



*Summer's End*

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## *Prologue*

‘*Tom, Tom*, the Piper’s son . . .’

The Austin’s engine chugged rather than sang as it tackled the shallow incline past Tillow Hill, a cloud of dust billowing behind to mark its passage. Always the son, never the daughter, Tilly thought bitterly.

‘Stole the pig and away she run . . .’

Run? She’d *marched* out. Families should shelter, not judge, surely? There’d been no haven for wounded chicks at *her* home, though – not unless she betrayed everything she believed in. Yet what, ironically, was she doing now? Why, motoring straight towards another family, her brother Laurence’s. Life at the Rectory was different, however, Ashden was different, and they sang to her a siren song.

‘Over the hills and far away . . .’ In the mildness of the Sussex air, it would be all too easy to abandon the fight, and let England drowse on. But she couldn’t, and someday

soon she would be forced to leave even Ashden.

As the Austin motored over the brow of the hill, she glimpsed Lovel's Mill and now the first tentative leaves of Gowks Wood, the cuckoos' wood. It was early April and Ashden's children would be listening eagerly for the sound of the first cuckoo, just as Laurence's brood used to when they were younger. Caroline her favourite, Isabel, Felicia, Phoebe and nephew George. Well, my pretty darlings, here comes your cuckoo! Tilly laughed, but soon stopped, for it hurt to do so, and, besides, there was no humour left in her.

She turned the wheel of the tourer to round the bend, and the wind caught her face, attacking even the secure moorings of her black toque, and assailing her dustcoat. It exhilarated her. Something was thudding as loud as the engine, her heart perhaps, if she still had one. Then the wind was breeze, and before her was the rose-red warmth of Ashden.

From Stumbly Bottom, wild daffodils and primroses sang of spring, trumpeting her arrival, but the woman did not need trumpets. Already, perhaps, she had been over-daring, by choosing to drive here by motor car. Call it her gesture, her snook at disapproving Society. Ashden, she thought with a touch of impatience, could call it anything it dashed well chose. She had promised her brother to abide by Ashden's rules while she was here, both in the Rectory and in the village, and that meant slipping back into the role she had filled at home – no, not home any more, at Dover: dutiful, all fires damped down, and waiting.

Such had been the pace of events in her life recently, however, that it was nearly two years since her last visit to

Ashden, and the village unfolded itself in one panoramic swoop as memory's clutch released its hold. Bankside, rising from the Withyham road to red-brick cottages, the ugly Village Institute, the proudly white Norville Arms, and beyond it Nanny Oates' cottage. She must go to see Nanny tomorrow; she'd be expected of course, Tilly realised with pleasure. Over to the left was St Nicholas, Laurence's church, and beyond it the village high street. Wasn't that a new sign? Teas! Who for, she wondered. Outside boys were playing, spilling all over the roadway. Marbles? Of course, in readiness for the great Marble Day of Good Friday in a few days' time. A girl was bowling a hoop, pinafore skirts flying. Wryly, Tilly noted that she, who believed so fiercely that England needed change, was already being seduced by a scene that was yesterday, today – and, if she knew Ashden, had every intention of being tomorrow.

People were looking up. Surely now, in 1914, motor cars were not so unusual even on this remote Sussex road? Motor cars were the future, however, even Ashden must see that. She was glad that in a spirit of bravado she had kept the top down, for this, the Austin's first outing since its winter lay-up.

Taking a deep breath, she gripped the wheel to turn in to the familiar driveway. Who would come racing out to greet her? Anyone? She gave a defiant toot on the hooter as she swept around the garden, its grass still sheltering the countless daffodils and tiny blue scillas that dotted it in clumps under the trees.

Somewhere a dog barked, her tyres crunched on the gravel, still muddy from the March rain. Loving mud they

called it in Sussex, because it held so fast to you. Like Sussex itself in the mind and in the heart. Somewhere a door slammed, girls' voices were raised in laughter, sounds distanced by her own memories. She had driven over the hills and far away, and now 'far away' was *here*.

The smell of the rich earth brought out by the spring sun caught her with a rush of emotion for the timeless England she both loved and resented. The late afternoon sun mellowed the red brick of the rambling Rectory, and the front door was opening.

## *Chapter One*

The Rectory shook itself awake. Outside the red bricks were already brightening in the early morning light. Inside, still dark, the house waited expectantly as the first feet clattered down the servants' stairs. Soon the shutters would be flung open, letting the new day into the Rectory's cheerfully cluttered rooms. In the kitchen a print-gowned backside swayed vigorously as its owner attacked the kitchen range with black-lead, and another was soon at work in the dining room with cinder pail, black-lead, broom, and tea leaves to strew on the carpet for easier sweeping. Any moment now the descent of a superior being would herald the turning of the key in the clock of the Rectory's daily life: the cook-housekeeper Mrs Dibble was never late.

Upstairs in her small room on the second floor Agnes Pilbeam yawned. It was six o'clock and it was her privilege

as parlour maid to enjoy another thirty minutes in bed. She was no longer a mere housemaid like that dratted Harriet, but almost old Dribble Dibble's equal. Any moment now, Mrs Dibble would, she guessed, be strutting round 'her' kitchen, superintending Myrtle, the new tweeny, like a sergeant-major as she prepared breakfast for the servants and later for the family. She debated whether the moral advantage of keeping even with Mrs D. by forgoing her precious lie-in was worth it, and decided it wasn't – especially on Easter Day. High up in her small room on the second floor, she felt as far away from grates and bed-making as the birds singing their spring song in the waving branches of the tall larch tree outside her window. They must think a good day lay ahead – and they were right. It was her half day off.

'Water, Miss Pilbeam.'

