The Chessmen

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'You have destroyed my chessmen, and I will take back, piece by piece, from your family, until the set is complete again'.

It was an old man's threat, made in anger, and no one believed it. But Sir Nicholas Darke's words were picked up, were harnessed, and their effect was felt, slowly but with dawning horror by nearly every member of the Glass family. By Patrick, pursuing his career as rake and successful mill-owner; by the disreputable Farrell, working in the raffish world of the Regent's London; by Simon and Denzil in their crumbling old mansion, and by Prudence, who tried to run away from the world to her Convent, but found that the world pursued her.

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By the same author

Mask of the Fox

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PART ONE

Patrick

1

Unlike my father, I never believed in the chessmen curse. Not, that is, until events proved me wrong, and my father – a renowned rake in his youth – right.

The rakishness had, on this occasion, nothing to do with the matter. In any case, Sir Tobias Glass was fifty when it happened; not old by most standards, and indeed, the most surprising ladies were wont to eye him wistfully and hint at what had been. But the Georgian rake had succumbed to gout and to a peculiarly nauseating form of repentance, and no trace remained of the young man who had held a bet with a crony to see how many ladies of Covent Garden Green Room could be bedded inside of a fortnight.

Nor did my own reputation – partly inherited but mainly due to my own efforts – have any bearing on it. I was fifteen when it happened, and my reputation had still to be established. And I was miles away at the time. In fact, when my father played his disastrous game of chess with his old friend Sir Nicholas Darke, I was in London, at the Opera, being seduced by Alicia, Nick Darke's second wife.

I had had my own ideas on how the overnight stay in London, *en route* from Winchester to the north, should be spent. But Cousin Maria, who had housekept for my father since my mother died of

consumption and neglect, knew her duty, and presented herself at Winchester on the last day of term. She had come, she announced, to bear me company on the journey to Yorkshire.

"With dear Herbert, naturally."

"Naturally." I smiled encouragingly at Cousin Maria's spouse and listened with horror to the plans put forward.

We would spend the evening at the Opera, she explained, for she knew quite well – had she not a son of her own? – that young men liked a little jollification. It would all be most pleasant, and we would travel to Yorkshire altogether on the morrow.

I sighed, and bade farewell to my plans to sample the wares of the sinful city in company with a school friend. Cousin Maria, in full force, was more than even I could hope to combat.

"We have booked you in at our hotel in Clarges Street," went on the lady, "perfectly respectable, you know, and they quite sympathize with Herbert's unreliable digestion. Most important. And the opera is to be 'The Magic Flute' – quite elevating, is it not?"

I did not want the respectability of Clarges Street and the elevating pleasures of Mozart. I wanted noisy licentiousness, shameless harlots, and as much wine as I could lay hands on. I was fifteen and as lecherous as any tom cat.

Herbert, allowed a half glass of port after dinner, essayed a little nervous conversation, and embarked daringly on an anecdote of how, as a young man not yet in orders, he and a friend had sneaked out of Durham University, in order to watch a performance of Handel's 'Berenice'.

"Handel, you know, was quite a favourite of the late King," explained the rector. "But then," he added

sadly, "that was when he had all his wits."

It was whilst we were waiting on the steps of the respectable hotel for our hired carriage, that the high-wheeled barouche with the crested panels and matched greys came bowling down the street. The driver hesitated, reined in, and drew his horses to a stop. The window was rolled down.

"Dear me," said an amused, slightly husky voice from within, "Patrick Glass as I live and die! My dear boy, I should hardly have recognized you!"

Alicia Darke, the dashing young second wife of old Sir Nick, with whom my papa was wont to reminisce about the days of the Four Horse Club and Dorothy Jordan. I eyed her thoughtfully.

"Are you – enjoying a night or two of dissipation before returning home?" The eyes widened a little, took in my companions, the unquestionable respectability of Clarges Street, and slanted in malicious amusement.

"Yes," I said.

"Won't you allow me to convey you to – wherever it is you are bound?" To Paradise or the Elysian Fields or Avalon said her tone.

"Drury Lane," said Cousin Maria uncompromisingly as the rector bobbed up happily at the idea, "and I really don't think – "

"Dear me," said Lady Darke again, the amusement deepening, "what a very astonishing coincidence. I am bound there myself."

I regarded her. "The Opera?"

"As you say, the Opera." Her eyes travelled over me. "Shall we taste together the pleasures of – "

"Mozart."

"Thank you, of Mozart." Again the smile. "My – conveyance is entirely at your disposal, Patrick."

We swept into Drury Lane in her wake, amidst bowing doormen and obsequious footmen, and a large gentleman with a front like a pouter pigeon, who washed his hands with pleasure and was sure that Lady Darke's box would be available – "Even without notice, for we are always – "

Lady Darke waved him aside and put out one hand imperiously for my arm. Her fingers closed about the broadcloth of my evening coat and tightened, and we proceeded along the carpeted corridors with the cavorting plaster cherubs and satyrs leering from the ceilings. The rector peered mildly at them with the air of one discovering a new species of life, and his spouse bridled and adjured him to have recourse to his dyspeptic bolus. "Since you dined richly, Herbert, and will be bound to suffer for it."

I thought it was probably Alicia who was upsetting Herbert's digestion.

She was playing havoc with mine.

The Darke box was situated halfway along the right-hand side of the house, framed by rich red velvet drapes, and with the jutting bay of its neighbours. I moved to the front and looked down at the colourful shifting scene of a London audience settling and re-settling itself, waving its programmes and studying its neighbours before the orchestra arrived. Lights blazed from the domed ceiling and there was a buzz of noise and the thick scented feeling of wealth and anticipation. On each side of us, mirror images of our box jutted out, each with its own curtains which could be pulled back, or left slightly across, screening the occupants from view ...

The pouter pigeon was fussing about, suggesting screens so that Cousin Maria should not be troubled

by draughts, wondering about refreshment.

"A glass of wine perhaps?"

"If you please," said Lady Darke. "Patrick?"

"By all means. Cousin Maria? Sir?"

But the rector did not feel himself equal to imbibing further that night and his lady also was doubtful.

"I believe," observed Alicia as if the matter was of no importance at all, "that a glass of claret is thought excellent for the digestion." She raised her eyes to Herbert's face. "For the stomach's sake, my dear sir, as Saint Paul once said."

And for sure, Alicia, my love, you could quote the Scriptures to suit your purpose more than any woman I have since known! The rector hesitated, wavered, considered the matter.

"A half glass," he compromised, no more proof than I was against our hostess's wiles.

And so the lights were doused and the audience settled itself and the performance began.

It was – apparently – the first performance of 'The Magic Flute' in English. And a famous soprano sang. Apparently. It was, in fact, a gala night for Drury Lane, and I registered nothing at all of Mozart's 'fairy opera', nor of the renowned soprano. My whole concentration was centred on Alicia, wondering what she would do and how she would do it, and wondering, also, whether I had misread the signals she had sent out. 'My conveyance is entirely at your disposal,' she had said, amusement trickling from the corners of her eyes, and I would have staked my life that it was not only the barouche she was placing at my disposal. Under cover of refilling the glasses and waving aside Herbert's protests, I studied her.

She was old Sir Nick's second wife, his first who had been a Beauty in the days when it had a capital B,

having died in giving birth to his heir, Denzil, some twenty years earlier. Popular belief held that Sir Nick had found the second Lady Darke in a brothel, but others, more charitably minded, said no, she had been an actress who had failed to catch the eye of the Royal Dukes, and had to make do with a mere baronet. Actress or harlot, she was lovely enough to satisfy the tastes of a slightly sinister old gentleman who was popularly supposed to have caught the eye of Royalty himself.

The Italian soprano was embarking on a longish aria when Lady Darke's hand moved, slowly, but with definite purpose. I jerked sharply in my seat, and nearly climbed halfway up to the ceiling. Her profile was turned a little away from me, her eyes on the stage. She was bland as buttermilk, her left hand toying idly with the stem of her wine glass. But her other hand – I glanced down uneasily. She was wearing dark red, her arms gloved to above the elbow in the same colour. And it was not – surely it was not possible to discern that dark red silk against the black stuff of my evening clothes. I looked to where Cousin Maria and the rector sat, and sweat broke out on my brow at the notion that either of them might, at any moment, look round.

The next few minutes held the most exquisite frustration I had yet experienced. I could not, on any account move, nor could I give vent to my feelings in any of the normal ways. I had perforce to sit silent and as motionless as I could manage, whilst beside me, the lady whom popular belief put down as a harlot was – As the soprano approached her climax, so did I. I was just – only just – in time to push Alicia's hand away.

The first interval was rendered remarkable by the rector's obviously increasing discomfort, and Cousin

Maria's insistence that he should forsake the Opera House for the quiet of Clarges Street.

"Nothing is more uncomfortable than to be – unwell in public, Herbert."

The rector pressed a handkerchief to his lips and cast a hunted look about him.

"Of course he must go back to your hotel," said Lady Darke suavely. "You must allow me to send for my carriage, Mrs. Malvern." Her eyes flickered, lizard-like, towards me. "I don't know what Patrick would care to do," remarked the lady.

"Shall I come with you, sir?" I said, ignoring the promise implicit in the long eyes.

But the rector would not hear of it. "Never forgive myself, m'boy – spoil the entire evening for you. Still the 'Queen of the Night' aria to come yet. I shall do very well – "

"Licorice and rhubarb water," pronounced Cousin Maria, at home in her own subject, "and a hot brick to his feet." And she ushered him out to where the pigeon waited distressed, to accompany them to Lady Darke's carriage.

I closed the door of the box, shutting it into its own little privacy and regarded my companion.

"What," I said, leaning back against the door, "did you put in Herbert's wine, Alicia?"

"I?" Her tone was a masterpiece of astonished virtue.

"You." I moved a little further into the box. "Jalop? Senna?"

She smiled and made a deprecatory gesture with one hand. "What would you have had me do, Patrick? He won't take any hurt and it – rid you of an unwished-for encumbrance." Again the smile. "What would you have me do?" said Alicia again.

I came right up to her. "For a start," I said, "you can remove your gloves."

* * *

We journeyed home two days later, the rector's indisposition having quite disappeared. I sat in the corner of my father's carriage and felt sleek and altogether satisfied with life.

"I shall be at Darke House next week," she had said. "We may even – meet, I suppose."

"And so we may."

"Michelangelo's 'David'," she had said, touching my hair with one hand. "What a beautiful young man you are, Patrick."

I smiled and said nothing. If Alicia wanted to ascribe to me the attributes of a classical statue, let her. In truth, I had the fair hair and the regular features supposed to be a prerequisite for good looks, but my eyes were cat-green and my cheekbones too high, pushing my eyes upwards, and by no stretch of the imagination could I be considered classically handsome.

Fingers of gold were touching the moors as the carriage jolted through the village of Glasmead. I leaned forward, enjoying the tang of the autumn air, seeing how the rolling moors on the left were just touched here and there with yellow broom. I had roamed those moors ever since I could walk, along with Maria's son Simon, and with Denzil Darke. We had fished and birds' nested and climbed together through countless holidays. Simon and Denzil were in London now, the former having strongly rejected his father's tentative suggestion of a clerical career; the latter having taken one look at his sire's new wife five

years ago, and shaken the dust of Darke House from his boots. There had never been any love lost between Alicia and her stepson.

"Yes, but she's very lovely," I had said to him with the fervour of eleven.

"Oh a diamond of the first water. But – shop-soiled." And he looked down his nose in a way that reminded me for a moment of my own father, and turned his attention to persuading Simon to come in with him in some scheme he had in mind to set up business in London.

Yes, I thought, watching the moors slide past, yes, Denzil had known Alicia for what she was. And so, of course, had I. My Queen of the Night was little better than a Piccadilly tart, but she plied her trade so beautifully.

In the distance I could see the chimney tops, the towering smoke-stacks and the funnels of the mills; among them my father's. The carriage was bowling along the moor road now, high above Glasmead and the little town with its manufactories lay in a hollow. From the window I could see far below to the huddle of houses where the operatives lived, and the occasional gleam of the canal. The cotton lord lived on his hill, amongst his parklands at Strawberry Fields House, while his workers dwelt in narrow dark houses, jam-packed together and looking out onto cobbled streets and, sometimes, to open cesspools. Tobias Glass did not consider the working classes needed space, and refuted with horror the suggestion that he might re-roof the odd house for his managers, or provide a few more privies with efficient drainage. Strawberry Fields had twelve main bedrooms and several smaller ones, and two of the new Bramah water-closets which drained into a soakaway.

As we climbed higher, I sat forward in my seat, waiting for the sudden turn in the road that would bring us to first sight of the house.

Strawberry Fields House had been built about sixty years earlier by the first baronet, my grandfather, who had apparently interested King George III in some revolutionary method of producing cotton at a low cost. The King – who had had all of his strength and most of his wits in those days – had been interested, and visited Glasmead and young Oliver Glass's small manufactory. Hanoverian King and Yorkshire mill-owner, so went the tale, had found something in common, and the King had been impressed by what he had seen. And so – the baronetcy, the grant of money, and the deeds of the old strawberry fields high up on the moors, a little removed from the town. Oliver would have re-roofed the cottages, I thought frowning, and taken better care of his underlings. And then the house came into view and I forgot – temporarily – about my father's careless stewardship.

It was a long low building, constructed of ivory-coloured stone. Great soaring pillars support its roofs, and odd little turrets sprouted at unexpected corners. Oliver Glass had considered all southrons ungodly, but he had once seen that other Strawberry Hill, and had fallen victim to the lust of the eye. The influence of Horace Walpole's false Gothic stucco castle was glaringly apparent, right down to the last pastrycook scroll and pargeted roof, and old Oliver had liked his house and taken a simple pride in it right up until his death. My father regarded it wincingly, and was wont to refer deprecatingly to his eccentric parent, and try to turn the house off as an unfortunate social lapse.

I never did. The house was ugly and pretentious, but unlike my father it did not pretend to be anything

it was not.

He was coming down the curving stair as we arrived, one hand resting on the gilt balustrade, careful to let the slanting rays of afternoon sun strike the lights from his still-fair hair, and careful also to keep his face a little averted from the too-searching brightness. I watched him, and thought how he was enjoying the picture of the successful aristocrat and mill-owner – which he was – and the fond father – which he was not – welcoming his heir.

"Ah, Patrick. My dear boy." He took my hand and rested his other on my shoulder. "Excellent." He peered at Cousin Maria and the rector. "Excellent," said my father again, and ran out of words.

"I'm pleased to be home, sir." I looked about me with pleasure. The black and white chequered floor shone with beeswax and constant buffing, and the gilt scrollwork of the balustrades gleamed gently in the sunlight. Doors opened off each side of the hall; dining-parlours and drawing-rooms; a music room, earmarked by Cousin Maria for the dutiful progress of Simon's small sister, Prudence. At the far end, I could see the library, firelight washing over the soft calf and tooled leather of the books which Oliver had bought by the yard because he had been told that a country gentleman always had a book room. To my knowledge there was not a readable volume among them. A couple of skin rugs lay on the floor of the library, which guests usually ascribed to 'dear Sir Tobias's skill with the twelve bore'. My father always smiled faintly at such comments and studied his fingernails. In fact both rugs had been bought cheaply from an out-of-work seaman who had picked them up in the East India Road.

My father had turned his attention to Cousin Maria

and the rector by this time, railing them on their dissipations in London.

"Frivolling every night, hey? Hey?"

Cousin Maria, thus adjured, confessed to an evening at the Opera.

"Ah. The Opera. Yes indeed," said my father, who never willingly remained in the room when the ladies demonstrated their prowess at the harp or pianoforte. He listened with furrowed brow and an air of tolerance to the tale of the small party.

"And poor dear Herbert so sadly indisposed, and forced to leave early – such a fortunate chance that Lady Darke was present and offered us – "

The bushy brows snapped together.

"*What*?" demanded my father, red lights in his eyes.

"Lady Darke." Cousin Maria stood her ground whilst her spouse cast about for an escape. "We met outside the hotel – quite by chance, you know – and shared her box. And then when poor Herbert was – was forced to retire, Patrick remained."

My father glowered and Cousin Maria retreated a little.

"You will never," he pronounced awfully, "never, Maria, nor you Herbert, refer to That Name in this house!"

"I don't – "

"*Ever*."

"Of course, if you wish it, Tobias – " Cousin Maria lifted her eyes to the ceiling, and finding no inspiration there, wrung her hands.

"I do wish it. Nicholas Darke," said my sire with some feeling, "who I thought my friend – " He paused, and appeared almost overcome. "My friend," repeated my father heavily. "Yes. And he has driven a great wedge between our families."

Two households with ancient grudge break to new mutiny ... ?

"Yes?" I said.

"We played a game of chess," explained my father, folding his chins at the reasonableness of it. "Yes. A game of chess. And I beat him!" he shouted, causing Cousin Maria to flinch. "I beat him fair and square, the old – " Words apparently failed him, and the rector looked relieved. "He accused me of cheating," said my father awfully. "Cheating! *Me*!"

"Good Lord."

"Quite absurd," said my father. "Quite absurd," he repeated, as if the repetition lent verisimilitude. "Words Passed."

"Naturally."

"I may have been a little hasty. I don't deny that I have a quick temper." He dwelled pleasurably on the image of himself as a quick-tempered generous-hearted gentleman.

"What happened?"

My father drew himself up to his full height. "He cursed me."

"Blasphemous old devil," I said, and the rector looked shocked.

"I do not," said my father, "mean that, Patrick."

I stared at him.

"When I say Nicholas Darke cursed me, I mean precisely that. He *laid* a curse on me, and on the line.

"Which," said the cotton lord, "is arrant nonsense. I intend to ignore it, and so must you. Have any of you dined?"

"Of course he believes it," said Simon Malvern throwing himself down in the only comfortable chair in my bedroom, and watching my struggles with a

recalcitrant evening tie. "He nearly wetted himself on the spot."

"What happened?"

"What? Oh, *I* don't know." Simon moved over to the window and stood fiddling with the curtain cord. "What I do know is that he's forbidden all mention of the whole family." He frowned, and I glanced at him in the mirror, noticing how the ominously weak mouth became petulant.

"No but what did happen, Simon?"

"Oh well, it seems that old Darke had just inherited this particular set of chessmen from some ancestor or other. Been in the Darke family for ever, and Sir Nick had coveted them for years."

"Nice?"

"What?"

"The chessmen. Are they nice?"

Simon's face broke into a grin. "Oh Lord, yes. Ivory and pearl for the white ones, and ebony and jet and lord knows what for the black. Probably worth a couple of fortunes," said Simon discontentedly. "And when you think of the allowance Denzil gets – " I said nothing, and Simon shrugged. "Well, it don't matter a fig anyway. We do very well in our business."

"Simon, I don't give a tuppeny damn whether you do well or get clapped into Newgate! Either tell me the story or go away!"

"Oh, all right then." Simon sat down again. "Old Darke challenged your father to a game with the chessmen," he said. "And, of course, your papa agreed."

"He would."

"More than that, he boasted about his prowess at the game – you know how he is – can't bear to think any man his master at anything."

"Yes."

"Well," said Simon, "there you have it. He cheated – probably knew from the start he hadn't a cat in hell's chance of winning. I mean – old Nick Darke's a wily old devil with a mind as twisty as a Tudor chimney pot. He *would* be good at chess, wouldn't he?"

"He would."

"So your father h'rrmphed and fizzed a bit and got red in the face, and then he played a silly trick. He drew Sir Nick's attention to something on the other side of the room. Woodworm I shouldn't wonder," said Simon, "for Den says the place is falling to bits about their ears. Anyway, Sir Nick looked, and your father moved a couple of pieces – to his own advantage." He met my eyes in the mirror and shrugged. "Child's ploy," said Simon, "but he will do it, Patrick."

"I know. And – Sir Nick saw?"

"Well of course he did. Whipped round in a minute and demanded to know what the deuce Tobias was about. Said – oh well, you might as well have it – said in his sneery way that it was apparent his old acquaintance – acquaintance mark you, not friend – hadn't had quite the advantages of a gentleman's background, since he didn't seem to know how to lose like a gentleman. Well," said Simon, peering into the mirror and fussing with his slightly over-long fair hair, "it was fatal. Your pa does set so much store by his title and all, and he fired up at once. Began to bluster, Denzil says, and got redder and redder in the face – "

"Denzil was there?"

"My dear," said Simon, squinting at an imagined blemish on his cheek, "positively trembling in the wing-chair by the fire, and hoping neither of them would remember about him."

"Oh I see."

"And then your papa lost his temper in earnest and swept the chess-board to the floor and proceeded to stamp all over them, and said there! Now Nick should see what happened to his precious chessmen. Really, he almost put out his tongue and said yah!" said Simon with a grimace of disgust.

"He would."

"And then Sir Nicholas turned very white and his eyes went – almost black. It quite gave Denzil a turn. Sir Nick just went on staring at your father, until at last he blew himself out of words, and then Nick said, 'So, you have taken my inheritance, have you, Tobias?' or words to that effect, and your father snorted. And Sir Nick said 'Very well, I shall take yours. Piece by piece, until my set is complete again.'

" 'Rubbish,' said your father.

" 'Rubbish, is it?' said old Darke. 'Well, we shall see. I will take from your family, one by one, until I have my inheritance back'."

There was a short silence, then –

"Thrilling stuff," said Simon at last. "Pure Mrs. Radcliffe or Monk Lewis, isn't it?"

And it was, it was, only –

"How many pieces were spoilt?" I said.

"What? Oh, curious that. Exactly half. All the white ones. The ones your father had been using."

All the white ones ... And Nick Darke would replace his white chessmen, his beautiful ivory and pearl chessmen, with sixteen live ones from my family.

It was nonsense, as Simon said, it was pure Mrs. Radcliffe. What was beginning to be called 'melodrama'. But still ... sixteen white chessmen to be replaced. Eight pawns, two bishops, two knights, two castles. And the king and queen.

After a moment, I followed Simon out of the room and down to dinner.

2

"I dinna believe ye went to the Opera to see Mozart!" Aleister Roache, my father's partner, screwed up his wrinkled walnut face and dug the rector heavily in the ribs. "When I was a young man, a mite more'n music went on in the boxes of Drury Lane!" he added, looking pleased with himself.

"Patrick enjoyed the Opera," said my father composedly. " 'The Magic Flute', you know."

"I dinna," said Aleister. "There's only one type o' magic flute I recall dealin' with in an opera box." He sucked his cheeks pleasurably and beside me, the rector buried his nose in the port.

"Mr. Roache is sometimes a little playful," said my father after a moment, "and I must say – "

"Och, must ye?" Aleister supped his own port, and dug the rector again. "I'll go bail Patrick ain't reached the age of sixteen without exercisin' his – "

"Aleister!"

" – own flute occasionally," said Roache blandly. "D'ye know, Toby, you've a wonderful short memory and – " He broke off as Butterbank, my father's butler entered, in the nearest thing to agitation he permitted himself.

"Your pardon, sir, but there is – someone to see you."

"I am at dinner," declared my father superbly.

"The – lady said it was important, sir."

"Old sins have long shadows," observed Aleister.

"Catchin' ye up, are they, Tobias?"

"No doubt one of your workers, Tobias," suggested Herbert, always anxious to look on the bright side. "Perhaps one of your managers is unwell and his good lady has come with a message. Or – " a better idea occurred to him, "a village girl may be seeking a position."

Beside him, Aleister snorted, and gave his opinion as to the sort of position the wench might be successful in obtaining. "I said, ye're sins'd catch up, Tobias! Babe in arms, had she, Butterbank?"

Butterbank was understood to say that the lady had been alone.

"Sir, would you like me to – "

"None of us will go, Patrick. The lady," said my father, master in his own house, "will wait."

"An' that's what she will not, Toby Glass!" The voice rang out from the doorway, piercing as steel through buttermilk. We turned and Butterbank shrugged, washed his hands of the matter and trod from the room. "Six times I've tried to see ye, Toby, and six times ye've fobbed me off! And I will not," said the lady in the doorway, "be fobbed off, nor will I listen to excuses any longer!" She stood hands on hips, regarding us, her black hair rioting its way from the demure ringlets, and her black-fringed blue eyes sparkling with anger and with something that I could have sworn was enjoyment.

For a moment no one spoke, then –

"State your business my good woman," said my father.

"Ho!" said the lady, " 'business' is it? And 'business' was it when you an' I first met?"

"I don't – "

"An' you tumbled me with no regard for the consequences?"

"It – "

"In the upstairs room of Marivaux's," said the lady with disastrous attention to detail. She moved into the room and perched herself on the edge of the table. "Eleven years last Michaelmas," said our guest to the rector, "an' me just off the boat – pretty as a hedge rose an' innocent as a spring lamb."

"The boat?" Herbert, fascinated despite himself, dragged his eyes from the lady's neckline.

"Galway," said she, "an' no more'n twenty I wasn't. Pretty as a hedge rose and innocent as – "

My father, unable to bear it any longer, brought his fist crashing down on the table. "Madam, I have never seen you before in my life and if this is an attempt to – "

"Oh, may the good Lord forgive you for a black liar, Toby Glass, an' may Heaven send ye've not passed the sin onto either of the children!" Her eyes gleamed with wicked amusement. "Briony Flynn's me name, *and* you know it!" She disposed herself in the chair recently vacated by Cousin Maria. "If we're to talk business, I'll take a glass with ye, for I'm partial to a drop o'port, an' it'll be a good vintage if you had the choosing, Toby darlin'." She reached for the decanter and eyed Aleister. "He taught me a lot of things, the old goat, an' one of them was to appreciate a good port," said Briony Flynn.

Aleister grinned his walnut grin. "Shall we leave ye to y'r fate, Tobias?"

"Yes indeed, I feel sure that Tobias will wish to – "

"No one will leave!" shouted my father.

"Well, 'tis on your own head, Toby." The lady

sipped her port and slewed her eyes round to me. "So you're the legitimate one, are you?"

"So I believe. Won't you allow me to refill your glass, Mrs? Miss? Flynn?"

"Miss," said she, holding out her glass promptly. "I'll say this for ye, Mr. Glass, ye've more address than y'r sire."

"Thank you."

"A pleasure. An' I don't mind admitting," added Miss Flynn, "that if I was fifteen years younger I'd be eyeing you meself." Her features tilted into a rather attractive smile and she raised her glass in a courtesan gesture. Herbert, having managed to drag his eyes away from Miss Flynn's saucy flesh-coloured stockings, now cleared his throat, and bumbled his way from the room, murmuring about matters of business, and privacy being so much more desirable. My father folded his arms and stared up at the ceiling.

"I have nothing to say to you, Miss Flynn."

"No, and haven't for twelve months past! And I want to know why! Not a penny piece have I had," said Miss Flynn, resting dimpled elbows on the table. "An' me and the brats starving in a garret while you lord it over the half of Yorkshire!"

"Blatant lies!" shouted my father. "I set you up in that blasted cathouse in Sparrow Walk nine years ago, and you've taken a damned good allowance since!"

There was a silence while my father's colour returned to its normal hue.

"Ho!" said Miss Flynn softly, cupping her chin in one hand and regarding her erstwhile protector. "So you remember that, do ye, Toby? Me darlin' boy you're as transparent as your name." She leaned back in high good humour and rested her feet on the table top, causing Aleister to suck in his cheeks. "I'll not be

greedy," said Miss Flynn virtuous as a saint, the mischief trickling from her eyes, "but there're the children. There's the boy – Farrell – an' a credit to the both of us, he is." She sent me a sideways look and half winked. "Isn't it natural now that I'd want the advantages for him you've given to this one?" said Miss Flynn and my father turned in his seat and regarded her with horror.

"Winchester?" he said at last, uneasily.

"Winchester," affirmed the lady, and brought her fist crashing down on the table. "I'll have him educated, Toby, or see you suffer the consequences!"

"He's too old," growled my father.

"He is not. Ten years, an' eligible for entry next term – supposin' a kind friend was to provide the ready." Again the sideways glance at me. "An' 'twould be a fine old thing for him to have his brother there to guide his footsteps, wouldn't it?"

"He's a hell-spawned brat, and I shouldn't be surprised if the devil didn't guide his footsteps already!" shouted my father. "I'll be damned if I'll pay for Farrell's education!"

"Well you'll be damned if you don't," observed the practical Miss Flynn. "And then there's Maura – an' the spittin' image of meself at that age, she is. I've a wish to see her put out to a fine lady, Toby, an' take her place in Society as she's fit to do. As your daughter," she added, lifting her eyes and regarding my father directly.

He paled visibly. "You'd do that?"

"I would."

"Spread the story about?"

"Certainly. Word of a – " she winked at Aleister, "word of a Celt," said Miss Flynn piously.

"Ha!" said Roache. "Don't you dare refuse the lass

after that, Tobias!"

My father, caught between the two of them, glowered. "And none of this is suitable for Patrick to witness!" he shouted belatedly.

"I'll go."

"Och man, stay an' hear the whole!" Aleister pushed me down and refilled his glass. "I'll go bail it's better than any amount of magic flutes!"

"Well?" said Miss Flynn, eyeing my father. "Do we have a deal, Toby?"

I noticed that the Irish lilt was suddenly absent. Briony Flynn, it seemed, believed in making use of whatever weapons were to hand.

"Blast and damn," said my father. "Yes, curse you, I'll pay for Farrell's schooling – yes, all right, and for Maura's adoption or whatever you want to call it you heartless bitch. But – " A finger was pointed, and the rags of dignity re-assumed, "understand me, Briony – not a penny piece will you get over and above it!"

"Bless us all," said Briony, setting down her glass, and beaming, "I don't want your pennies, Toby darlin'." She made an urchin's face at him. "I could buy and sell you up, the way I'm goin'. There's money in immorality," said the lady, "an' Sparrow Walk's near enough to the fine gentlemen's clubs to make me a good living." She regarded him with amusement. "I'll not offer you an invitation, Toby Glass, since ye've long since reformed, they tell me." Her eyes slewed round to me again. "But you," said my father's mistress, "will be welcome any time you care to come, Mr. Glass." She moved to the door. "On the house, of course," said Briony Flynn and made good her exit.

I stood in the quiet afternoon, watching Alicia canter demurely down the overgrown carriageway that led to

Darke house, and while I waited for her signal, I studied the house. I had seen it several times, but never like this, never approached illicitly with the afternoon dying and long shadows stealing across the lawns and the chestnut trees black shapes in the dusk. Never with the night-scented stocks opening and the windows blind and the lady of the house waiting for me.

