

CHAPTER 1

APRIL 1864

In the east the sky was beginning to lighten, the glimmer reflecting dimly on the wet slate roofs of the houses lower down the hill. John stayed at the window for a while but there was little to see so early in the morning. The river was hidden behind the factories, foundries and shipyards that colonised its banks, and the town of Lowcarr, clinging like a limpet to the rising ground above, had not yet opened its eyes to peer through the smoky haze belching from household flues and prolific chimney stacks of industry.

Never a lie-abed, John was not usually up quite so soon. Everyone else in the house was sleeping. He shivered a little, and moved away from the window to the hearth. It was still warm from last night's fire and he knelt to clean out the white ash from the grate, working quietly so as not to disturb the sleepers. Charles, his elder brother, snored softly in the loft bedroom above, but from the other bedroom, the one next to the kitchen where their parents slept, John could hear nothing.

Before going outside for coal he took his father's work jacket from its hook on the door. It felt tight across his shoulders, the sleeves leaving his wrists uncovered, but it was close and warm and it protected him from the worst of the cold, damp air.

Once the fire was lit he sat in the old armchair, which was the only real comfort the room could offer. The dancing light from the hearth flickered over his face and warmth from the flames seemed to release him from the constraints he had set himself. For a moment he let the joy of youth wash over him. It was a feeling he'd been careful to suppress of late.

'If you're to make a go of your new job, you'll have to look as if you're capable,' James, his father had advised. 'Your brother can afford to have his dreams of the future but your prospects depend on what happens now.'

He accepted the advice. Charles, two years his senior, had served an apprenticeship as a compositor but his heart was set on a completely different career. In contrast, John, just turned twenty, had postponed his dreams while he dealt with reality. Now, within weeks, his single-minded approach was paying dividends and he was more confident in his work. Only one problem remained and it was in respect of this that John intended to show everyone, his mother in particular, just how determined he could be.

Stretching out his long legs, he dozed a little, making up for the sleep he'd lost during the night. But his mind was too active for proper sleep and soon he was lurching awake to face up to the day ahead, his stomach turning over at the thought of what it might bring.

Hannah, John's mother, disturbed by the movement in the kitchen, lay awake listening to the heavy breathing of her husband James Herrington. She envied him his rest. Through twenty-three years of marriage and the bringing up of two sons it had always been left to her to lie awake and worry about whatever there was to worry about. Of course, working down the pit was hard work and James deserved his rest but she couldn't help thinking that a few glasses of ale of an evening would help anybody to sleep. Wide-awake in the grey morning light, she took what comfort she could get from the warm bed. But soon she was up, slinging a woollen shawl about her shoulders. She looked at James. *Let him sleep*, she thought as she went into the kitchen. *There'll be worries enough for both of us before this day's done.*

In an hour or so, when the spring sunshine was glinting mistily through the window and the kitchen sweltered in the heat from the fire, John and Charles, still in their underwear, vied with each other for elbowroom before a tiny mirror over the sink. The brothers looked alike. They were lean and energetic, long limbed and broad shouldered. Unlike some of their friends they were healthy and strong. Their mother had seen to that. Even in the worst of times she'd managed to put good food on the table. Known to those close to them as *Hannah's boys*, they had dark brown eyes that crinkled with laughter, eyes that attracted the girls and made their mates envious. Relinquishing his place at the mirror to Charles, John wiped the remains of the soap from his face with a towel and turned to his mother who had come in from the bedroom. Dressed for outdoors, she wore a black hat trimmed with grey feathers.

She touched the hat. 'It's not very suitable for a spring morning, is it?' She averted her eyes from his state of undress. 'I've had no chance to get anything else.'

Surprised that she was actually talking to him, John was slow to reply. But he was spared the need to comment when his father appeared, dressed in the grey frock coat that he kept for special occasions. James checked his watch then glanced at Hannah who was studying her appearance in the mantelpiece mirror.