The raucous shout was unnecessary. The thump outside the door would have told her that Myrtle had plonked down her jug of hot water. Agnes sighed, forced to contemplate the tasks ahead before she met her Jamie this afternoon. Dribble Dibble was all too adept at nabbing the tweeny during the times when she should properly be assigned to house cleaning. Not if Agnes Pilbeam had anything to do with it she wouldn't. With sudden resolution she swung her feet to the floor on to the old Wilton carpet – it was threadbare, but nevertheless *carpet*, which was more than Rosie Trott got at the Manor. That reminded her what was unusual about today. Those Swinford-Brownes were coming to luncheon, instead of the Squire. Yet the Hunney family *always* came to the Rectory on Easter Day. She supposed it would not affect her, except in so far as everything that went on in the



Rectory mattered to her; it almost intoxicated her, in fact, and had right from the moment she'd nervously asked Mrs Lilley what her wages might be.

'Tuppence a week and jam every other day,' had been the alarming answer. It had been Miss Caroline who had explained it was just a joke, a quotation from some book, and the wages were sixteen pounds a year. Then she'd lent her the book, not even asking if she could read. From then on, she felt part of the family. She never let it show, but within herself, she laughed when they laughed, grieved when they grieved and stomped around bad-humouredly when there was stormy weather. And that was inevitable from time to time, what with the Rector and Mrs Lilley, the four girls, young Master George, and now Miss Tilly, the Rector's sister, come to stay.

Often Agnes played silent umpire when these thunderclouds appeared: 'Miss Isabel, you're being downright bossy'; 'Miss Caroline, don't you let your ma leave everything to you'; 'Miss Felicia, stand up for yourself'; 'Miss Phoebe, remember you're a young lady now'; 'Mr George, don't you cheek your father'; and above all, 'Mrs Lilley, don't let them get away with it!'— by them she meant old Dibble, Percy Dibble, and that Harriet (Agnes's own thorn in the flesh), as well as Mrs Lilley's family.

Or did Mrs Lilley let them get away with it? Agnes reconsidered this as she hopped on one foot struggling with a recalcitrant black stocking. Now she came to think of it, no one did get away with much in the Rectory. For all Mrs L. never seemed to get involved in quarrels, either in her family

or in the servants' hall (and what a silly name that was for the converted apple storeroom allotted to them at the back of the house, comfy though it was), everything usually turned out the way Mrs Lilley wanted. Luck, Agnes supposed vaguely.

The Rectory was large; even with seven family, plus six live-in staff (if you could call poor Fred Dibble staff), they rattled around like old peas in a pod. Somehow, however, the only time it *seemed* large was when the girls and Master George went to Dover once a year to visit the Reverend's mother, the Countess of Buckford. Then she missed the laughs, the cries of horror or disgust, the constant noise. To Agnes, the only child of elderly parents, coming to the Rectory (even though that had meant only a half mile walk down Silly Lane from the cottage she'd lived in with her parents) was like being thrust into a pen at market, deafened by moo's and baa's. She wasn't sure she liked it at first, but once she got used to it, it made her feel safe. And *that* made her think of Jamie again – his warm arms round her and the way it made her feel.

'Agnes Pilbeam, you should be ashamed of yourself,' she informed her reflection in the oval mirror, before slipping her blue print gown over her head, automatically tugging at those dratted garment shields. No afternoon black for her today, she rejoiced. She'd be wearing her Sunday best, her new pink linen costume with a wrap-over skirt, not to mention underneath. Daringly she was going to wear the nainsook camisole and knickers she'd bought in Weekes' in Tunbridge Wells. Her mother would be shocked; if she had her way her daughter would be in cotton bloomers and neck-to-knee whalebone for the rest of her life. But times

were changing – because of Jamie Thorn. She'd never let him see how she felt about him, of course; that wouldn't be proper. Any more than she'd let the family see how much being at the Rectory meant to her. It was better that way. She remembered hearing years ago: 'The Royal Sussex is going away, leaving the girls in the family way.' What did it mean, she asked her mother, only to receive the sharp reply, 'It means keeping yourself to yourself, gal.'

So she had.

Talking of families, she remembered she'd promised to clean Miss Caroline's blue felt hat, the one messed by the jackdaw last week. Miss Caroline had joked that the feather must have annoyed the bird on behalf of his fellows, and made her smile. Strictly speaking, it was Harriet's job as housemaid, but Agnes was known to have a way with stains. Anyway, it was always a pleasure to do something for Miss Caroline. Secretly, she was her favourite – perhaps it was because of her brown curls, and her quick, light way of moving, so different to Agnes's own dull straight lumps of hair, and deliberate steps. She twisted the offending locks up into the usual bun, glad she'd given them a rosemary rinse when she washed them. Jamie seemed to like her hair, she couldn't think why. She'd do that old hat straight away to be ready for church. For her, Miss Caroline was the centre of the Rectory whirlpool, and if a mix of lime and pearl-ash could help her, then Agnes was only too willing to dab it on.

'Caroline!'

The door of her room crashed open, and defensively Caroline burrowed down under the bedclothes. Pointless,

of course, since if Isabel had a crisis she would rampage through the household until it was solved. Why pick on her first, though, on Easter Day of all times? She peered out cautiously to see Isabel posed behind her bedroom door, a Second Mrs Tanqueray, tragedy writ large on her face. Unfortunately her fair curls and English rose complexion, plus her carelessly tied dressing gown revealing dancing corset, bodice and pink tango knickers, made this a difficult role to sustain.

‘Despair!’ Isabel continued.

‘Don’t tell me,’ Caroline muttered. ‘You’ve torn a button off your glove.’

‘Worse. Truly. I’ve lost my silver buckle.’

‘But that was Grandma Overton’s.’ In her shock Caroline sat bolt upright.

‘I know. Isn’t it a nuisance?’ Isabel sighed. ‘But you do see I simply must have a special buckle. Could I borrow the jet?’

‘Why *must* you?’

‘I simply must, that’s all. I want to look my best. You do see?’ She opened grey-blue eyes earnestly.

‘Just because the Swinford-Brownes are coming to luncheon, I suppose?’ Caroline came back to the heart of the grievance. It was Easter Day, and for some unknown reason for luncheon this year the Hunneys had been superseded by the ghastly Swinford-Brownes.