It was as old as Strawberry Fields was new, and it had been built, so went local legend, on the site of an old monastery, by men who had sworn allegieance to a god considerably older than the one worshipped by the Christian Churches. In fact, the name 'monastery' had merely been a convenient euphemism, and in time, they had been discovered, those devil worshippers, and driven out by King James's witchfinders. But one had remained. Ralph Darke, self-styled abbot, had contrived to talk his way out of the flames – and to do it with such charm that far from losing his life and suffering excommunication, he had married with full approval of the Church, and had settled down on the newly-exorcized monastery to found his line. I frowned, watching the dusk thicken about the old house, waiting for the light in the upstairs room which would be my signal. They said that exorcism was not always successful ... I turned up my collar against the tiny evening wind and tried to remember what I had heard about Nick Darke's ancestor. He had been an inveterate chess player, they said, and every night he had played a game with his one remaining attendant. His skill had been legendary. And then, so went the tale, he had challenged the devil, and he had won, and the devil had handed over his own chess set, a beautiful thing of incalculable age, ebony and jet, ivory and pearl and

white jade ...

'I will take back, piece by piece, my inheritance ...'

The light flared in the third window and I moved forward, leading my horse quietly round to the stables, handing over the reins. "For one extra horse will never be noticed, Patrick, and the grooms – " a small smile, "they will keep my secret anyway."

Grooms and gardeners, Alicia? And gamekeepers? And fifteen-year-old boys?

In fact had I not been fifteen and quite as lecherous as any tom cat, I think I should have found it a struggle to match Alicia Darke's appetite. She was insatiable. At last, I sat up in the tumbled bed, pushing my hair back and reached for my clothes.

"Surely you need not go yet!" She rolled over in the bed, the sheet clinging to her breasts. I eyed them without a flicker of interest. "Nicholas will not be back until later, we have – quite the entire evening."

Oh God, so we had. "One must eat," I suggested.

"So one must." The narrow-eyed smile slid out. "James will easily serve us supper here."

"Yes? With – no questions asked?"

"Oh no," she said, and there was no doubt about the amusement. "No questions asked."

Butlers as well, Alicia? Well, I thought, let him satisfy you madam, for I am reduced to a quarter of an inch with no immediate prospect of improvement. "I must go," I said, turning my back and reaching for my clothes. "I'm expected back for dinner." I dressed quickly, smiled and kissed her, and left.

The shadows of Darke House rose up to meet me as I moved across the upper landings. Far below was the cheerful kitchen clatter, the chink of a coal scuttle being filled, the opening and closing of doors. Ordinary, everyday noises. They might have been a

thousand miles away.

Ralph's house closed about me, and it was not from fear of meeting a cuckolded husband that I moved stealthily, but from fear of something I refused to acknowledge. Because exorcism did not always ... I jumped as a mouse scrabbled behind the wainscoting and scuttered to its home, and then grinned and reached for the handle of what I thought was the door to the central part of the house.

It was not. Either I had missed my way in the dark, or my sense of direction was faulty. 'Thither is my north and there my needle points ...' Yes, but that referred to something quite different.

The room I was in was octagonal, with a high moulded ceiling and heavily leaded windows. Tapestries as old as the house shrouded the walls, and rich Persian rugs, their colours dimmed by age, softened the uneven stone floor. There were carved mirrors and oak settles, and in the jutting window stood a round cherrywood table, bright with the patina of age and beeswax. I hesitated and then went in. Sir Nick's sanctum. Ralph Darke's study; the oldest part of the house. And on the cherrywood table, reflected fathoms down in the polished surface ... After a moment, I moved forward.

And they were beautiful. The stories had not lied. They were ebony and jet and black pearl, and the armour gleamed and the crowns sparkled with chippings of some unknown stone. The chessmen that the first Lord Darke had won from the devil. Nick Darke's inheritance. Ralph's legacy. Small wonder, I thought, that the old man had been enraged at their senseless destruction, and vowed revenge. 'Piece by piece until the set is complete ... ' It was absurd, it was theatrical and ridiculous, but – standing in the

dimness of the old room, the black chessmen caught the light and gleamed dully. Almost I could have sworn that a fold of the king's cloak twitched, that a prancing knight tightened his rein ...

'All the white ones ... '

Of them, of course, there was no trace. Ivory and pearl, they said, and white jade.

'I will take from your family ... '

After a moment, I went quietly from the room, collecting my horse from the stables, and avoiding the sly grins of the grooms. At the end of the carriageway I reined in and turned to look back at the house. A chink of light still showed from Alicia's curtained window, but my eyes went beyond it, frowning, trying to place ... And it was there. The exact centre of the house, moonlight playing on the mullions. And as the moon came out from behind a cloud, I could see, quite clearly, the sixteen black chessmen, standing sentinel at the window.

Winchester, with its air of grave leaning, and its bonuses towards last termers, provided an unexpected respite that autumn. I looked round the small study with pleasure, unearthed the port I had judiciously abstracted from my father's cellar, and debated on the choice of a couple of friends to share it. I was unlocking the corner cupboard when I became aware of the black-haired urchin in the doorway.

"Did you want something?"

"Are you Glass?" demanded the urchin belligerently.

"Yes."

"I'm your fag," said the child, thrusting his chin out and daring me to oppose him.

"Good God." I stared at him, seeing the black-

fringed blue eyes that had met mine knowingly across a dinner table, and the wide mouth with the suggestion of Irish mobility. He was scowling, but I thought that his smile would be quite as attractive as his mother's. "Are you – by any chance – Farrell Flynn?"

"I am." There it was, the faintest hint of brogue.

"And – you know who I am?"

"My half-brother," said he, his eyes sparkling dangerously. "And I'm not here through any wish of mine."

"I don't imagine you are. But since you *are* here – "

"Are you going to beat me?"

I stared at him. "Of course not. Why the devil – "

"I shall fight back."

"Why the devil should I beat you?"

"They do," said Farrell with the wisdom of ten years and twenty-four hours inside a public school. "Some of 'em get a thrill out of it." He looked down his nose fastidiously, and I was suddenly and unpleasantly reminded of my father. "And some of 'em," he said, eyeing me, "work off their frustrations."

"I'm aware of it."

"So if you're thinking to – "

"I'm not."

"Good. Because I shall fight you."

We eyed each other, and I began to laugh. "My father was right," I said, "you're a hell-spawned imp. Well, I shan't beat you, nor shall I – what did you call it? – work off any frustrations." I grinned at him. "My tastes don't lie in the direction of small boys."

"My mother," said Farrell, determined to top me, "said you'd be a riot in Sparrow Walk."

"Sparrow – ? The cathouse?"

"Yes. She said you'd go through the girls inside a

single night, and still be – "

"Well, she's probably right," I said hastily. "Do you always threaten to fight people?"

"Yes."

"The – volatile Irish?"

"Blood up to the eyes," agreed Farrell. "Will I come back later?"

"No. Go and ask the two boys on each side to come in. And then you can fetch some coal for the fire." I set out the port and the glasses, and Farrell watched appreciatively.

"Is that my father's port?"

"I – " I stopped short, and stared at him. His jaw was set truculently, but his blue eyes hesitated. "No, it's mine," I said at last. "And understand me, brat, if ever I hear you refer again – "

"I don't care," said Farrell, his eyes sparkling. "He's my father as well, and if you don't care to hear me say it – "

"I don't – "

" – you'll have to put up with it, because if you make me stop, I'll – "

"I know," I said. "You'll fight me. Get out before I reach for the whip."

He treated the hallowed portals of Winchester as if they were little better than the slums of Whitechapel. Authority held no terrors for him; he was as likely to defy authority – and win – as authority was to shake its head and vow that he would come to grief. He never did. If anyone started a fight in classroom or quadrangle, it would be Farrell who was the ringleader, if not the sole instigator, but if anyone was guaranteed to come out on top, it was also Farrell. He went out of his way to rebel and suffered his canings stoically, his black hair falling over his forehead, his

lower lip thrust out mutinously. Me, he treated with a modicum of respect, although he never failed to implant the odd barb about his parentage. And not only to me. He appeared to delight in noising abroad his irregular birth, with the result that the scions of noble houses eyed him with horror, and his friends were composed of the raff and skaff of the school.

"My mamma is a very charitable lady," I once heard one lineage-conscious young gentleman inform him. "We live in Eaton Square."

"*My* mamma," said Farrell with relish, "is a whore. And we live in a cat-house."

The Eaton Square dweller regarded him with nervous dread and moved a step backwards.

"And what's more," said my half brother, his blue eyes sparkling, his fists curling in readiness, "it's the best cat-house in London, and if you don't like it – "

Blood up to the eyes.

3

I left Winchester that December for good, and bade farewell to Farrell Flynn with his quarrels and his rebellions and his brilliant, rare smile. Probably our paths would not cross again.

"Come and stay at Thimble House for a few days, Patrick," said Denzil Darke, during a snatched weekend in London towards the end of term. "Simon's away – seeing business contacts in the north you know – and you'll be company." The lazy smile slid out. "Highly salubrious neighbourhood, Portugal Street," said Denzil. "We back onto the College of Surgeons and rub shoulders with the dregs of the law. Convenient."

The house which Simon and Denzil had just taken over was a tall crammed building, cheek by jowl with the barristers' chambers and merchants, and the odd brass plate of a physician. It was a remnant of Queen Elizabeth's day, a frowning, over-hanging building, half timbered and grim. It might have been attractive if someone had had the energy and the money to renovate it.

"Falling to bits," agreed Denzil that first night. "But we like it. And it's devilish convenient."

"Oh. Yes, of course. The – the export business."

"Exactly," said Denzil, smiling. "Just so."

I surveyed the ground floor which consisted of one huge room opening directly off the street, and looked up to the tottering remains of a minstrels' gallery which ran precariously round the hall.

"Is business good?"

"Reasonable." Denzil studied his fingernails. "We supply a good many surgical instruments to the various medical colleges. The beginning of term is always – quite lucrative. The new intake has to be provided for."

"Yes. Of course." I deposited my bags in one of the upstairs rooms, managed to overlook the dust and the indignant family of spiders I had disturbed, and changed quickly, steadfastly ignoring the ambiguous insect above the curtains which appeared to have got to the chrysalis stage, died, and become fossilized. I was not surprised. If I stayed very long in this room I should become fossilized myself. It was as cold as a nun's embrace.

Denzil and I dined that night at the Thatched House Tavern in St. James's Street, and Denzil immediately became involved in discussion with a group of gentlemen who appeared to require his

assistance to settle some kind of wager. I watched, grinning, and enjoying the Thatched House's excellent claret, and found myself next to a tall gentleman with piercing grey eyes and a high sloping forehead.

"Good evening. You're a – relative of young Darke?" he enquired, inspecting me over his glass.

"Not at all, sir. Merely a friend."

"Ah. Forgive me. Mistook the matter." He sipped his wine. "Astute feller, Darke."

"So I believe."

The grey eyes regarded me. "Just down from school?"

"Yes, sir. Winchester."

"Ah. Goin' into young Darke's business?"

"Export? No indeed, sir. My father has cotton manufactories in the north." I studied him. "Do you – perhaps do business with Denzil, sir?"

Amusement showed for a moment. "I have done," said the gentleman. "Yes, I have done. He supplies my hospital, y'know. Him and Simon Glass. You'll be a relative of Simon's?"

"He's my cousin."

"Ha. Thought I detected a resemblance. Not often wrong about it. Bones're my business."

"You're a – surgeon?"

"For my sins." He drained his glass and waved to a waiter. "Odd trade, y'know. A good surgeon has to have the eye of an eagle, the heart of a lion and the hand of a lady." His own fingers, long and sensitive, curled about his wine glass. "I teach," he said, off-handedly. "Teach the young cubs how to carve 'em up."

A little distance away, Denzil was arguing hotly, saying something about two hundred guineas, and his

opponents were roaring with laughter, and shouting something about 'Not if they all had two heads apiece'! Denzil looked up and caught my companion's eye and the mirth subsided instantly.

"Well, Patrick," said Denzil in his drawl, "making the acquaintance of our illustrious patron, are you? Sir, you appear to have met Simon's cousin – Patrick Glass, I see."

"I have." The grey-eyed gentleman inclined his head. "We didn't exchange names, however, Glass. Cooper's my name. Astley Cooper, you know."

"Fellow," observed one of the others, "of the Royal College of Surgeons – tipped as its next president, and *still* he has difficulty in distinguishing a prostate from a prostrate! Deuced awkward for the patient at times, hey, Astley?"

"*I* always know when a thing's prostrate," put in another. "Especially if it's a female."

"Yes, but an enlarged prostate couldn't cope with a prostrate anything," argued the first.

Astley Cooper cuffed the two young men good-humouredly and cursed them for a pair of irreverent pups. "And where's the entertainment you promised me, hey?" He sent me a sideways smile. "Never trust a physician, Patrick. Here now, we have half a dozen young gentlemen who would undoubtedly describe themselves as 'up-and-coming' – "

"Oh I say, sir!"

"Really sir, wouldn't dream of – "

"Who would describe themselves as up-and-coming," finished Cooper, winking broadly, "and they can't come up with a decent evening's entertainment! Now, gentlemen, what is it to be?"

"I do think," said Denzil crossly the next morning,

"that you might let me know when you intend to stay out all night, Patrick." He frowned over his breakfast correspondence.

"I didn't stay out all night. I got back at five."

"It's the same thing." He slit the envelope and unfolded the letter. "Well don't blame me if you end up with an anti-social disease."

"Naturally not. It wouldn't be your fault."

Denzil shot me a suspicious look and returned to his letter. I grinned and continued to serve myself from the dish of kippers placed on the table by Shilling, Simon and Denzil's factotum.

"Oh God," said my companion, coming to the end of his letter.

"What's the matter?" I was investigating the extent of Shilling's cuisine, and finding that his abilities with a kipper did not extend to the filleting of it. "Bad news?" I said, giving up the kipper and reaching for the toast.

"You might say so." Denzil flung the letter down. "Simon returns today."

"Isn't that–"

"In company," stated Denzil, "with his mamma and sister."

I paused in the act of buttering my slice of toast. "Cousin Maria and Prudence? Nonsense, you must have misread it." I reached for the letter. "Why the devil should they come to London?"

"Because the old – because Mrs. Malvern must needs shop for Christmas and take the brat to purchase new clothes!" said Denzil disgustedly. "And they'll require bed and board and I shall have to clean the house up and – oh confound 'em!"

"How long will they stay?" I had given up the toast as being freer from bones than the kipper, but

considerably more burnt. I poured more coffee.

"Until," said my host with a gleam of malice, "you all return to Strawberry Fields for Christmas."

I put down my cup. "You're right, she's an old – "

"Yes?"

"She's the soul of a nervous virgin," I said angrily. "Devil take the woman, can't she keep her long nose from interfering!"

Denzil sat back and regarded me with amusement. "More assignations, Patrick?"

"Go to the devil!" I finished my coffee and reached for the letter again. "I suppose she wants my escort home," I said. "D'you know that woman sees rape lurking behind every bush! It's true," I said as Denzil grinned. "She sees every man from one angle only, and it terrifies her!" I looked round. "And yes, Denzil, you will undoubtedly have to clean the house."

Denzil favoured me with his long-nosed look and said nothing.

"All right then, get someone in to clean it for you. If Shilling ain't up to it – and he doesn't look as if he's up to anything – surely there's a couple of women nearby who'd be glad to earn a – "

"Spare me your social conscience, Patrick!"

"Sorry."

Cousin Maria arrived at dusk several days later in my father's barouche, loaned for the occasion. Cousin Maria peered from the windows, with Prudence, Simon's solemn seven-year-old sister beside her, and Simon lounging, bored, on the velvet squabs. Prudence was borne off to her room for supper and bed, having bobbed a shy curtsey and regarded me with a wide, grey-eyed stare. She might have been a dainty pretty version of Simon, but the pale hair was

dragged uncompromisingly into braids, and her mamma's sense of propriety kept her almost speechless.

"Such a dreadful journey, Patrick, but there, it had to be made, and you may imagine how grateful I was for Simon's company, and to know I should have the shelter of his house at the end of it." She pecked my cheek and looked about her. I hoped Denzil had not let Shilling put her in the room with the leaking roof.

Shilling surpassed himself over dinner. He had sent out to a nearby shop house – "Since I knows wot's wot, Mr. Denzil, sir" – and he waited at table in a borrowed frockcoat, suspiciously green about the seams, but good enough in the candlelight. We dined off pea soup, lamb cutlets with mint sauce, and apples with rice.

"Excellent," pronounced Cousin Maria, helping herself from a dish of broiled spinach. "Dear Herbert would have it that you did not look after yourself properly, Simon, but I said no, I said, we may depend on the dear boy's good sense. Herbert made one of his little jokes about bread and the staff of life you know, and so it is, Simon, so it is." She ate spinach composedly and turned her attention to the house which she had not, until now, seen. "Really quite an old house, is it not," observed Cousin Maria, "and so clean." She beamed innocently, and I thanked whatever powers might be appropriate that she had not seen, as I had, the slattern from the corner tavern rubbing neat beeswax into the door posts. "Do you know, I could smell polish the minute you opened the door, Patrick."

"Could you really? Have some more mint sauce."

"I am not, however, pleased with the prices here," pursued our guest. "Quite a shilling a pound for a very

inferior Stilton cheese, and actually ninepence a pound for ham."

"How fortunate that Cousin Tobias's mills remain prosperous," drawled Simon.

"Is it not?" Cousin Maria took it at face value. "And yet one is constantly hearing of the closing down of mills in Manchester and Nottingham, with the poor workers destitute."

I started to say something about the Chartists but Cousin Maria was in full flood now.

"And the factory inspectors! Really a very *low* sort of person. Do you know, one of them actually had the impertinence to inform your father, Patrick, that Glas Bank was a fire risk! The idea! Naturally your father sent him about his business at once!"

"Naturally."

But Glas Bank always had been a fire risk. It was the oldest of the mills, a wooden structure erected in Oliver's day, and on the first hot day, a spark from the machinery would send the lot – building, stored cotton and all – shooting up like a tinder box. I pulled my thoughts away and found that Simon was offering port, predictably declined by our guest. "Although very good for the digestion, I believe, but what, as my dear mother used to say, then digests the port? No, no, I will leave you boys to your glass, but you may be sure I shall be up betimes to oversee the preparation of your breakfast."

"Which," remarked Simon, watching her depart, "will be of interest. Will Shilling be sober?"

"I've no idea." Denzil reached for the port again.

I left them shortly after eleven, thinking they would probably have business to discuss after Simon's absence. And in any case – I grinned as I undressed – in any case, the previous night which had finished at

Kate Hamilton's infamous bawdy house, had been somewhat deficient on sleep. I was frankly tired, and Simon had had a heavy hand with the port to boot.

But despite my tiredness, despite the port, sleep was slow in coming. I lay awake, watching the moon-light wash over the spidering of cracks in the ceiling imagining them into the shapes of animals and faces ... Cousin Maria, grotesquely bonneted, the kitten-faced with at Kate Hamilton's last night ... Denzil with his eyes slitted and something vaguely familiar peering out ... Below me I could hear the sound of their voices, blurred by the thick timbering of the walls ... The moonlight shifted and played about the shabby old room and the shadows changed as sleep stole over me, and took on identifiable forms ... sixteen carved chessmen moving in, standing at the corners of my bed, four and four and ... I blinked and pushed myself half up in the bed. I was not awake, I could not be, and yet nor was I asleep, and I could see them quite clearly, just on the borderline of consciousness, waiting ...

I have no idea what jerked me back to full awareness, but I suddenly found that I was fully awake and sitting up, listening. The moonlight had moved and from downstairs – I reached for my discarded breeches and pulled them on, glancing at the little clock. One o'clock. I did not stop to think, I pushed open the door and went quickly and quietly along the gallery.

The fire still burned in the room below, and the scarred panelling was bathed in a soft red light. It had not occurred to me that they would still be up. The two heads on the sofa before the fire were turned away from me, the one dark with red lights in it, the other honey-bright and sleek. And then as I watched, Simon

moved away from the sofa and crossed the room to replace his glass on a small table, and I heard his voice, low and blurred with something I could not for a minute identify, saying something about his two weeks' absence ... or had he said abstinence? Denzil laughed and looked up and Simon turned, the glass replaced, his right hand going to his belt, unbuckling, and then moving lower, unbuttoning ...

At first I thought that it was simply that Simon, the worse for drink, could not be bothered to go through to the outside privy, and was about to douse the fire in the good old-fashioned manner. And then he moved back into the circle of light thrown out by the flames. And I saw that I was wrong. Simon was advancing towards the sofa, towards Denzil, and there could be no possible mistake about his intentions.

I saw him bend over Denzil and Denzil's hand reach out ... Simon's face took on that unmistakable look of concentrating pleasure and I turned sharply away, knowing that they could not have seen me, and that I was safe to slip back to my room. I moved quickly across the landing, and as I did so, I saw the sudden movement at the far end, the blur of some light-coloured material shrinking back into the shadows. She disappeared back, along the little corridor that ran away from the landing.

"Prue!" I reached out for her, trying to speak quietly, knowing we were hidden from Simon and Denzil, but knowing also how sounds carried at that dead time of the night. "Prue," I said softly, "What the devil – "

She shrank back, her eyes going beyond me to the firelit room below. I glanced back. The sofa was drawn up to the fire, and its high back hid the two occupants. Even so, she must have seen ... She looked

back at me, her eyes dilating and I knew that she had seen and recognized a threat from the opposite sex which she could not possibly understand.

"It's all right," I said, bending down and taking her hand. "Did you hear a noise? And come out to see?"

"I – " It was a thread of sound and she nodded, her eyes enormous in her scared little face and sliding nervously from my look, I cursed inwardly. The child had seen Simon in that state of nature never referred to in mixed company, and it had terrified her because she did not understand it. And now she was placing me in the same category. A threat.

"It's all right," I said again, trying to speak softly. "Go back to bed, Prue. I expect you had a bad dream."

And if that was the worst she managed to believe, she would probably take no harm.

She nodded, still unable to look at me, and slipped away, a small ghost in her white nightgown. I glanced back at the downstairs room. The fire was burning low, sending out blurred shadows and the high-backed sofa still hid them from view. After a moment I went quietly back to bed.

Christmas at Strawberry Fields was celebrated much as usual, my father enjoying the image of himself as a benevolent mill-owner, and giving his workers a whole two-day holiday and a dinner for them and their families at Glas Bank.

Glas Bank was the oldest of my father's mills. It was a wooden structure, built by old Oliver who had shipped his cotton plants from the Americas and Egypt, and had gone out himself to see to the irrigation and the binding, and had fought against frost and the American boll weevil and the Egyptian

pink boll worm. Glas Bank was his monument, a several-storied mill with the weaving sheds on the ground floor, still with the old Cartwright power looms. Above were the store rooms, the offices, the great dying vats, but for Christmas Eve, with the cotton lord smiling down on his workers, the weaving sheds had been cleared and long trestle tables set up, decorated with holly and vine. At the end of the long room, a table was set a little apart for the family, who would dine on the same food.

"So generous of dear Tobias," beamed the rector, tucking into his portion of roast beef with a vigour which would undoubtedly cause him problems later. "So heart-warming to see the good people enjoying themselves, is it not?" He smiled amiably about him, noted that several musicians were about to play, and bethought himself of the dancing planned. "I hope you mean to dance, Patrick?"

"I expect so." I was eyeing the females present, running my eyes over the likeliest, marking out one bright-eyed minx with red hair.

"I hope," went on the rector, pursuing his own train of thought quite happily, "that there will be some of the good old country dances. I cannot think this new *romp* at all graceful, you know."

"The waltz?" I was watching Aleister Roache eye the red-head.

"Indeed yes." Herbert shook his head at his plate. "Most indelicate."

I smiled absently, only half listening to him.

"And so sad, is it not, to think that this time last year Sir Nicholas and his lady were with us."

"Very sad." In fact I could only bless the Providence that had kept Alicia Darke away from me this winter.

"But there now, perhaps in view of Lady Darke's condition she would not have attended our little celebrations anyway."

I felt as if I had just received a jolt beneath my ribcage. "Her – "

"Did you not know, Patrick?" Cousin Maria, never far behind in the current gossip, chimed into our conversation. "A happy event, and such a surprise, for I am sure no one had thought Sir Nicholas – at his age – " Cousin Maria broke off, conscious of having, for once, touched on the forbidden subject. "But there, I am sure he is delighted."

"Yes."

Too old, I was thinking. Too old. Well of course he was too old. He must be – sixty? More? And Alicia with her grooms and her stableboys and her butlers ... And her fifteen-year-old boys. Well, and was it so surprising at that? I tossed off the dregs of my wine and waited for the signal that would herald the start of the dancing.

My father had made it clear that I was expected to lead out Jean, Roache's young daughter for the first quadrille, whilst he would partner the wife of his head overseer. "And Aleister will take out Minchin's wife," he said, as if, I thought, we were royalty, graded in order of importance. Minchin was the head clerk, and his wife was a rigidly corseted lady with improbable red hair and a decided preference for the opposite sex. She would have Aleister for breakfast and spit out the bones.

When the signal was given, I pushed back my chair and walked straight across to the red-haired weaver.

"Will you dance with me?" I stood, looking down at her, hearing the gasps from the top table, and the shocked approval as it was realized that the musicians

were not striking up the unexceptionable quadrille as arranged, but a waltz. I had given the conductor a half sovereign to do so. The girl glanced to where my father sat, chin sunk on his chest, a man saddened by his only son's conduct.

"I'll be out o' work by the morrow, Mr. Patrick."

"I don't think so." I put out my hand. "You do waltz, don't you?"

"Aye," she said. "I waltz."

We circled the tiny wooden floor twice before the rest of the room recovered itself sufficiently to follow my example, and I grinned at my partner.

"Well, ma'am?"

"Me name's Jenny," she said. "An' you're a disgrace to your da'."

"Yes. Shall we go and get a drink?"

We had our drink and then we danced again. She was a weaver she said, and – yes, she liked it well enough, though the money weren't all that good. The girls were a grand lot, though.

"How old are you?"

"Old enough." The bright eyes met mine and she laughed. Her teeth were tiny and white, and the movement she made towards me was unmistakable.

I had her up against the back wall of Glas Bank, within several feet of the lighted windows and the noise and the laughter.

"Just think," she said, leaning back against the wooden structure and wrapping her cloak about us both, "just think on the other side of that wall – "

"I know. Shocking isn't it?"

"Anyone might come out."

"So they might." I bent my head again.

"I reckon," she said, when I freed her mouth, "that

you brought me out here for – "

"I did. Isn't that why you came?"

"Aye," she said.

Glas Bank might be the oldest of my father's mills, but I can vouch for the firmness of its rear wall.

"You will go," said my father austerely, "abroad, Patrick, and you will learn something of the business you will eventually inherit, and there will be no more of this womanizing!"

"Sir."

"You will go," said he, "to the plantations in South America, and you will learn your trade, sir, and it will do you a deal of good to suffer a little privation!"

"Yes, sir." I watched his colour subside. "When?"

"As soon as I can arrange it!" shouted my father. "In the spring sailings, I don't doubt."

Spring. I thought of Spring at Strawberry Fields and I thought of Alicia Darke with the child she would undoubtedly pass off as Sir Nick's.

"All right," I said, meeting his eyes hardly. Because – if my father thought I could not put up with a few hardships, I would prove him wrong. I would go out to the plantations, and I would learn, as Oliver had done, the business from the very start. And I would come back to England and make Glas Bank and Mill Mead and Valley Mill and all of the others the finest cotton-producing mills in the country.

I sailed in March of the following year, on Her Majesty's ship *Conquest*, with England behind me, with Spring unfolding and the cuckoo calling in Oliver's forest and the hawthorn in blossom. I exchanged England for the arid heat of the Argentine and my

father's estate, Cloudberry, and it was to be three years before I saw Glasmead and Strawberry Fields again.

4

Michael, my father's overseer at Cloudberry, was a half-caste; the result, so he said, of a liaison between a visiting English lord and a mulatto field worker.

"I am a mongrel, Patrick – the worst of both breeds and the good of neither."

"Certainly the lechery of both sides," I said, grinning at him. "In England, you'd be dubbed as a rake, and all self-respecting papas would lock away their marriageable daughters the minute the sun went down!"

"It is true?"

"It is perfectly true," I said, and refilled his glass with the harsh too-young wine that the natives brewed and drank on every possible occasion.

Mongrel he might be, but whatever his parentage, he had inherited startling good looks. His skin gleamed like polished mahogany, and his hair was boot black, but his features were regular European, with nothing of the bluntness of the pure-bred Negro. Almost he could have been taken for a Spaniard or a Puerto Rican. And he was as lecherous as a tom cat.

I came upon him, two days after my arrival, entwined with a couple of Negro girls. The harvest was in and so, it appeared, was Michael. He grinned at me from the tumbled bed and waved a hand about him.

"You see that we are not all the work without the play, my friend."

"It's fairly apparent," I eyed the girls with their lovely ebony bodies and strong young thighs.

His eyes flickered with pure mischief. "The Sir Glass wishes you to become familiar with all of the business of cotton growing," he said. "You will – perhaps – like to join us?"

I held out a hand to the younger of the two girls. "With pleasure," I said, and pulled her to her feet. "But in my own room."

His brows went up. "You prefer the privacy?"

"We're still fairly reserved in England," I said and winked.

At Cloudberry the year was governed by the cotton; the sowing, the difficult period of irrigation, the rains, the 'ginning' when the seed was separated from the lint; the picking and baling for export. And in between times, the workers held festival; got drunk on their fierce wine and sang curious unintelligible songs in their lilting voices, and made love anywhere that happened to be handy. I worked with them, separating, picking, digging. And joining in their particular brand of 'play'.

Once, following a particularly good harvest, Michael and I took the dog cart, Cloudberry's only form of transport, and went into the nearest town, to the local brothel. It was a one-storey shanty building, with sawdust on the floor, and it boasted six girls.

"But it will be quite clean, Patrick," said Michael anxiously, and he and I took three girls each and swopped over at midnight.

"You have enjoyed yourself, my friend?" he enquired courteously, as we drove back to Cloudberry with the dry pink sun coming up over the low horizon.

"Very much, thank you."

