here today, and I understand it's your turn to try out crutches. The next will be two walking sticks, then one. Then . . .' Her voice trailed off as she asked herself why she was talking like this. She was feeling awful, and she didn't really know why. Usually she was over the moon when her term of night duty was finished. But she knew he had come to rely on her in a way; and they had warned her – well, Sister had warned every one of them. She could hear her voice saying, 'Watch yourselves. You can be attracted to a wounded man; it's natural sometimes, but it

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happens more so when they are blind. All the stupid instincts of youth come to the fore and you see yourself as a ministering angel, but let me tell you it has been proved you would soon lose your wings if you were married to one, because the blind can become dominant. Unless you are very strong and independent characters in yourselves, they will want to possess you, suck you dry.' And she recalled that Sister had ended, 'I know some of you go out of this room saying, "She's a hard-hearted bitch," but I'm speaking from experience, twenty years of it, and I'm not blaming any one of you for your emotions; I'm only warning you against them and of the consequences of giving them rein.'

And now, on a small laugh, Elizabeth said, 'Well, I suppose I'll have to be going; and this is, I'm sorry to say, farewell, goodbye; see you at the 'Sizes. That's a saying of an old aunt of mine.'

'What are you talking about? Farewell, goodbye? You're leaving?'

'Night duty. I've had three months of it. That's more than enough. Of course I've had weekly breaks, but you always know you've got to come back to it.'

'And you didn't like it?'

'Not particularly.'

Seeing the look on his face, she added, 'Except in some cases, where I think I might have been of help.'

'Where will you be going?'

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'You mean straight away? Oh, I've got a week's

leave, then I go on day duty. But first, I'm going home.'

The hand nearer to her was gripping the iron edge of the bed. When she prised his fingers open, the hand clasped hers and in a low voice he said, 'How tall are you?'

'Too tall, five foot seven and a half.'

There was a pause while his hand moved over her fingers as if massaging them. 'Tell me, are you really forty-nine?'

She laughed now, that chuckle that he had come to know. 'Worse, I've put on one year since then. I had a birthday last week.' She now went to draw her hand away from his, saying, 'I must go. The day staff are on their rounds, but I thought I'd like to say goodbye and wish you the very, very best of luck.'

His voice was no longer rough, but low and warm as he said, 'I'm going to miss you – Ducks.'

At this she laughed outright, saying, 'That's the first time you've called me that. Now I *know* you are well along the road.'

'I . . . I want to say thank you and I don't know how.'

'The only way you can thank me is to get on your feet and hit out at life.' Her voice had a serious note as she added, 'Now, I mean that. You've got a lot to live for, so much. But I must go.' There was a slight break in her voice. 'Goodbye, Captain.'

She had forcibly to take her hand from his, and then she was gone, and he was left with two hands gripping the counterpane . . . Oh God! There it was

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again. He could see it. He was hugging it close, the dead body without a head . . .

He was in hell. They were all in hell. Why? Why now? They had crossed the Senio River, and now it was the Saterno. The 2nd New Zealand Division was already across, but they had come up against those bloody stubborn German rear-guards defending the bridge. All the winter up in the hills they had been fighting the buggers, but now, on the plain, everything was looking up. Oddments of different companies had joined them, some from the North-East, and he had welcomed the sound of their voices. They had been camped on the plain for a time, and Foxy had turned out to be a good scrounger. And then there was Jerry Fulton. Oh yes, Jerry. It was those two, Fox and Jerry, who had stopped him running wild. But the headless body in his arms; there it was again. And all round him the dead. Dead. Their blood had splashed those mountain slopes, German blood, American blood, Italian blood, British blood, oh yes, British blood. And now it was running all over him. Was it Ferguson's? Had they killed Ferguson? He had never liked Ferguson. Oh my God! He threw the torso from him but he couldn't see where it fell. The tank was on fire but he couldn't see it, he could just feel the heat. His head was numb. He was running now, tripping over bodies. He fell but couldn't save himself, one hand was gripping his gun and the other a grenade. There was noise all around

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him. He was deafened by it. Where was he? It was black dark. It hadn't been dark. Words yelled in his head: No! No! . . . The thought brought him to his feet and running. He had to get away. Away from the bridge. They had lost the bridge. Why hadn't they sensed those buggers would be waiting? He became aware again of his gun and hand grenade. What use was a gun now he couldn't see? The bridge had gone, they were all dead. The bridge. He lifted his arm and flung the hand grenade and as he did so he felt himself being grabbed on both sides and brought face downwards into slime and mud. A voice was yelling into his ear: 'Stop it! Stop it!' He recognised the voice: it was young Jerry Fulton's. Then another voice, a remembered voice, Fox's: he was telling him to stop yelling. He wasn't yelling, it was the barrage, but Fulton was shouting, 'If the barrage stops he'll pinpoint us, sir.'