The Rectory living was in the gift of Sir John Hunney as lord of Ashden Manor, although neighbouring parishes were held direct in the Diocese of Chichester, so surely this meant that close links should be maintained between

the two houses? Caroline had always thought of Ashden Manor as a second home, since she and Isabel had shared a governess with the three children of the Manor, Reginald, Daniel and Eleanor. Felicia, Phoebe and George, being younger, had been drawn into the family by a kind of osmosis.

So why was everything to be different today? George was furious because Reggie and Daniel provided a rare ration of menfolk among the monstrous regiment of women he lived with and Felicia upset because she, as Caroline, liked tradition. Only Phoebe was not too perturbed, probably because she could poke fun at some new victims, her sister thought indulgently.

Caroline realised that Isabel was getting her own way as usual over the jet, but, if she refused to produce it, the large eyes would fill with unshed tears and Isabel would depart in silent bravery to tell Mother all about it. As usual, her sense of proportion came to her aid.

‘All right. But be *careful*.’ Despite her porcelain looks, Isabel was renowned for her clumsiness, and jet was fragile.

Isabel jumped up and planted a kiss on her sister’s forehead. ‘You’re a dear. I knew you would.’ She skipped over to the dressing table, yanked open the lid of the wooden jewellery box (Caroline’s own remembrance of Grandma Overton) and extracted her prize.

Caroline watched her sister prance out. Only Isabel, she thought in amusement, would have bothered to tack lace all the way round cheap cotton knickers. There were four years between herself and Isabel since sister Millicent, born in 1890, had died of diphtheria at a year old. Once upon a

time she had looked up to her pretty, talented elder sister in blind adoration. At sixteen Isabel had gone to Paris to finishing school, paid for by Grandmother, Father's dragon of a mother, the Dowager Countess of Buckford. After her return, Caroline had seen her with a new detachment, and adoration had tempered into affectionate tolerance. Somehow for all Isabel's looks and charm she was still unwed at twenty-five, and Caroline suspected the fact terrified her. Isabel, of all of them, found the constant lack of money at the Rectory hardest to treat as a challenge, as Mother encouraged them to do.

She decided she could no longer ignore the rapidly cooling water Myrtle had brought in twenty minutes ago, and reluctantly put foot to floor.

The Rectory boasted two bathrooms, one for themselves and one for the servants, but seven of them, let alone any guests, all expecting to wash at the same time led to strike action by both ancient boiler and boiler guardian, Percy Dibble. Since Father's timetable necessarily governed the Rectory, he had precedence, with Mother coming second, and, then, of course, came Isabel. Somehow no one ever challenged her right.

'Blackbird has spoken'. Caroline thrust up the sash in her everyday ritual. Below her lay the Rectory gardens and beyond several farms, and beyond them the Forest of Ashdown, that mysterious and enchanted 'other place', almost all that was left of the great prehistoric forest of Anderida which had once covered three counties and even now cast its spell of the past on those who stood still to receive it. 'My sermon today is life,' Caroline solemnly informed the world. 'He

that hath ears to hear let him hear.' A blackbird in the larch tree apparently didn't, because he promptly flew away with a loud cry of alarm, followed by annoyed clucks. This was her life, these green lawns, this village, this church, this house, and every day she reminded herself how much she loved it, in case, she supposed, something changed. As it might do. Perhaps there was still time to be an intrepid lady traveller, another Lady Hester Stanhope or Isabella Bird; maybe she'd travel the desert like Gertrude Bell and write a book as good as *The Desert and the Sown*.

Now the water really was cold. Ugh! She hurried over her ablutions, impatient now for the day to get going as she struggled into corset and stockings. She had already put on her new straight-skirted costume when she remembered she was going for a walk with Reggie Hunney this afternoon. *Some* consolation for the coming disaster of luncheon. Still, she couldn't wear her blue walking skirt for church and anyway she'd forgotten to ask Harriet to clean the bottom from last week's mud splashes. She thought enviously of the frightful Patricia Swinford-Browne and her daring appearance in old-fashioned bloomers on her bicycle. A brief appearance, for Patricia's mother had all but fainted. All the same, trousers, or at least divided skirts, were entirely sensible forms of dress. She regarded herself critically in the mirror, thankful that for once her wayward hair had condescended to be swept up reasonably neatly and to remain there shackled firmly with pins. Perhaps the day wouldn't be so bad after all. She raced down the stairs to family prayers and breakfast. Dear Aunt Tilly, still not recovered from the nose and throat problems that

had brought her here a few days to convalesce, would be deputising for Father and Mother who were still at early Easter Celebration. Tilly was next in seniority, but it was hardly fair on her, Caroline thought. There was something a little odd about this visit, for her aunt was very vague about how long she intended to stay. She could not, Caroline wondered, by any chance have quarrelled with Grandmother? No, surely not; she was far too quiet and unassuming to quarrel with anybody.

Caroline was a little late in arriving at prayers and the Dibbles, Agnes, Harriet and Myrtle were already sitting in their row. So was eighteen-year-old Felicia who was the most quietly organised of them all, as well as bidding fair to becoming the most startlingly beautiful with her dark hair and deep brown eyes. Amazingly, Isabel was already here, and Phoebe and George were sauntering up behind her with the lackadaisical privileges of youth at sixteen and fifteen respectively.

‘Beastly shame,’ glowered George.

‘What is?’ his elder sister enquired. George’s dislikes varied from day to day.

‘Ever-so, ever-so Edith and What-a-good-fellow-am-I William coming to lunch, of course.’

Caroline laughed at her brother’s apt characterisation of the Swinford-Brownes. Emboldened, George continued: ‘Not to mention Pasty Patricia and Rainbow Robert.’

‘Rainbow?’

‘Have you seen his spotted waistcoats? And his stocks. *Striped!* I ask you.’ George spoke with the lordly disgust of a youngster for his elders. Not much elder, though. Robert



must be twenty-six by now, Caroline guessed, without much interest, as she took her place for prayer.