He smiled, sending me a sideways look. "You are

still the – reserved Briton, I think."

"Oh well, you know, it sticks," I said vaguely. "But – yes, I enjoyed the night."

"They are good girls," said Michael consideringly. "And one may rely on them as well."

I grinned, and recalled how he had explained to me – with exactly the gravity he had used to describe the process of ginning – the simple method of anti-conception practised by the workers.

"It is quite easy – a small wad of cotton wool soaked in vinegar." He shrugged. "In England, we hear you have appliances which a man may purchase, but here – " again the shrug, "there is only self-control."

"Well – yes."

"But you must be certain yourself that the girl has prepared properly," said Michael, precisely as if he was asking one of the headmen to prove the efficacy of an irrigation channel. "For they are a lazy lot."

Now I grinned at him in the lightening day.

"A – one hundred percent reliable house?"

"Surely," said Michael, affronted. "It is not the desire to make problems that makes them neglectful, simply the lack of memory." He frowned and flicked the reins idly. "My mother was forgetful," he said.

"And – your father?" It was the question I had wanted to ask ever since I arrived. Now I wondered if he was offended.

But nothing offended Michael. After a moment he said – "You do not guess, Patrick? That we are – of the same stable?"

"I did guess," I said, still watching him, and recognizing the tilt of the cheekbones, the slant of the eyes that was pure European and was pure Glass lineage. "The old goat," I said without rancour.

"No, for the Sir Glass is a great lord and pays for

my education and appoints me as manager here. I am satisfactory, you know." There it was, the tinge of arrogance.

"I didn't know he'd ever been here," I said.

"Oh yes, he came here – twenty years now, with his great friend, the Sir Darke."

"Nick?" I said, sitting up. "Nick Darke was here?"

"Surely, and with his lady." Michael smiled. "I do not see her, of course, for I am not yet born, but she was a very lovely lady." He glanced at me. "She is dead now, the lady?"

"I — yes, she is dead, and Nick remarried."

"To such another?"

By itself my mouth curved into the smile of memory. "Yes," I said, "to such another."

"The three of them were most friends," said Michael. "She was here for the sea voyage, the Lady Georgina, following an illness, and they are all here together, and the lady is made well again, and – " the smile that brimmed over with mischief lifted his mouth, "the Sir Glass is also made well," said Michael. "I hear it all from my mother." He looked at me. "You do not mind, Patrick?"

I looked at the dark eyes set slantwise in the high-boned English face. "Not at all," I said, and smiled. "But I'm beginning to wonder how many more of my father's – slip-ups – I'm going to uncover."

Two years slid by, and then three. I worked with Michael and the headmen, sowing, picking, grading. I went into the ports and watched the packing of the great bales of raw cotton wool, bound for England, and I joined in the harvest celebrations and got drunk on the harsh Cloudberry wine.

It was just a few weeks short of my twenty-first

birthday when the letter arrived. Cousin Maria, quite as flustered on paper as she was in person, wrote at some length, and to begin with I had difficulty deciphering the closely-written sheets.

'Always unsafe, and of course dear Herbert had so often warned ... Mr. Roache doing all he can, but of course ... and one must be charitable in this sad time, but he is *not* a gentleman ... '

I frowned, scanning the page again.

'Naturally you will come home as soon as may be, Patrick ... must tell you we are not at all happy with Minchin's part in all this. Had he but told us that the place was unsafe ... '

Glas Bank I thought, looking up from Maria's sprawling sheets, seeing not the arid fields of Cloudberry, but Glas Bank with its dry old timbers and its archaic Cartwright power looms and the flimsy railings separating weaving sheds from stores. I looked down at the letter again.

And it was there, standing out clear enough in the spidery hand. My father, on a routine visit amongst his workers had missed his footing, and had fallen the length of the treacherous old stair which should have been strengthened and which my father had bribed the factory inspectors to pass.

And since no one survives a broken neck, he had died at once, and Glas Bank and Mill Mead and Strawberry Fields House were all mine.

The four years might never have been. I stood at the scrolled gates of Darke House, my horse tethered nearby, and the years dissolved. I was sixteen again, standing in the dying light of a September afternoon, waiting for the flare of light from a bedroom window. After a moment I pushed open the gate and stepped

inside. 'If it be now, then 'tis not to come'. I should have to face her sometime and better now, with no onlookers to nudge and whisper. Better this way.

But the house was closed up, the knocker removed from the oaken door, curtains pulled across the windows. An apple-cheeked girl peered uncertainly around a back door, and informed me with a curtsey that master an' missus was from home.

"An' won't be back while next week, sir."

"I see. Thank you." I felt in my pocket and flipped her a coin, which she caught with the ease of practice.

"Tha'll be calling again?"

"Possibly."

"I'll tell them," she said. "But they'll be back for memorial service next week."

"Thank you." I walked slowly back down the driveway, noting the gardens that bore the signs of neglect, the over-long grass in the park, the tiny weeds beginning to force their way through. And the house. I stopped halfway, and leaned against a copper beech, surveying it. The ivy clustered more thickly than I remembered, and the brickwork was dull. Over to the left, an ominous dip in the roof told its own tale. My eyes strayed over the central portion, to the original part where Ralph and the renegades had lived, and where Sir Nicholas had his study. And –

I had been about to turn and leave Darke House to its solitude. Now I stopped short, my eyes on the uncurtained window. Four years ago I had walked this path, in the purple twilight of a dying summer, and I had turned back and seen the sixteen black chessmen standing sentinel in the window. And now – now they were still there, the thin sunlight catching them, and even from here picking out the jewel in a monarch's robe, the diamond-bright point of a warrior's sword.

Sixteen ebony and jet chessmen, their white counterparts crushed beneath a vain spoilt old man's foot. But even from here, I could see it. The single white figure that had not – I would have taken Bible oath on it – that had not been there four years ago.

A single chessmen. Ivory and pearl and white jade.

And even in the uncertain light, even at this distance, with the mists rolling in from the moors, I could see that it was the king.

" ' ... and being here to mourn the passing of one who was a true son of Glasmead, and whose prosperity in turn brought prosperity to others ... ' "

They were employing a good deal of licence at this memorial service, I thought, sitting in my seat at the very front of the church. My father had been enormously prosperous, but he had kept most of it to himself.

"And I will ask you all to join me in that beautiful Twenty-Third Psalm ... "

They always dragged it out, I thought resignedly, turning the pages of the prayer book.

'The Lord's my Shepherd, I'll not want ... '

Nor I would, now that I had Strawberry Fields and Glas Bank and all the rest of it.

'He maketh me to lie in pastures green ... '

As often as possible as far as I was concerned, but hopefully not alone. 'He leadeth me ... '

I frowned and tried to concentrate on the service.

'Though I walk through the valley of the shadow ... '

Glas Bank in its valley with the shadow of my father's death over it, and its doors closed.

'Thy loving kindness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life. And I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever'.

It was as evocative as ever it had been. Beside me, Cousin Maria brushed away a tear and Herbert looked grave. I let my eyes slide past them to where Simon sat and beyond him the twelve-year-old Prudence, her eyes enormous, her hands clutching the prayer book. I had not looked behind me, but I knew that the church would be as full as it could hold. There would be foremen and mill girls; Minchin in his best frockcoat with his lady beside him. On my other side sat Aleister Roache, his walnut face arranged into an unfamiliar gravity, his daughter, Jean, staring straight ahead.

And then we were proceeding down the aisle, the choristers falling in behind us, brandishing a censor and emitting an odour of incense so powerful as to make several elderly cousins cough pointedly and eye the vicar disapprovingly. Cousin Maria drew in her breath sharply and Herbert looked grave at this evidence of the vicar's hankering for Rome.

I met the curious eyes unflinchingly. They were all there, black-bonneted, dyed ostrich feathers, jet beading. There was a lingering scent of mothballs, which even the Romish incense had not been able to disperse. I wondered if it was for its fumigant qualities that it had been used, rather than because of a wistful kinship with the Papacy.

The faces were watching me as I moved circumspectly in the little procession; hushed inquisitive faces; interest written in nearly all of them, as they inspected me to see what changes the four years had wrought; if I yet showed signs of quieting down, or if the distressing fondness for the opposite sex – the cause of my banishment – was still apparent.

"Poor dear Tobias, you know, had perforce to send the boy away. *Women*, you know, dear." I could hear

them whispering it, and deliberately I lifted my chin a little higher, and allowed my eyes to stray to where a gaggle of mill girls occupied a rear pew, best bonnets carefully dyed for the occasion, hoarded silk stockings on discreet show. With a flick of an eyebrow, so brief it would have been hard to prove it was ever there, I reviewed them.

"Like a Sultan inspecting a new shipment of Circassian slaves," muttered an ex-India Army colonel before stumping into his place behind Great Aunt Edwina, who had cordially disliked my papa for close on forty years.

I moved through the chancel and out into the little vestibule with the uncertain October sun trickling in. And then I saw them.

They were a little removed from the body of the congregation and the sunlight was touching their hair and turning it the colour of ripe corn. They wore black, stiff correct wear for small boys at a memorial service, and their eyes – tip-tilted cat eyes – regarded the church and its occupants solemnly. And between them –

She was wearing black also; thin, beautifully cut crêpe, and beneath the veil her eyes were as glowing and as predatory as ever.

Alicia Darke with one hand in each of her sons.

I glanced back at the prim line of cousins and uncles and great-aunts, and then walked across to her. From behind me, the Indian Army colonel remarked loudly to Great Aunt Edwina that it was just as he had said; there was bad blood in that side of the family and four years in the wilds had done no good at all.

"Sir Patrick," she said, and her voice licked over the words with satisfaction. "Pray accept my condolences."

I studied her for a moment before replying. Then – "Thank you, Lady Darke, for attending the service."

"Oh, it was quite the least I could do." Her eyes went to the two boys. "I think you do not know – my sons?" Behind the veil her eyes were laughing. "Twins, you know, and born – shortly after your departure."

"So I believe." I looked down at them.

"Robin and Gilchrist – Gil."

"How do you do?" I said, and held out a hand to each of them. They took it shyly. "They do you credit," I said at last, conscious that the congregation was still sorting itself into little groups, with the vicar running around them with the censor.

"They do their father credit," said she, and the smile that had not changed slid out. Alicia was enjoying my discomfiture, enjoying also the knowledge that the boys resembled me strongly, and that half of Glasmead must be realizing it.

"How is Sir Nicholas?"

A tiny frown creased her brow. "Well enough."

"I see. Well," I said, holding out my hand to her, "it was good of you to deputize for him, madame. Such a solemn occasion for two young children."

She hesitated before taking my hand, and when she did so, the pressure of her fingers on my palm was unmistakable. "It was the least I could do," said Alicia and walked smoothly past the watching congregation.

I turned back to find at least a dozen eyes on me and I smiled slightly. "Mr. Minchin," I said, raising my voice a little, "you'll recall our appointment?"

"Two o'clock at Mill Mead? Most certainly, Sir Patrick."

A ripple of disapproval went through the watchers,

and Cousin Maria was moved to remind me that my presence was expected at Strawberry Fields.

"Is it? By whom?" I smiled at her. "I imagine my presence at my mill is of greater importance," I said. "But go ahead, Maria, and entertain whoever you wish." I turned away and caught the eye of the two people standing in the porch. "Well," I said softly, "smiling down into the dark blue eyes, "so the bastards are out in force, are they? Miss Flynn, I'm pleased to see you."

"And I am not at all pleased to be here," said my father's mistress with a toss of her head. "For Toby had a good few years in him yet, Sir Patrick."

"You needn't be so formal. In view of the connection I should think we might almost be related. Will you honour me with your presence at luncheon?"

"All right," said she, eyeing me. "We'll be pleased to accept, won't we Farrell?"

I looked at him. Once past twenty-one, four years makes little impression, and neither Alicia Darke nor Briony Flynn had altered very much, although I thought Miss Flynn was considerably plumper. But at eleven Farrell had been a child, and now at fifteen, he reminded me startlingly of myself. His years at Winchester – if they had not quelled the rebellious sparkle – had at least given him a surface polish. And his years in the cat house would have equipped him to deal with all walks of life. I had the distinct impression that in three or four years, Farrell Flynn was going to be a force to be reckoned with.

"More half brothers?" he demanded, nodding in the direction of the twins as we moved out into the sunlight.

"No," I said, taking Briony's arm towards my carriage. "They're your nephews, Farrell."

I walked into the low-ceilinged office above Mill Mead and threw my caped greatcoat onto a chair. From behind the desk, George Minchin rose to greet me.

"Sir Patrick – truly there was no call for you to come 'ere. I'd have waited on you at Strawberry Fields, that I would." He was a chicken-necked little man with finicky hands, so over-careful of his aspirants that he sometimes mislaid one which would later turn up where it was not needed. Snob, I thought crossly, and sat down in the chair he indicated.

"I preferred to see things *in situ*," I said and smiled at him. "Shall we begin with the order book?"

From the order book we progressed to the ledgers. I spent a considerable time studying them, sending Minchin out for a pot of coffee halfway through, and pretending not to see how the prominent eyes followed my every move, and how the stubby fingers stabbed at different entries in an attempt to divert my attention from that which he did not want me to see.

But I saw it all the same. I might not have an accountancy degree, or more than a nodding acquaintanceship with book-keeping, but Michael had taught me a good deal in the four years at Cloudberry. He had taught me how to spot the skilfully altered figure, the debit which should have shown £500 compared to other years but only showed £300. He had shown me how easily a one could be made into a four, or a seven; how fictitious creditors could be invented. He had shown me how seemingly above-board transactions could be turned to the advantage of the one who manipulated them. And it was all there. George Minchin had been making a very good thing out of Glas Bank and Mill Mead. I sat back and eyed him.

"Well?" I said. "Hadn't we better have a talk?"

He admitted it at once; for that he must have credit. It all flowed out, an embarrassment of riches in confession which I neither wanted nor liked. How the wages were low; Sir Tobias – "your good father, Sir Patrick" – had linked his salary to productivity; how in the years when profits were low, he had had to take cuts. "And the rent always to find and the cost of coal." The large eyes flickered uneasily. And then, it seemed, there was Bella. "The best of good women, Sir Patrick."

"Of course."

Bella, it seemed, had viewed her spouse's modest rise to manager at the Glass mills enthusiastically. They must be worthy of the promotion. George must set them up in a better-class district. "Not that there's nothing – " he frowned and corrected himself, "anything against the 'ouses, Sir Patrick. No indeed. And for them as has to work long h-ours – " the aitch was carefully pronounced – "it's a boon as you might say, bein' so close." Bella, it appeared, had cast covetous eyes on the little mews slightly above the valley, and the rent of £50 a year had seemed not out of reach.

"Only – it didn't stop there."

"Yes. I see." And curse the unpleasing little man, he was rousing my unwilling sympathy. Bella Minchin – a highly-complexioned lady on the shady side of thirty – was probably the cause of the whole affair. Better houses, education for her children, modest little Sunday lunch parties for the managers of rival concerns. And what was wrong with any of it? Nothing, other than the fact that her spouse had had to resort to dishonesty to maintain the standards she demanded.

"A good woman," he repeated, his eyes shifting. "A

good wife, Sir Patrick, if sometimes – "

"What?"

Minchin hesitated, and then threw caution to the winds. "Affectionate," he said, almost in a whisper. "Very – what you might call loving."

"Yes?" It was common knowledge that Bella Minchin was anybody's, but it was not the moment to say so.

"Very 'ealthy, you might say. Never – ails."

"I see. No – headaches?"

"Never," shuddered Minchin. "An' – it isn't given to us all, Sir Patrick, to – to – satisfy – "

"No. Well of course not."

"Every night," he said, eyes closed in horror. "Every night, Sir Patrick, and I – tryin' as best I could, but not always able to – "

"Yes. You don't need to tell me any – "

"And since I couldn't meet 'er demands in *that* way, I tried to – to meet the other demands." He eyed me. "You will help me, won't you, sir?"

"Well regarding your wife, I hardly think I – "

"No! Strike me down if I should ever 'ave meant such a thing! I mean – you won't turn me over to the law, Sir Patrick?"

There was a short silence. At last, I said –

"No, I won't do that. I won't even dismiss you, Minchin, although by all the rules you're as guilty as all hell." I frowned. "But I think we'll – spread the load a little, so that you're – " I grinned at him, "so that you're not exposed to temptation again."

"Was you intending to – oversee things yourself, sir?"

"Heaven forbid," I said. "I've no head for book-keeping. No, you may have it all and with my blessing." I grinned again. "But I think I'll put in

another – shall we call it a joint manager? – to assist you."

5

Michael at Glasmead was a riot. He walked into the mill that first morning, as impeccable as London tailoring could make him, every hair sleekly in place, his mahogany skin gleaming. He ran his eyes over the weavers and the dyers and the girls at the looms, selecting here, discarding there, smiling arrogantly at the stares and the shocked gasps as he strode easily into Minchin's office.

And from the first, he made Mill Mead more profitable.

It was thought a little eccentric of me to employ him – 'For whatever dear Herbert may say, Patrick, about us all being God's children, the man is a nigger and probably quite savage.'

I thought of Michael with his smooth European tailoring and his finely boned features and his devastating charm.

"But extremely clever, Maria." I regarded her. "You knew he'd negotiated a meeting with two or three of the larger post houses in London? We're to supply them with this new material – moquette they call it – as a cover for the seats in the mail and stage coaches. It'll be lucrative enough."

"I was always given to understand," said Cousin Maria huffily, "that wooden benches were provided for the type of person who used the common stage."

"So they are, but there's a deal of competition in the field these days. That Scottish chap – what's his name? – McAdam talks of re-laying half the roads in

England, and travel will be – "

"If," said Cousin Maria bridling, "we are to pander to the whims of the *lower classes* – "

"Oh, let's not stoop quite so low," I said, hiding my anger with an effort. "Let's say the merchant classes, Maria; the *nouveau riche* who don't keep their own carriages but like to travel in a degree of comfort." I sat back in my chair. "And anyway, the more profitable Mill Mead is, the more comforts I – or ought I to say 'we'? – shall enjoy."

"If you wish Herbert and me to leave, you have only to say and we shall go *at once*!"

"Have I? And where would you go?"

"Simon would be very pleased to house his mamma."

"And Prue?"

"I am very displeased with Prudence," announced her mamma, further incensed. "She was doing very well at her school, very well indeed. For a girl."

"Well?"

"She has become," said Cousin Maria stiffly, "friendly with a – a girl of a different faith, and has actually requested instruction into that faith!"

"Flirting with Rome, is she?" I said, mildly amused. "I expect it's just a phase. She'll get over it."

"Herbert is most upset. His digestion is suffering."

I thought that Herbert's unreliable digestion was becoming more upset by his recent discovery of a particularly fine Burgundy in my father's cellars. Having been wholly abstemious for the better part of fifty years, the rector was making up for lost time. Scarcely an evening passed without him lapsing into a happy stupor at dinner, and on the occasion of a small dinner party to celebrate Aleister Roache's forty years' association with the Glass mills, he had made

the amiable observation that Great Aunt Edwina had a face like a bottom.

"Jus' like a bottom," declared Herbert happily, waving his glass and beaming on the assembled company, before being hastily hurried from the room by his spouse.

Michael and I journeyed to London a week later and were entertained royally by the post house owners, who appeared to have formed themselves into some kind of private company, and were eyeing their competitors shrewdly. They were inclined to eye Michael askance, but my half-brother, in whom British insularity was producing an outer skin of urbanity, declined their brandy and cigars, took his seat at the foot of the conference table, and proceeded to hammer out one of the most profitable deals it had ever been my pleasure to witness. He contrived to give the impression that we were actually doing them a favour, that the supply of the moquette was distracting us from other, far more important customers, and that since none of the other mills would undertake the job, the charges must, perforce, be set to suit Mill Mead. The bewhiskered gentlemen, all prepared to dismiss him out of hand, hummed and hawed, fingered their moustaches, and thought that some mutually advantageous arrangement might be arrived at.

Michael smiled, begged to leave with them his carefully prepared report, and took his leave.

"We're invited to dine, I believe," I said to him, as he shook hands with out hosts.

"That is kind, but you will forgive me from being present? I am arranged to see someone."

Which meant that Michael, the bed-hopper, was going on the rampage. He smiled at me, bland as buttermilk, and knew quite well what I was thinking.

"Well?" I said as we sat back in our carriage and watched London slide past. Between the buildings I could see the faint gleam of the river, silver-grey in the failing light, and here and there pinpoints of light flaring in the houses. London's night life was waking up; taverns, supper rooms, bawdy houses with discreet entrances and a different vice on each floor. I cursed the bewhiskered gentlemen. "Well?" I said again. "What's it to be, you old goat? Kate Hamilton's? Or one of the lesser establishments?"

He smiled at me. "Sparrow Walk," he said at length. "You jump? You hear of it, my Patrick?"

"Yes, I hear of it," I said crossly. "And so do you, devil take you for a mulatto rake!"

"Is it so good?" mused Michael, his attention wholly on the thoroughfare of Piccadilly which, even at this hour, thronged with people; early theatre crowds and clerks and shopgirls. Over to our right was St. James's with its cluster of gentlemen's clubs, correct, respectable. Behind us – I scowled.

"I believe it's excellent," I said. "At any rate, it's something of a family concern." The carriage drew up outside our hotel and I grinned at him. "You may meet yet another half-brother there," I said. "A black-haired Irish rebel with the temper of the devil and the smile of an angel. Give him my regards if you do." And leaving him, for once, bereft of words, I jumped lightly down into the street.

I dined with Gerald Latham, the youngest of the bewhiskered gentlemen, at, surprisingly enough, The Mitre in Fleet Street.

"Expecting the Athenaeum or White's, were you Sir Patrick? Sorry I don't aspire to such heights."

"Not at all," I said, looking round with interest.

The Mitre was jam-packed with diners; gentlemen who argued hotly, or appeared deep in discussion. From the kitchens an appetizing scent of roast beef wafted. We ordered beefsteak pudding with a very acceptable beaujolais.

"Often come here," explained Latham. "I've a bit of a share in this new periodical – *Everyman's London* – and it interests me to see 'em – the literary coves, you know."

"Yes of course." The beefsteak pudding was excellent. "Does it – prosper, your newspaper?"

"Oh, well enough," rejoined Latham. "It's non-political you know. Simply aims at news. Sort of thing the ordinary man can follow. None of this – what do they call it? – satire. Don't follow the half of it myself." He helped himself from a dish of buttered carrots. "It does well enough," he said again. "Youth – that's the great thing, Sir Patrick. There's a young editor, and a couple of bright boys under him. Take 'em early and train 'em up, that's his way." He ate beefsteak pudding reflectively. "We aim to uncover the scandals," he explained. "That multiple murderer a few months ago – forget his name just now – but *Everyman's* was partly responsible for his capture."

"Really?"

Latham nodded vigorously. "Make a speciality of it," he explained. "At the moment," he went on, "we're onto this affair of the medical boys. Heard about it at all?"

"I don't think so."

"Well," said my host, who appeared to harbour more enthusiasm for his newspaper than for his post and mail coaches, "probably a red herring, but we don't think so. Supply and demand, y'see. Surgeons demand the bodies for their lectures to the students –

but who supplies 'em, that's what we want to know."

"I thought the gallow's victims – "

"Don't account for the tenth part," said Latham. "I tell you, Sir Patrick, Astley Cooper and his satellites are feedin' off the fat of the land, and why? because of the number of students they take on. Five guineas a term, *and* that entitles 'em to a chunk of a dead body to practise on."

"Good Lord."

"And where do they get so many bodies?"

"Well, where?"

"That's what we want to know," said Latham, pausing sufficiently to order an astonishingly large portion of apple tart and proceeding to eat it with concentrated enjoyment. "We believe," he said, "that there's a highly efficient organization operating."

I looked up at him, and as I did so, he caught the eye of a newcomer who had just entered The Mitre, and was standing watching the crowded coffee house with frowning amusement. Opposite to me, Gerald Latham called a welcome and beckoned him over. "One of *Everyman's* bright boys," he said to me. "Journalist, and quite the most promising young man – of course, he's a deal to learn yet, but there, youth – it's the great thing." And he turned and waved to the waiter to set another chair as the young man came up to our table.

The temper of the devil and the smile of an angel I had said. The temper looked to be fairly well controlled just now, and the smile was cautious. After all, I reminded myself, Gerald Latham was his employer and, as such, presumably a person of some importance. But little else had changed.

"Hello, Farrell," I said, standing up and holding out my hand. "How are you?"

If I had thought that my half-brother might be at all intimidated by the presence of the chairman of his newspaper and his sire's legitimate offspring, I was wrong. Nothing ever intimidated Farrell, not because he was boorish or without imagination, but simply because he was Irish, and the Irish, I have since discovered, consider themselves the master race anyway. They cannot conceive of anyone ever being superior to them. It was a quality that Farrell possessed to a remarkable degree.

He accepted the offer of a glass of wine, and discussed, equably enough, the young paper, *Everyman's London*, which he had graced with his presence upon leaving Winchester six months earlier. The conversation – inevitably – turned to Latham's current hobby horse; the resurrectionists. Across the table, I saw Farrell's blue eyes narrow with amusement and the wide mouth with its Irish mobility twitch.

"And I hope you are following up your enquiries, Mr. Flynn," demanded Gerald Latham with serious brows.

"I am, sir." He drained his glass. "You'll have seen my article last week?"

"Indeed, yes. A most – descriptive piece."

Farrell grinned. "A mite too strong for you, was it, sir?"

"It was certainly – strongly put," amended Latham, and Farrell grinned again and turned to me.

"I did an article about the providing of murderers' corpses to the anatomists," he said. "The original charter was granted by Henry the Eighth to the Barbers and Surgeons of London – did you know that? It was sufficient enough in those days, but now they're pouncing on the carcasses as fast as the gallows cut

'em down. The minute a murderer's corpse is unstrung, the relatives fight over it with the College of Surgeons. There's more shame in ending up on the anatomists' tables than being gutted, tarred and hung in chains. Fascinating subject."

"Very," I said, staring at him, and trying to picture him in the drawing-room at Strawberry Fields.

"Whoever's at the head of the organization," said Farrell, "not only has a shrewd head on him, but he'll be making money from it as well."

"Then you – believe such an organization exists? That there's a – supply network for the anatomists?"

"Certainly," said my half-brother, his eyes brimful of mockery. "Aren't I paid to do so?" He stood up. "And now, gentlemen, you'll perhaps forgive me? I came in to see a colleague, but I see he's not present. You're staying in Half Moon Street, aren't you, Sir Patrick?"

"Yes I am, but how the devil did you – "

"I'm a newspaper man," said Farrell. "It's my job to know things. Perhaps we'll meet again. Goodnight to you both."

6

Michael and I stayed on in London after our meeting, penetrating the delights of Kate Hamilton's famous bawdy house – in all senses – , eyeing the opera dancers in the notorious green and white room at the back of Covent Garden; making and receiving assignations, and dining at the tables of the *haut ton*. Me, the hostesses were inclined to regard favourably, but Michael was looked on as something of a freak. He eyed his detractors with lazy amusement, set himself

to charm, and soon became as much a novelty as the waltz had once been. It became the fashion to secure him for a dinner party or a ball, and place him next a minor Member of Parliament, or a poker-stiff maiden aunt, purely for the pleasure of seeing him win the disapproving ones over.

It was about a fortnight after our arrival in London, with our negotiations with Gerald Latham's co-directors drawing to a successful close, that we attended Lady Malin's Primrose Ball in Grosvenor Square. Her Ladyship had early on added Michael to the list of her lovers, and was now casting her net for her three daughters, all of whom, she declared, had been born when she was a mere child. And gels made their come-outs so early now, did they not?

"She is forty if a day," observed Michael as we alighted from the carriage, "but in bed she is – "

"Yes?"

"Remarkable," he said and left it at that. I grinned and followed him through the doorway, the liveried, white-wigged footmen springing to attention.

"It's the usual crush," I said to Michael, as we stood on the edge of the ballroom, sipping warm champagne and eyeing the dancers. "Debutantes and gigolos and eagle-eyed mammas. Shall we leave and go on to Madame Kate's?"

Michael started to say something – quite probably to agree – when I stopped and stared at the little cluster of girls on the other side of the room. Three of them were in the usual pattern; pink and white ringletted dolls, demure in their high-waisted gowns. But the fourth – Even at this distance she stood out. Her hair was black and her eyes were surveying the dancers with an air of delighted amusement. She looked seventeen, no more, and she was as fresh and as

different from the others as she could be. She turned then, as if aware of my regard, and the wide mobile mouth curved into a grin. One eyebrow lifted in unmistakable interest as I started across the floor towards her.

"I think, Sir Patrick, that you are a little out of line to – single me out before my cousins."

I looked down at her as we circled the floor. "Will they mind?"

She inspected me thoughtfully. "Oh yes," she said, and the amusement was there. "I should think so."

"Madam, I have the feeling that you are a hussy."

"And so I am," she agreed. "Did you know I should not be here at all?"

"No?"

"Because," said she with an air of imparting a delightful secret, "I am not officially out yet, and when Lady Malin catches me, she will surely have me horsewhipped and shut away in a – a dismal turret, with only bread and water!" She grinned again. "Perhaps, Sir Patrick, you would climb the walls and rescue me?"

"If," I said, "you would be sure to open the windows and let me in to share the seclusion."

"I believe that is improper!"

"It is." I looked down at her, and she laughed again.

"No, you must not proposition me, for I am still in the schoolroom, and think how shocking of you!"

"I'm not propositioning you," I said, and as she looked up, her blue eyes brimful of laughter, something unexpected and unfamiliar twisted at my heart. "You know, you haven't told me your name," I said.

"Nor I have." She considered the matter. "Well

then, it is Mary, and I dislike it very much!"

"Why so?"

"Because it is – it is too *English*!" confided Miss Malin. "I believe I should prefer to be called – "

"Yes?"

"Evelina," said she, her eyes sparkling, "Or Angelica." She looked over her shoulder to where Lady Malin was making a stately progress round the floor. "Oh dear," said Miss Malin, "I rather think – if you do not mind – that it is perhaps time I – disappeared. You see, it would not do for Lady Malin to see me, since I am – "

"Not supposed to be here?"