What was he on about? What were they all on about? He wasn't shouting, his mouth was full of blood and mud. He would swallow it; he was choking. And why were they in the river? They were dragging him along the edge of the river. They were going to drown him. By hell, they weren't. He would die his own way.

His arms began to work, flailing at his captors. That was it: he had fought them off, yet they were dragging him uphill. Why couldn't he feel his head? Had he lost it, like Ferguson or whoever that was? His mind gave him no answer, for at that

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moment it seemed he was lifted straight up into the sky and he knew that now he had only half a body . . .

Had he found that out straight away or did he learn of it later, when they kept sticking needles into the part of him that felt as though it wasn't there? It was then he hit out and yelled at them, at those voices that kept saying, 'He shouldn't be here. We can't sleep.' They were fools, all fools; no-one slept in hell. You had to work if you were in hell. Stand up for yourself. Tell them you weren't a coward, you hadn't run away. But that was another thing. He couldn't speak, only yell . . . and then his mother had come and held him.

'You all right, Matthew?'

Matthew blinked his sightless eyes, and then replied, 'Yes . . . yes, I'm all right. I . . . I wanted to see you, Jerry. You're . . . you're off today, I hear.'

'Yes . . . yes, I told you.'

'I . . . I'll miss you.'

'And me you; but you're getting along fine. Amazingly well. And your family are so happy about it.'

'Jerry?'

'Yes?'

'What does Nurse Ducksworth actually look like?'

Jerry bit deeply on his lower lip and, after drawing it in between his teeth, he said, 'That's a question that's going to be difficult to answer.'

'Why? Why should it be?'

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'Because . . . well, she's not what you think. I mean . . . you . . . well, the night that you were upset she played the mother, and in her helpful way she went along with it by saying she was fiftyish.'

There was a pause before Matthew said, 'And she's not?'

Jerry's laugh was clear now. 'No,' he said; 'no, she's not, Matthew. She's twenty-four years old.'

'What!'

'I said she's twenty-four years old.'

There was a snap in Matthew's tone as he said, 'And you'll be telling me next she's a long-legged blonde.'

'No; she's long-legged all right, but she's not a blonde. Brown hair, brown eyes and a lovely face that matches her nature.'

'Why the hell couldn't you tell me this before?'

Jerry bent towards the angry countenance. 'Just because, if I had, she would not have bothered so much with you. You wouldn't have got her holding you and practically rocking you that night as she did. And stroking your hair and holding your hand since. She could do it because you thought she was a middle-aged woman, in fact you took her for your mother. Have you forgotten that? You called her Mama in your nightmarish condition, or whatever it was, and the way she looks she can't afford to act her age, particularly with fellows like us who crave sympathy. You know we do.'

Matthew's jaws were grinding now, and when he said, 'I've been made to look a blasted fool,' Jerry answered:

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'Yes . . . yes, of course you have, but only to yourself and me.'

'I've told my folks about the motherly nurse, and Mama said she was going to write to her; and if I know anything, when they meet the motherly nurse, if ever they do, they'll have a damn good laugh because—'

His self-pitying tirade was interrupted by Jerry's quiet rejoinder, 'I'm telling you this, chum: she saved your bacon that night because you were ready for going over the edge again. Although you were crying it out you were in a hell of a state, and had been for weeks. They were to send you for special treatment, you know, but then she took you on; and I know she only did it because you imagined she was a middle-aged woman. If she had given half the attention to some of the fellows here that she gave to you they would have eaten her alive. So I say again, you should be grateful . . . By the way, I said goodbye to Charlie Fox a while ago. He wants to come along and see you. That all right?'

'Yes . . . yes, I'd like to see him . . . But about yourself. What're you actually going to do?'

'Oh, go back to where I left off. Old Beeching has kept my job open. I'd done my last year in accountancy, and the agreement was I'd be taken on in the firm and he's kept his word. I'll have an office of my own, and one day, some day . . . well, say twenty years' time' – he laughed now – 'I may become a partner.'

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There ensued a silence between them until

Matthew asked quietly, 'Can you see well with your one eye?'

'With glasses, yes, very well; without them, it's a different bag of tricks. I can make things out, but only through a sort of mist.'

'The other eye . . . what happened?'