‘Hast delivered us from the power of our enemy,’ Tilly was intoning, as Caroline brought herself back with a start to ‘Boot parade’, so dubbed from time immemorial because of the row of undersides of servants’ boots in front of her. She was hungry, and breakfast, awaiting them in chafing dishes on the sideboard, smelled good. After prayers, George would bear in the traditional Easter eggs, painted with caricatures – his own work. Caroline began to feel happy again, for life in the Rectory tended to be regulated not by months, or even by seasons, but by the Church calendar, which chimed out the high points, like the hours on Mother’s beloved French Cupid clock: Advent, ding dong, ‘Lo He comes with clouds descending’, help wash and pick over the fruit for the Christmas puddings; Christmas Even, ding dong, decorate the church with greenery, holly, mistletoe, and rosemary, Solemn Evensong; Christmas, ding dong, ‘Born this happy morning’, carols, candles, goose, presents, love and laughter; Epiphany, ding dong, ‘Brightest and best of the sons of the morning’, blessing the orchards or apple howling (according to whether you used the old religion’s terms or the new, Father had explained); Candlemas, ‘Let there be light’, Septuagesima, sing the *Benedicite*; Lent; Passiontide; Holy Week, and now Easter, which meant that the huge stove in the Rectory entrance hall would stop spreading its warm glow until Michaelmas.

Soon summer and autumn would tumble over themselves with activity. Church Helpers’ Supper, the Sunday school treat, fêtes at Rectory and Manor, and Harvest Supper were

but a few of them. The village had its own seasons; hoops, tops, marbles, Ladyday and Michaelmas, for instance, when the farm labourers got bonuses and bought their new boots for the year from old Sammy Farthing. In August the hop-pickers swarmed down from London, in autumn the stonebreakers arrived to break up the huge piles of flints for road-mending. The Rectory too had its immutable timetable: ‘Dibbles day’, for a massive spring-cleaning when carpets were pounded and cleaned with vinegar and water, monkey soap made for the coming year, clothes put away with moth balls; lavender day, when the church altar cupboard drawers received their new season’s bunches to keep insects away from the purificators and napkins – Caroline’s favourite job as a child; and there were bottling days, wine-making days, chutney and preserving days, all *sorts* of days, each with its own special flavour.

The more she fretted for new fields to conquer, the more important the measured clock of the Rectory year seemed. And she still could not understand why today it had to be changed.

Elizabeth Lilley closed the heavy front door behind her. The chill of waiting in the porch for the sake of avoiding any more questions about luncheon today was worth it. By the time she and Laurence had returned for breakfast, the family had departed save for George, still munching his ravenous way through toast and marmalade. Her genuinely enthusiastic reception of the egg he had painted for her, complete with caricature of Grandmother Buckford (which she had hastily whipped away before Laurence could see it) had temporarily banished his opposition to the advent of

the Swinford-Brownes for luncheon, just as she had hoped. Much the best way to avoid dispute. The cloudy morning was dithering between declaring itself spring and retreating back to the uncertainties of March. She felt rather the same herself: in a few moments she must walk to the church with Laurence thus declaring herself a symbol. To be within the walls of the Rectory with her family would be her preference.

‘Skulking, Elizabeth?’

Tilly had found her out, and come to join her in the porch. Elizabeth liked Tilly though they had little in common and treated each other with caution. One of the few things they did share, however, was a lack of interest in fashion, Tilly because she thought it of no importance, though her tall spare figure and innate grace made her always look smart and stylish, Elizabeth because her striking good looks and mature figure needed little pampering; she wore what colours and styles she chose, not what fashion houses and magazines dictated.

‘Listening to the cuckoo, Tilly.’

You’ve got at least one inside, Tilly thought to herself, but did not speak aloud. This Mother Hen had no sense of humour where her chicks were concerned. ‘The bluebells will be out soon,’ she commented brightly.

Elizabeth did laugh at this. ‘All right. Skulking. Hatted and gloved to go on parade three quarters of an hour early for once.’

‘I’m honoured.’ Laurence Lilley, carrying stole and chasuble over his arm, came to join his wife. When Laurence saw Tilly as well, he raised his eyebrows even higher. ‘I am doubly honoured. Why so early?’

Elizabeth brushed this aside. ‘Have you talked to Isabel again, Laurence?’

He pulled a face. ‘No chance. I had to return to the vestry and don my Solomon’s mantle to settle a dispute between Mrs Mabel Thorn and Mrs Lettice as to which fair linen cloth should be laid for the Eucharist. It left no time for family discussions. You must have noticed Mrs Lettice had laid her grandmother’s cloth, elegantly trimmed with lace and far too Roman for Mrs Thorn. She insisted on its being changed for this service.’

‘Isn’t that the sacristan’s job?’ Elizabeth asked mildly. She hadn’t noticed, of course. She had been carried away with the music and majesty of Easter.

‘Poor old Bertram has only held the position since Lady Day, Elizabeth, and Mrs Lettice is of Mutter stock. If I set him to resolve a quarrel between a Mutter and a Thorn, he’ll faint into the grave Job Fisher has just finished digging.’

‘Laurence!’ Elizabeth was still capable of being taken aback when her husband joked on ‘church ground’. To her, the division between the formality of Church and the rumbustious informality of home was absolute.

‘Come, Elizabeth. We are adults. I meant no disrespect.’ He paused. ‘And Isabel, too, is an adult, you must remember. She makes her own choice.’

It was Tilly who built the bridge. ‘They’re all sensible children, Elizabeth, thanks to you both. They know what they want.’

‘But are they right?’ Elizabeth’s anxiety gripped her with a painful intensity, though no sign of it appeared on her

placid face. Four daughters, one son, all her babies. No, that was not all, for there had been her darling Millicent, and the gap her baby left was as real to her as the five living children: Isabel, the butterfly that blindly fluttered where it chose; Caroline, the bird that longed to fly, save in her heart of hearts; Felicia, who wanted only to stay close in the nest; Phoebe the ugly duckling – no, that was wrong, for Phoebe was not ugly, though the future might be easier if she were; and George, the colt that would one day soon become a thoroughbred like his father. *Did* they all know what they wanted? It is a wise mother who knows her own child, the saying went. Was *she* wise? *Did* she know them? Probably not, but she was a peaceful haven from stormy seas. Today even Elizabeth could see the prospect of troubled waters.