"Well no," she said. "But I put it to you, sir, whether anyone *could* remain in a dreary bedchamber with all the music and the guests down here!" The blue eyes were lifted to mine again. "Would you believe I wrestled very strongly with temptation before I succumbed?" demanded Miss Malin.

"No."

"No, you'd be right not to," she agreed. "For I had quite made up my mind to come down and have at least one dance before I was discovered. In fact," she went on, artlessly, "my cousins and I raided their wardrobes to provide me with an evening gown. Do I look nice?"

"Very," I said, eyeing the soft pink satin with the gauzy over-slip. "Must you really leave?"

"Well I think I must," said she, stopping as we reached the edge of the floor. "I will disappear through here, Sir Patrick, and you will walk nonchalantly through to the supper room for a glass of wine, and you will wonder afterwards if I was not just a figment of your imagination!"

"Never that," I said, holding her hand for a

moment longer.

"No? Well then, perhaps I am a will-o'-the-wisp, and you will – will watch my lantern bobbing elusively before you for the rest of your life!" she said mischievously, and slipped from my grasp and between the stone pillars.

And perhaps, I thought, staring after her, I would.

Will-o'-the-wisp she might be, but I did see her again. She was present when I followed up with a morning call after the ball, and she sat, demurely-clad in schoolgirl raiment, whilst the three daughters of the house under their mamma's eye, simpered and giggled and regarded Michael with nervous interest. Michael smiled, crossed one leg over the other, and engaged their attention, thus leaving me a little out of the conversation, and able to further my acquaintance with Mary.

"She is a little young for you, my Patrick," he observed as we walked away from Grosvenor Square. "Unless, of course, you need the stimulation of extreme youth to – "

"I do not," I said, more sharply than I intended. "Are you going to hail that hackney, or are we going to walk all the way to Piccadilly in this rain?"

She was at Ranelegh Gardens, at the very improper masquerade ball three nights later, and I danced with her, and made her unmask to me in one of the secluded groves which the planners of Ranelegh had caused to be set about for the use of unscrupulous gentlemen and their unsuspecting partners. Miss Malin, it seemed, was quite aware of the uses to which Ranelegh's groves were put.

"Did you bring me here to make love to me, Sir

Patrick?" she enquired coolly.

"Yes. Will you take off that mask, or would you like me to take it off for you?"

"Perhaps – you will take it off for me," she said, her voice suddenly a little uncertain.

I touched her cheek lightly. "It's all right, Mary," I said. "I won't hurt you," and reached out to the strings of her velvet mask, pulling them undone. And – there was something incredibly arousing about that simple action, almost as if I was about to take off far more than the concealing mask. Without meaning to, I pulled her into my arms.

And – dear God – she roused me as no woman had ever done before – or has ever done since. I felt my body harden at once, and it was all I could do to keep the distance between us as I kissed her. After all, she was barely seventeen, and I had not yet reached the stage of seducing schoolgirls, or those without any idea of what they were about. For she had no idea. As my mouth closed on hers, I knew that for her it was a first kiss. Even so, she responded eagerly – too eagerly for my comfort – and when at last we drew apart, her eyes were shining and her face flushed. I took a deep breath and drew her over to one of the benches beneath the trees.

"You know," I said, watching her attempting to straighten her tumbled curls, "you know, Miss, it is very improper of you to be meeting gentlemen in this way."

"I know," she said, laughing at me. "What shall we do about it, Sir Patrick?"

I walked into The Mitre and stood for a moment in the doorway, watching the crowded room. All the lights of the literary world came here, it was said, and

watching them, I wondered how many of them were here simply because they hoped to be thought a part of that circle. I thought I recognized Sheridan, the Drury Lane manager and playwright in a corner, but could not be sure.

"Viewing the lions, Sir Patrick?" said my half-brother's mocking tones. "Have you seen enough, or will we sit down and order our supper?" He indicated a corner table. "Thank you for coming."

I sat down. "Your message hinted at urgency."

"I never hint," said Farrell. "I go in, boots and all." He waved the waiter over and studied the wine list. The waiter's brows went up at his choice and Farrell looked pleased. I watched, and was amused to realize that he was still young enough to be pleased at the approval.

"Well, brat?" I said as the waiter withdrew, "are you about to uncover my past and threaten blackmail? Or produce marriage lines of your mamma to our departed sire? Or inter a couple of family scandals and splash them across the front of your disreputable rag?"

"Your past's your own affair," he said. "I don't care what you do." He looked down his nose at me. "And no, my mamma did not inveigle our papa into holy matrimony. And he a Saxon and a Protestant to boot," said Farrell.

"There is that."

"But as to the scandal – "

"So it is blackmail?"

"Hell and the devil!" he said explosively. "It is not! Tell me, Patrick, do you always suspect a person's motives?"

"Until proved otherwise. Shall we have it without frills?"

"Well, and there's precious few." He paused as the waiter arrived with our order and the wine, which had been carefully decanted. "Will I ruin your digestion by talking while we eat?" demanded Farrell.

"If it's that serious, my digestion will have to do the best it can." I watched as he sipped the wine, frowning, and then filled my glass.

"Did we both inherit Tobias' palate?" said Farrell as I drank.

"It seems so," I said dryly. The wine was excellent. "Well, brat?"

"It's about Latham's current hobby horse," said Farrell, watching me. "You'll recall that we discussed it, Sir Patrick?"

"I don't think," I said, "that you need to be quite so formal. I doubt five years separates us, quite apart from – "

"Our departed papa? Christ, he was a hypocrite, wasn't he?"

"He was – " I stopped. Tobias had been a hypocrite. "You're right," I said. "He was a copper-bottomed hypocrite."

He sent me his sudden blinding smile. "That's better," he said. "I like you better when you're honest, Patrick."

"Thank you."

"Did you believe Latham?" asked Farrell abruptly. "About the resurrectionists and the – network they've set up?"

"I thought it might be a scheme to increase his readership," I said. "Is it?"

"It is not," said Farrell, and although Winchester had smoothed the sharp edges, the anger rose readily in his voice. "It's perfectly true. The teaching hospitals are shouting blue murder for fresh corpses –

and they're getting them. We've been following it – the whole thing. We've talked to porters and sextons and there's a whole bloody organization behind it."

"You're very vehement," I said curiously.

"Am I? Well, maybe it's my good Catholic Irish upbringing." He grinned. "Would you believe I'm as devout as my frivolous life allows?"

"No."

"No, you'd be right," he agreed. "I'm bespattered with mortal and venial sin, and when Saint Peter opens the gates, it's not myself they'll be letting in."

"Farrell," I said severely, "I know for a certainty that you're only half Irish, and so this stage Irishry – "

"But wholly Irish by inclination, Patrick." He ate roast duckling reflectively. "That's why I feel strongly about the – body snatchers. I am a Catholic you know – no matter how lapsed – and we're like the Jesuits – got at for the first seven years, the doctrine sticks." He frowned, and what I had called his stage Irishry fell away. "We don't take kindly to disturbing the sleep of the dead," said Farrell. "We consider it's God's job." He drained the wine in his glass. "We've discovered who's behind the organization."

"Yes?"

"We've kept watch. Interviewed and questioned. They – bribe sextons and parsons. We know all their tricks. We've watched cemeteries and graveyards." He grinned. "Grisly, isn't it? But we know most of their tricks by now. Did you know they sometimes fill the coffins with house bricks and keep the bodies conveniently in a back room? And that if they have to dig, they only uncover half the coffin – the top half – so that they can break the lid and drag it out?"

"No." I ate my duckling, not tasting it.

"They bundle them into sacks," he said, speaking

quickly now. "Like – so many potatoes. Christ, Patrick, I've seen the bodies of animals treated with more respect!" He frowned at the untouched food on his plate. "They store 'em," he said. "In – outhouses of hospitals. Thomas's and Bartholomew's. And in houses adjoining the cemeteries." He paused and I looked up.

"Houses?"

"Yes," he said. "And, Patrick, there's one particular house."

"I see."

"All our enquiries lead back there." He paused and I said nothing. "Thimble House," said Farrell at last. "Did you know?"

"I – didn't think so, but now that you've said it, I – yes, I did know." And I did, I was thinking, my mind going back across the years to a night at the Thatched House Tavern. 'Bones are my business,' he had said, his grey eyes inspecting me. And 'going into young Darke's business, are you?' Young Darke's business. I stared at the table, at the half empty decanter of wine, not speaking.

"They – deserve what's coming to them," said Farrell at last.

"What – is coming to them?"

"Oh, they'll get off lightly enough," said he. "It's a – minor felony, you see. They're not actually depriving anyone of anything. A dead body doesn't belong to anyone."

"No. Of course not."

"Six months," he said, watching me. "And probably a stiff fine."

"I see." I relaxed a very little. "Just – that?"

"And that's if they're unlucky." He sent me his

brilliant smile again. "It isn't a hanging offence, Patrick."

"No. Of course not." I looked across at him and he grinned.

"Have I spoiled your evening?"

"Not at all."

He studied me for a moment. "Will I make it up to you by – issuing an invitation? It's only eleven – early by the standards of the streets."

"Invitation?"

"I thought," said my half-brother, standing up, "that we might repair to Sparrow Walk." He waved to the waiter for his bill. "Will you come?" Again the smile. "On the house, of course, Sir Patrick," said my half-brother.

PART TWO
Farrell

1

Being brought up in a brothel, particularly such a successful one as that run by my mamma in Sparrow Walk, had certain advantages. Mamma had opened it early in 1790, and made enormous profit out of it, so much so, that at the age of ten, I was sent to Winchester, to make what name I might for myself among the sprigs of the peerage and the budding squireens of England.

"For," said Mamma, "I've no notion of letting you stay in Sparrow Walk, Farrell darlin', and learnin' the tricks of the house." She eyed me through the cheval glass in her boudoir, whence she had summoned me. "I sent your sister away," said Mamma, assuming an air of great self-sacrifice, "so that she'd have the advantages of London Society – and didn't I pay through the nose for it!" added Mamma, temporarily dropping her pose. "Lord, how that female did rook me! But I don't grudge it, for Maura will have all the things I never had! Fresh off the boat I was when Toby Glass spied me and – "

"Pretty as a hedge rose and innocent as a spring lamb."

"Yes. Did I tell you before?"

"You did." I grinned at her.

"Ah well, he paid for his pleasures, that Toby, and

so there's Maura learning to be a lady, and I'll have you learn to be a gentleman as well!" declared Mamma. "You'll go to Winchester, Farrell darlin', and show these Saxons that an Irish gentleman's twenty times better!"

"But for all that, they look down their noses," I said to my sister, who was stealing a weekend at Sparrow Walk during Mamma's absence. Mamma had sold the grand Society lady with whom Maura was living, some highly embroidered tale about humble but unimpeachable backgrounds and the wrong side of the aristocratic blanket, which was the only reason the family had adopted my sister. That, and Mamma's very substantial quarterly payments into Child's Bank. Maura was supposed to have cast off her disreputable beginnings, and if the family in Grosvenor Square guessed, or Mamma suspected that Maura slid home sometimes, Michael and all his angels would not have defended my sister from their united wrath.

"I don't suppose," she now said, sitting in the centre of the hearthrug and hugging her knees, "that you let them, do you, Farrell?"

I grinned, and arranged a new row of chestnuts to heat in the embers of the fire. "Was there ever an Irishman born who allowed himself to be bested?"

"There was not!" said Maura, and proceeded to weave one of her fantasies about the Society household where she lived, and the lady of the house who pretended not to know that places such as Sparrow Walk existed. "While her pudding-faced lord visits 'em every night!" said Maura, "and Madam entertains gentlemen by the dozen! Oh Farrell, I wish you could see her bedchamber, all hung with silk and mirrors as it is, and with wicked joss sticks burning,

and Madam at the centre of it. She sends the maids scuttling," went on my sister, her eyes bright, "with billets for her lovers, and the lovers creep up the back stair and peer round the door for fear of Lord Pudding-Face! And really," added Maura, picking out another chestnut daintily and dipping it in the dish of salt, "such an ugly one as she is, with a face like the dough before it rose! If she knew I was here," she went on, "you know I'd be clapped in chains for a week!"

Charm, particularly charm of speech, is a difficult thing to describe, but Maura had it in full measure. She invested her characters with a larger-than-life quality, turning them into comedy or tragedy as easily as she was turning the chestnuts over in the hearth, viewing the world as if it had been arranged expressly for her entertainment.

"Where does Madam think you are now?" I said, and Maura made me a face.

"I am visiting a great aunt," she confided. "Great Aunt Agatha who lives in Wapping. I am having a very dreary time, you know, drinking a dish of tea each afternoon and never minding that it tastes of mothballs, and taking the snuffily pug dog for a walk each morning. It is all very noble of me."

"It is," I said dryly. "Shall we go to Astley's Amphitheatre this afternoon?"

Maura went back to Grosvenor Square, and I returned to Winchester which was bringing out the very worst in me. Baulked of the country estates and the London *pied à terres* of most of my contemporaries, I fell back upon a contrary snobbishness, never failing to remind all and sundry of my background, and dragging Mamma's disreputable profession in at every opportunity. They might despise me, those English lordlings, but by God they should not ignore me! I

tumbled in and out of fights with monotonous regularity, so that everyone shook their heads and prophesied an early downfall. But I learned something along the way, both from Winchester and from Sparrow Walk. The former moulded my mind, while the latter –

"Farrell," said Mamma, eyeing me shortly after my fourteenth birthday during a half-term holiday. "Isn't it time you discovered the weaker sex?"

"Well I – "

"I'll not have you learning from the street women," observed Mamma, who had grown plumper with the years, but still retained traces of the beauty which had captivated Tobias Glass fifteen years earlier. "Nor will I have you picking up their tricks or their claps," added Mamma, whose vocabulary had not been tempered with euphemistry by keeping a cat-house for fifteen years.

I sat down and waited.

" 'Tis the duty of a gentleman," went on Mamma, peering into her boudoir mirror and re-aligning an eyebrow, "to know what he's about when he enters a lady's bedchamber. Farrell, darlin', I sent you to Winchester to learn how to be a gentleman, but I'll wager my new Sunday bonnet that they're not teaching you how to – "

"They're not," I said hastily as Mamma lifted the new eyebrow at me in the mirror.

"Right," said she, setting down the hare's foot, and turning to face me. "You'll present yourself in Sophie's room in twenty minutes exactly."

The twenty minutes, presumably, were to allow me time to reflect on the fate ahead, and summon up whatever mental and physical resources might be required. My mental state was slightly taken aback at

the turn of events, but my physical state had no doubts whatever. I had, I discovered, a good deal in common with my half brother, Patrick, of whom I once heard it said that he went through his life with one hand driving his beloved mills, and the other on his trouser flap.

My upbringing might have been unconventional, but it was effective, and when I left Winchester and entered the ramshackle, only partly-respectable world of Fleet Street, I found that I was perfectly able to hold my own with all levels of society. With everyone from the ballad singers and the street vendors outside the offices of *Everyman's London*, right on up the scale to where my father's family lived in their ivory tower at Strawberry Fields House ...

Simon Malvern and Denzil Darke – a pair of unnaturals if ever I saw one – were arrested in the summer of 1810, quietly and efficiently. Bow Street, despite its unfortunate reputation, had worked well enough and had gladdened Gerald Latham's heart by sharing out information, pouncing on the tidbits turned up by the staff of *Everyman's*, and modestly refusing to take any of the glory. The glory was duly claimed by Latham, who proceeded to splash it across his front pages with a lack of restraint that caused me more than one bad moment. Newspaper man I might be; vulgarian I was not.

It ought to have been a simple enough matter, the trial of the two young men who had made their money by procuring and selling dead bodies to the anatomists. "Six months' gaol," I had said to Patrick. "And a fine. And that's if they're unlucky."

"Yes. Of course."

"It isn't a hanging offence," I had said, and he had

sent me that curious slant-eyed smile that was no small part of his indecent charm.

And it was not a hanging matter. It was nasty enough, and doubtless it would have its share of publicity. But it was not a hanging matter.

I sat in the courtroom that first day, listening to the trickle of the opening evidence, seeing how Prosecuting Counsel, portly and self-consequential, extracted the evidence, laying it before the Judge and Jury, holding up the choicier pieces with the unerring eye of a master. The whole thing would be predictable enough, I thought, scribbling my notes. They would question porters and night-watchmen, sextons. All of them had been in the pay of Denzil Darke and his partner. I sent a surreptitious glance to the dock where they stood; Darke the older of the two, facing the Court challengingly, his head held high. Beside him, Simon Glass – incredibly my cousin – the tumble of fair hair reminiscent of Patrick, but the chin weak and the lower lip thrust forward in a petulant way which would have hinted at his predilection for his own sex, even had Prosecuting Counsel not thought it necessary to drag it in anyway. The Defence objected at once, of course, and the objection was upheld, but the damage was done. Another mark against them. I scowled and stood up, seeing the Judge beginning to close that day's proceedings, thinking I would have time to draft my first article for tomorrow's edition.

I stalked into the slab-faced building just off Fleet Street, where *Everyman's London* had its headquarters. The long untidy room was deserted with the single exception of a tall thin gentleman, who drooped languidly over a sheaf of papers at the far end. I ignored the overflowing waste paper baskets and the

dirty coffee cups, and flung my topcoat vaguely at the coatstand. The stand, already overburdened with numerous ambiguous garments, over-balanced and I swore.

"Dear me," observed the gentleman at the far end, "the energy of youth. I observe, Farrell, that it is quite eleven o'clock, and I note – with a pang – youth's vigour. Tell me, is it possible that you intend to work?"

"It's not eleven yet," I said, glancing at the battered clock whose face was partly obscured by the office cat who was sitting on it.

"Nor it is."

"Anyway, you're here, Crisp."

"So I am, dear boy." He sighed and silence reigned briefly. "Do tell me," remarked Crisp, presently, "what it is that engages your attention so fervently, Farrell. Not, I trust, that singularly tasteless matter of the Irish famine?"

I set my teeth and said nothing.

"No?" mused Crisp. "Then perhaps the recent marriage of Bonaparte to the Emperor's daughter? Do you know, I fear we shall hear more of that gentleman before long. How would you like to smuggle yourself into France, Farrell, and present *Everyman's* with one of your delightfully *stirring* pieces about Napoleon's single-minded acquisition of Europe?"

"I'd like to," I said, momentarily diverted.

"Well, we shall see. By the way, I believe I had the pleasure of meeting your sister recently at some soirée or other."

"Really?" I looked up, startled. "How did you –"

"Recognise her?" He studied his fingernails. "Dear boy, it wasn't difficult. And you had – do forgive me – but you had divulged the tale of her adoption to me

one night, or had you forgotten?"

"I had as a matter of fact." I frowned. "How was she?"

"Oh, in high boom," said Crisp, leaning back in his chair and looking studiedly at nothing. "She appeared to have a number of – ah – admirers."

I laughed. "She would, the minx."

"You don't – dear me, how inquisitive I sound – you don't see her at all?"

"No," I said. "Since my mother died, we've had no contact at all." I looked at him. "I expect it's for the best. Our worlds would hardly mix, would they?"

"I imagine," said Crisp, getting up, "that you would mix into any world you found yourself in, but that is quite your affair, Farrell." He strolled over to my desk. "Ah, that particularly unpleasing matter at Thimble House, I see. Are you taking an interest in it?"

"I am."

"Yes. Do tell me – how does the noble baronet comport himself throughout?"

"Well enough," I said shortly.

"Looks down his nose in well-bred arrogance, does he?" enquired Crisp.

"I didn't know you knew him?"

"Oh, I met him somewhere or other recently," said Crisp vaguely. "Are we to have the pleasure of one of your 'eye witness' articles on the business? You won't, I trust, allow your – ah – zeal to outrun your discretion? My blue pencil – "

"I don't give a tuppeny curse for your blue pencil," I said. "If you don't like what I write, I'll sell it to *The Post*, or *The Times*."

"*The Times*," said Crisp, tucking his chin into his neck and looking wise, "will not last dear boy. No

staying power." He sighed and allowed his feet to carry him to the door. "By the by, Farrell, rumour has it that you have a – a left-handed connection with Sir Patrick. I don't imagine there's any truth in it?"

"I don't imagine there is."

"Then," said Crisp, "you won't be likely to discover any tiresome scruples about the reporting of Simon Malvern, will you?"

"I haven't got any scruples," I said. "Go away, Crisp, and leave me to work."

"Don't stay up all night," said he, closing the door behind him.

I sat in court the next day again, and found that despite the horror, despite the pictures being conjured up, I could find it in me to feel a sneaking admiration for the sheer efficiency of Denzil Darke and Simon Malvern. I found that I was itching to be at my desk; to paint vivid, grotesque word pictures of the creeping night-time trade of the resurrectionists. Simon and Denzil had sat at the head of a large organization; had controlled the spider strings of a network that had reached as far as the Northumberland moors and Scotland; they had moved their wretched underlings and pawns with the precision of machines and had grown fat on the greed of Astley Cooper's anatomists and the thirst for knowledge of the surgeons. The search for knowledge was something I could admire, could even feel a sympathy with. Indeed, had it not been for the crux of the matter – I frowned, shaking my head a little, trying to concentrate on the crowded courtroom. What was it, that faint uneasiness lying like a tarnish across my thoughts? Disgust at the whole thing? At the disturbing of the sleep of the dead? At the resurrecting of the dead before

resurrection day? Well, whatever else might be said of an Irish Catholic childhood, at least it stayed with one, sometimes on occasions when one would have been better without it. I ought to have been able to condone in part the supplying of fresh corpses to the hospitals. It was not, after all, a hanging matter.

I had been half listening to the drone of cross-questioning that was going on and as my thoughts ran to and fro, something in me jerked suddenly to attention.

Sir Harold Fish, Counsel for the Crown, had been examining one George Minchin, manager at Mill Mead. With consummate skill, he had chiselled the information he wanted out of the unhappy little man; had brought him to the damning admission that Denzil Darke had approached him – "With a little proposition, sir, an' 'oo was I to say no. It – it seemed reasonable enough, and the wages aren't much, an' the wife – " his eyes shifted beneath the eagle stare, "the wife likes the kiddies to 'ave nice things."

"Of course." Sir Harold was as smooth as silk. "And?"

"I 'ad the key – Sir Patrick always trusted me with that," went on Minchin, drawing himself up a little.

"And you allowed for the storage at the mills of – ?"

I barely heard Minchin's protest that he had never thought – never dreamed – "Smuggled brandy was what I was told, sir."

Across the courtroom I was watching my half brother, who had come in quietly, and was sitting in one of the public benches, his eyes fixed on his manager, with a look I could not identify.

"I imagine," went on Sir Harold, practically purring, "that you knew very little of – the whole business?"

"Nothink," affirmed Minchin. "I wasn't told nothink."

"No. Of course not." Sir Harold's long fingers played with his eyeglass. "They used their own men?"

"Yes." Whatever Minchin might, or might not know, he was not saying. He closed his rat-trap mouth and sent a righteous look forwards his employer.

"I imagine," went on Sir Harold, the eyeglass swinging idly, "that they used – professional killers."

In the silence that followed, I saw my half brother's head come up, and the expression in his eyes crystallized into pure disgust as he stared at his cousin.

It came out piece by piece. The paid criminals, the dregs of London's underworld who had been paid tenpence apiece for the supply of an unmarked body and no questions asked. I scribbled furiously at my articles, trying not to think too much about it.

It might not have been a hanging offence at the outset, but it was certainly so now. The whole grisly business tumbled into the open, and murder, mass murder, was punishable by the law's severest penalty. Simon and Denzil were as damned as surely as if they had the devil's mark upon them.

The crowds began to form outside Horsemonger Lane Gaol at midnight, jostling each other for the best position, shouting to the street vendors to supply them with hot potatoes, with roast chestnuts, with ale ... From all sides, windows were flung wide. The scaffold would be high enough, but even so, there was a certain cachet in being able to view the proceedings from the comfort of a chair, opera glasses to hand. The fashionable and the poor and the rich and the curious

all came together outside Horsemonger Gaol to witness the execution of the two murderers who had plied their trade with the skill and the ruthlessness of Astley Cooper himself when he cut into the living bodies beneath his knife. Of him, of course, there was no sign. With all the grace for which he was famous, he had contrived to be out of London for the duration of the trial; in a sworn statement, he had advised the court that he knew nothing of the supply of fresh bodies for his teaching hospitals; he had taken the word of his porters and his sextons, and had merely given thanks to a generous God that the supply was so good, and that he might pass on his few skills to those under him. Undoubtedly Astley Cooper knew of the vast network controlled by his henchmen; equally undoubtedly he had no notion of becoming involved in what had become the case of the decade.

I frowned, thinking how easily my thoughts framed themselves into journalese. And yet it was the case of the decade. The entire grisly inhuman trade had rocketed across London in a blaze of notoriety and when, nearly twenty years later, two Irishmen were brought to book for the self-same crime, their efforts looked meagre in comparison.

I stood on the edge of the crowd, watching the Bow Street runners cope sweatingly with the morass, seeing how the ballad singers and the running patterers were out in force, already peddling 'confessions' of the two felons, broadsheets describing the grislier of their crimes. I stared unseeingly at them, and thought about the stories that had come out in court ... The hospital where the matron and half the nurses had been in Darke's pay, and where the frailer of the inmates did not survive ... The workhouses where the porter had taken ghoulish delight in sharing his gin

with the poor wretches under his care, and had spiced the gin with something that did more than give temporary relief from the workaday world. All carefully chosen victims, friendless, without families, pathetically grateful for the befriending by the ghouls who were nightly reporting to Thimble House.

I turned away, disgusted by the sight in front of me, and it was then that I saw him. He was watching the people just as I was, seeing how their mood was one of hilarity, and I thought that a fastidious disgust flared in his eyes. After a moment I moved forward and he saw me.

"Well, Patrick," I said, "so you've come to see the end of your cousin and his lover as well."

He frowned. "Why should I not?"

"It's what I'm wondering," I said, "for I'd not thought you the one to enjoy such a sight."

"I shan't enjoy it," he said angrily. "Damn you, Farrell, do you do it on purpose?"

"Taunt you? Seemingly I do. Why *did* you come?"

"I don't know," he said, and looked around at the jostling crowds. "I've been here since – oh, I don't know – since about three. I couldn't sleep."

"Nor could I."

"No." He turned a little away and I followed him, pushing past the people. We came out a little nearer to the high platform surrounded by guards.

"They're coming out," I said suddenly, and as I spoke, the crowd began to cheer and surge forward. We stood together, watching the door halfway up the grim grey building of the gaol, the shouts of the crowd all about us. He turned to me, his face white, his eyes blazing.

"What is it they're saying? What are they shouting?"

"It's the street boys," I said, shouting myself above the noise. "It's the name they gave to them – didn't you know? They all went by code names in Darke's organization – for security." I pulled him to one side. "It was the most childish part of the whole affair. Didn't you know? It came out in court one of the days."

Patrick was gripping my arm. "What are they calling?" he said, and there was a dint of white on each side of his mouth.

"They took names from the church hierarchy," I said. "The suppliers were the lowest – they called them vergers. And so on up through the 'priests' who acted as links – messengers."

"And Simon and Denzil?"

"They called them the bishops," I said, and watched as he stared at me, the pupils of his eyes contracting suddenly as if he had been faced with a blinding light.

And in the end it was over quickly enough. I stood beside Patrick and listened to the roar increase, to the yells of the crowd for the blood of the two who had battened on the weak and the frail, and grown fat on the proceeds. They were ordinary enough, I thought, watching them walk steadily onto the platform where the hooded executioner waited courteously, the blindfolds held out before him like gyves. Denzil Darke shook his head at the blindfold, and after a moment Simon did the same.

"That took courage," I said, and Patrick frowned.

"They don't lack that," he said, and then he grasped by arm. "Dear God," he said, and there was something in his voice that made me turn to stare at him, and then to follow his eyes to where Denzil Darke

stood. And –

We were both near enough here to get a close view of them both. Prison had altered them little, but they were thinner, more drawn, the hollows of their cheeks a little more pronounced. And Darke who had been plump-faced was turned towards us.

As Patrick stared, I looked at Denzil, and I saw, and wondered why I had never seen it before.

The planes of his face, revealed now by the meagre prison fare which he would have been too fastidious to eat, were slanting, patrician, quite unmistakable.

"Dear God," said Patrick again, very softly, "the South American trip. Michael said that the three of them – "

And then the executioner moved and the trap dropped, and as the mob yelled for the bishops, my cousin Simon and my half-brother Denzil dropped into nothingness.

2

"Farrell," said John Crisp, drooping over his desk, "there's something very odd going on in Yorkshire."

"Oh, not again! Crisp, if you're sending me on another furtive flight across England in the wake of a couple of – "

"Oh, it's not the resurrectionists this time," said Crisp, frowning and pushing a pencil through his hair. "Although London hasn't forgotten that, even though it's two years."

"Three," I said shortly, and Crisp shot me one of his sharp bright glances.

"Three," he said. "All right. But it's the same family – rather curious, you know."

I said nothing.

"Really," pursued Crisp, apparently intent on the pile of copy he was correcting, "really, their – ah – misfortunes – almost leave one with the impression that they are – "

"Cursed?" I said, half amused.

Crisp winced, and begged me not to be brusque. "A failing of your delightful race, Farrell, and an admirable trait in your chosen profession, but really, dear boy, in polite society – "

"Ho," I said, "I'm to enter 'polite society' am I? Upon what grounds?"

"Well, you have the doubtful honour of being an ex-Wincastrian," said Crisp who had himself attended Eton. "I imagine you can hold your own pretty well anywhere." He played with his pencil thoughtfully and I waited. "Sir Patrick Glass," said Crisp in quite another voice, "appears to have suffered another – disaster at his mill."

I looked up. "Yes?" I said, making my voice carefully colourless. I had not seen my half brother since that morning outside Horsemonger Lane Gaol.

"Latham thought you might investigate it for us," went on Crisp. "He seemed to think you had a – slight acquaintance with Sir Patrick."

"I have," I said. "What is it you want me to do?"

"Turn out your usual deathless prose. Infiltrate the camp and ferret out the facts."

"You're very alliterative this morning," I said crossly. "What's happened at Strawberry Fields?"

Crisp lifted an eyebrow. "Dear me, I had no idea you were – quite so well acquainted with the family as to know the house."

"I'm not. I remember it from the – other matter."