She spoke to her husband's reflection. 'Are you ready, Jim?'

'Aye, I'm ready. But it's far too early, Hannah. If we go now we'll be first there.'

'That's what I want—I want to be first there.'

John cringed at her caustic tone and thought how easy it would be to hate her. As he lifted his trousers from the back of the chair he caught her looking at him, as if she could read his thoughts.

At the door she called over her shoulder. 'Get on with it you two. Don't make things any worse by being late.'

Through the open door he saw how she scanned the street for observers, her chin lifted in haughty defiance. Children's voices drifted in from the street. *Silk—satin—cotton—rags*. He

recognised the voices of their neighbour's children, schoolgirls who skipped where the ground was level on the corner of Engine Row and Vulcan Street. He'd seen them there before, their pleated skirts swinging to the rhythm of the chant and the turning ropes.

What meaningless words they are, he thought. But even after his father had closed the door the words, *cotton—rags*, still rang in his head.

Ten minutes later, when he opened the door again, the girls were still playing. This time they stopped skipping and let the ropes dangle around their ankles. They watched the brothers, dressed in dark coats and trousers, coming out into the street.

'What are you looking at, Janey Briggs?' John pushed his face nearer to the girls, his black brows drawn together in mock anger. 'You should be on your way to school. If your mother comes out, she'll skin you.'

Janey stared at him harder, her eyes round and insolent. 'What ye got yer best clothes on for, John Herrington?'

He glared at her, knowing that to be seen in anything but working clothes on a Monday morning was bound to attract attention. 'Go on, get off to school.' He turned away to look for Charles who had disappeared around the corner.

The river was behind them as they went through the town. Screened by densely packed rows of houses they couldn't see it but were aware of it. Monstrous crashes and bangs reverberated through the streets; derricks and cranes groaned and creaked and ship-builders' hammers pounded out a reminder that the morning shift was underway at the Lowcarr shipyard. To the Herrington brothers the uproar was of no consequence. Quietness on a weekday morn would have given rise to unease.

When they got to Church Lane there were few people about and freed from the restraints of their own neighbourhood, they jostled and teased each other in the way that brothers often do. Their laughter echoed between trees green with new foliage and still wet from the early morning rain. Then, as if to join in the merriment, a skittish breeze snatched the brim of John's hat and sent it skimming over a wall. It rolled and skeltered along the gravel path to end up dishevelled and dusty in the doorway of the Parish Church, where Charles ran to retrieve it.

'Come on, John,' he said, brushing the hat with his sleeve. 'Tidy yourself up and get a move on. Sarah will be here before you know it. And give us a smile, man.' He gave the hat back to his brother.

Managing a half-smile John's hand trembled as he turned the handle to push open the creaking door. Then breathing deeply in an attempt to bolster his courage, he stepped bravely over the church's threshold. But his boldness didn't last, and as soon as he was inside he felt intimidated, out of place. Had Charles not been behind him he might have turned back.

After the pale, spring sunshine outside, the interior of the church seemed dark and cold. Very

different from the Methodist Church where his mother was a member. As a boy he'd rebelled against going there but recalled a lively place, noisy with ranting preachers and fervent hymn singing. The church he entered now was dreary and quiet and no one came forward to greet him. He looked down the nave, loath to go further until his eyes became accustomed to the gloom. It was as if he had entered a tomb.

At first he thought, that except for themselves, there were no others in the church. Then he saw the shadowy backs of the congregation. There were five of them in pews far away, down in the body of the church. They sat at either side of the aisle, three on one side and two on the other. In the grey half-light that filtered through the narrow windows they were silent and still, as if hewn out of stone like the angel monuments on the graves outside.

A nudge from Charles reminded him to move towards his place in the front pew. To his left he could see Sarah's mother and brothers, Albert and Bobbie. Mrs West, in an old straw bonnet trimmed with new blue ribbons, turned to look at him. He thought the embellishment only drew attention to her lined, worn face.