‘Caroline, may I walk to church with you?’

Caroline glanced up from her struggles to stab her hatpin into the newly cleaned hat as she sensed the restrained excitement in Felicia’s voice. Her sister was fidgeting on the threshold of the room, her heavy hair carefully swept up under the rose velvet hat. Felicia was gifted with her hands, she had long sensitive fingers, which Caroline envied, as if she expressed through them, whether making a hat, a cake or drawing a wild flower, the inner feelings she kept so firmly to herself. Her other sisters tended to take little notice of her. Isabel was somewhat scornful, sixteen-year-old Phoebe wary, for although closer in age they had nothing in common. Caroline felt fiercely protective towards her, especially since the fiasco of the finishing school. Pushed into it by Grandmother, she had been so unhappy that Father

had taken her away after only six months. Yet sometimes Caroline felt Felicia might have a strong inner core that would sustain her however rough the waters.

‘I have to tackle Mrs Dibble first. Mother’s orders.’

‘I’ll come with you.’

‘Where’s Isabel?’ Caroline was slightly surprised. Usually Felicia avoided any possibility of conflict with Mrs Dibble, whom she found intimidating.

‘She had a headache. Father excused her.’

‘She was well enough half an hour ago.’

Mrs Margaret Dibble, together with her husband Percy, odd-job man, gardener, boilerman and sometime driver, dominated the small servants’ hall. Since the departure of Nanny Oates her position had been undisputed. The Dibbles’ younger son Fred (their two older children, a boy and a girl, had married and moved away) was also nominally one of the staff, but no one talked a great deal about Fred. At nineteen, he affably wandered his way through a life bounded by the Rectory, for he could not cope with the world outside.

When Caroline saw the cook–housekeepers of her friends’ homes, she wondered how Mrs Dibble had escaped the mould. The comfortable plump bodies that stomped heavily round her friends’ kitchens bore no relation to Mrs Dibble. She was small and quick, with lithe movements, and she bustled rather than clonked across the floor. Her eyes were like a robin’s; she watched, and then she hopped. Mrs Dibble was all-seeing, all-doing, the grand vizier to her mother’s sultan.

Caroline and Felicia found her up to her wrists in pastry mix, singing in her surprisingly deep, lusty voice: ‘Once

he died, our souls to save; Where thy victory, O grave?’ Mrs Dibble saw it as her duty to uphold the Rectory’s spiritual values at all times, and believed her cooking was only possible with the Lord’s blessing. She and Mother did not always see eye to eye as a result, and Caroline found herself a frequent but unwilling go-between when there were awkward tasks to perform. As now.

‘As we have guests,’ she began brightly, ‘we wondered whether you still had time to make your lovely pond pudding, Mrs Dibble. They —’

Mrs Dibble slowly extracted her hands from her basin, rolled up the mix and slapped it on the marble slab. ‘That’s Palm Sunday, not Easter, Miss Caroline. Easter’s apple and primrose pie, as you well know.’

‘Yes, but —’

‘I daren’t, Miss Caroline.’ Mrs Dibble relented into humanity. ‘Thirteen for dinner. It’ll be unaccountably bad, that I can tell you.’ Her religion was a pastry mix in itself, Caroline thought, old and new mixed with a dash of Dibble.

‘I thought you always told us the sun danced for joy on Easter morning?’ Felicia ventured.

‘That I did, and see it’s cloudy already. Praise the Lord,’ Mrs Dibble added and picked up the rolling pin, having won the argument. Caroline stole one of the precious new mint shoots to chew and retreated in defeat. ‘I’ll do you a Bible cake,’ was thrown after her as a peace offering. Caroline’s heart sank. She hated figs, a prominent feature of the recipe.

‘Nahum, III, 12,’ Mrs Dibble shouted, as if reading her mind. ‘If they be shaken they shall even fall into the mouth

of the eater.’ And raisins is up to tuppence a pound.’

Caroline ran, before the first book of Samuel reached her too. George was in the choir so, thanks to Isabel’s headache, only three of them and Aunt Tilly took their decorous places at Elizabeth Lilley’s side in the front pew. How could Isabel bear to miss it, Caroline wondered. After the solemn darkness of Passiontide and Good Friday services, Easter Day was a happy service. She enjoyed the changing liturgical colours, from Passiontide to Palm Sunday’s violet, to white on Maundy Thursday, then black, and now glorious white again for Easter Day, and so on through the year. And she enjoyed watching Ashden dressed up for the occasion, for whatever motive, from Mr Roffey, the sweep, and his wife in their Sunday best to Mrs Swinford-Browne in her ghastly new hat. *That* must be new. The black ostrich feather was far too stiff and ostentatious to be anything else. The Swinford-Brownes were chapel-goers normally, so this rare visit must be because of the Rectory luncheon. Caroline’s heart sank again at the prospect, but she firmly dragged it up again. They should *not* ruin her day.

Private pews had been abolished at St Nicholas’s fifteen years ago, despite the loss of their revenue to her father, albeit a small one. Mysteriously, however, there still seemed to be a Hunney private boxed pew, and even a Norville pew, just as there were Hunney and Norville chapels. The Norville pew was rarely occupied for the Misses Norville were recluses and over ninety. Risking her mother’s disapproval, she twisted round to see if the Hunneys were all here – which immediately brought back her sense of grievance over luncheon once more.



Caroline knew Sir John enjoyed the company of his enlarged family at the Rectory, though Lady Hunney behaved more as if it were her social duty to those less fortunate than herself. Poor Lady Hunney, she thought. Her problem was that as leader of village society everyone was her inferior, and the charm that had made her the toast of London society while her husband was still able to pursue his army career had curdled when the death of his father brought him back to Ashden.