'Oh, they put a glass one in. Everyone says it looks natural and all right, but you have only to stare into a mirror . . . You know, I can't say you're lucky, I'm not meaning that, Matthew, because it's damned awful the set-up you're in, yet nevertheless there's not a blemish on your face and no-one on God's earth would think you're blind. And you know something? There is a possibility, I understand, that you could get your sight back, if . . .'

'Oh, shut up! man. You should know better than to talk to me in that fashion. My sight is blown to hell.'

'It isn't blown to hell. You've still got your eyes. They say it's the nerves at the back have gone, or some such.'

'Yes, or some such. Now shut up about it. Anyway' – his voice altered – 'let me say again, Jerry, I'm going to miss you.'

'And me you, Matthew. I'll never forget how decent you were to me when I first entered . . . the "drawing room". I'd heard about you further back in the lines. Bit of a devil you were, some of them said, but on that day when I almost fell into your tent your hand came out and steadied me; then you shook hands with me and you said, "Welcome to the drawing room"; and this greeting and your

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manner to me in the days ahead helped me to ignore Lieutenant Ferguson, who was ignoring the second lieutenant who was neither Eton, Harrow, Oxford or Cambridge, yet *was* from the same town. People imagine that the war killed snobbery. Well, I think it killed everything but. That was the second time I had been posted into his company, so he knew all about me; and right from the beginning I didn't speak his language. I got a shock, I may tell you, when I saw him that day, but you helped me through that patch and I'll always be grateful.'

Matthew wanted to reply, 'Don't talk such nonsense. You know you repaid anything you felt you owed me on that particular night that neither you, Fox nor I will ever forget . . . and the reason why.' Instead he held out his hand, and Jerry gripped it, saying, 'I'll find out where they're sending you. They'll be wanting to fix you up in some kind of profession fairly soon, you know. Whatever happens, I'll look in on you.'

'Thank you, Jerry. They tell me I'm due for a month's leave once I can manage the sticks. Why not come for the weekend? It isn't all that far from Carlisle. Take down the address: The Beavors, Little Fellburn. It's about two or three miles outside the town. You can get a train from Carlisle to Newcastle, then one from there to Fellburn. A bus'll take you along the main road. It stops at Manor Grove, and five minutes' walk along the towpath from there will bring you to our gates. You can't miss it. We've got a small farm attached but the house lies some way beyond. You might

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find it interesting. It's rather an odd place and I know you'll be very welcome. You've captivated my mother, I feel sure of that.'

'She captivated me; she's a lovely woman.'

'And my father talked to you. That was something. He can't bear strangers, not since this other business hit him. I don't know how on earth he got here, for he refused to come in his wheelchair.'

'I found him a most pleasant man, kindly. What is actually wrong with him?'

'Multiple sclerosis, but it's attacked him late in life, and so, I understand, it's a slower business; nevertheless it's hellish both for him and Mama. He was so active, so full of life. He was in the army, too, you know.'

'No! In the army?'

'Oh yes; colonel, no less. That's why I had to take over from him. I didn't want to. No . . . but then my elder brother William scooted off to America just like that; walked out one day, leaving a letter, and that was that. He's been in the car business there ever since and doing well. There's five years between us, and Father didn't seem to notice me until he lost William. Then it was about that time, of course, that the illness struck him. So, for me, it was Sandhurst instead of Oxford. And that was a mistake.'

Jerry put in, 'No it wasn't. It certainly wasn't; you were a splendid officer. And you stuck it for four years . . . well, practically to the end, when we were all unlucky. And you had only one leave in all that time, I understand.'

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'That was my own fault, Jerry, for I knew that once I got home I'd never go back.'

The words had been spoken low and slowly, and Jerry made no answer to them for some time; then he said, 'Most of us felt like that. I know I did. I was petrified at times and scared that the men would notice it.'

Matthew made no comment; he knew that Jerry was being kind, as always, trying to make him forget the sight of his gun spiralling through the fairy light.

'Goodbye, Jerry.'

'Goodbye, Matthew. Be seeing you soon.' He was about to add, 'Keep your pecker up,' but you didn't say things like that to a fellow like Matthew Wallingham; and on this thought he could hear Lt Ferguson saying, 'Inanities grate on me.'

Oh, to hell with memories of Ferguson and all his type! He himself was out of it, he was free. All he had to do was to get on with his job, find a nice girl, get married and have a family. He wanted a family, to be of a family. He had been brought up by an aunt and uncle since his parents died when he was seven years old, and they were kind. They were good, God-loving, God-fearing, but they weren't like a family. Now the captain back there, he had a family, marvellous people. His father, mother, his younger brother and two sisters. He had heard there was also a grandmother somewhere, a grandmother whom they all laughed about, an old terror she seemed. Yes, in a real family there was always an old terror. And now

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there was another brother in America. He envied Matthew. He stopped in his striding along the corridor. Did he envy Matthew? No! dear God, no! Because all the families in the world couldn't make up for sightless eyes.