"I see. Well, on the surface, it appears to be

straightforward enough," said Crisp, "but – well, you must put it down to my keen nose. There's been some kind of accident at one of the mills – Glas Bank, is it? Some of the workers were killed."

"Straightforward enough," I said, standing up and reaching for my top coat from the rickety stand.

"So it seems. But there was a similar tragedy some years ago. Sir Tobias – the old baronet, you didn't know him? no of course not – fell to his death at Glas Bank, shortly after a factory inspector had pronounced the place sound. And then, of course, there was young Malvern." He fell silent, to all intents lost in his thoughts.

"So you think there's a story in it?" I dragged my coat on and turned up the collar.

"Well, do you know, dear boy, I rather do." He sent me his sudden sweet smile. "What about it, Farrell? Will you – infiltrate the camp? With your usual famous subtlety?"

"I'll infiltrate the camp," I said, thrusting my hands into my pockets and scowling at him. "And I'll probably be about as subtle as Bonaparte was trekking into Moscow." I grinned. "Did you see he lost nearly five hundred thousand men? By God, if we don't get the allied armies together and beat him yet, I'll be a Buddhist monk!"

Crisp sighed. "Your preoccupation with fighting leaves me thoroughly exhausted," he informed me. "I suppose that before long I shall have to appoint you as *Everyman's* foreign correspondent, although I feel sure that to do so will probably put us in danger of starting an international incident!"

I grinned and made for the door. "By the way, Crisp, you said 'several' workers were killed. Do we know exactly how many died?"

"What?" He looked up from his copy. "Oh – eight, I believe." He glanced at his notes. "Yes. Just eight."

The post-chaise travelled over every single rut in the appalling Yorkshire roads with single-minded devotion, and left me feeling as if my entire inside had been wrung through a mangle.

"Not goin' to cast up your accounts, are you dear?" enquired the homely lady in the poke bonnet who had sat opposite to me from Oxford onwards.

"No," I said through my teeth, summoning up every ounce of resolve. But it was a close call, and only by exercising the most concentrated will power did I finish the journey with some semblance of dignity.

"*I* allus find a drop o'brandy 'elpful," put in a well-disposed farmer who joined us on the last stretch of the journey, and appeared to have brought in most of his fertilizing manure with his boots. I slid farther down in my seat and glowered at him from over the collar of my topcoat.

"Nice drop of small beer, that's what my Rosie's Sidney used ter say," recommended the homely woman. "Still an' all, you do look pale, dear. Be all right will you?"

I made a huge effort. "Madam," I said, "I will not succumb to the indignity of being ill, nor will I stoop to take English brandy."

"Ah, now," put in the farmer, sitting forward, hands spread on the thighs of his moleskin breeches, "French brandy, there you 'ave it. But what's to do, wi' that Frenchie rampaging across Europe, and puttin' a stop to honest folks' simple pleasures."

"I'd hardly describe French brandy as a simple pleasure," I said, and got down thankfully as the chaise rattled into the yard of the Black Boar, the

landlady shouting to Tom to come up, since the post was in, and the passengers likely fetless from lack o' nourishment.

I rose the following morning, partly refreshed, having been roused well before dawn by the crowing of a cock who appeared to think it his vocation in life to waken the countryside with his mating call. And then, since I was here to work, I hired the Black Boar's old-fashioned open carriage, and suffered further jolting to Strawberry Fields House. I would beard the noble baronet in his mansion.

And the mansion was noble enough, I thought, eyeing it as I paid off the driver and jumped down into the road. It was a long low white house, decorated with pastrycook scrolls, half a dozen styles all at war with one another. It was ugly and tasteless, but undoubtedly it was the seat of a gentleman. I squared my shoulders and walked up to the front of the house.

He was sitting in a long high-ceilinged drawing-room, green and white and gilt, faintly scented with *pot-pourri* and with the sunlight that was streaming in from the garden. His legs were stretched out in front of him, the *Gazette* and *Morning Post* in disarray on the floor at his side. And there was something startlingly different about him. I could not – then – pinpoint it, but as he stood up and came towards me, there was a quality of – repose. I looked at him, and had the impression that despite the tragedy that had hit his beloved mill, despite the rumours that must be flying about, he was seeing it all from a distance. Almost as if he was enclosed in a safe warm place, and the world could not get at him ... I frowned, and pushed the fanciful thought away.

"Good God, Farrell," said Patrick, "you look as if you've been up all night. Have a drink."

"I haven't been up all night," I said crossly, "and if I look as if I have, you can blame it on your roads. I suppose you have to live two hundred miles from London?"

"Not – carriage sickness, Farrell?" said Patrick, with the lift of an eyebrow.

"Go to the devil," I said, tossing off the drink he had given me, and then setting it down very hastily. "Hell, Patrick, do you have to give me neat brandy!"

"You looked as if you needed it," he said mildly. "I suppose you're following your brother vultures, and on the search for a good story."

"Times is hard," I said. "Have you really lost eight of your workers?"

"Oh yes," he said. "There was an accident – one of the railings gave way on an upper floor in the dying room. The girls all died at once."

"Will we discuss it?"

"There's nothing else to discuss," said Patrick, and moved across to the drinks table again.

"Is there not?" I watched him. "You know they're saying the family's cursed," I said without thinking about it very much, reaching into an inner pocket for my notebook as I spoke. Across the room Patrick made a convulsive movement, and the decanter of brandy went crashing to the floor, splintering into half a dozen pieces. Brandy – French brandy at a price of God knew what – ran freely across the polished floor. Patrick straightened up slowly and looked at me.

"What made you say that, Farrell?"

"Well it – " I stared at him. "Only that the old man died at one of the mills, didn't he? And your cousin – " I stopped, my brain working furiously. Was it just possible that Crisp had been right; that there *was* something more than a series of misfortunes.

"How did you know?" said Patrick into the silence.

"Know what? That you're – Dear God," I said explosively, "spare me the Gothic horror, would you? Oh no, Patrick, if you're thinking to bamboozle me into printing some rubbish about – "

"Oh, it's not rubbish," he said, and in the bright morning light I saw the pupils of his eyes contract, so that I was reminded of the morning when we had watched Simon and Denzil executed. He came to sit down again. "I suppose I'll have to tell you the story," he said, "because if I don't, you'll get half a dozen versions from the servants. And anyway," said my half brother, regarding me over the rim of his glass, "you're the old man's son, you may as well be – "

"What?"

"Warned," said Patrick. "I don't imagine the thing will make any difference between legitimate and otherwise, do you? Or are curses necessarily moral? I wouldn't know myself, whereas the Irish – "

"If," I said angrily, "you've got some whimsical picture of Ireland being stuffed full of leprechauns and will-o'-the-wisps and – "

"How odd you should say that."

"No it isn't. I'm only trying to – "

"Anyway, we can't talk now." He stood up. "You'd better stay to lunch," he said. "In any case, you haven't met my wife yet, have you?"

I had been in the act of replacing my empty glass on a side table. I stopped with it halfway down and stared at him.

"Christ, Patrick, you kept it dark, didn't you?" I searched my mind for mention of his marriage in the Society columns and could not find anything. Patrick grinned.

"It's perfectly in order, Farrell. No shotguns, no

irate papas. For once I behaved impeccably." He turned as the door at the far end opened and a slight figure appeared. Patrick grinned at me again and moved forward. "Mary," he said, "come over here, and meet – "

The rest of Patrick's speech was lost as the white and green drawing-room tilted, spun, righted itself. Through a whirling tunnel of sunlight I was aware that he was standing between the two of us, that he, being much taller, had shielded me from her, but that in another minute he would move aside, and she would see me, and I would have to speak, and –

And then she moved into the pool of sunlight spilling over the oak floor and the tunnel narrowed again, throwing up the scents of *pot-pourri* and spilt brandy and hot roasted chestnuts lying on a copper fender ...

After a moment I managed to get a hold of myself and I moved forward, ignoring her outstretched hand and the mischief in her eyes, seeing only that she had hardly changed at all, except to become as lovely as I had thought she would, seeing also, that beneath the surface poise, she was still a hoyden at heart.

I looked down into the wicked little heart-shaped face, and heard from a great distance Patrick's voice, with the heartbreaking note of pride in it.

"This," he was saying, "is my wife, Mary, and – "

My voice came out more harshly than I had thought possible. "She isn't your wife, Patrick," I said. "She's your sister.

"And her name isn't Mary. It's Maura."

I sat for a long time in the green and white room, where the *pot-pourri* and the spilled brandy still lay heavily on the air. It was pointless to rail against my

mother's snobbery which had sent Maura away; pointless to tell myself that if I had kept in touch with her ...

I paced restlessly about the beautiful room, not seeing it, pausing occasionally to scowl at the lawns and the shrubberies outside. I wondered when they had married.

The sun had almost completed its journey across the pale floor and the light was beginning to fail when she eventually came in, closing the door carefully and walking across to sit opposite to me. For a long time neither of us spoke, and I looked for traces of tears on her eyelids. There were none, but her eyes were bright with a hard, feverish glitter. She sent me a cautious smile.

"Poor Farrell, what a – welcome for you."

The part of my mind over which I had no control gained the upper hand for a moment, and I thought – she is going to try to wheedle her way out of it, just as she has wheedled her way out of trouble all her life. And then I was horrified at the thought.

"Have you talked with – Patrick?" I said at last, trying not to remember how, after one shocked look, he had stormed, white-faced, from the room.

"No." She gave a little wriggle. "He in his ivory tower, and I in mine."

"But you will? Maura, you must, you know."

"Oh yes." There it was, the flippant, almost uncaring tone. She smiled at me again. "Didn't I always know it was too good to last?"

"Did you?"

"Oh yes." Her voice took on a far-away quality. "I met him at Lady Malin's house, you know. He was on the look-out for – " again the smile, "for willing ladies, and I was taking a forbidden look at Society." She

leaned back in her chair. "He was very honourable all through, will you believe?"

"Oddly enough, I do believe it."

"We had an – an intrigue," said Maura, her eyes sparkling. "We met – oh, for months! – in quite the most unlikely places! I used to slip out of the wicked Malin's house, disguised as a chambermaid or a – flower girl, and meet him at Ranelegh – very improper, but such fun! – or in a little riverside tavern." She looked at me. "I was under age, you see – sixteen, and the Malin would never have countenanced it."

"No."

"We were married six months ago," said Maura, "by a special licence, and – I have been here ever since." She leaned back in her chair, watching me. "What must I do, Farrell?"

"Leave," I said, avoiding that bright stare. "Go away at once – I'll help you to secure an annulment."

Her laugh came as true and as unshadowed as ever it had. "Farrell, darling, for all your temper and your posturing, you're as orthodox as any ordained priest! He'll never let me go!" She stood up, and in one swift movement came to kneel before my chair, "We – we will find a way out, won't we?" she said, her hands in mine.

"Maura," I said gently, "we will not. There – isn't a way out. You don't understand."

And nor did she, I was thinking. She had charmed and coaxed all her life, and all her life it had served her. In another person I might have applied the epithet of spoilt; in Maura I simply saw that she had inherited that share of the family charm, and that her innocence, for the moment, was protecting her. The wrath of the law she simply laughed at, snapping her

fingers in its face. But there were other laws. Laws not made by man. I had never lived close to the soil, but Mamma, before she came to England, had spent her childhood in the Irish countryside, and not all of her tales had centred about the bog-creatures and the will-o'-the-wisps of Irish folklore. There had been odd, grisly little legends of two-headed children kept locked away in the farthern most turrets of castles; creatures without faces that could only go abroad by night; babies born with extra arms or legs, and thought to have been marked by the devil for the furtherance of his work ... Mamma had adopted them all, woven them into her bedtime stories with the curtains safely drawn and a fire roaring in the hearth. And the part of me that was strictly practical, the part of me that Winchester had stretched and strengthened, knew that such tales had their base in fact. That inbreeding, too-close cohabitation, could produce some curious things ... Nature made her own laws, and man merely followed.

I said none of this to Maura. I took refuge in platitudes, in the man-made lawns. I tried every method I could think of to persuade her to leave him and come with me to London, to make it easy for Patrick. Because I knew as surely as I knew myself that for Patrick there would be no self-deception. He would send her away, or he would go away himself. There would be no half-measures.

When I finished speaking, she was still kneeling at my feet, her little pointed face perfectly white, her eyes still holding that hard bright glitter.

"I won't leave him!" she said, and it was there at last, the wilfulness of the girl who had been so lovely and so charming that nothing had ever been denied her. I will not, she said, but somehow she must be

made to. As she pushed away from me, and ran from the room, I saw that the tears were starting at last.

Her tears availed her nothing. Patrick was implacable, as I had known he would be. He faced her in the long room, which would forever hold the taste of misery for him, and set out his terms. She must leave as soon as she had packed her things; I, if I would be so good, would accompany her back to London, and find suitable lodgings.

"There will, of course, be quite sufficient funds made available," said Patrick, not looking at either of us, and using a remote courteous voice that set us both beyond his barriers.

"The – annulment?" I said at length, as the silence grew and threatened to become embarrassing.

Patrick looked at me as if he had never seen me before. "That will be arranged" he said, and went quietly from the room.

And so I took her back to the Black Boar, where the landlady fussed over her, accepting the story of a sudden bereavement. Maura ignored her, and flung herself, dry-eyed on the bed.

"Are you going out, Farrell?" she said some little time later, when I entered the room after a cautious knock.

"I am."

"Could I come?"

"No," I said, touching her cheek lightly. "I'm going to work."

"Are you?" Her voice held a trace of interest, and I risked a smile.

"Since the boy must eat, he must work. I am going," I said, "to storm the bastions of Darke House."

"Sir Nicholas? Oh but why?" said Maura, sitting

up, her curls tumbled, and looking as rosy and untroubled as if she had just awoken from a refreshing sleep. "I do not know him, but he is a sinister old man who lives in a castle – " the familiar slant to her eyes flared for a moment. "You know they say his ancester made a pact with the devil, and that it has caught up with Sir Nicholas, so that he is – resorting to unholy practices to stave off the settling day!"

"You've been reading Marlowe," I said.

"I have not! Truly, Farrell, he is a sinister old gentleman, and quite probably eats children for breakfast!" She regarded me, her head on one side. "If," said my sister, "you are not back in time for supper, I shall think you have been sacrificed to Satan!"

3

And despite practicality, despite my training in the realities of life, I found myself remembering Maura's words as I approached Darke House. It was set back a long way from the main highway, surrounded on all sides by thickly-foliaged trees, and against my will, her words surfaced in my mind. 'His ancestor made a pact with the devil'. Looking at the frowning old house, I could believe it. I shook off my mood and tramped down the drive, seeing how the shrubbery encroached on each side. In summer there would probably be rhododendrons, bright studs of colour, but now there were only the dark thick leaves, drooping a little, heavy with last night's rain. I shivered and turned my collar up. And then I rounded the curve in the drive where the shrubbery thinned a little, and saw them.

They could not have been much more than nine or ten, and they were walking down the slope that rose gently behind the house, bows slung on their shoulders, a quiver of arrows on each arm. As I stopped, the vagrant sun slid out, and picked out lights in their hair, turning it the colour of new-run honey.

Patrick's sons, fathered onto old Sir Nicholas's wife, and brought up in the house where the pact had been made with the devil. For the briefest moment I felt that piercing fear that the Irish call being fey, and the English do not acknowledge at all. They looked so incredibly young and so absorbed in each other and in their plans. As I hesitated, they looked up, and smiled. And it was my half-brother's smile and Maura's smile. After a moment, I moved forward.

"I'm seeking Sir Nicholas Darke," I said without preamble.

"Oh my father is at home," said one of them. "I should think if you went on up to the house you'd see him, sir."

Sir. It emphasized their extreme youth, their innate politeness.

"Thank you."

"Would you like us to come with you?" enquired the other boy.

"I would, but not if it cuts across your plans."

They grinned, making me party to their secrets.

"We're going hunting," confided the first boy. "But we're not supposed to, since Papa don't care for it."

"You won't tell, will you, sir?"

"No." We walked on, the twins falling into step with me. "Do you often hunt?"

They exchanged grins. "Oh yes," said the first boy. "I say, should we know you, sir?"

"Because," added the other, "you look sort of familiar."

And if I did, wasn't it the familiarity of their own reflections? "You don't know me" I said. "My name's Farrell Flynn, and I'm a – writer."

We had reached the great front door now, and they pushed it open, indicating to me to follow.

A sinister old man who lives in a castle ... Well yes, Maura, you were not so very far wrong. It was dim in the hall and somehow a little sad. Black and white squares formed the floor and on the right, a wide shallow-treaded stair curved up and out of sight. Deep window embrasures with leaded lights jutted out on each side of the massive oak door, and a thin light penetrated, laying a chequer pattern across the floor. It was very quiet.

"Papa will be in his study," said one of them – I had given up trying to distinguish now. "Shall we take you up?"

"Thank you." I glanced about me again. "Isn't your mother – "

"Mamma's dead," replied the boy with the hardness of extreme youth. "She died last year in a carriage accident. That's her portrait," he added.

I had barely time to glance at the portrait at the far end of the hall before following them up the stair. But I saw that she had been a beauty, their mamma, with just the hint of a predatory gleam in her eyes and in the curve of her hands. But still a beauty. Patrick had ever good taste.

The room to which the twins took me was a small octagonal chamber, dark from the panelling and the heavily leaded windows, oddly chill from its stone floor. I glanced quickly round, taking in the fact that a round cherrywood table stood in the window, partly

screened by half drawn curtains, that tapestries hung here and there against the panelling, and that Persian prayer mats glowed richly against the stone flags. And then I found my attention concentrated on the figure sitting by the fire in a high-backed chair, his face shadowed by the red glow of the flames, but the light catching his eyes, making little pinpoints of light dance there. 'A very sinister old gentleman'. Sir Nicholas Darke, whom Patrick had cuckolded, and from whom I must now try to obtain what John Crisp called 'background information'.

He offered me a glass of sherry, and enquired, politely enough, how he could be of service to me. His voice was silky, assured. The privileged and landed English aristocracy, I thought with a spurt of anger, and then I remembered Patrick with his thousands and his haughty remote voice, and the pain in his eyes. And I remembered that Sir Nicholas's heirs were cuckoos in the nest, and that his gardens were overgrown and neglected. I sat down and attempted to explain. Sir Nicholas listened, his head inclined towards me a little, and behind my carefully prepared speech, I studied him.

He was much older than I had expected, seventy at least, and possibly more. His face was lined and had the pale polished look of age, but the thick silver hair grew closely to his skull, and his eyes were intelligent. Indeed, I had the curious impression that it was not an old aristocrat who sat there, but something else. Something that had sat there for countless generations, waiting and watching, seizing its time to pounce ...

I shook my head and took another sip of the pale sherry.

"And so you see, sir, I thought you'd perhaps be

good enough to tell me a little about the family – from the point of view of a – a neighbour. An old friend." I sat back and regarded him, and surprisingly, he smiled.

"I should not have thought, Mr. Flynn, that you needed telling very much about your own family." He smiled again as I made a sharp movement. "Did you imagine I should not know that you are of – how is it put? – of the same stable? Sir Tobias – " Was there the slightest check in his voice there? "Sir Tobias was importunate in his early life, Mr. Flynn."

I scowled and said nothing.

"I think," pursued the gentleman, "that you cannot know that our two families are – not on friendly terms, these days." He glanced at me. "No, I see you did not know, otherwise you would not have come, I believe." He reached for his glass, studying me. "Despite the appearance you wish to present, I think you are a man of infinite sensibility."

"I'm a newspaper man," I said hardly.

"Yes." He sipped at his wine. "And how strange, since I could give you – how would you phrase it? – the story of the decade."

"Yes?"

Again the thin smile that was doing nothing at all for my peace of mind. I did not like Nicholas Darke, whatever opinion he might have of me.

"You would never print it, Mr. Flynn," said Darke, watching me. "Your superiors would condemn it as fantasy. And yet, you know, it has happened. It *is* happening." The fire flared as a log fell apart in the hearth, and again I had the impression of something immeasurably ancient sitting crouched in the chair.

"The curse?" I said, almost choosing my words at random, and yet remembering Crisp's words, and

Patrick's stunned look as he straightened up from the spilt brandy and stared at me.

"So you do know of it? A tribute to your enquiring mind? No, I think not." He refilled our glasses as if it was the most important thing in the world. "But just possibly a shot in the dark?"

"I know a little about it," I said, feeling my way, aware that a great abyss yawned at my feet, and that at any moment I might put a foot wrong.

"You know of the – chessmen?" There was the faintest pause in his words.

"I – no."

Nicholas Darke smiled. "Then you do not know anything, Mr. Flynn." He leaned back, toying with his glass. I said nothing. "The chessmen are of incalculable age," he said, and I looked up sharply. He smiled at me. "That is exactly what you had been thinking of this room, was it not? Well, you would be right. This is the oldest part of the house; it was old even when the monks, my ancestors, built their abbey on the site of an ancient temple in Henry the Seventh's reign." He paused. "History will tell you that it was a druid temple, that they were sun worshippers, those original dwellers." He frowned. "They were not sun worshippers. History has whitewashed them. They worshipped the dark, Mr. Flynn, and they lived here for centuries before the early Christians arrived to impose their beliefs." Again he paused, and I searched my mind. The early Christians? St. Benedict? Augustine? When would that be? Say just before William's invasion – A.D. 900? Earlier? Opposite to me, Sir Nicholas was watching. "The monastery was built during Henry the Seventh's reign on a site that owed its allegiance to gods far older than that worshipped by the Christian Church," he said. "And

there were those who said that the old beliefs persisted, that the monastery was no true house of God." He sipped his sherry, and I thought his eyes went past me, looking into a past I could not see. After a moment he continued.

And he had been right; it was unprintable, Crisp would scoff, but even so, it had me on the edge of my seat.

The steady growth of the monastery, despite the stories whispered about it in the village; the monastery's survival of the Reformation, curious in itself, since according to Darke, it had been a prosperous busy house, and Henry VIII and Wolseley would be unlikely to have overlooked it. One more piece of evidence that the monks had made a pact with the devil? And then, in the early seventeenth century, the final fall from grace; the monastery had joined the victims of James Stuart's witch-hunts, the inhabitants paying the dreadful price extorted in those days. Only one, Ralph, had escaped the flames, and had remained at Darke House. Sir Nicholas was speaking more slowly now, savouring his story, lingering a little over the details of his ancestor's famous chess game with the devil, and the handing over by the devil of his own chess set.

Ivory and pearl and white jade. Ebony, jet, black pearl. Each piece carved by the devil and handed over to the first Lord Darke and his heirs to keep in perpetuity.

"And so they were," said Sir Nicholas, "until, ten years ago, the white pieces were destroyed by a fool and a selfish old man." He leaned forward, his eyes black pits. "He was a fool, Tobias Glass, and he deserved – "

"Yes?"

Sir Nicholas sat back, the light dying from his eyes. "I lost my temper," he said, frowning a little. "I lost my temper and I said things which – once spoken – could not be recalled. I swore to have back my white chessmen, piece by piece, until the set was again complete. I swore that they would be replaced from members of his family. *And it is happening Mr. Flynn.*"

"Surely – "

"But yes," he interrupted me, with an urgency that I felt was foreign to his nature. "The pieces are being replaced – you see!" With a sudden sharp gesture he turned in his chair, and drew back the half-closed curtain. I half rose in my seat, staring at the round polished table reflecting the delicate carved figures that stood, pranced, sat on the squared marquetry of the surface.

Sixteen black pieces. King, queen, knights, bishops, castles, eight pawns. And –

They stood at the other end, the white chessmen destroyed by my father in a spurt of anger and childish rage. But not complete.

"No," said my companion, his eyes on me, "no, they are not complete, Mr. Flynn. That is what you are thinking. But you see – " One thin white hand touched the figures. "The king is back and also the – bishops." The faintest tremor touched his voice, and I remembered Denzil Darke who had swung at the end of a rope three years since, and whom this old man had thought his son. "And now the pawns," said Sir Nicholas, his fingers just brushing the plainly carved figures who stood before the king and the bishops. "There was an accident at the mill. Eight people were killed. Eight workers, Mr. Flynn. *Eight pawns.* Unimportant people, perhaps, but still – "

"Still people."

"Yes," he said. "People belonging to Patrick Glass."

There was a small silence. Then – "Can you not – stop it?" I said at last.

He slumped back in his chair. "Stop it? Do you not think I would if I knew how? Do you not think I have sat here, night after night, staring at the white figures, wondering just what it was that I set in motion? Do you not think I would give anything – *anything* – to take it back?" He stopped, breathing a little fast, a white pinched look about his mouth. I stood up and refilled his glass, not with the pale dry sherry, but with the golden liquid from the square shouldered decanter.

"Thank you." He drank the brandy and after a moment, the pinched look faded. I sat down. "What I said, I said in anger," said Sir Nicholas. "Can you understand that?"

"Yes. Oh yes."

"Yes. And can you also understand that – that given the history of this house, the rites that must have taken place here, perhaps sacrifices – "

"Anger," I said, feeling my way, "anger can be harnessed." I glanced at him and saw that he was listening intently. "My Church," I said, half embarrassed, but interested, "sets great store by – goodness. Self-sacrifice. By the – relics of the saints. Pieces of the Calvary Cross."

"Yes – things imbued with the goodness – the very deep goodness of holy men and women. And with their sufferings."

"Yes," I said, still picking my words. "There've been cases of miracles – cures – effected by such things. There's the Shrine at Walsingham," I said. "And several others. There's strong evidence to support the theory that goodness can – can be

directed. Yoked. What I'm trying to say – "

"What you are trying to say, Mr. Flynn, is that is goodness can be so harnessed, then why not evil also?"

"Yes," I said. "Just that. Given that you believe in the miracles, or at least in *something* outside of this world, then you have to believe in the counterpart, don't you? Everything has its opposite. Light and dark, strong and weak – "

"Good and evil. Yes." He sat back, regarding me. "So that is your explanation. That my words went out, and that – something – some entity, perhaps simply just the echoes of the wickedness that once existed here – picked up my words and – "

"Harnessed them? Yes," I said again. I indicated the round table with the beautiful marquetry and the incomplete chess set. "It's ridiculous, isn't it? Pure fantasy. But – it's happening. They're being replaced with – with members of the Glass family.

"And short of out-and-out exorcism, Sir Nicholas, I don't see what you can do about it."

I was in no spirit to pursue the rest of my interviews, but pursue them I must. But I obtained little more. All of Glasmead obviously knew about the grisly quarrel, and equally obviously, it was not talking. The death of the eight workers at the mill was an accident, a regrettable misfortune, a tragedy. But that was all.

"'Twas no fault of Patrick's that the rail gave way," stated old Aleister Roache, Patrick's partner, "and ye'll not print a word saying it was!" He glowered at me, daring me to disagree.

"Indeed, Patrick is quite beyond reproach," put in Mrs. Herbert Malvern, who dwelt in the Dower House at Strawberry Fields House and was, I

recollected, Simon's mamma. "So hard as he works as well, and I never thought to say it, but Michael, a – a distant connection – was quite the finest thing he ever did."

"Aye, a heathen, but a good lad," interposed Roache, sucking his cheeks. "Of course, I do not allow ma daughter to speak to him."

"Of course not."

"Aye, but I'd not be so confident about Prudence, Maria," pursued Roache. "It's a good thing she's not here, for he's a deal o' charm, that Michael, and she'd as likely take him as a bosom friend, talkin' as she does about everyone bein' God's creatures! Which," he added, "is daft to my way of thinkin', for if God meant us all to have black skins, He'd 've put them on the English! And," he added fairly, "the Irish."

"Thank you."

"Prudence is your – daughter, ma'am?"

"My only daughter," affirmed Mrs. Malvern, "and as good as lost to me, Mr. Flynn." She clasped her hands to her bosom. "I could bear with it in the early days, for it only entailed certain – rituals, and as dear Herbert – " a sniff and an automatic search for a handkerchief, "as dear Herbert always pointed out, we are all seeking the same God, if by differing paths, and in any case, we were all taking the same path before Henry the Eighth."

Aleister Roache, unable to follow this slightly muddle theological analogy, looked wise.

"Has Miss Malvern – er – gone over to Rome?"

"Utterly!" declaimed her mamma. "Incarcerated in a convent, and I doubt but I shall see her again!"

"Now then, Maria, she's only what the heathens call a novice, and likely won't stay the course," put in

Aleister. "It's a stiff enough training," he added, as if the unknown Prudence was learning to be a master carpenter.

"It is," I said standing up. "Thank you – both – for your time. It's been very – helpful."

Mrs. Malvern received my gratitude with a sad little smile, and Roache blew out his cheeks and hoped I would not find it necessary to print anything unsavoury about the matter.

"Oh no," I said. "I doubt I shall print anything at all, sir. Good afternoon to you."

Maura and I arrived in London three days later. The journey, in one of Patrick's barouches, was considerably more comfortable than that which I had taken a week before, but even so –

"You are going to be sick, aren't you?" said Maura, rousing herself from her own misery.

"I am not."

"Will you tell me where we'll be staying in London?"

I hesitated, grateful to anything that put the nausea from my mind, however briefly, but wondering how she would take the fact that Patrick had made over one of his houses to us, so that she might at least live in reasonable comfort.

"We'll be staying in Portugal Street," I said at last. "It – isn't a very big house, but it's – interesting. Tudor, I think." I eyed her, watching for the flare of interest. It came, and with it the pallor receded a little.

"And – will there be a ghost?"

"Quite probably," I said, reaching for the catch to let down the window. "Will you tap for the coachman to pull up again, or will I?"

4

There were no ghosts at Thimble House. If the shades of the two young men who had battened on Society's weaknesses walked here, then they walked unseen. I never saw them then or at any time later.

I liked the house at once, right from the moment we were admitted by Shilling who had acted as general factotum to Simon and Denzil, and now occupied an ambiguous position on Patrick's pay-roll. He had a bewhiskered wizened appearance and – I later discovered – a boundless thirst.

Almost the entire ground floor of Thimble House consisted of just one huge room which opened directly off the street, and had a massive stone hearth. The stairs were opposite to the door, and led up to a minstrel's gallery which ran the length and breadth of the house, with bed-chambers opening off. I slung the bags down and stood looking at the ancient panelling, able to overlook the scars and the evidence of neglect, liking the carved balustrades and the delicate tracery of the rood screens at the far end.

"Why is it called Thimble House?" asked Maura, as I opened the shutters and let the afternoon light flood in and lie, muted and golden, across the solid old floor.