Caroline caught Reggie winking at her, while apparently staring straight ahead with a solemn face. Lady Hunney smiled at her with honeyed sweetness. ‘Beware the jaws that bite, the claws that catch.’ Caroline thought, gracefully inclining her head to the Jabberwock, before grinning at Eleanor. Eleanor was wearing her new royal blue costume which they had chosen at Debenham & Freebody’s, and it suited Eleanor’s pleasant looks better than the usual nondescript shades she wore. No doubt Caroline was getting the blame for this radical move. Only Lady Hunney was permitted the height of fashion, having long dismissed nineteen-year-old Eleanor (Caroline suspected) as a non-runner in the social race.

‘Christ the Lord is risen again . . .’ She sang out in happiness as the hymn began.

*The Easter Service is glory, all glory . . . Mrs Thorn got her way over the altar linen – no lace. That meant sometime in the future Mrs Lettice must be appeased . . . What would the future hold for her sisters, and George? Would they marry? Would she marry?*

‘Alleluia!’

Caroline quickly offered an apology to God. How could she take Communion with such secular thoughts on her mind?

Elizabeth rather liked Edith Swinford-Browne, or perhaps it would be more truthful to say she felt sympathetic towards her. She knew Edith was feeling out of her depth in the Rectory drawing room. The high puffed coiffure, the over-ornate Magyar sleeves, and the inappropriate velvet bag all testified to her ordeal. It wasn't at all like The Towers in Station Road into which she and her husband William had moved five years ago; William was the biggest landowner in the parish, rivalling even Sir John Hunney of Ashden Manor, and he set out to ensure that the village knew of and benefited from his enormous wealth. All except the Rector. Elizabeth was quite convinced, despite her husband's refusal to discuss the issue, that Swinford-Browne deliberately undervalued his yields for the purposes of the tithe rent charge, on which the Rector depended for his income. He was a self-made man, as he proclaimed modestly, a phrase which had caused much mirth in the Lilley household.

However, the Rectory, not the Manor, was the key to village approval, and Edith knew if she could but grasp the intangible thread that led to this, she need fret no more. Yet here she looked lost, as if she was longing for the moment when the gentlemen – William, Robert and the Rector – would emerge from their little talk to rescue her. Not that she was shy. Far from it. But she obviously liked to know where she stood, and here she did not.

Elizabeth watched her, pityingly.

Poor Edith would see only that the Berlin-worked tapestry on the chairs was well-worn, the piano long past its prime, the rosewood what-not battered, the souvenirs from Worthing and Brighton cheap and chipped, the frames of photographs and sketches crammed together, and the books left lying on tables and chairs, instead of being placed decorously back on their library shelves.

Edith was obviously searching for a comment. She found one.

‘It’s the servant problem, isn’t it?’

Elizabeth agreed with her warmly, as sympathy oozed from her guest’s voice. ‘Indeed it is.’ Then, unable to resist temptation, she added: ‘I should be quite distraught if any of our efficient servants left, now I have fully trained them.’ She felt she was being unfair to Edith, who had done nothing to deserve such a put-down, even if she would never recognise it as such.

‘I wonder,’ Edith asked brightly, ‘if you would care to join my Committee for the Relief of Fallen Women, Mrs Lilley? We meet at the Pump Room in Tunbridge Wells.’

‘I regret not.’ Elizabeth gave her slow, warm smile. ‘I never join committees. It sets such a bad example.’

Edith stared at her nonplussed, as Elizabeth knew she would be. ‘Oh, quite,’ she said weakly.

Elizabeth was the daughter of a Kentish hop farmer. What extra money there was at the Rectory had come from her, not Laurence, for all that he was a son of the Earl of Buckford. He had only the money from his living, a sum of £490 a year, greatly diminished over the last thirty years owing to the general agricultural depression, and always at

the mercy of late payers and deliberate avoidance, sometimes to Elizabeth's fury, by those who so officiously carried out Church duties. It was love, not money, however, that had brought about her marriage to Laurence. She knew Ashden found her puzzling as a Rector's wife, for she did not move among the cottagers unless the need was great. Her parish was the Rectory, her parishioners her family, and through her ministry her husband and her children prospered. Why waste time on a thousand essentially useless missions?

With relief, she heard Agnes beat the gong inside; it seemed a fanfare of release – until she remembered what was to come.

Thank goodness Reggie arrived promptly at the Rectory. Luncheon had been a nightmare. Caroline was aware she had not behaved well, though better than Phoebe and George, who had giggled together whenever Mother's eye was not on them, aided and abetted by the frightful Patricia Swinford-Browne, who was not above mocking her own mother, Caroline noticed. The tradition of eating the first lamb of the year at Easter persisted in the Rectory despite the fact that modern farming meant they could enjoy it in January if they wished. Now that treat had been spoiled, and so had that of the primrose pie. How could one *enjoy* such delights while having to entertain Robert Swinford-Browne, who was sitting next to her? He was tall, good-looking in a vapid kind of way and, to her at least, as interesting as a tailor's dummy. She liked him, but she found him hard to talk to, since he seemed to have no purpose or interests in life – save tennis, of course. She had

obligingly raised the subject of Anthony Wilding and his prospects at Wimbledon, about which she knew little, and he, unfortunately, knew a great deal. 'He's like Brookes, he can play from any position on court. Of course, Brookes' horizontal volley.'

*And then it had happened.*

'Reggie, what do you think?' Caroline could wait no longer. She had hardly taken in a word Reggie had been saying, so full was she of the thunderbolt that had struck at luncheon. They had reached the wicket gate of Crab's meadow and Pook's Way, the track which led to the nearest gate into Ashdown forest, before she could contain herself no longer.

'She's a stunner!'

'Who?' Caroline was thrown.

'Penelope Banning, of course, Caroline, you never listen, that's your trouble. I've been in love with Penelope for three whole months now. Why do you think I've dragged you out today? I need your advice and I'm blowed if I'm going to have the whole of your blessed family chipping in on my romantic life.'

'*Your* romantic life, Reggie,' she replied, nodding to Alf Tilbury as he painfully hobbled down the garden path of Whapples Cottage, 'can wait for once. I have something much more important to tell you. Now *listen*.'