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3

The house would have appeared square in shape, and uninteresting, were it not for an annexe jutting out from the left side, which could have been a bungalow but for the two dormer windows protruding from the roof like two enormous eyes. These windows were almost buried in clematis *montana rubra*, which had crept from the base of the house and clawed its way onto the main building and up to the high group of ornamental chimneys. But there it must have been checked, for the large slate roof of The Beavors was clear of creeper, as were the twin chimneys on the right side of the house.

The main house was built of stone, large blocks of it, each facing stone having been specially trimmed before finding its place in the structure, and the whole presented a warm creamy texture which, like the roof, was in no way marred by any greenery. The low stone-flagged terrace ran the length of the house. There was no rail to the terrace, nor step, for it lay flush with the deep green

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lawn, beyond which, and facing the front of the house, were well-laid-out flowerbeds.

On the ground floor were six windows, all large with sloping sills, and symmetrically placed between them stood the door. It was made of dark brown oak reinforced with six iron hinges stretching the width of it. On the upper floor were eight windows, four the pattern of those below, the rest smaller and flat-faced. There were no other windows to be seen at this side of the house.

There was no approachway for any vehicle to the front of the house, other than perhaps a bicycle that could be pushed, but beyond the right side wall was a large area that contained a stable block consisting of three loose-boxes and a barn-like structure, the entrance to which would take two coaches abreast if the yard it faced onto had been accessible. But it was no longer so, the drive to it having been cut off 300 feet from the house. The trap and other vehicles were housed at the farm.

It was an early November morning. The countryside lay under a white frost but, inside, the house was warm. The heat from the open log fire in the hall, together with the smell of cooking coming from the kitchen, was rising to the first landing and to Matthew, standing for a moment, warily feeling with his foot for the first stair.

He hadn't descended more than three stairs when the sound of a piano note being struck three or four times brought him to a halt, and he hesitated
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again while tilting his head down and towards the

door from behind which the sound was coming.

When the notes formed a little trill he almost hurried down the remainder of the broad staircase. Reaching the bottom, he immediately put his stick into his right hand and thrust out his left as if searching for something, and like this he made his way towards a corridor and the first door in it. Thrusting it open he demanded, 'What are you doing with that, Tommy?'

The small man, with very short legs but a large head, turned towards him, saying, 'Well, what d'you think, Mr Matthew? I'm tuning her.'

'Who told you to?'

'The old 'un' – his large head bobbed backwards – 'the old lady along there. Get at it, she says, no matter what he says. And I'm doing just that.'

'Well, you can stop doing just that because I have no intention of using it. I've told her.'

'Oh, she said you have. But d'you think she takes any notice of you or anybody else, or ever has done?' He now struck two notes, saying, 'Anyway, use it or not, it's a sin to let an instrument like this rot. It's five months since I last laid hands on it.'

'Well, you can stop laying hands on it now and get yourself out.'

'Not me, Mr Matthew; I wouldn't dare go back to the old 'un. She's a good customer. Not many of them have their instruments tuned twice a year, sometimes more; but then, she uses it. Eeh! my. Use it she did, during the war. She used to knock hell out of Wagner every time there was a ship sunk. You could have heard her in the

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town, never mind the village. But then, I don't think she's ever played a soft piece of music in her life. She really should've been in a percussion band. I wouldn't have put it past her many a time if she had got one of those constructions that play a dozen instruments themselves. Hands, feet and boomps-a-daisy!' He now ran his fingers right up the keys of the piano, and when Matthew moved nearer he said to him quietly, 'You know, Mr Matthew, I'm being serious now: it would do you the world of good if you got your hand in again. You were always good at it, you know. Oh aye; not right up to concert-platform stuff, but you were good at what you did. You had a touch. So why don't you have a go, eh?'

Matthew's voice was quiet too: 'It's no use, Tommy. I could never play much by ear anyway.'

'Well, once you started you would find it coming back like natural. Look at Art Tatum, blind as a bat. Rachmaninov said he had the quickest fingers on the piano he had ever heard. It would give you a pastime, something to aim at. You don't want to be Middle C all your life, do you? Even handicapped as you are.'