"It's supposed to have been built by a Tudor nobleman for his mistress," I said. "She was married while still a child to a rich old duke who was as jealous as all hell and hardly let her out of his sight. The nobleman was married to some ugly old harridan who kept him dancing attendance on her, and had pots of money. It was difficult for the lovers to be alone, and

so he – the young man – built a – what he thought of as a little house, a set of apartments where they could meet without fear of discovery. They were both used to grand houses, and this was probably like a dolls' house to them. When she saw it – the girl – for the first time, she's supposed to have clapped her hands in delight, and teased her lover that he had given her a house which would fit into her thimble. She said it should be her thimble house, and so the name stuck."

"I see," said Maura, her eyes huge in her little white face. "That's fascinating, isn't it?"

"If you like to think so."

And indeed, she appeared to enjoy the house; to explore it that first afternoon, and consult with Shilling as to the hiring of more staff.

"Because, Farrell darling, if tonight's supper is an indication of the extent of his abilities, we'll both waste away before a week's out!"

I welcomed the plunge into house-keeping – out of character though I suspected it was, and eyed with favour the apple-cheeked country-woman engaged by Maura, who viewed both Shilling and the house with the air of one who desires nothing better than to take a scrubbing-brush to them both. Thimble House, neglected I suspected for years, prospered under the ministrations of Mrs. Millkin, who believed in the virtues of beeswax and neat's foot oil, and brewed up curious-smelling potions in the kitchens, and fed Maura assiduously with home-made broths and jellies and with fresh butter and cheese which she managed to procure by some private method of her own. Thimble House blossomed under the influence of polish and elbow-grease, and Maura began to lose the white pinched look a little.

But the grief, the tears which I had been awaiting,

did not come, and Maura appeared to regain so much of her former glow that I eyed her uneasily, wondering what was going on beneath the demure façade.

"She's a delight, Farrell, dear boy," observed Crisp, who dined with us shortly after our return. "How tragic for her to lose her husband so young."

I sent him a sharp look. "Did she tell you she was a widow?"

"Yes. Why? Isn't she?"

"Yes," I said, and cursed Maura who was apparently spinning her tales again.

Crisp studied his fingernails thoughtfully. "You've not forgotten, I take it, your little assignment over the noble baronet and his family?"

"I have not," I said. "But there's nothing to be got in Yorkshire."

"Is there not?" He rose to take his leave. "I feel sure, dear boy, your ever-inventive mind will think of another method of approach." He sent me his lazy smile. "No doubt the family is not entirely concentrated in Yorkshire," he said and took his leave.

The family was not, as he put it, entirely concentrated in Yorkshire. One of its off-shoots was here, in London. The only problem was whether I dared to seek an interview with her.

It is true that there is something very unapproachable about the cloister. Had I not been firmly imbued with the teachings of the Roman Church by Mamma, who held that the running of a cathouse did not need to divorce one from one's true religion, I doubt if I should even have attempted it. But since Glasmead had closed its ranks against me, and since I could obviously print nothing of Sir Nicholas Darke's tale, I must seek to satisfy my superiors in some other way.

Prudence Malvern, Simon's sister, was a novice in a convent just outside London. A nursing order, in the main, so my sources informed me, and therefore quite reasonably well in touch with the world. Even so, as I alighted from my hackney and paid off the driver, I was confronted with huge iron gates, uncompromisingly closed, and with a high brick wall. In touch with the world they might be, but the Sisters of St. Anthony still shut out most of it.

It was orderly inside the iron gates and very quiet. Shaved lawns and thick shrubberies led the way to the square white building with the tall flat Georgian windows and the small bell tower. I walked slowly, hearing my feet crunch on the hard drive, drinking in the peace – recognizing it for what it was – the repose of the cloister. I felt, as many others must have done, the tug of attraction. To live here, to shut out the loud world and all of its worries ...

And, said my particular devil, to shut out also the sinful joys of that loud world? I grinned, and turned the drive to a scrap of lawn with a white statue of that tortured figure of Christ exposing His bleeding heart. I looked at it for a moment, and then, wondering if Christ or St. Anthony was likely to at all approve of what I was doing, I reached out and tugged hard at the bell rope.

The peace was there again in the withdrawn face of the black-garbed nun who listened courteously to my request for a short interview with Sister Prudence on family matters.

"I believe that would be in order, Mr. Flynn, although I must, of course, seek Reverand Mother's permission."

"Of course." I stepped inside and waited, watching her flit away, hands folded into her wide hanging

sleeves, the rosary swinging gently at her side.

I met the piercing stare of Reverend Mother straightly.

"I trust you do not bring bad news, Mr. Flynn?"

"No," I said.

"Well, Sister Prudence may see you for a short time. You have chosen a fortunate time, you know. It is our recreation hour. Were it not – "

"How fortunate," I said smoothly, and turned to follow the first nun to a small parlour at the back of the house. She made one or two commonplace little observations on the way, glancing at me diffidently, and then –

"You – you are Irish, are you not, Mr. Flynn?,And you are – of our faith?"

"I – yes."

"Then perhaps you will care to join us for evening Benediction? Reverend Mother most particularly requested me to issue the invitation, but, of course, you may have another appointment – "

"I'd be delighted," I said, casting about in my mind for the Latin responses that had once sprung without thinking to my tongue. It was five years since I had attended Mass; even longer since I had taken part in any of the other services.

I waited in the small visitors' parlour whilst Sister Prudence was fetched. Someone had left the windows open, and outside a low-branched pear tree dipped its leaves, the winy scent of the pears warring with the convent smells of polish and with the ordered quiet which I was disturbing – I could sense it – with my masculinity. It had been there in the curiosity of the Reverend Mother's appraisal, in the sideways glance of the younger nun, and –

And it was there again, in the wide grey eyes of the

girl who stood in the doorway, one hand resting lightly on the door handle. She moved forward to sit in the chair I indicated, directing that disconcerting gaze onto me.

I never flattered myself that I shone when it came to rhetoric. To Maura had been given that careless charming ready flow of talk; to Patrick the gift of knowing what to say and how to say it. I could beat both of them with my pen, but here, in this quiet room with its religious texts and pictures, and the scent of the pear tree and the steady gaze of the white-clad figure opposite to me, I could only rely on truth. And it never occurred to me to offer Prudence Malvern anything else.

She listened to my story courteously, even with interest, and as I talked, I studied her, seeing something of Patrick in her, seeing also that she was another who would never admit of compromise. A fighter. She would fight for what she believed in, this one, and not care for the consequences. And whilst, as a *religieuse*, she must presumably know the sins of the world by name, there was a shuttered feeling about her, as if she had deliberately chosen to ignore the world's temptations. I wondered why she had entered St. Anthony's.

I got nothing at all from her. If she knew about the chessmen, she was not saying. She took refuge in the rulings of the Church, in her own cloister-made barriers. I felt her withdrawal, felt her touch the wall she had erected against the world, and present me with an unruffled exterior, maddening in its smugness. Finally, I stood up.

"I've taken up your recreation hour. I'm sorry."

"It does not matter." A smile touched her face, and for a moment it was my sister who stood there. "I am

only a novitiate, you know, and allowed some licence." She moved to the door. "I shall not profess for three years yet."

"And – will you?" We were standing by the door, quite close together, and it was very quiet outside. I was dimly aware that the six o'clock bell was ringing, and that the nuns had all come in from the gardens. And – oh God, I had committed myself to attending Benediction, and I could not recall a word of the responses!

"Take my vows?" She was looking at me, frowning a little, as if for the first time in her life she had come up against something she could not explain.

"Yes." A little wind ruffled the leaves of the pear tree, and the scent drifted across the air. Far-away in the depths of the house, the bell had stopped ringing.

And then she moved away to the door and the moment splintered. "Yes of course I shall," said Prudence, as remote as the moon. "Will you come through this way to the chapel, Mr. Flynn?"

And, after all, the Latin rose readily enough, and I murmured the responses and felt the force of the well-tried words, and the security of the Church, and the authority that had come down unbroken over nearly two thousand years. I sat in the tiny pew, Prudence beside me, her head bent, murmuring the responses. But I had the feeling she was very much aware of my presence.

And – the conceit of it! Of course they were aware of me, all of them! It was doubtful if they came into contact with a man from year's end to year's end, apart from those who were too sick to care, and apart from the dried-out priests with the fires of lust banked firmly down and turned inwards. I scowled and

dredged up the Latin responses from the back of my mind.

It was late when I reached Thimble House again, and Maura was sitting waiting for me, curled up by the fire, the firelight and the candleglow turning her hair to mahogany red. As I paused in the doorway, she turned, and I saw that excitement blazed in her eyes.

"Farrell," said Maura, her voice unsteady with something I did not for the minute recognize. "Farrell, I thought you'd never be back – I have the most marvellous news for you."

And God forgive me, I knew what was coming, and I knew that I could not quench the blazing happiness in her face. Not for anything.

"I'm pregnant," said my sister, rising from her chair, and coming towards me with her hands outstretched. "Isn't it wonderful! Now, you see, Patrick will have to take me back!"

I travelled to Strawberry Fields two days later, arriving at the Black Boar more dead than alive.

No, I was informed, Sir Patrick was thought to be from home – "likely seein' to his concerns in London".

"Likely so."

"Aye." Mine host ruminated on the matter. "I reckon that manager o' Sir Patrick's 'll likely be in later on."

I looked up. "Manager?"

"Aye, the black man, though to call him that's an insult, for he's as Christian as tha."

Michael, I thought grinning. "Thanks," I said. "Will you tell me if he does come in? And – leave the brandy, please."

Michael walked calmly into the coffee room some little time later, and eyed me with amused interest. "It

is Farrell, I think, and I am recalling how we met in your mamma's most excellent house." He shook my hand and enquired politely as to the health of my mother, appearing distressed to learn of her untimely demise.

"Not so very untimely," I said, tipping up the brandy bottle again. " 'Twas a grand enough life she led while she was in it."

Michael regarded me thoughtfully. "You have – perhaps been a little fortifying yourself, my friend?"

"Against the slings and arrows of – no, blast it, that's something else. Against," I said, "the accursed English roads."

"Ah."

"How," I demanded, "did you know?"

"Our half-brother was once of the opinion that you were very Irish, Farrell, but that you became – *more so* when you had been – "

"Dipping deep?"

"Yes," said Michael apologetically. "I only repeat his words, you understand."

I stood up. "Come on," I said, "I'm going to dine, and you can keep me company."

"I shall take a pleasure to do so, Farrell," said Michael, "and you will not disquiet yourself, since it will be seen that I am aware of the correct use of knives and forks."

"I don't care if you swing from the wall brackets."

We dined off capon and a dish of roast pigeons, followed by a sweet omelet.

"And you will allow that I provide the wine, yes?" said Michael smoothly, eyeing the list proferred by the head waiter, and selecting a hock which would not have thought itself out of place at White's or Brooks's.

"How's Patrick?" I said as the waiter trod away.

"He is – well enough," answered my companion, leaning back in his chair and making an exotic picture against the mellow English panelling.

"Will he be consoling himself?"

Michael shrugged. "You will know Patrick."

"Oh yes," I said. "I do."

Michael smiled. "You are another of these correct Englishmen, Farrell?"

"Hell, no!"

"Patrick loved your sister very much," he said without warning.

I thought of the way he had looked at me three months earlier, from his warm safe assured world.

"I know."

"He is – not happy."

"Well," I said angrily, "and nor is Maura." I sat back in my chair, staring at my empty plate. "Of all the stupid childish games she must play – "

"And it must lead to – this."

"Yes," I said, still staring at the littered table. "And although he's my half-brother, and I thought I had a – an affection for him – "

"Now you do not." Michael played with the stem of his wine glass. "Do you not think he suffers as well, Farrell?"

"Be damned to him," I said. "I don't care if he suffers twenty different hells. Will you tell them to fetch up the port, or will I?"

Do you not think he suffers? Despite my anger at Patrick and my boundless compassion for Maura, Michael's words stayed with me; they coloured my thoughts and slid treacherously to the surface of my mind when I least wanted them. Do you not think he suffers. Well then, let him do so, for I would put him

from my mind, and I would not care that he was finding 'consolation'. If he suffered, it was only what he deserved. I hoped my aristocratic half-brother suffered fifty separate torments. I hoped that he caught a dozen claps from his lights of love and that he became impotent in six months. I hoped that I need never set eyes on him again. And indeed, there was no reason why I should.

I travelled back to London the next day, having asked Michael to convey to Patrick the information about the child, and closed my mind to the family.

Maura was at Thimble House, and as my carriage drew up, the doctor who had been engaged to attend her, was taking his leave, his own carriage drawn up alongside mine. He paused when he saw me, and came at once forward.

"Mr. Flynn? I'm glad to have caught you."

I pushed back the longing for a glass of brandy after my journey, and the quiet of my bedroom.

"Well? Is my sister all right?"

"For the moment, yes." He stood squarely on the roadside, chewing his lip, frowning a little.

"What's the matter?"

"The matter, Mr. Flynn, is the child." He looked up at me. "You've been frank with me, sir, I'll endeavour to be so with you. The – nature of the child's parentage – "

"Well go on."

He hesitated, clearly choosing his words, then – "To be blunt, Mr. Flynn, where a child has such – such closely related parents, matters are not always –"

"Yes," I said. "I understand that. And?"

Again the hesitation. "You may, of course, wish for another opinion, but even so, I believe I shall be found right." He frowned. "I have examined your sister

today – a routine examination, you understand, to – ascertain the progress of the baby's growth."

"Yes?" It was very quiet in the street. On the other side of the warehouses I could hear the dull rumble of the carriages.

"The child," said the little doctor, looking straight at me now, "is not developing as it should. There is – a vital part missing.

"In short, Mr. Flynn, the child your sister is going to bear has no head."

A headless child. It was the stuff that nightmares were made of, the quintessence of all Mamma's tales. If ever I had doubted the power of old Sir Nicholas's curse, I doubted it no longer. She would die, my lovely heedless sister and the baby with her.

To the end, Maura believed that Patrick would take her back. He did not. He sent money regularly and generously, but he did not take her back. Even so, she clung to the belief through the darkening days, as autumn slid into winter and the tree outside her window at Thimble House became leafless and tapped skeletal fingers against the glass. And then winter gave way to February, and early March, and the fragile shoots thrust through the ground, and purple-headed crocus appeared. The distortion of her figure became more marked, but – dear God – not as marked as it should have been. A headless child. I pushed the thought away twenty times in the day, and as many times it came back to me. If Patrick suffered, then so did I as I watched Maura die.

She spun her fantasies all along, laughing and coaxing me into laughing with her, making up stories about the Tudor nobleman who had built Thimble House, insisting that his ghost surely walked, and

played Peeping Tom behind the door of her bedchamber when she disrobed for the night. And – at some stage towards the end, her hold on reality slipped, and fantasy became fact, and she believed that she was the Tudor's illicit love, and waiting for him to steal away from his ugly rich old lady.

The child was never born, of course. Maura died in the upstairs room at Thimble House, with the fire playing tricks with the light, so that the shadows solidified and took on the forms of two young men who had swung at the end of a rope nearly five years ago, and then of sixteen carved figures, standing around her bed, waiting for the queen to join them. Maura did not see them. If she saw anything, she saw the young man who had built the house, young and eager, clad in doublet and hose, rich satin and velvet. And if she heard anything she heard –

I looked up from where I had been sitting by the bed, her hand in mine, her hair curling into little damp wisps. Hope flared in her eyes as the carriage came along the street and stopped outside. It would be the doctor of course, or it would be John Crisp, or a delivery of provisions for Shilling. But even so, I felt my eyes turning to the door, listening to the sounds of arrival downstairs, and then the step on the stair, and the tap at the door.

And – "Do you not think he suffers". And, dear God, he had. The thick fair hair was still the same, the high cheekbones that pushed his eyes upwards, the faint hint of arrogance just beneath the surface. But the light had gone from his eyes, and his mouth had a wary set to it, as if its owner had set a guard over it. And I thought – I did that to him.

I truly think Patrick did not see me. He moved straight to the bed and for a moment the old light

flared in his eyes, and I thought Maura tried to say something, and to smile at him. And then the fire burned up and I saw that she was dead.

Patrick's will-o'-the-wisp was gone, and in a remote Yorkshire mansion, the queen would be back in her place on a polished cherrywood table.

"So," said John Crisp, eyeing me thoughtfully, "So, Farrell, that is it, is it? Incredible enough, isn't it?" He fiddled with a quill lying amongst the disorder of his desk, and frowned. "Shall you care to stay in London now?"

"Not particularly."

"Because," pursued my editor, "it occurs to me to make the appointment you've been hankering for any time these four years." He smiled gently. "Well, Farrell? Will you take on the job of foreign correspondent for *Everyman's*?"

I hesitated before replying, thinking of the emptiness of Thimble House which Patrick had made over to me absolutely, and which I did not now want, because Maura was there, waiting for me in every room.

"Yes," I said, looking at him. "I'd like it."

"And so I thought, my dear boy. All right then – you're *en route* for Brussels if you please, with orders to keep us quite up to the minute on Boney's progress. They say Wellington's on his way there, and the allied armies are already in residence, and spoiling for a fight."

"I know." I looked at the long untidy room and at Crisp. "Oh God," I said, "how the devil am I going to cope with being foreign correspondent, when I can't travel from here to Kensington without throwing up!"

And so I left London and put the whole thing behind me. The queen had been taken – Maura, my beautiful reckless sister – and I cared not at all for the rest: for the two knights and the two castles still to be replaced in Sir Nicholas Darke's chess set.

PART THREE

Prudence

1

I suppose that everyone may look back on his childhood and see it as a series of long golden afternoons, spent blackberrying and picking wild primroses and searching for birds' nests. And roasting chestnuts by the nursery fire with the curtains drawn against the night, and building snowmen and sledging. Mine was little different; indeed, I was more fortunate than most, for my childhood was spent in Yorkshire, on the estate of my cousin, Sir Patrick Glass who lived at Strawberry Fields House. I attended lessons at Miss Pringle's Seminary for Young Ladies – because Mamma wished it, and, more importantly, because my Uncle Tobias during his lifetime, paid for it.

I cannot remember when I was first made aware of the difference between the sexes; certainly Mamma covered the matter up with so many hushed faces, that I early on became convinced that the sterner sex was something to be feared. Mamma, married to a gentle elderly cleric who drank himself into an untimely grave, could never have obtained her dread of gentlemen from him, but when it came to the men of her own family she may have had a point. Indeed, I once heard it said that my cousin Patrick went through life with one hand on the driving rein of his

cotton mills, and the other on his trouser flap. I was seven at the time, and although I did not understand the words, the sentiment behind them left an odd lingering impression.

I was fourteen when Patrick came home from South America, whence he had been sent four years earlier in dire disgrace.

"Wild," pronounced Great Aunt Edwina attending Uncle Tobias's memorial service, and eyeing Patrick with disfavour in the drawing-room at Strawberry Fields. "I knew how it would be; I told Tobias at the time that the boy would bring nothing but trouble, and I don't doubt he'll be enjoying an uneasy rest in his grave this day."

"Bosh," retorted my papa, who had a hectic flush to his cheeks sometimes these days. "Biggest lecher in London himself, Tobias, 'fore he repented."

"Well, and his sins found him out," sharply replied Great Aunt Edwina. "We see where his penny pinching brought him in the end – headlong down a flight of rickety stairs he was too mean to have repaired!"

"Serve him right, sinful old satyr," said Papa not quite in an undertone, and beamed as Great Aunt Edwina's jet-trimmed bonnet quivered awfully. "Spent all his money on bawdy houses an' bawds in his youth," added Papa with reckless insistence on truth, waving his half-empty glass, and causing Mamma to hurry him from the room, informing the assembly with determined nonchalance that dear Herbert was about to take one of his turns.

"Nonsense," said Great Aunt Edwina, turning to Patrick, who had stood watching the entire episode with barely-suppressed amusement. "Drunk as a wheelbarrow, and he a man of the cloth!"

"Ah," said my cousin, "but you must remember that he is married to Cousin Maria, mustn't you?"

Great Aunt Edwina blinked, snorted, and retired in disorder, and Patrick smiled. I grinned and took the opportunity to slip away unnoticed.

The Forest of Glas was my favourite part of Glasmead. It had been planted by Oliver Glass, the first baronet, and it sprawled darkly across the Yorkshire moor, shutting out the sun in places. It was where – well, I will be honest – it was where I ran when mamma's strictures and papa's odd humours became unbearable. I scrambled through the gap in the hedge, wondering if things would be different now that Uncle Tobias was dead and Patrick was home. Half a dozen yards across the high grass with the wild primroses, and Oliver's forest closed about me, green and gold, the trees overhead interlacing their branches, and the sun filtering through, making harlequin patterns on the bridle-path. Perhaps if I was very quiet I should see a squirrel. I moved cautiously along the path, liking the frowning trees, and trying to remember the bit out of Macbeth, which I had read under cover of the bedclothes by the light of a single forbidden candle, and which talked about Birnham Wood. How did it go? Something about secret murder, and Birnam Wood returning to Dunsinane? I shook off the odd mood and came out into the little glade where the moss rose steeply on each side, and where harebells mingled with the grass.

They were sitting together in the centre of the clearing, their bent heads bright in the sunlight, the black outfits which had made them stiff, unrecognizable little boys at the memorial service discarded for serviceable nankeens.

They looked up as I moved forward and smiled.

"Prue," said Robin Darke happily, "have you come to play with us?"

"Yes." I sat down on the grass. "Are you playing truant, twins?"

"Oh no!" Angelic faces were raised to mine, mischief in every inch of them. "We had to go to a – funeral service," explained Gilchrist earnestly, stumbling a little over the unfamiliar word. "It was very *boring* and there was a funny smell."

"Yes, and Mamma made us stand for ever in the chancel, only to speak to a gentleman who she said we must know," added Robin disgustedly. "It was *fusty*, Prue."

"I expect it was," I said, "but you see, sometimes we have to do things we don't care for, to remember someone who has gone to Heaven."

"*I* know," said Gil. "Sir Tobias Glass." He wrinkled his nose. "But we didn't know him, Prue."

"No, and Papa says he was a – a disgusting old lecher," explained Robin, "so we didn't care very much about going to sit in church for him."

"Well – no."

"I expect," put in Gil, having thought it over, "that a – what Papa said – is pretty bad?"

"I expect so," I said, standing up and holding out a hand to each of them. "Shall we go and see if we can find the red squirrel?"

I was fourteen when the notion of embracing the Catholic religion started to become attractive. I liked the pomp, the splendour, the feeling that the rituals and the services had their own security. I liked the feeling of absolute power invested in the ordained priests as well.

"Flirting with Rome," Uncle Tobias called it,

laughing indulgently. "She'll get over it."

And – "Would ye rather have her makin' assignations with the stable boys?" demanded Mr. Roache, who was what Mamma called very *warm* in his conversation, except when his daughter was present.

"I expect," said Jean Roache, clasping her hands and looking soulful, "it is the attraction of all those young men who have renounced the world."

In fact they were all wrong. I bolted into the safety of Rome's arms, purely because at sixteen the alternatives terrified me, and when, three years later, I met Farrell Flynn, I knew I had been right. Farrell, with his disturbing masculinity and his sudden smile and his black-fringed blue eyes posed the biggest threat of all.

I was allowed my way, and the Sisters of St. Anthony duly approached. They viewed me with a degree of caution, speaking at length of the rigours of convent life, and of the degree of sacrifice demanded. Reverend Mother, a thin-faced lady with a soft skin that owed nothing to artifice, sat behind the desk in her little study looking out over the old orchard, and spoke gently of a life dedicated to God.

"You are so young, Miss Malvern; I wonder if you truly know what you contemplate?"

"Oh yes, Reverend Mother."

The nun frowned, straightening the blotter on her desk, re-aligning a pile of papers. "You know, of course, that the reasons for entering the sisterhood are necessarily diverse, but that – at bottom – must be a – a common agreement, a feeling basic to all."

"Yes." I leaned forward eagerly, anxious not to miss her thoughts, tumbling over myself to agree and to feel whatever I must feel.

"That feeling, Miss Malvern, *must* be present. You must never lose sight of the love of God; you must be able to feel a self-emptying love for Him." She paused again, watching me. "The belief, the trust, has to be blind, you know." Again the pedantic little movement of the papers before her. "God is a jealous bridegroom; while He permits us to further His work here, He does not permit of any other commitments." She studied me again. "You are – forgive me – you are not at all drawn to the young men of your own – "

"No," I said. "Oh no, Reverend Mother."

She smiled slightly. "You will forgive my appearing to pry, but it is not uncommon to come across young ladies who have been – *disappointed in love* – and must perforce fling themselves into sanctuary, believing they will never love again." The smile flickered again, a little wryly this time.

"No," I said vehemently. "I do not – the very idea is – "

"Displeasing?" The calm eyes were raised to mine, and for a moment she did not speak. "I see." She stood up and I followed suit. "There can be no professal for some years, of course, but I will suggest a – period of probation before you become a novice. Does that seem sensible? You will come here, and take part in convent life; share in our retreats, help with our work in the infirmary – all as a lay sister. And then, perhaps after six months, perhaps after a year, we will talk again."

"Oh yes," I said. "Yes, yes, yes."

And – no and no and no! I should never have been permitted to do any of it! I should have been teased, laughed out of my high-flown notions, taken to the assemblies in Harrogate, taught how to prink and primp and giggle. I should have been shown that

young men were not nearly as alarming as I thought them.

It was not to happen. Mamma was embracing widowhood, taking up residence in the Dower House and blackmailing a pension out of Patrick. My father and Simon were both dead; the one from some cause I did not understand, save that it had a taint of disgrace and no one ever referred to it; the other, as Great Aunt Edwina never failed to point out, from an excess of French brandy. Patrick, who might have done something to bring me out of my unnatural state of mind, was engrossed in his mills, sending for Michael who became his manager and who startled the countryside with his light mahogany skin and his perfect manners and odd tricks of speech. And anyway, I was as much frightened of Michael as I was of Patrick, and of any other gentleman above the age of sixteen. I can see, now, where it began; equally I can see that properly handled, the whole thing need never have happened.

I was little more than six when we travelled to London, Mamma and my brother Simon and I, to see Thimble House, where Simon lived with his business partner, Denzil Darke. The journey was a long one, and we had stopped for luncheon on the second day – a great treat for me. Once on the road again, Simon, whose luncheon had included two tall tankards of ale, became increasingly restless, and finally, bowling through the Cotswold Hills, after a hasty furtive whisper to the coachman, jumped down into the road and slipped behind a hedgerow. I, sharply adjured by mamma to look the other way, had obediently done so, only to find that the particular arrangement of the carriage windows plainly reflected my brother's

activities behind the hedge. Puzzlement, tinged with curiosity, might have lingered for a while to later vanish, had not Mamma's red-faced embarrassment pointed up the little incident. Even then, the matter might have faded from my mind, had it not been for what occurred later at Thimble House.

My room was at the front of the tall, frowning old building, and it seemed to me, used to the quiet of Strawberry Fields, that all of London congregated in the street below. Link boys making their way along Portugal Street, late night revellers, high-perch phaetons on their way to St. James's Square – all of these sounds came clearly up to my little room, interspersed with the monotonous regularity of the Watch, who patrolled London crying the hours. Sleep pulled me under now and again, into a curious half-world where the street noises blurred and drifted, and the figures in the street mingled with the shapes of nightmare, and with odd carved figures that marched round the moon-washed walls of my room, two and two, some of them with fantastical head-dresses or prancing chargers, or ...

What roused me to full wakefulness, I have no idea, but roused I was, and after a moment, I slipped from my room with its odd shadows and unfamiliar sounds, and stole along the corridor to the galleried landing.

How much of what I saw in the room below can be ascribed to nightmare, and how much to reality, I have never been able to judge. Denzil Darke was seated on the settle by the fire, and my brother was standing watching him. And then Simon began to cross the room, his one hand unloosening buttons, and the thing that had puzzled me earlier, on the road, puzzled me again. Only – this time it was different, and a fear I did not recognize welled up in my throat,

so that for a moment I feared I might be going to be dreadfully sick, and they would hear me and –

I backed away down the corridor, straight into Patrick's arms, and the fear rocketed into terror, and stayed with me for the next twelve years.

And so I bolted into my convent, and if it was for all of the wrong reasons, no one – least of all myself – suspected. I was seeking a sanctuary that was not to be found outside of my own self; seeing my feelings all wrong. It was all wrong.

I wavered only once during my novitiate, and that was at Patrick's tragic marriage to Maura Flynn.

I had been given permission to attend the wedding, and a dispensation to participate in the Protestant ceremony. I was to stay for two nights with Mamma at the Dower House, and Mamma appeared pleased enough to see me, whilst strongly deploring my white novice's habit, quite sure I should cast a gloom over the proceedings.

I did not, of course. Patrick and Maura – or Mary as we all thought of her then – were completely bound up in each other, and Patrick's partner, Mr. Roache, appeared to take my presence as his signal to act with more warmness than usual. He sat making gargoyle faces at Great Aunt Edwina behind her back and finally fell in with a third cousin of Papa's, who had a face like a wash leather from years of service in India, and was supposed to be very sound on the Kaffir Wars and the imbibing of Scotch whiskey.

I sat quietly through the wedding breakfast, enjoying the food which was much better than convent fare, feeling guilty for doing so, and watching the faces along the table, hearing little snippets of conversation from different corners.

Patrick's wife was considered to have won for herself mixed blessings, for, whilst it must be considered something of a *triumph* to catch one of Yorkshire's most eligible and experienced bachelors, the experience was sighed over. It was wondered whether my cousin would settle with one woman after his early career. "Chequered, there is no other word for it," observed an elderly cousin of the Roaches, speaking in the loud voice of the deaf. "I doubt but he's had half the county on the catch for him." She resettled her lorgnettes and thought that had she been twenty years younger, she might have entered the lists herself. "For he's a bonny lad for all he's a womanizer."

"*I* never trust a rake," was the daunting reply from the prim-faced lady to whom this sally was addressed.

"Handsome is as handsome does" agreed the deaf cousin sagely. "I'll say this for the gel, she's wonderfully calm for a wench with her wedding night ahead of her. Probably has no notion of what's in store for her."