'It's hard to listen when you're stumbling over stones and *your* dog is intent on seeing me come a cropper. What do you think horses were made for? Why wouldn't you ride? Smith needs exercise too, you know.' Smith was his hunter.

'Because shouting at someone on horseback is not

conducive to having a serious conversation. Besides, Poppy isn't mine, she belongs to all of us, and Felicia wanted to ride this afternoon.'

'Mother would have lent you her mare.'

Would she? Caroline doubted it. Lady Hunney's famous charm seemed to have a steel edge where Caroline was concerned. Isabel called her Aunt Maud, but there had never been any suggestion that Caroline should adopt the same informality. It had occurred to Caroline that since she got on well with Reggie, Lady Hunney might fear she had designs upon him, something that would not look well in her social book. The second daughter of the third son of an earl, and an impoverished one at that, was the kind of catch that Lady Hunney would immediately throw back in the sea.

To her annoyance, he continued to talk non-stop of the wonders of this Penelope Banning as they strolled into Five Hundred Acre Wood. The Forest – a misnomer now that much of Ashdown Forest was open heathland – was heaving with signs of spring and the sun had chased away the clouds of the morning. Yet Reggie hardly noticed. Couldn't he feel, as she did, the magic of this place?

'Oh, Reggie, do stop to look.' Caroline was momentarily side-tracked from her impatience at not being able to impart her news.

'What is there to look at? Trees, flowers, birds.' There was all the gloom of the frustrated romantic lover in his voice.

'That's a Dartford warbler,' she said crossly. 'Very rare. What more could you ask?'

'Penelope.'

'Reggie, pretend I am Penelope, and *listen* to me.'

‘All right. What is it? You overboiled the jam again?’

‘No,’ she said scathingly. ‘*Real* news. Isabel is engaged.’

‘What?’ He staggered around, clutching his brow. ‘My secret hopes blighted.’

‘Don’t be an idiot, Reggie. It’s Robert Swinford-Browne.’ The awfulness of it engulfed her again. It had seemed unbelievable at first. Father standing up and making the announcement in his ‘parish’ voice, so she knew he wasn’t happy about it either; then William Swinford-Browne opening bottles of champagne which he’d brought with him. and all the time Isabel, sitting there nakedly displaying not dewy-eyed love, but a kind of triumph – or so it seemed to Caroline. Perhaps that was just the champagne which had made her head swim, and Isabel suddenly seem a stranger.

‘By Jove, she kept quiet about that.’

‘Exactly what Phoebe said. Perhaps Isabel didn’t want it to be known in case we teased her, but if she loves him—’

‘Aha. Did I note an ‘if’?’

‘Oh, Reggie, I can’t believe she does. Robert’s not like his father, but marry him? It would be like marrying Fred Dibble. I’m not being unkind,’ Caroline added hastily.

He glanced at her bright hazel eyes and the light brown hair leaping out as usual from its restraining pins, saw that she was indeed worried, and began to take the matter seriously. ‘You’re never unkind. But it’s not the same. Robert’s got his own mind – somewhere. He’s a decent chap, is Robert. Handy with a racket, too. And a lot of money.’

Caroline sighed. ‘You know Isabel. Once she gets her way, she no longer wants it. I suppose I shouldn’t say that either.’

‘It’s only me, Caroline. You’re not being disloyal.’

She looked at him gratefully. ‘After she came home from finishing school and got presented at Court, and after that man backed out of marrying her, I think she grew obsessed with marriage.’ There had been two men, in fact, one who backed out and one highly unsuitable one (if rich) whom Father had chased off.

‘It’s always the same with you girls that have got no money,’ Reggie said encouragingly. ‘Family isn’t everything these days.’

‘How nice of you to put it so tactfully. Isabel obviously agrees with you, or I can’t believe she’d be marrying into the Swinford-Browne family.’

‘Perhaps the patter of tiny feet will change her.’

‘It wouldn’t me.’

‘It would most women.’

She fell silent. Did he mean she was not a womanly woman? Not like her mother? She wanted to be like Mother, only there was a restlessness in her that made her suspect she could never be so.

‘Look,’ he continued, ‘even you and Isabel have more choices than me. I didn’t ask to be the eldest son, after all. Yet here I am, and as soon as the old man dies, I’m lord of the manor and the Ashden estate whether I like it or not.’

‘Don’t you want to be?’

‘Of course I do. It’s an honour to carry on the torch like that, I love the old place, and I love the village. There have been Hunneys at Ashden for over three hundred years. But just once in a while, I feel like cutting loose.’

Caroline had never questioned Reggie’s attitude to



his heritage before, and now she wondered why. The established order must continue under Reggie. Daniel, his younger brother, would be off travelling the world as soon as he came down this summer from Oxford, but Reggie had had no hope of taking up a full military career after his degree, despite his time in the university officers' training corps, and his periodic visits to something called 'camp'. His father had been called back to Whitehall to assume his formal title of Major-General Sir John Hunney, on the Balkan troubles in 1912 — 'Just an army desk job' was all he said about his duties there. Since then Reggie had had to take his place running the estate. He ran it well. The bailiff was a good man, but Reggie was the one the village turned to. He may be young, but he was a Hunney.

'But I'm a woman. How can you say I have more choices than you?'

'You chose not to go to finishing school. You're helping your father.'

Helping, Caroline wondered? Was what she did now worth those rows, first with her grandmother when she refused to go to the Paris finishing school, for which Lady Buckford was so generously paying. Instead she had remained at St Margaret College in East Grinstead, and then taken up her duties as the Rector's daughter. Just like Reggie. Little by little, she had gained ground in expanding her role, first writing the parish magazine, and then helping her father by copying and making sense of old decaying registers; now she also worked in the Ashden Manor library — Reggie's suggestion — cataloguing and repairing volumes. Interesting, but ultimately stultifying. In return for this, she sometimes

took the Rector's wife's traditional place at the Mother's Union, and in organising flower shows and fêtes. Recently she had done some teaching at the village school, which was Church of England controlled. But at times, particularly now in spring, none of this was enough. Much as she loved home and Ashden, she felt her life was straining against a liberty bodice that had grown too small.