He now banged on the C. 'You know, I've learnt about life from these keys, and I feel that half the population don't know they're born. They never look inside themselves – well, if they do, it's just to envy somebody else making money or getting on in life. They don't think that

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they could have done much the same in some way or other if they'd made the effort. All right, a lot of them have had a bad start like meself. You know what they were going to do with me when I was ten? Put me in a home for the neither-here-nor-there, because I couldn't read. And they would've done it. Me own dad. But I had an aunt and she had a piano, an old thing with a fretwork front and green baize behind it, and if ever a piano needed tuning that one did. Apparently from the time I'd been a small child, every time I went to her house I got at those keys and I dinged out a tune; so it was she who said to my parents, if you keep him at home I'll pay for his lessons. So they kept me at what you would call home, but I had a hell of a life because I had four brothers and two sisters. And you talk about Germans being cruel! You don't have to go any further than your own family at times. But anyway, me Aunt Ethel had her way and I ended up playing in a band. Well, it was sort of playing at half-a-crown-a-night dos. But I was still going through hell. I was a funny little man, you see, but not in a comedian's way, else I would've made a fortune. I couldn't tell a joke, I couldn't make people laugh. When people laughed I died inside. Anyway, I didn't remain Middle C. D'you get what I mean? I'll never reach Top C, I knew that from the beginning, but I left that band, determined to have a profession. Although I wasn't a good pianist I loved the piano; I loved it for itself.

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‘In the end, one day I got my chance to help build a piano in the factory I was working in. I was living with me aunt at that time, had been for some years, and I’d been six years in the factory when she said to me, “You’ll never be a Paderewski, but you love the blooming thing so much it’s like a baby to you, so you could go out and nurse other people’s babies, become a piano tuner.”

‘Candidly, I’d never thought of it, but that’s what I did, and from the first visit I made I learnt about people, those in the Base and those in the Top Cs, and the multitude in Middle C.’

‘Well, you can put me down for one of your Middle Cs because I won’t be playing that, Tommy,’ said Matthew gravely.

‘You never know. You never know, Mr Matthew. You can’t sit doing nothing all your days. The army, I suppose, will put you into some kind of a job; they always do.’

‘Not in this case; I’m going to stay on the farm and learn to milk the cows and the rest.’

‘Oh well, that’ll be something, but I can’t see that satisfying you.’

‘No? Why not?’

‘Well, because I remember you before this business started. You were going places: you were a rip, just like Mr William used to be before he went off to the States. But there you are: once I get going on family records I forget to stop. I must get on.’

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Matthew went out of the room, actually

laughing now. It was a long time since he had laughed to himself. Tommy was a character: he and his Middle C. Well, he had joined that majority, because there was nothing else for him, because he would never leave this house or these grounds again. He would learn some way to farm; and that would be his life and he would accept it. There was nothing else for it. It would be a quiet, peaceful life.

He now made his way to the end of the corridor, into a small hall, off which went four doors. Standing just within the hall, he called, 'Where are you?'

And a voice came back to him, 'I'm in the sitting room.'

He put out a hand and made his way, still tentatively, towards the door next to the one leading into the conservatory, and opening it, he said, 'You're up early.'

'No; you're up late, it's a quarter to ten.' Then he realised that to someone standing beside her she was saying, 'Take the tray, Mary, and don't rattle it; you'd think you were getting old.'

The answer he heard was, 'Huh!' And when the elderly woman passed him with the tray, he said in his usual voice, 'She was always so gracious for a good deed, wasn't she, Mary?'

'You've said it, Mr Matthew. Never changes.'

Then the gruff voice hit him again, saying sharply, 'Sit down! Matthew. Don't tell me, I know why you're here. And yes, Tommy will go along there and tune that piano every six

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months. He's early this time. What d'you expect to do with your days? Sit picking your nails?'

'No, Granan, I've told you. I've told them all. I want to try my hand at farming.'

'Farming be damned! Teaching was what you had set your mind to before all this started: history and the piano. That might have been a youthful choice, but nevertheless it was there. Bleeding army! Why the devil I married into it I'll never know! But once I was in, I let them know what I thought of it. Your grandfather' – she laughed abruptly here, a deep, almost manly sound – 'your grandfather used to shake in his shoes every time there was a drawing-room night. He used to say he'd rather face a battalion of conscientious objectors any day. But I can tell you something – the men loved me, but the women hated my guts, even though they made excuses for me, because I didn't come of military stock. Then what happened to your father when he was born? He was put down for the army before he was christened.