"Probably *has*," rejoined the prim-faced companion, with vicarious prurience, and they both turned to inspect Patrick who sat at the head of the table. I glanced quickly to Maura's place, and saw that she had heard the fragment of conversation and was even amused by it. Her eyes went to Patrick, and they both smiled, and some private message seemed to pass between them. I frowned, looking down at my plate, feeling suddenly and sharply lonely. Did then Maura know 'what was in store for her', and knowing, was it possible that she was actually looking forward to it? I sent her a covert glance, seeing how her blue eyes were sparkling, and how the smile hovered at the corners of her mouth; seeing, also, how her eyes went to Patrick at every opportunity.

I saw them only once more before I returned to London, and that was from the garden of Mamma's little Dower House. I remember that we were inspecting the rose garden, mamma giving an eye to an old-fashioned Tudor rose of which she was particularly proud, when we heard the sound of my cousin's phaeton bowling down the avenue from Strawberry Fields House. I straightened up from the rose bush, thinking that I must bid them good afternoon, feeling a piercing embarrassment on being faced with the twenty-four hours' wed couple, and wondering how to speak to them with perfect propriety, for Patrick's eyes always had such a very knowing slant to them.

I need not have concerned myself. Neither of them noticed either of us. Patrick held the reins of his horses lightly in one hand, and his other arm was about Maura's shoulders, her hair streaming loose as if she had not bothered to pin it up that morning, her head on his shoulder. They looked – I tried to bite back the thought and could not – they looked as if they were shut away in some private world of their own, where no one could reach them and nothing could touch them.

'Probably has no notion of what's in store for her'. She might not have done, but she knew now, and from where I stood, I could feel the happiness glowing from them. A tiny shoot of doubt sprang up and for the first time my faith wavered. 'God is a jealous bridegroom'. Yes, but how would it be to have a bridegroom here, beside one, a bridegroom who looked at one as Patrick had looked at Maura, and made one feel the way Maura was looking. I stared after them as the carriage passed on down the high road, and felt again the sharp loneliness, the treacherous doubt; the certainty that

although the green pastures might be lying in wait, it ought to be possible to have some of them now. Here. I turned back to the house, to mamma's talk about the Tudor rose, and shut out the sight of Patrick's phaeton going on down the avenue.

But the doubt persisted and my faith had slipped a little.

2

Their private world was to last only a few months. In the autumn of that year, Farrell Flynn arrived at Strawberry Fields, and with one horrified look, laid bare his sister's masquerade, and put out the light for both of them.

He told me of it, sitting in the little visitors' parlour at St. Anthony's, Sister Clothilde fluttering about him, proferring a dish of tea, or a glass of parsnip wine – "Really very good this year, and quite innocuous, Mr. Flynn."

"Then," said Farrell with perfect gravity, "I'll be pleased to sample it, Sister."

Much delighted, Sister Clothilde scurried away, and for the first time for three years, I was alone with a member of the opposite sex.

His masculinity cut through the calm, all-female domain of St. Anthony's as sharply as a knife cuts through curds. Used as we were to dear Father John, nearly seventy, and occasionally apt to forget one's name, and to the pitiful cases in our infirmary, he upset the whole ordered peace of the convent. It was in Sister Clothilde's excited ministrations, in Reverend Mother's narrow-eyed appraisal, in the glances sent his way during Benediction.

And, God forgive me, it was in my own reaction as well. I watched him as he sat easily in the uncomfortable parlour chair, talking to me in his soft voice with its hint of Irish, and weighing me up with his black-fringed blue eyes. He was no Patrick Glass; he was perfectly able to converse with a member of the opposite sex without considering in his mind whether she would, or would not make a desirable bed partner, but he had his fair share of the Glass charm, and of the charm of his own race also. I sat stiffly in my chair, pulling the skirts of my white habit closely around me, and without warning, a wholly unfamiliar tremor went through me. Of all those unknown gentlemen lying in wait, ready to pounce and inflict the humiliating indignities, of all the men I had fled from to the security of the cloister, here was the very one who might have –

I snapped the thought down before it had time to take its shape. But it was there, a layer or two beneath consciousness, all the more treacherous for not being allowed recognition.

He was speaking of the legend attached to Sir Nicholas Darke's chessmen; the legend I vaguely recall hearing about. Sir Nicholas had had some quarrel or other with my Uncle Tobias, and was supposed to have invoked the powers handed down by his ancester to replace the ruined chessmen with people from Uncle Tobias's family. I had paid scant attention to it, and indeed, it was precisely the sort of thing the Catholic Church set its face against, smacking as it did of witchcraft and graven images and idols. I sat up a little straighter, pulling the invisible barriers more safely about me, and spoke primly of submitting to God's will.

"Evasion, Miss Malvern?" said Farrell, his eyes

sparkling. "Or – do I call you Sister Prudence yet?"

"It doesn't matter," I said, more sharply than I had intended. "I am not yet – "

"No. Is it a no-man's land, that of the novice? Not yet professed to God, but forbidden to ordinary mortals?" He was watching me. "Are you going to profess?" he said suddenly. "Take your vows and bid farewell to the sinful world?"

"I – yes, of course I am." I looked up, startled. "Why should I not?"

"Every reason in the world," he said, leaning back in his chair, wholly at his ease. "Will I tell you about Sir Nick's curse, Miss Malvern?" He grinned at me. "Or – are you frightened of it? You shouldn't be, should you? After all, you've ranged yourself on the side of the angels, and didn't someone once say that God's usually on the side of the big battalions? I don't remember who said it, but it was doubtless someone who had good cause to know about such things."

"I don't believe in curses," I said coldly. "They're a – a primitive superstition, invented to keep the early Christians in line, and – "

"Yes, I'll grant you that in part," said Farrell. "But having professed yourself to God – do I have that right? – having done so, don't you allow for the other side? Don't you allow for the devil, Sister Prudence?" He tilted his head, watching me, something that might just have been amusement in his eyes.

He was outrageous, there was no question about it, and yet I felt again that tug of attraction. What might it be like to be able to engage in verbal battles with this dark-haired young man with the mobile mouth and the quick-silver mind?

"I'm sorry," I said at last. "I am – not qualified to discuss such matters, Mr. Flynn."

"And now you're taking refuge in retreat," he said. "Faint-hearted, Sister Prudence? Can't you muster even one musket for God?"

I stood up angrily. "I can't help you," I said. "I don't know anything about your 'curse', and I shouldn't be surprised if you hadn't made up – "

"It claimed your brother," he said, cutting across my words, stopping me short. I had been about to open the door and suggest, quite calmly and courteously, that he leave. Now I stood, one hand going to my throat, staring at him. Simon's death, several years earlier, had always been a forbidden subject, and even now I had no idea how he had died.

"I – don't believe you."

"Oh, it's true enough – though you'll hear it argued that he battened on Society's weaknesses, so that Society made an end to him."

"Simon was *executed*?"

"He was. Outside Horsemonger Lane Gaol. I was there," said Farrell, "and so was Patrick."

"Patrick knows?"

"Yes."

I sat down again, staring at him, not believing that he could be speaking the truth, knowing at the same time that he spoke nothing else. From a great distance I could hear the far-off sounds of convent bustle; the muted clatter of crockery from the refectory, the occasional rustle of starched muslin as nuns walked past the door; the tolling of the bell from the chapel for Benediction ...

"What did he do?" I said at last.

"Does it matter?"

"Well of course it – No," I said, "if his sins were sufficient to allow him to be executed – "

"An eye for an eye? Good Old Testament stuff, isn't

it?" He leaned forward. "Don't you then support the opposite view – the turning of the other cheek? You can't have it both ways, can you Miss Malvern?" He sat back, his eyes narrowing. "So – you support the side of the law and order, do you? To the extent that you aren't even interested to know your brother's sins!"

I clutched frantically at the invisible barriers. "Sin must always be punished if we are to – "

"Gain the life everlasting? Don't be such a bloody prig, Miss Malvern!"

"How dare you – "

"How dare I swear at you? Well," he said, "You'd make St. Michael and all his legions swear, and I'd wager anything you like that you're in this religious cathouse for reasons which don't bear too close scrutiny!" He stood up, looking down to where I sat, my fingers gripping the sides of my chair, my eyes averted. "Well?" he said. "This absurd – curse. Don't you care that it took your brother? Can you speculate on who's next? I daren't. It might," said Farrell conversationally, "be you or me, mightn't it? Or it might be Sir Patrick, or your mamma, or – " He stopped and I thought that he frowned slightly. "Aren't you in duty bound to tell me anything that might help us to – "

"To stop it?" I was on my feet now, my fists clenched at my sides, unable to beat down the anger that rose up. Because how dared he, how *dared* he challenge me and – "I don't know anything about it!" I said. "And I don't want to know! It's – we're taught to disregard such things as the – the machinations of the devil."

"Hell, of course it's the machinations of the devil!" said Farrell, angrily. "I'd have thought that you

who're supposed to be so well ranged on the side of the angels would have seen that! But you can't knock a thing out of existence simply by disregarding it, can you, Miss Malvern? Or – can you?" He was watching me closely again. "Don't you allow for the existence of the devil – ever?" said Farrell again, very softly.

Half a dozen emotions struggled upwards for expression and for a moment I could not speak. Then – "Of course, we allow for the existence of – of everything," I said, and bit my lip. "Will you believe I didn't even know how my brother died until today?"

"I will," he said, and his voice softened a little. I looked at him.

"Are you really going to attend Benediction?" I said curiously.

"I am." His sudden attractive smile slid out. "Will you believe I once had the responses so pat I could say them in my sleep?"

"You probably did," I said. "I wouldn't put it past you to emulate the Royal Dukes and the Regent and sleep through the service!"

"In that case," said Farrell, and smiled again, "You'd better sit next to me and make sure I behave fittingly, hadn't you, Sister Prue?"

You can't knock a thing out of existence simply by disregarding it. Couldn't you? It seemed that I had been trying to dismiss the existence of the entire male sex for most of my adult life by ignoring it. And – you must allow for the existence of the devil, he had said.

The devil. Well supposing one admitted his existence to begin with, it was reasonable to think he could assume whatever shape he chose, and hold out to one just that temptation best calculated to seduce one into his arms. To have to admit that I had entered,

however briefly, into a verbal battle with Farrell Flynn and had felt the tug of attraction, not only to his body, but to his mind – wasn't that admitting that a temptation had been held out to me, and that in a sort, I had succumbed to it?

I frowned, trying for the clear mind and the analytical approach we were taught. In any case, the whole story of the 'curse' was absurd. Farrell was Irish, I remembered, and the Irish were notorious for their 'embroidering' of a tale. And he was a newspaper man. Probably he had pieced the entire thing together from nothing in order to gain – what did they call it? – a good story. And I should be much better employed in the infirmary wing, where I was supposed to be helping Sister Martha Mary serve the mid-day dinners.

But – 'You can't knock a thing out of existence simply by disregarding it'. I could not. I could not dismiss the whole thing as if it had not happened. The seals of my careful safe life had been broken and once there, the cracks widened, little by little, barely perceptible, but still they widened. I found I could no longer view the sick men in the infirmary with quite the same detachment; I had begun by being nervous of them, and then had passed on to pity, ending with a conviction that my white habit was a sure barrier. Now it was not. The men were mostly down-and-outs, unfortunates who could not afford any other kind of medical assistance; sailors for whom the loss of a limb made their sea-going days over, and found themselves unable to settle to anything else. Hitherto they had respected my barriers, even whilst not properly realizing that they were there. Now there was a difference. They made feeble little jokes – indeed, their

ability to turn humour from their tragedies had also gained my admiration – but now the jokes were subtly altered in flavour. I could pretend not to understand, but three years of working amongst the poorer sections of the East End made sure that I did understand. Faced with the more intimate side of nursing, they were suddenly reluctant; suggesting that it wasn't no task for a lass, and to fetch up Sister Martha Mary. That, I knew, was because my attitude to them was different and they sensed it. The impersonality had gone.

You can't knock a thing out of existence ...

It took six months before I sought out Reverend Mother. Six months, during which the seeds of doubt, first sown at Patrick's wedding, took root and flourished treacherously. Six months for me to go over and over Farrell's words.

'Don't be such a prig, Miss Malvern ... I'd wager anything you like that you're in this religious cathouse for reasons which don't bear too close scrutiny ... '

Reverend Mother sat behind her desk, the thin fingers playing with a quill, turning it this way and that. "You have confessed to Father John?"

"I – yes," I said, wondering how to explain, how to tell her as I had not been able to tell the dear unworldly old man, that although the light was still there for me, there were other lights now – lights that beckoned treacherously. I leaned forward. "Forgive me, Reverend Mother, but how can a – "

"A celibate old man know the sins of a young girl's thoughts?" She smiled briefly, her hands still passing the quill to and fro. "And yet, you know, Prudence, he must once have grappled with the sins of the flesh himself."

And of course he must. But the other sins? The sins of the mind? The thoughts that rose unbidden and coiled about one's innermost self, so that one awoke from sleep with the warm memory of black-fringed blue eyes and a curious tough mind that found an echo in one's own? I was beginning to take what Reverend Mother called the sins of the flesh in my stride; it was the other, less tangible sins, that I could not master.

"It isn't that," I said at last.

"No," said she, watching me, "if it was, it would be much simpler, wouldn't it?" She frowned. "You have yet to take your vows, of course. You have time to – reconsider."

"Give up so easily?"

Reverend Mother smiled. "That is part of your trouble, child. You see everything as a fight." She stood up. "Don't make a final decision yet, Prudence. I will arrange for you to spend some time in one of our other houses." She stood for a moment looking at me. "But you know, one day, Prudence, you will have to stop fighting and face whatever it is that frightens you."

3

And so I crossed the Channel in company with Sister Matilda, and journeyed to Brussels. There was nothing to keep me in England; mamma died early in 1814, and there was nothing for me at Strawberry Fields. Had my dilemma occurred a twelvemonth earlier, I should not have been able to flee England for the Convent of St. Stephen just outside Brussels. But peace had been made and the wars were over; Bonaparte was safely caged on Elba.

"Though there's those as reckons to see him rampaging back," declared Sister Matilda, a countrywoman from Staffordshire who considered that God approved best of plain speaking and was known to bully patients under her care into health, and declare shame on them for falling ill to begin with. "He'll bide his time," she added, settling herself into her corner of our carriage and eyeing the French towns we travelled through with a disapproving mien. "He'll watch the wrangling and the Peace Treaties and all of the nonsense, but you mark my words if he doesn't take his chance and be back with us before the cat has time to lick its ear!"

It was a strange sensation to travel through France, that unknown, so-long forbidden country, and I thought that Sister Matilda was right. It had not ended. Bonaparte might be confined to his island, but France was by no means tranquil. The years of the Terror could not so easily be dismissed. The common people were disinclined to permit the return of the *ancien régime*, unwilling to give up what they had won. Roads had been made and bridges built; the sturdy peasants had cultivated the holdings acquired from the sale of national land, and there should have been the base for a prosperous well-run nation.

"Ah, but they are a greedy nation," declared Reverend Mother, welcoming us to the Convent of St. Stephen. "They are of a large immorality, those French, and they do not care who leads them – Napoleon or your Lord Castlereagh, so long as someone succeeds for them." She shook her head and turned her attention to conducting us over the little convent with its white-washed walls and its slatted shutters to guard the wards from the mid-day sun.

And – since sick people do not change very much no

matter their nationality – we settled in, Sister Matilda and I, slipping into the new routine, picking up little phrases of French or Flemish, coming to know the local tradesmen and the shopkeepers. Sister Matilda entered into bargaining sessions with them which appeared to be enjoyed by all parties, emerging victorious as a rule, with the declaration that if God had wanted M'sieur Grosman to charge such excessive prices for his cabbages, he would undoubtedly have made them grow with gold-tipped leaves. France, with its uncomfortable rebellions and its uneasy peace seemed a long way off, and the English began to come back to Belgium; to Ghent and to Brussels, taking grand houses and mingling with the aristocracy of half a dozen nations. All the world and his wife came to the capital, so said Reverend Mother, shaking her head over the folly of people, and at the same time deploring the houses of ill repute that were springing up to accommodate the gentlemen as a result.

"And it's to be hoped they don't bring their nasty diseases *here* for attention," declared Sister Matilda roundly, "for we've as much as we can do to help the poor souls sick from no cause of their own, without attending to *that* sort of ailment! Not but what I haven't a phial or two of mercury by me," she added, "and I'll warrant that once they took *that* they'd think twice before entering Madame Bernice's again!"

And so Brussels began to glitter beneath the titled and the wealthy who flocked there, and the old ways were a little revived. Candle-lit balls were held every night; white-wigged footmen held open the doors of scores of carriages, and ladies stepped daintily into the social round once more. The peacemakers sat back with quiet hands, and thought that all was well. They

viewed Europe with complacency, and forgot that there was a tiny island quite close which held a man so arrogant and so supremely confident that he had declared himself Emperor and had crowned himself at Notre Dame Cathedral.

In our convent much of it passed us by. We were always busy and there was seldom time for speculation – even had Reverend Mother allowed it. But human nature varies very little, and a bunch of ladies together will always gossip a little, no matter how devout they are, and snippets of news filtered through.

The Emperor's lifework was being undone, it was whispered, and he would have to come again. The Leghorn Jews were shipping buttons with his eagles stamped on them into Elba. The British Commissioner on the island had sent warning to London that something was being plotted, that the little man under his care paced the gardens of Porto Ferrajo and lifted his telescope to scan every passing sail; would not much longer endure his captivity. The blood of all Frenchmen was stirring again, it was whispered, and the Emperor would return in the spring with the violets.

All the world knows how quickly events moved in that spring of 1815, and I can add nothing to what has been written and said. Napoleon escaped from his island prison and with supreme vainglorious confidence, announced that his eagles would alight again on Notre Dame. He began once more a triumphal progress across the country that had followed him willingly to defeat.

And the armies of the allies were mobilized at once, and put under the command of the Duke of

Wellington. The military began to pour into Brussels.

I was walking through the Plâce Royale a few weeks later, enjoying the sun, noticing how the daffodils were thrusting above the ground, idly watching a little group of soldiers outside one of the taverns, when I heard myself hailed.

I turned, expecting to see one of the shop keepers or another of the sisters, to find that two of the young men outside the inn were coming towards me, the afternoon sun striking golden sparks from their uncovered heads.

"Robin!" I said, barely able to believe my eyes. "Oh, Robin and – and Gil!" I flew across the street, heedless of the dust that brushed my skirts and the carriages, and met them halfway, holding out my hands in greeting. "Oh – how on earth do you come to be – oh, never say you're here to fight!"

"Well, we ain't here to do anything else," said Robin, grinning at me, his blue eyes narrowed against the sun. "Devil of a thing if we're sent home without taking a few pot shots at the Frenchies, you know, Prue."

"Riflemen," put in Gil. "The Ninety-fifth, you know – first in the field and the last out of it."

"Well no I – I didn't know." I was surveying them, seeing their splendid regimental dress of riflemen, the green-frogged jacket and the short cloak and the plumed shako. And seeing how absurdly youthful they both looked. "You both look – very grand," I said.

"Don't we just!" said Gil, grinning.

"I suppose," said Robin, "that it's – er – no good asking you to join us?"

"In a – drink?" I glanced beyond them to the little wrought-iron tables with the brimming tankards.

"I'm afraid not. But – thank you anyway."

"Of course she won't have a drink," said Gil, frowning at his twin. "You'll forgive him, won't you, Prue – the poor fellow never did quite know what was what!" He sent me his wide schoolboy grin. "Been hobnobbing with the artillery, you know – the raff and skaff of the regiments!"

"The Artillerymen," said Robin with dignity, "are not nearly as low as the linesmen, and – "

"Peace," I said, laughing. "What a pair of rebels you both are! How did you inveigle your papa to giving his permission anyway?"

"Well," said Gil, "it was quite easy really – "

"We told him that if he didn't purchase a commission, we'd run away anyway, and sign on in the ranks – "

"And so he curled his lip a bit – *you* know – and said he'd be damned – sorry Prue – said he wouldn't have his heirs hobnobbing with the common soldiery. And I must say," finished Gil, "that if he could see Robin with his Artillery cronies – "

"Don't listen," begged Robin. "Excellent fellows in the Artillery regiments."

"I feel sure they are." I hesitated, not wishing to bid them goodbye, but knowing I was expected back. "Where do you stay? Could we keep in touch? It's – so nice to see someone from home."

They were quartered just outside of the city, it appeared, near to the Forest of Soignes.

"Dashed flat," observed Robin.

"Are you – hoping for action?"

"Not above half we ain't!" said Robin, his eyes glowing. "You wait, Prue – won't we show 'em a thing or two in the Old Guard!"

"I – hope you will," I said, and moved away,

leaving them to their tankards of beer.

As I walked slowly back to St. Stephen's, I was conscious that my particular devil was arguing his case again. And – it *would* be good to show the arrogant Bonaparte that the British were masters. To put an end to the Corsican ogre and send him running.

But –

Violence, Sister Prudence? Man's inhumanity to man? What of turning the other cheek? What about the all-devouring love towards one's fellow man?

Be damned to that! An eye for an eye and let's rout Boney in a blaze of glory!

Meeting violence with violence? What of loving your enemies?

And what of Genesis? 'Whosoever sheds man's blood by man shall his blood be shed'? What of Exodus and the smiting of all the firstborn? What of the sins of the fathers passing onto the third and fourth generation?

The devil quotes Scriptures to suit himself. What of the soft answer that turns away wrath?

Eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot ...

Yes, the devil could argue his case eloquently enough, and I would have nothing more to do with him. I pushed the treacherous thoughts away and walked quickly away from the Plâce Royale, leaving behind Robin and Gil and their eager young faces and their brave green and black lace and silver lion's head belts. And as for the war that everyone said was coming, as for the much-talked-of confrontation between Napoleon and Wellington's armies, I would have nothing to do with that either.

Should I have ridden it out, that curious unsettled

time? Should I have beaten down my doubts and been able to withdraw my mind from the battle and concentrate on my calling? I believe I might have done, but I also believe that the doubts would have come back, stronger, and that if I had taken my vows and professed my life once and for all to God, the doubts, pushed back again and again, would have gathered in force. Because by ignoring a thing, you cannot knock it out of existence ...

He arrived in Brussels on the evening of the 15th June. I was walking through the Plâce Royale, glancing across at the little inn where Robin and Gil had sat so recently, wondering how they were faring in their billet out at the Forest of Soignes, glancing up at the carriages rumbling past. The Duchess of Richmond was holding a ball tonight, and all that brilliant glittering aristocracy who had poured into the city was attending. Even the Duke of Wellington was to be there, although it was whispered behind his back whether it was wise of him to frivol in such a way, on the eve of what must surely be war.

I stopped, hearing my name, conscious of a feeling of *déjà vu*. But it was not the two young men in their brave green who sat outside the tavern, but Farrell Flynn, a glass of pale golden liquid before him, his mobile mouth curving into a mocking smile. Something sharp jabbed hard at my rib cage and I stopped stupidly in the centre of the road, one hand going involuntarily to my throat.

"Well now, Prudence, did you not expect I'd be here, along with the other vultures?"

"The – vultures?" I said, staring at him, seeing the black-fringed blue eyes, seeing also the tiny lines at the corners of his eyes which had not been there before. I remembered Maura, and felt a swift rush of sympathy.

"Aren't I here with all of the other newspapermen to look down on the battle and send reports back?"

"I – are you?" I could not stand here in the middle of the Plâce Royale, with the grand carriages sweeping past me *en route* for the Rue de la Blanchisserie and the Duchess of Richmond's ball.

"I am," said Farrell, leaning back in his seat and lifting the brandy to his lips again. "And as you'll observe, I'm more dead than alive. Your bloody Belgian roads, Sister Prue."

"They aren't my roads."

"Well, if Napoleon's about to liberate the Netherlands, let's hope one of his first tasks is to build better roads," said Farrell, draining his glass and standing up. "Will I walk back to St. Stephen's with you, or will it put you in the black with Reverend Mother?"

"I should think my reputation could stand being seen with you," I said. "If yours can stand being seen with me."

His eyes narrowed appreciatively. "So you've learned to hit back, have you, Prudence?" he said. "Where's that inculcated humility?"

"I'm still striving for it. I suppose you came to Brussels because of the war?"

"What do you think?" said Farrell as we turned down one of the side streets. "Would I miss out on a fight, and this likely to be the best to date?"

"I don't imagine you would." We had reached the wrought-iron gates of the convent now. "Are you staying in Brussels?"

"I'm out at the Château – Hougoumont," said Farrell, grinning at me. "I thought I'd do the thing in style, you see, and I'm rubbing shoulders with the great."

"Truly?"

He grinned again. "I'm sharing an upstairs room with three other newspapermen, although one's from *The Times*, and to call him a newspaperman's the devil's exaggeration. But there's every comfort to hand – if you can get through the staff officers and the Guards stationed in the gardens, and the Hanoverians in the woods."

"I see."

"The place is swarming with soldiery," said Farrell, "and I the lowest of the low, I assure you."

"So it's true that there will be a – battle?"

"Never a doubt of it. Boney'll come in down the Charleroi Road. If the Duke doesn't stop him at Quatre Bras – and I doubt he will – they're saying the clash will be somewhere around Mont St. Jean or Waterloo." He looked up and sent me his sudden brilliant smile. "Do you know, Sister Prue, if you were a normal female, I'd say to you come out to Hougoumont and see the fun." He studied me for a moment. "You'd like to as well, wouldn't you?"

If you were a normal female ...

"I believe," I said coldly, "that you forget, Mr. Flynn."

"Do I?" His eyes were on me again, and despite the security of my habit, I felt once more the sharp jolt of – I frowned, pushing it away. I would not even give it a name, that treacherous, honey-sweet sensation that was even now –

"I think you do," I said, and walked away from him and through the convent gates.

I lay awake in the narrow little cubicle, watching the moonlight slide across the bare floorboards picking out the worn strips of wood, touching the edge of my

narrow bed. I pushed the clothes back impatiently and swung my legs out of bed. The heat was intolerable, it was lying on the city, pressing down.

If you were a normal female ...

I pushed open the casement windows and leaned out, trying to feel a breath of air from the silent garden. There was none. Nothing moved in the city, and the only thing I could feel was the throbbing of my aching head. I leaned against the cool window pane closing my eyes, trying for that calmness of mind, that acceptance that we were taught.

If you were a normal female ...

And how would it be, how would it be to swing across a horse, free of the cumbersome medieval robes and the tight head-dress, riding out to Hougoumont where Wellington was massing his forces, preparing to beat back the aggressive Corsican?

If you were a normal female ...

A tiny breeze stirred through the garden and lifted the short curls lying on my forehead. By day they were pushed severely behind the starched wimple, but by night they sprang up, as curling as any fashionable lady's. How would it be to ride through the night with Farrell waiting at Hougoumont?

The throbbing of my head was getting worse, mingling with the oppressive heat. I stood up, reaching for a cotton wrap. I would go down into the garden and walk quietly through the shrubbery. I would say a rosary, and I would push back the thought of –

But the garden was hotter than my room had been, and the throbbing was here as well, outside of my aching head, filling the air. I paused at the iron gates, peering between the bars, staring down the road that led back to Brussels.

And then they came. Regiments, battalions of them, red and gold, green with black braid, silver and blue; swirling kilts with brave tartans and epaulettes and sashes and shakos. Wellington's armies, the Allied Armies, British Hussars and Cavalry and Infantry; Brunswickers and Highlanders and Scots Grey and Artillery. All converging on Waterloo.

And then the guns, the artillery dragged along by the horses, rumbling across the cobbles of the Charleroi Road to meet head on with the aggressor. I stood there clad in a light wrap and I watched them all.

The sky was streaking with the first light of dawn when the last of the army passed, and I stood for a long time, listening to the sounds die away on the quiet air, and to the tiny rustlings of the garden. And then I went back and slipped through the still-sleeping convent into the Lady Chapel. I did not think Wellington could stop Bonaparte, but I thought that God might.

4

God did not stop Bonaparte. He came on, into Quatre Bras, and the guns began the next afternoon. Several times I stopped in the middle of some routine task and looked up, listening, sending up yet another prayer that the fighting would stop, that both sides would see reason, that Bonaparte would see – surely would see – the overwhelming might of the Allied Armies, and would surrender.

I sat it out all through that day and through part of the next, hearing the carts still going past, on their way to the battlefield, seeing from an upper window

columns of smoke rising from the direction of Quatre Bras, hearing the ceaseless pounding of the guns.

More than once, frenzied groups of soldiers galloped past the convent gates, shouting wildly exaggerated reports. The French were coming, they were at the city gates ... Napoleon had promised his men the sack of the city ... Reverend Mother shuddered and compressed her lips at that. And the guns went on and on ...

"Can't we do something?" I said at last, despairingly to her. "Surely we cannot just – sit here. There will be wounded men – "

"We are praying for peace, child."

"But it isn't doing any good!" I said angrily. "We could be of help – real help. We could go nearer to the battle – we could assist the wounded – "

I'd say to you come out to Hougoumont ...

"Violence does not solve anything, Sister Prudence."

"But nor does complacency! Nor does smugness!" I cried. "They're lying out there – suffering – Reverend Mother, we must do something!"

I ran from the room, not caring that she called after me sharply. I stood for a moment in my narrow cubicle, fighting for calmness, knowing that I was not going to achieve it. And then I tore off my white habit and the starched wimple and the over-gown, and laid it on the bed.

"Maria!"

Maria, the fat Bruxelloise maid, came panting along the corridor.

"You ring for me, Sister?"

"Yes," I said, tugging at the cotton wrapper I had worn the night before. "I ring, Maria." I eyed her plump figure. "You have a brother, yes? Jean, who

helps in the gardens?"

Maria rolled her eyes. "Oh yes, Sister, but he has not – "

"I want a suit of his clothes."

Maria stared at me, her mouth dropping. "But Sister, it is not – "

"Never mind what it is not. Will you go and get it or must I go myself?"

"Like that?" She stared in horror at my flimsy robe. "No, no, I beg of you – I will at once go myself." And crossing herself, she fled.

Night was falling as I tugged at the iron gates of the convent, the bridle of the astonished pony in my other hand. At my side, Maria's brother Jean, glanced nervously about him.

"Mademoiselle, they will surely dismiss me, and the good God will – "

"The good God," I said, "will understand, Jean, because He is on the side of the big battalions."

"*Pardonne*?"