Reggie broke into her thoughts. 'I suppose you'll get married some day anyway.'

'Why do you suppose that?' Her step quickened; the criss-cross of beaten paths was taking them across exposed heathland, the bedraggled dead bracken still covering most of the ground, with only a few green shoots struggling through here and there. Ferns were the oldest greenery, Father said, prehistoric, pagan, and here in the middle of the forestland it was easy to believe it. All around them must be hidden some of the thousands of animals that dwelt here, retiring, waiting for the friendliness of night before they emerged. Unknown shapes in the dark. Like the future. Like marriage.

'Women have to.'

'Suppose no one asks me?'

'Oh, come. What about that curate, Oliver, who stomped off to drown his sorrows in Manchester? Or Philip Ryde? He's always making sheep's eyes at you. Don't say you hadn't noticed.'

She had, but was carefully ignoring it. She liked the schoolmaster, but that was all. Marry him? She simply couldn't imagine kissing him. 'I have no intention of marrying Philip Ryde. If it's any of your business,' she

added brightly, glad that the path was taking them back into the comforting shady woods full of the familiarity of the known.

‘It is,’ he said seriously. ‘In my position as future lord of the manor, I feel I have to keep an eye on you village girls. It’s my *droit de seigneur*.’ He yelped with laughter as she attacked him with a dead branch, to the great astonishment of a young couple walking decorously by who quickly averted their eyes.

‘That’s a fine example to Agnes,’ Caroline said ruefully. Agnes was so restrained, she was never quite sure what she was thinking, though her sweetheart always had a twinkle in his eye.

‘Your parlour maid, wasn’t it? And young Jamie Thorn?’

‘It was. Future lord of the manor brained by branch wielded by Rector’s daughter, the *Courier* will say. Maybe even the *Church Times*.’

‘I won’t tell Joe Ifield,’ he reassured her. ‘No charge will be made to the police.’

‘Joe Ifield doesn’t know what a charge is. He thinks it’s made by a goat. In this case he’s right.’

Crashing over the dead bracken to catch her as she tried to escape, Reggie pinioned her arms from behind. ‘Apologise.’

‘No,’ she said suddenly.

Reggie watched her, knowing she was upset, not knowing quite why. ‘When’s the wedding?’ he asked casually.

‘The first of August. They wanted it in July, but there’s the Rectory fête, Sunday School treat, the flower show *and* my birthday.’

‘Good.’ Reggie was pleased. ‘Daniel will still be here before he goes off on his grand tour. Come up to the Manor after church and meet him. You haven’t seen him since Christmas, have you? Bring the whole bunch of lilies if you like. Come to dinner.’

‘No. I can’t miss supper. The lily bunch will be chewing over events.’

‘You can spit them out at the Hunney Pot afterwards, then. If I know the Mater, she’ll be dying to hear, though she’ll pretend she isn’t.’

If only to gloat, Caroline thought crossly.

Sleep was coming hard that night. Unfinished thoughts whirled round her mind like rose petals on a windy summer’s day, falling to earth only to be whisked up once more. Isabel engaged – that meant she would leave the Rectory when she married. What would happen here when she did? They all loved the Rectory as home, but Caroline saw it almost as a member of the family with its own character, one who needed to be consulted on such major events as Isabel’s marriage.

She knew the old red-brick house was far from beautiful to most people’s eyes, but it was to hers. It was a higgledy-piggledy mixture of styles from the medieval to the almost modern, including one wing which was an early Tudor house, serene in its red-brick, mellow glory, and a pretentious tower and porch added last century. The centuries had settled down contentedly together, however, into something that shouted home. Inside the house was a children’s paradise and a maids’ nightmare. Odd steps

linking different levels provided traps for the forgetful; nooks and crannies beckoned everywhere.

Bedrooms . . . Who would have Isabel's bedroom now, the coveted one on the corner? Would she still be the same Isabel after she was incarcerated in The Towers like Rapunzel? Would there be a baby? She'd be Aunt Caroline, if so. The Swinford-Brownes would become part of the family, take part in the games, be present at their table. Her thoughts raced on. Why had Felicia been so quiet this evening at the Manor? She was always subdued, but this evening it had been very noticeable. Only she and Felicia had gone to the Manor, for the others could not be prised away. Daniel, Reggie and Eleanor had made up for it, firing questions like a machine gun at them, but it was nearly always Caroline who answered – even when Lady Hunney was questioner. Her rigidly corseted self-control shimmered within its midnight blue velvet dinner gown, and its high-necked lace fichu displayed the Hunney pearls as a discreet reminder of her qualifications to render what would be overbearing inquisitiveness in others into her proper sphere of concern. Eleanor, bless her, a silent but whole-hearted sympathiser with Caroline's predicament, winked in a most unladylike manner as her mother proclaimed:

'Such a pity Isabel takes nothing with her to the marriage. I presume that is the case?'

'Yes, Lady Hunney.' Nothing but her youth, warm heart and good spirits, she had thought angrily, loyally overlooking her sister's defects.

'A home wedding. At the Rectory, you say?'

'Naturally.' In fact there was no 'naturally' about it. The

Swinford-Brownes had pushed hard for The Towers, and Isabel had visibly wavered.

‘How delightful. Provisioned by Fortnum, of course. Their usual pies. They are most reasonably priced, I am told.’

‘Provisioned by ourselves, Lady Hunney, as our privilege and pleasure.’

Reggie had given her an approving pat as he and Daniel walked them home afterwards. The sky had been clear and the air still mild. The April evening touched them with the silken hopefulness of spring.

And still she could not sleep. Try as she would, she could not imagine Isabel sharing a bed with Robert. Caroline was fully aware of what this meant, not through any enlightenment from her mother but through the auspices of Patricia Swinford-Browne, who was by no means as repressed and demure as was generally believed – particularly by her own mother.

Isabel and Robert. Yet curiously enough it was not of them she was thinking as at last sleep came, but of Reggie’s new brown boots marching over the fresh green shoots aggressively pushing their way to the light in Five Hundred Acre Wood. How silly.