'Then, years later, old Bertie, your great-grandfather, baptised your brother William with champagne. Poured it over the child's head. Here was another victim to be trained to blow somebody's brains out; and what did William go and do? You know, Matthew,' her voice dropped to an even, soft note now as she said, 'even your mother doesn't know this. But the day William walked out, just left that note to say he wasn't going into any army, he was going off

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to the States, I came into this room and I laughed until I cried, 'cos I liked William. I could talk to William, like . . . well, like I can to you. William and you were very alike. Rodney's the odd one out.' Her voice froze now. 'There's a farmer for you, hand-made. I don't know what he would have done had he been made to join up. Because the job he was doing was helping to feed the nation, he was left alone – and now he thinks he owns the blessed place. Well, the farm anyway. He can talk of nothing else. I'm going to tell you something, Matthew.' She put out her hand, and he took the bony fingers between his own and gripped them as she went on, 'No matter how he appears, he's not happy about you wanting to take over.'

Like a crack of a whip his voice came back, 'I don't want to take over, Granan, last thing in my mind. All I want to do is to work for him, for him to teach me what to do.'

'You're the eldest now, Matthew. And don't forget, one day you will be in charge. It'll all be yours, and it's a nice little estate. None better for miles around. Anyway, Richard might live for a long time yet. He contracted this MS business late in life, and they tell me that because of this the disease will not gather pace so quickly. So he could live another two or three, or even ten years, and like you he's stiff-necked and doesn't give in easily.'

'Oh! Granan.' Matthew was shaking his head at her. 'I've given in; I did some time ago. You

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know . . . huh! . . . Tommy has been telling me where I stand. He has a theory about the piano and our various places in life.'

'Oh yes, Middle C. And where did he put you? Don't tell me Middle C, just because you won't play?'

'That's right.'

'Nevertheless, he's a very wise man, is Tommy. He was from Bog's End, you know, in the town, but he was brought up mostly in the village down there. His own parents were scum. They're both dead now, I understand; it's a pity they didn't die earlier. But his aunt lived on until about five or six years ago. He was in his forties then, and what d'you think? He got married.'

'He's married? I never knew that.'

'No. Well, you wouldn't. It was about the time you went overseas. And she's a nice little body, a widow, and a bit younger than him. But he's come into his own since he took her on. Couldn't get a word out of him, you know, years ago; now he talks the nose off a brass monkey.'

'I'm glad to hear that,' said Matthew, softly now, 'because he always made me feel sorry for him in some way, he seemed so lonely.'

'Well, he was lonely. It's an awful thing, loneliness. It's like a tapeworm, keeps eating at you. Anyway, he hasn't got it any more; it's as if the wife acted on him like a dose of salts.' And she let out a deep rumbling laugh as she said, 'That's a good simile, isn't it?'

Matthew got to his feet. He, too, was

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laughing, and bending towards her he said, 'No, Granan, that wasn't a good simile; it was a piece of unladylike crudeness. I'm sorry for all those women in that drawing room years ago who had to suffer you.'

'So am I, boy. So am I' – she patted his arm – 'at least I was. But not any more, because I met some of them after they came back from India. They were worse. They had been used to so many damned servants that they treated the ones here like serfs. As for morality! I could tell you some tales.'

'I bet you could, and when it snows and I can't get out, I'll come along and keep you to your word.'

As he made for the door, she stopped him, saying gently, 'Here a minute, Matthew.' And when he turned about she said, 'I worry about you. You keep sitting in that room up there too much. What's happened to you has happened and nothing can cure it. If you want to talk about it at any time you know who to come to, and it'll be better getting it out of your system than brooding on it. Look upon me as that old night nurse Lucille said was so good to you. In fact, she said she pulled you round.'

'Well, I suppose you could say that, she pulled me round; but I've got a surprise for you. You would never be able to play her part, not now, not at your age, because what d'you think? She wasn't what I took her to be, what she gave the impression she was: kicking fifty, a middle-aged

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nurse, very motherly, oh yes, very motherly. Guess what I felt like when, just before he left, Jerry Fulton told me that my saviour, so to speak, was no motherly figure but a long-legged beauty of twenty-three or twenty-four? Brown hair, brown eyes, lovely skin. From how he described her, she had everything. Now guess what I felt like.'

'Well, how did you feel?'

'An absolute fool.'

She flapped his hand away from her, saying, 'Then you *are* a fool. She must have had some feeling for you to look after you as she did and keep up that pretence.'

'Well, as it was explained to me, if she had shown the same attention to the other fellows in the main ward they would have eaten her alive. I couldn't see her, and that made the difference.'

The old woman slid back into her chair, asking quietly, 'What's her name?'