"It's a quotation. I hope it turns out to be true. And no one will know what you have done." I had the gate open now, and I turned to face him in the thickening dusk. "Jean, you must help me to mount, for I have not ridden since I was very small, and – "

"You will assuredly fall off," said Jean gloomily.

"Well I will not, for the pony is too fat to go at any pace at all!"

Jean sucked his teeth dismally, but complied, and somehow I was scrambled onto the back of the pony which had looked so broad from below, but which now seemed full of sharp bones.

"It is improper," announced Jean as I swung one leg across and slipped it into the stirrup.

"It is a whole lot safer than that silly side-saddle you would have had me use!" I said tartly. "And anyway, it is dark, and no one will see. Now – the gates, if you please."

"It is beginning to rain," observed Jean, deriving some pleasure from the fact. "Certainly you will be drenched and suffer the consumption."

"And certainly you will be caught if you stand out here talking nonsense," I said. "The gates, Jean!" And so saying, I dug my heels into the fat pony's flanks and felt him give a startled snort before setting off down the road to Waterloo.

The rain began before I was a mile down the road. It flung down from the heavens, a thick curtain that drenched me to the skin and plastered my short hair to my head. Ahead of me all was quiet, and I shuddered, imagining the army camping out in this storm. The skies were split across with great jagged forks of lightning, and the ground shuddered with the thunder. My pony shied and snorted uneasily, and I put out a hand to quiet him, having no idea at all if he would continue to obey my uncertain commands.

The Château de Hougoumont lay about ten or twelve miles ahead, I thought, on the Nivelles road. It might take me half the night to reach it in this storm. Once or twice the moon tried to come out from behind a fitful patch of cloud, but in the main, the countryside was dark, lit only by the sudden startling flashes of light from the storm. Trees loomed hugely in the flickering lightning, their branches assuming grotesque proportions. More than once I felt the jolt of fear against my stomach as the branches swayed towards me in the wind; more than once I thought a tree moved towards us, uprooted by the storm and

suddenly possessed of unnatural life. And more than once –

It was doubtless the product of a feverish imagination, stimulated by the storm and by the headlong flight through the night, but several times I turned my head sharply, seeing the shadows take on oddly familiar shapes. Prancing chargers and carved wooden head-dresses, and the fantastical outlines of sixteen ivory chessmen who had once marched through a nightmare at Thimble House all those years ago. I shook my head impatiently and concentrated on guiding the pony along the road.

The Nivelles road was a shambles. All about us was the debris of the march to Waterloo; the over-turned tilt carts and the baggage carriages. If I got to Hougoumont in one piece and the pony with me, I should be very lucky.

Whatever side God was going to be on in this battle, He was at least on mine for the moment. We arrived in the courtyard drenched and shivering, I saddle sore, and with my thighs aching abominably from the constant need to guide the pony around the carts and the wagons.

The courtyard was fairly quiet, only a few men on what I supposed was a sentry duty. They sent a curious eye in my direction, but enquired civilly enough how they could help me.

"Bleedin' guns been poppin' all day," observed one private, and I started back, forgetful for the moment of my disguise. "'Elp you, can we, laddie?"

"I – I am attached to the newspapermen's section," I said, trying to deepen my voice, and thankful for the uncertain light. "I think – Mr. Flynn is – "

"Oh, 'e's upstairs wiv the others," put in the second man. "Tell you wot, laddie, they've got a fire goin' up

there – *an'* some wine, I shouldn't wonder. If I was you, I'd get out of them wet things an' take a noggin. Catch a pewmonia, you will."

"I – thank you very much." I slid all anyhow out of the saddle and handed the bridle to the private who cast an expert eye on my mount, and spoke knowingly about good rub-downs and bran mashes. At least the pony would be all right.

The Château was jam-packed with soldiery and staff officers and surgeons. Once I thought I recognized a surgeon who had attended at St. Stephen's, but the light was uncertain and I could not be sure. He walked past, not looking at me, and I was left to move on through the stone-flagged corridors with the flambeaux fixed to the walls, in the direction pointed out by the private.

Farrell was lounging on the sill of a small room at the side of the château, a pair of field glasses in his hands which he was training on the distant hillside. The remains of some sort of meal lay on the plain deal table, and two or three gentlemen's coats were strewn about. A fire burned up in the hearth, sending the shadows chasing across the ceiling. No one else was there.

He turned idly as I pushed open the door, and stopped in what he had been about to say, his blue eyes narrowing as he took in my soaked clothes.

"Christ," said Farrell, the smile flickering at the corners of his mouth, "so you deserted, did you, Sister Prue?"

The battle began in earnest early the next day, and before it was even a quarter over, I had stopped hoping that God was on the side of the big battalions. I did not think God was on anybody's side by then,

although I sent up a prayer now and again. But not for victory. I prayed that it would stop.

We were pretty much in the thick of it at Hougoumont; three times, so they said, Napoleon's men under Prince Jerome's command, attacked the château, and three times they were driven off. The courtyards and the gardens and the old orchards rang with the sound of shot and by midday the stench of the bombardment was so thick in my nostrils that I ceased to notice it. I worked in the back room with the surgeons, tending to the most ghastly wounds I had ever seen; giving sips of water to men mad with thirst, binding up flesh cuts, holding down jerking limbs as musket balls and splinters were extracted. Once I was vaguely conscious that the Prince's men were in the courtyard, breaking open the gates with axes, but some men from the Coldstream Guards beat them back. The woods swarmed with Guardsmen and with Hanoverian troops, and everywhere, everywhere I looked, was the dreadful carnage; the dead and the dying; men and horses and burnt-out guns and pieces of shrapnel and cartridges. I shook my head against fatigue and moved on, through the beautiful old salons of the house, going from one twisted body to another; seeing that one man was beyond assistance, turning my attention to those who were not. And all the time there was the ceaseless pounding of the guns and the screams of the horses, and the acrid reek of powder.

It was a little after six when fresh casualties were brought in; improvised stretchers carried by the orderlies who lay a little behind the lines of fire, and seized their chances to go in and remove the badly wounded. I had been at the far end of one of the rooms, binding up the leg of a young cavalry major, who was assuring me he would "do very well now,

ma'am, and only leave me to get back and paste the hell out of Ney's men who did it!" The little flurry of movement at the far end caused me to look up, bracing myself to meet whatever fresh casualties might be arriving; knowing that fairly soon my resolve was going to crack, because I could not much longer bear the sight of the agonies, of the mangled limbs and the ghastly stomach wounds.

They had put them together in a corner of the room next to the window, and as I stood for a moment, my breath catching in my throat, a thin shaft of sun slid in and picked out the locks of honey-gold hair, tumbling across their brows. The splendid riflemen's green was torn and muddied and their features were nearly unrecognizable with blood and sweat and pain. Even so, I recognized them, and as I did so, a light footfall behind made me turn, expecting to see one of the surgeons, knowing that it was too late anyway, that no one could save either of them.

It was not the surgeon. It was Farrell, his eyes shadowed with tiredness, a white look to his mouth. He was looking past me, to where Robin and Gil lay close together, the light dying from their eyes as we watched.

"Dear God," said Farrell softly, and I had to strain to hear his words.

"So the knights are taken back."

We left Brussels three days later, Farrell scribbling his articles as we travelled, and I hastily rigged out in a gown borrowed from a convent maid, with a cloak and a pelisse, and the most rudimentary items in the way of brushes and combs I had been able to get together.

Reverend Mother had been implacable; had refused even to see me, and had declared that since I had left

the sanctuary of St. Stephen's, then I must make my own way in the world. I had the suit of clothes loaned by Jean, a pair of shoes with the mud of Waterloo still on them, and that was all.

"Never fear, Prue," said Farrell, settling himself opposite to me in the carriage he had procured in Ghent. "We'll stop at the first town we come to and I'll buy you a toothbrush and comb." He glanced at me from over the top of his turned-up coat collar, and the irrepressible smile lifted his face briefly. "Improper, are you thinking? Well and so it is, but you needn't worry. By the time we've gone five miles I'll be in no fit state to seduce you. Your honour's quite safe."

"Yes. Oh yes, of course." I watched him for a while, seeing the cleft that came down between his brows as he frowned over his work; seeing the mobile mouth that could suddenly twist into that blinding smile, and the faint tracery of lines at the corners of his eyes.

I leaned back against the bumping side of the carriage and closed my eyes, shutting out the memories; my nightmare ride to the château, the fantastic figures that had marched with me and then had dissolved into the forest, only to reappear in the flickering lights of the salon at Hougoumont.

'The knights are taken back'.

Robin and Gil, the two little boys who had played in old Sir Nicholas's woods, and shot rabbits, and fished in the lake. And had gone bravely to war, their heads tilted in anticipation, their green and black-braided uniforms trim in the bright afternoon of a Brussels square. I blinked and bit my lip. And now they were dead, they had died at the hands of Napoleon's Old Guard in the château, and hundreds with them. I had seen the battlefield the morning after

Wellington's victory; I had seen the twisted bodies lying all anyhow, the flies buzzing over them, and I had smelt the stench of gangrene and death on the plains of Waterloo. And still, for me, the whole dreadful thing was summed up in the needless death of the two little boys I had played with at Glasmead.

Opposite to me, Farrell moved uneasily in his seat, one hand loosening his neckcloth. I looked up and saw that despite his pallor, his eyes held a trace of amusement.

"Here we go, Sister Prue," he said, one hand going out to lower the carriage window. "Will we stop about here, so that you can test your nursing skills all over again?"

5

I stood on the pavement outside St. Anthony's Convent exactly one month later, free at last of the protection of the Sisterhood. I had revoked it all, I had obtained absolution and I had had my novices' vows dissolved. Poverty, humility, chastity. I grinned. I had a couple of sovereigns in the world, and the clothes I was wearing were not by any stretch of the imagination the last fashion. As for humility, I had never properly achieved it anyway. But chastity? Wasn't that the root of it? And hadn't it been the cause of the whole thing? I turned my back on the convent gates and moved in the direction of the main thoroughfares where I could obtain a hackney.

I walked into The Mitre conscious that I was doing more than entering a coffee house, I was walking into a whole new world. I stiffened my spine and met the stares of the diners. I might not be wearing the latest

flounced muslin or chip bonnet, and my hair might still tumble about my head in its absurd short curls, but I could meet the world on an equal footing. I drew in a deep breath, and the little spring of anticipation welled up inside me and bubbled over with pure joy. Through the smoke and the thick scents of the food, I saw Farrell waiting for me.

"Thank you," I said to the hovering waiter. "I am to – join the gentleman over there."

"Indeed, madam. Mr. Flynn, is it not? One of our regular patrons." He moved before me and handed me into the chair as tenderly as if I had been the Princess Mary.

For a moment neither of us spoke, and then –

"Well, Sister Prue?" said Farrell. "Have you been absolved? Are you drummed out of the Church? Will we wait for the candle to be snuffed out as they excommunicate you?"

I grinned. "None of it," I said. "My vows are simply – cancelled."

" 'Go forth Christian spirit'?"

"Well," I said, "not exactly. But – I'm free."

"Free, are you?" His hand came across the table and rested briefly on mine. Something like the crackle of lightning ran down my spine and I looked down at his hand enclosing mine. It was the first time he had touched me. "Was it very bad?" said Farrell, withdrawing his hand and reaching for the menu.

"In parts," I said, watching him skim over the list of food. "But I managed to convince them."

"Yes?" He looked up and sent me the smile that made something jolt sharply under my rib cage. "Will we have the steak pie, Prudence? It's very good."

"Yes, that would be lovely." I looked up to find the waiter regarding me with a tolerant eye.

"And a bottle of the seventy-eight Burgundy," said Farrell carelessly, and then grinned at me as the waiter trod away. "You're a big girl now, Prue. You'll have to learn to drink wine and all manner of shocking things."

"I don't believe I've ever drunk wine."

"For shame. And you a Glass. And," said Farrell irreverently "a Catholic. What about Communion wine?"

"Sister Martha Mary used to buy it – do they call it 'off the wood'?"

"Dear God," said Farrell, sounding as if he meant it. He glanced up and nodded as the waiter presented a dusky bottle for his approval, and then his hand came over mine again. And again, there was that tremor between us. "Tell me about it," he said.

"Oh, it was really – not too bad. Except when – " I paused and then went on, "except when the bishop fixed me with his stern eye and asked if I had thought that one day I must be alone with God, and should I feel able to face Him?"

"Well?" said my companion. "Shall you? And what did you answer?"

"Well I said I should be more afraid to face God if I went on deceiving Him, and that I thought God might be a bit more understanding than the bishop, because He was supposed to have the understanding that – that passeth all comprehension, and – and I do not see what there is to laugh about – "

"Don't you?" said Farrell, helplessly. "Never mind, my darling. Go on."

I looked at him. "There isn't any more. I walked out a free woman."

"I see." We paused as the waiter placed our food before us, the rich flyaway pastry sending up spirals of

scented smoke, the gravy thick and succulent. Farrell lifted the bottle of wine and filled my glass. "And now what?"

"What?" I had been sipping the wine, wrinkling my nose a little at its unaccustomed taste, liking the way it ran down in a little trickle of warmth and set up a glow somewhere inside me. "I haven't the least idea," I said, beginning to eat. "Have you?"

He sat for a while, frowning, and the silence lengthened. All around us, The Mitre went about its business, and waiters scurried to and fro with plates of food and bottles of wine. I reached for my glass and drained it, and Farrell automatically lifted the bottle and refilled my glass.

"You could marry me," he said.

My eyes flew upwards to his face, and for a moment the silence threatened again.

"Yes, I could do that."

The smile slid out. "Out of one marriage into another, Prue? This one won't be easy."

"Nor was the last," I said, drinking some more of the wine. "And anyway, it wasn't marriage, not quite. I didn't make it to the altar steps, did I?" I lifted my glass again. "What did you say this was?"

"It's Burgundy," said Farrell, his eyes beginning to dance. "May the angels rejoice, Prue, for you're as drunk as a fiddler's butch!"

"Then," I said with dignity, "you had better marry me at once, before I sober up and change my mind, hadn't you?"

I never did change my mind, and I never did feel wholly sober again when I was with him.

We were married almost immediately, in a little church in Kensington, with a couple of Farrell's

colleagues for our witnesses.

"My congratulations, my dear," said John Crisp, Farrell's editor, taking my hand. "I imagine you realize what a – ah – a handful you have taken on?"

"I think so."

"Of course. Just so. Farrell, dear boy, I suppose this means you will not wish to roam the capitals of the world at will any longer?"

"I will not."

"Then," said Mr. Crisp, "I must look to employ you usefully here, must I? Such a difficulty."

"You'll find something, Crisp."

"Are you leaving already?"

"We are. It's a long journey we have."

Crisp looked pained. "Really, I cannot believe that you of all people, Farrell my dear boy, would undertake a – *long journey* – on your wedding day. No really, Farrell, you mistake my perspicacity. On your own admission you cannot travel from here to Brighton without being – ah – ignominiously ill."

"But then marriage is a fine thing," observed my husband tranquilly. "Wouldn't you think that in itself would take my mind off the devilish English roads?"

"No," said John Crisp.

"No, you'd be right," agreed Farrell, and without enlarging, bade our two guests farewell.

"Shall you mind Thimble House?" he said to me as we left.

"It's preferable to you being – what did Mr. Crisp call it? – ignominiously ill every five miles."

"And so it is." He smiled. "Don't look for the ghosts there, will you Prue?"

"I – no, of course not."

But I did. I was conscious of them the moment we stepped over the threshold. They reared up from the

shadows and danced on the ceiling in the light of the flickering fire lit by Shilling whom I vaguely remembered. And with every step farther into the house, they were waiting for me. The child that I had been hovered high up on the galleried landing, eyes enormous, staring at a firelit room below her, where her brother and his lover came together on the oak settle. There was the balustrade I had gripped as I watched them. I ran my hand lightly over the wood, feeling again the knot of fear and the rising panic. Here was the corridor I had fled down, straight into Patrick's arms before I had bolted back into my own room and sat, dry-eyed, watching the shadows leap back at me, seeing how they leapt into fantastic shapes, twining into the two young men downstairs, curving into curiously shaped figures, some with pointed head-dresses or – I stopped, half-way up the stair. So it had been there, even then, that odd legend. Sixteen white chessmen, waiting in the shadows of my family's houses; watching their chance to take form again. I moved on up the stair, still not sure if I believed the tale or not.

'Piece by piece, I will take back from your family ...'

As far as I knew, Sir Nicholas Darke was still living in his ancient tumble-down house at Glasmead. Well, his boast had been made good if Farrell was to be believed. I glanced down to where he was standing by the fire, a glass of wine in one hand, the firelight just touching his hair, and I smiled. He was Irish, my unpredictable husband, and probably he had been brought up on the legends and the myths of that charming wild country. Anyway, they were all back now, old Sir Nick's chessmen. King, Queen, bishops – I felt a tug at my heart as I remembered Simon – and now the knights. Pushing open the door of my room, I

frowned. No. They were not all back. The castles had still to be accounted for. And, given that one believed in the whole absurd story, that could only mean –

I closed the door and pushed the ghosts back.

Farrell smiled at me across the remains of the dinner we had taken downstairs, and took my hand. "Don't be frightened of me, Prue."

"Oh no," I said. "Oh no, of course, I'm not frightened."

But I was. I drank my wine and ate the food without tasting it, my mind jumping on ahead; to the embarrassing retiring to the big bedchamber. I should have to bid him goodnight, this stranger who was suddenly and terrifyingly married to me, and undress and climb into bed, and lie waiting for him to come in and ... I stared ahead of me, remembering how, shortly before I had bolted into St. Anthony's, I had heard two of the older girls at school discussing the details of a cousin's wedding.

"She said it was *so* embarrassing – there they were at dinner, making small talk and drinking wine – she drank twice as much as she usually did, you know, *just in case* – "

Just in case of what?

"And then he watched her go upstairs from the hall, and said he would have a 'final drink' and she was terrified, because she thought he might come upstairs *the worse for drink*, which would have been excessively unpleasant."

"And then what?" breathed the confidante. "Did she undress or what?"

"Well she didn't know," went on the other girl. "And so she put on a nightgown and lay there in bed waiting for him, wondering how long he would be, and

what she ought to do, and really, I believe that when he finally came in, she was absolutely speechless with nerves."

"How dreadful," said the listener, round-eyed.

And now here was I, facing my husband over a dinner table, drinking – yes I would admit to it – drinking far more than I ought to – wondering what I should do, dreading the moment when I must make the first move to go up to bed, not knowing if I should don a nightgown, or what he would expect –

And then I was aware that he had set down his glass and napkin, and had come round the table, and that his arms were about me and his mouth was against mine. I half rose from the table, and stumbled a little, dizzy from the wine, and he caught me and laughed, and said something about my being foxed, which was an expression I remembered Simon using.

And then, quite suddenly, I found that he had lain me on the settle by the fire, and that he was bending over me, and my hair had been freed from its pins, and was streaming over my shoulders. And that my shoulders were bare –

"Oh but – " I struggled up for a moment, "but don't I have to –"

"You don't have to do anything, Prue," said Farrell. And I felt his hands on my body again, and for a moment, I remembered those two young men who also had lain here, in the firelight, and the fear twisted my stomach again. Because, after all, this was the thing that had driven me into a convent four years ago, this was the thing that married ladies spoke of in whispers and shuddered over and bore patiently because it was a duty and a –

But wasn't it, as well, the thing that had made Maura lean against Patrick's shoulder that afternoon

in the carriage, and look at him with something akin to adoration, and not care that the world looked on?

I had not realized that Farrell had straightened up, that he had loosened his own clothing, but he must have done, because he was beside me, lying along the deep old settle, which must have seen bridals and deathbeds and wedding nights in its time, and then it was happening before I knew it, that thing I had always feared, it was happening, and I was not going to – not going to –

And then he moved again, and there was a quick, secret pain, and then the delight began, slowly at first, and then flooding over me in an incredible surge of feeling, and I pulled him closer, and I knew, I *knew* why Maura had looked at Patrick as she had that afternoon.

I should probably look like that at Farrell for the rest of my life.

6

With every curve in the road, the ghosts were waiting; they ranged themselves at the sides of the road as Farrell and I travelled to Strawberry Fields several days later. I glanced at Farrell, slumped into his usual corner of the carriage, and I saw that the ghosts were there for him as well. The wicked-eyed little girl who had played her game of make-believe once too often rode with us both.

I leaned forward as Oliver's forest came into sight, black-green, and sprawling untidily across the hillsides.

"May we stop?" I said eagerly. "It is so long since I was here, and – "

"As well die in somebody's forest as inside this carriage," said Farrell, and sprang down into the road, giving the jarvey directions to Strawberry Fields House. "Compliments to Sir Patrick, and Mr. Flynn and his lady hope to be with him in time for dinner."

"Will Patrick mind?" I said, as we turned off the road and stepped through the thick grass.

"That we're late? I shouldn't think so," said my husband. "He'll hardly be serving any fatted calves for us, will he? One sinner recognizing another."

I wondered if he was referring to himself or to me.

Oliver's forest closed about us as we trod softly across the bracken, no sound from the road reaching us, other than the occasional call of a wood pigeon, its liquid notes pouring into the still afternoon.

"Perfect," said Farrell, as we reached the clearing, and I felt his arms come about me. "No one within sight or sound," he said, and bent his head.

"I thought," I said finally freeing my lips, "that you were suffering from carriage sickness?"

"Did you now?" The familiar mockery flared in his eyes. "Well now, it's hardly carriage sickness I'm suffering from at the minute, is it, Prue?"

And really, really, it was little short of shameless to let his hands slide over my body, assured and familiar by now, and to let them move to fastenings and buttons, and then to feel the soft moss beneath us, and the ancient oak tree at my back ...

"Quite shameless," I murmured.

"And so you are," said Farrell, his eyes sparkling. "Anyone might come along, mightn't they?" He moved against me.

"Let them," I said, and pulled him down to me. "Oliver wouldn't care, anyway."

If my ancestor, Oliver Glass, was looking down – or

perhaps looking up – from wherever he might now be residing, he might well have been scandalized at the use to which his ancient trees were put.

"Highly convenient," said Farrell, getting up and brushing himself free of bracken. "The old satyr might have planted that tree there for that very purpose." He grinned down at me. "And you, madam, had better pin up your hair and tidy yourself if you don't want the noble baronet to guess exactly what you've been doing in his forest."

I grinned, but a part of me went back over the years, to another sunlit afternoon, when a phaeton had bowled smartly along the highroad in the direction of Glas Forest, the lady leaning against her escort, her hair streaming loose ... I thought that Patrick probably knew quite well the purposes Oliver's forest was occasionally used for.

"Wholly abandoned," said Farrell, still watching me, and lighting up one of the small foreign cigars he had taken to smoking since Waterloo. "Will you have exorcized your ghosts now, Prue?"

"I – what did you say?" I paused, in the act of jabbing pins more or less at random into my hair.

He grinned, the glow of his cigar sending pinpoints of light dancing in his eyes. "Isn't this a haunted forest?"

I thought of the two little boys who had sat in this glade and had looked up and welcomed me into their game. Fifteen years ago it had been, and now they were dead, and so were all the others, and Sir Nicholas Darke's chess set must be almost complete again.

Almost complete ...

The air had cooled as we came out onto the highroad, and the sky was darkening. I shivered and pressed closer to Farrell.

"It's an odd place," he said, pausing and turning to look down at the sprawling mass of the forest, black-green now in the failing light.

"Yes." I came to stand beside him, following his gaze, seeing how the moon was rising and how the shadows were thickening over the treetops. But shadows, I thought suddenly, never had –

"Farrell" I said, clutching his arm. "*What's that?*"

His eyes narrowed, frowning in the uncertain light, and under the broadcloth of his coat, I felt his muscles tauten. "It's smoke," he said.

"Smoke? But – " I stopped, staring at the curls of vapour lying above the trees, unmistakable now, even at this distance. It must be just about where Farrell and I had lain ...

Farrell and I ... the sharp tang of tobacco ... And pinpoints of light dancing in his eyes.

"Oh God," I said. "The cigar."

It was to be argued afterwards that had the fire service concentrated on the actual paths of the fire, instead of going to the heart of it, the double tragedy might have been averted. Probably a pair of lovers had started the fire, it was thought for the forest was a favourite place. And then the fire had spread. But a logical approach might have seen that the fire was burning two separate and quite distinct paths of its own, away from the centre of the wood, towards ...

There were those who argued otherwise. Who remembered a fifteen-year-old quarrel, and thought, but did not say, that the curse had to be worked out, that the castles had to be taken, and if it had not been for the fire, some other method would have been used.

"It isn't your fault, Farrell," said Patrick, facing us in the weary dawn, in the downstairs room of the

Lodge of Strawberry Fields House.

"Hell and the devil, of course it's – "

"It's no more your fault than my marriage to Maura was mine!" he said angrily, and for a moment I saw my husband and his half-brother eye each other, and something I did not understand pass between them like a current.

"You know where to hit, blast you," said Farrell, more quietly, and sat down again. "What will you do?"

"Do?" Patrick was pouring coffee from the pot that stood warming in the hearth. "Live here."

Farrell glanced about him. The Lodge, comfortable enough, could not compare with what had once been Strawberry Fields House.

"Yes," said Patrick watching him, "quite a difference, isn't it, brat?" He leaned back in his chair, stretching his legs before him. "But you know, it might be worse, and – " He stopped, as a gentle tap came at the door, and one of the parlourmaids entered with fresh coffee and steaming dishes of eggs and bacon and kidneys. She set it down on the little table, and turned to drop a curtsey.

"Will there be anything more, sir?"

Patrick eyed her for a moment, and then something of the familiar impudence slanted his eyes. "Not – just for the minute," he said. "Thank you."

"Thank you, sir." The demure curtsey did not at all match the sudden upward flash of her eyes, nor the blatant invitation in them. She went out, closing the door.

"Yes," said Patrick thoughtfully, "things might be a good deal worse." He grinned and heaped his plate with scrambled eggs. "It's all right Prue," he said gently, touching my cheek. "For the Lord's sake don't

waste tears on me. I'm a survivor."

"You're a disgrace," said Farrell, "and I ashamed to call you half-brother. Will you pass that dish of kidneys before we die from want of nourishment!"

"It's true, Prudence," said Farrell some time later as we walked down the carriageway and surveyed the burnt-out shell that had once been Strawberry Fields. "He'll survive. He cares far more for his mills than for the house."

" 'One hand on the driving rein of his beloved cotton mills and the other on his trouser flap'," I said, half to myself, and Farrell shot me an amused look.

"Where the devil did you hear that?"

"I've no idea," I said truthfully. "It's right though, isn't it?"

"Oh yes." We walked on down the carriageway away from the house. Farrell glanced at me. "Sir Nicholas is dead," he said gently.

I thought of him, the old man in his crumbling house, with three sons, none of whom had been his, all of whom had died. The chessmen had been replaced, but not, perhaps, as one might have thought.

"Will Patrick build another house?" I said at length. "Another Strawberry Fields House?"

"Within five years," said Farrell, grinning. "He'll be perfectly happy in The Lodge – so long as he has his mills, and so long as he can – " He grinned again, "So long as he can exercise his own particular brand of *droit de seigneur* over half the female population."

"Yes. It's strange, isn't it," I said, "that the fire should have been so – localized. That it should have just destroyed – what it did."

"Very strange," said Farrell. But his voice sounded unconvinced, and I knew that he was thinking that it

was not strange at all. Two pieces had remained to be replaced in Sir Nicholas's chess set. The castles.

We found them at the very centre of the smouldering rubble of Darke House, thirty-two beautiful figures, intact and undamaged by the fire that had razed the ugly house and all its secrets to the ground. Farrell stood for a long time looking down at them, the wind lifting his dark hair, his coat collar turned up.

And then he reached into his pocket for a taper, and holding it to a smouldering beam that would probably smoulder for several days yet, he held it to the chess men. The air sizzled and there was a sharp acrid tang as the ivory and the jet and the carved onyx melted and ran and finally dissolved.

Farrell held out his hand to me, and together we walked away, back down the highroad.

MASK OF THE FOX

BRIDGET WOOD

Reynard Hill had a curious history: it had once been inhabited by foxes, and legend said that the foxes would one day return.

In the last year of the 18th century, Sir Harry Fitzglen – a confirmed gamester who never refused a wager – won the house at a poker game. And the legend and the foxes awoke.

The story follows Sir Harry through the drawing-rooms and the gaming hells of Regency London; it traces a sinister path down succeeding generations – through the twins, Charles and Crispian, conceived on the night the foxes came back to Reynard Hill; through the illegitimate descendants, Nell and Kit, earning their living in the hard world of the Victorian theatre, and knowing nothing of their curious heredity; through Jonathon on the battlefields of the Crimea, who finally comes face to face with the horror of the legend in the underworld of Limehouse.

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Recent Hale Historical Fiction

TO MYSELF A STRANGER

STELLA MARCH

When she woke up in the hospital, they told her her name was Janet Nicholson; that she had run away from her husband on the evening of their wedding day and that she had been attacked by a footpad. She had to believe them; there was no way she could question what they said for she had lost her memory.

She returned to Woodways as mistress of a house that was completely strange to her and then, to her dismay, found she was more attracted to Doctor James Millington than to Matthew, her husband!

At length, someone arrives at Woodways and the shock is so great that her memory returns but then even more problems have to be faced before the whole truth comes to light and she is able to look forward to a happy future.

RUSTIC VINEYARD

KATHLEEN A. SHOESMITH

When her Italian mother married the Englishman, Charles Vyne, Gianetta's life became inextricably tangled with that of the Vyne family and the family's well-being became her prime concern. That her pretty sisters should seek advantageous marriages seemed the sensible way to mend the family's fortune. She was, therefore, incensed to hear her beloved Vynes dismissed calmly as a mere "rustic vineyard'

However, Gianetta was beset by more pressing a

Who was the enemy of the elderly mistress of Vy

Who was the heartless seducer of the young Ita d-servant?

Handsome, haughty Jocelyn Carradale, who ed Gianetta more than she cared to admit, coolly adv to return to Italy.

Her newly-discovered cousin, Rufus Drumm ed her to visit his family home in Scotland.

An ancient vine was discovered in Vynecourt's se. By the time the grapes were harvested, the many of the rustic vineyard had been resolved.

ROBERT HALE · LONDON