'Ducks.'

'What?' It was a loud enquiry.

'Well, her name is Elizabeth Ducksworth, but she is known as Ducks.'

'Well, where is she now?'

'The last I heard of her, she was at the other end of the hospital on day duty; and apparently nurses were not encouraged to visit old patients, especially blind or near-blind ones. It had something to do with emotions,' and he stressed the word.

'Well I never! Does your mother know, I mean

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that she wasn't an elderly woman, this nurse?'

'I don't know; I've never discussed it with her.'

'I'm the first one you've told?'

'Yes.'

'Thank you, dear. Have you got her address?'

'No; and I don't want it. What can I offer her?'

'Get yourself out! Go on! Get yourself out.'

The voice was hoarse and harsh again, and he went out smiling ruefully.

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4

'Why don't you sit down a minute, Lucille, and talk to me?' said Colonel Wallingham.

'I talk to you all the evening, dear,' said his wife, 'and sometimes half the night, but there's so much to do. Cook had Rosie in tears this morning. She forgets that we're lucky to have Rosie. These days most young girls of sixteen don't like going into service and, at times, she's such a help to Mary and Bella.'

'But what is there to do?'

'There are two more bedrooms to see to for one thing. Don't forget you've got two daughters coming with their husbands, and two grandchildren. I'll have to ask Rodney to go along to Granan's part of the house, because the children must have a room to themselves. She won't like that, but I can't send the children along to Granan's, she can't stand them. She makes so much noise herself yet can't stand anybody else making it.' And saying this, she pushed her husband's shoulder where he sat in a deep armchair near

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the fire, and then she added on a laugh, 'Anyway, there's the party. You'll love the party.'

'Go on with you; get yourself away.'

She bent over and kissed his brow, saying, 'I'll be back as soon as I can, dear. But there's another thing: I'm worried about Matthew. He's so taciturn: he can sit there for half an hour and not open his mouth. Of course if you mention the war or anything to do with it he's on his feet and out. Do you understand that?'

'I do. I do, Lucille . . . Well, in a way I do.'

'You know, he never wanted to go into the army; it was never his choice, it was yours. Now you must own up to that.'

'I don't and I won't. He was a man.'

'He was not a man, not really. He was just coming out of boyhood. You know something?' She burst out laughing now. 'I sometimes feel like Granan. Yes, I do. She was, to use her own words, bloody well thrown into this army gang because she was the eldest of five daughters. As she said, in those days if you weren't married you might as well go and shoot yourself. So she thought it would be better to go and watch others doing it, and your father, you know, was army-mad. Long after he retired he imagined he was still in command. You remember him bawling from the top of the stairs, "ANN-EE! ANN-EE! Here this minute, woman!"? Then Granan would go to him and say, "What d'you want?" And he, just like you, would say, "I want to talk to you."'

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'But you must admit I'm more polite than

Granan was, because more often than not her answer was, "Go to hell and take a couple of guns with you."'

He said quietly, 'I'm not like him, am I? Well, not as bad?'

'No, Richard; you're not as bad.' Then bending towards him again, she said more loudly now, 'You're worse sometimes.' And with this she hurried from the room, her laughter making him smile.

It was four o'clock in the afternoon when Peter Carter brought Matthew back from a visit to his colonel. Peter Carter had been Colonel Wallingham's batman in the army, and when the colonel had to retire early, once multiple sclerosis was diagnosed, Peter too had asked for his discharge in order to continue to look after him. It had been no hardship for him to take on Mr Matthew too, although at times it was a difficult task as the younger man disliked assistance of any kind and managed mostly for himself, except when he left the grounds. These he knew like the back of his hands. As yet the colonel did not often need night attention once he had settled him in bed, and so Peter kept to his rooms at the top of the house, which were well furnished and comfortable. He had two pastimes that were assets to the colonel: he was an excellent chess player and he loved crosswords. And in a way it was fortunate that his younger master was of the same mind, although as yet he was not so expert in the former as either his

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father or Peter, for with chess he had to speak his passes. With crosswords, though, Matthew was way ahead of both Peter and his father, his answer to most clues coming sharp and crisp. They could go through four papers a day with crosswords, and once a week the men of two neighbouring families, the McArthurs and the Hendersons, would drop in and form a four for bridge. Naturally special cards had to be used, and Mr Matthew was becoming expert at it . . .

Bella had opened the front door to the two men, saying, 'What a day! It's a snifter, and there's flakes coming down.'

'Well, you wouldn't expect them to go up, would you, Bella?'

'Oh, Peter!' She had almost said 'Mr Peter', because it seemed he was treated as one of the family; but in the kitchen the others said he wasn't really, and he was no better than the outside men because he had been just the colonel's batman before the war, nothing else. But he was nice and well liked.

'You look froze, Mr Matthew.'

'I am, Bella, and you know what that spells.'

'Yes, Mr Matthew, a pot of hot tea.'

'You're right, Bella,' and in a lower tone, he added conspiratorially, 'and ask Cook if she has a drop left of her medicine to put in the teapot.'

Bella's reaction was a high giggling laugh as she answered, 'I'll tell her that, Mr Matthew. I will.'

'You do, and see what she says.'

'Oh, *there* you are, dear' – Lucille had now

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entered the hall – 'You look frozen, both of you.'

'So we've been told, Mama; and it's all right, Bella's had her orders, hot tea and', he added in a low voice, 'a little of Cook's medicine.'

'Oh, you didn't!'

'Yes, he did, mistress,' Peter put in, 'and that'll put Cook on her high horse; it'll be a skinty dinner we'll all get.'

As Peter made for the stairs, carrying Matthew's coat, hat and scarf, Lucille led her son towards the drawing room, and as his hand brushed the prickly leaves of the Christmas tree beside the door he paused and said, 'That in already?'

'Yes, it is, because I'm sure we're going to have snow for Christmas, probably well before, and it's an awful job bringing it in when it's wet.'

Matthew could smell the extra warmth of the drawing room and in it the scent of his father's cigar, and Richard's voice came at him, saying, 'Oh, hello there. So you've got back. You saw your colonel?'

'Yes, Father, yes, I saw the colonel.'

'How is he?'

'Oh, as usual: polite, diplomatic, kindly and inane.'

'Oh, Matthew, you're too hard on him. A bit dull, I admit, but he knows his job, and he was a good soldier. Still is, although I understand he's retiring next month.'

'Yes, he told me, and it seemed with deep regret.'

'Well, what did he say, dear? What did he suggest?'

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'Oh, just what has been suggested before, Mama, that I take up an occupation. I have a choice: I can train to be an osteopath. And then there's the piano.' He laughed and added, 'Oh yes, Tommy should have been there when he was on about the piano. He recalled when I first joined the unit that I dinged out for them at impromptu dances in the mess, so couldn't I take that up again, seriously that is? Lots of men did. Oh, and just think, I could become a psychiatrist. He thought I'd have deep insight into that, and when I couldn't help adding, "And become madder than they were, sir?" he informed me very stiffly that people didn't go mad with shell-shock, they were only deeply troubled people who had lost their way for a time. At the end I thanked him warmly, but said I had already got a niche, I was going to learn farming.'

It was Lucille who now asked quietly, 'What did he say to that?'

She had to wait for his answer. ' "I think you'll find that more difficult than the other three suggestions." '

'And he's right there. Yes, he is.' His father's voice was loud. 'Definitely he's right. You forget you'll be dealing with animals, and they don't move out of your way when they see you. And neither does the bull; remember, he'll greet you head-on.'

'Well, I'll have to work that out. Oh, here's tea; thank the Lord for that.'

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When he heard the tray being placed on the table

he said, ‘Is that you, Bella?’ And she answered, ‘Yes, Mr Matthew; it’s me.’

‘Did you give Cook my message?’

‘Well . . .’ Bella paused, then glanced at her mistress, saying, ‘I don’t think it would be wise of me to repeat what she said, Mr Matthew. She finished up by saying that if you could find any special doctor’s medicine kicking around her kitchen she’d be glad to share it with you.’

They were all laughing now, Bella too, and as she made her way towards the door, she muttered on a giggle, ‘She didn’t mention anyone searching her bedroom, sir.’

The incident had lightened the atmosphere, and Lucille, still laughing, said, ‘We can laugh, but what she calls her medicine will ruin her liver, if it hasn’t already.’

‘Well, she’s been drinking for at least thirty years, to my knowledge,’ Richard put in, ‘so what’s done is done, I should think, and it hasn’t spoilt her cooking. She’s the best cook in these parts, in spite of rationing. The Hendersons and the McArthurs jump at the invitations to dinner, not forgetting the Marshalls and the Taggarts.’

‘Yes. Yes.’ Lucille sighed now, then began to pour out the tea. She handed a cup first to her husband, and then to her son, before sitting down with her own and saying, ‘Let’s get back to the career business. Are you really set on trying your hand at the farm, Matthew?’

‘It isn’t that my heart is set on it, Mama; it seems the only right thing for me to do. I know every inch

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