He stole a glance at his own mother who, sitting with his father on the right, greeted him with a barely discernible nod. Only the quivering of the feathers on her hat indicated that she had moved at all. The brooch of silver and jet at her throat glittered in the meagre light of two candles placed far away on the altar. Her lips were pressed tightly together and she sat on the edge of her seat as if she had no intention of staying for long.

In the front row Charles slid along the pew so John could be next to the aisle.

'Don't let her upset you,' he whispered.

But John, still smarting from the sharp words his mother had lashed out when he'd had asked for permission to marry, could not put aside her anger.

'You're too young to get married, John,' she said. 'Sarah West is not the girl for you. Coming from a family like hers, she's bound to hold you back.'

'Now, Hannah.' John's father had intervened. 'It's Sarah he wants to marry, not her family. She's a bonny lass and I know he's only twenty but he's in a position to provide for her. If it's done quickly there'll be no gossip.'

'That's not what I mean, James.' Hannah's hands beat the air to stress her point. 'John's got a future ahead of him. Not many lads of his age have a job as good as he's got. Sarah West *is* a bonny lass, there's no denying that, but there's more to marriage than a pretty face. Mark my words, that lassie knows which side her bread's buttered on. She's trapped our John.'

John had hung his head, and so did his father and Charles. Three grown men, heads bowed in awe of a woman's tongue. But her tirade was not over. 'I've worked hard for your future. You could have

followed your father down the pit but I wanted a better life for you. And what thanks do I get? Charles is more interested in those ungodly Thespians than anything else and John wants to get married before he's out of the cradle.'

.'Leave me out of it, mother.' Charles' protest was mild. 'It's only a pastime and the Thespians aren't ungodly. Some of them are professional people, you know.'

In the days that followed Hannah was not to be reasoned with and the atmosphere in the home was dark and heavy. Day after day she maintained a steely silence and then unexpectedly, just before the week was out, she suddenly relented and grudgingly agreed to James giving his consent for John to marry Sarah. Even then she limited her conversation to what she considered to be essential.

'I won't have her here to live with us,' she said through lips that hardly opened. 'You'll have to find a place of your own.'

Inwardly John smiled. He already had a house for Sarah to live in. Two months ago he'd been appointed manager of the grocer's shop where he'd served his apprenticeship. Mr Logan, the shop owner, retiring because of ill health, had gone with his wife to live in Tynemouth where the sea air was said to be bracing. That meant the rooms over the shop were vacant and Mr Logan, understanding John's predicament had, only that morning, offered the accommodation to his new manager at a nominal rent.

'Do the right thing by the lassie,' he told John. 'Marry her, lad. You've got a roof over your head and a steady income. It might all turn out for the best. A businessman needs a good wife behind him.'

It was a generous offer and John promised to follow Mr Logan's good advice.

The door at the back of the church closed with a thud heralding the arrival of the bride and John took up his place facing the vicar who stood on the chancel steps. Behind him Mr West's boots clattered rudely on the wooden floor as he accompanied his youngest daughter down the aisle and a whisper of rustling skirts tempted John to take a look. His bride, caught in a fleeting ray of sunlight that dappled hazily from a tall window, wore a wide hat decked with creamy ribbons, beneath which raven black hair framed her pale face. She came to his side and glanced up at him with misty brown eyes that were quickly veiled beneath a sweep of black lashes. She wore a simple dress of white muslin and carried a miniature posy of violets and lilies of the valley. The sight of her thrilled him with passion and tenderness.

In a way, he thought, I've always been in love with her. He'd first seen her when, aged ten or eleven, he gone to the Dene to play with his friends by the water. The Dene had once been a quarry but the stonemasons had gone, leaving a deep crater to fill with water from the burn that ran down to the river. Local children played there, lighting campfires and fishing for newts and tadpoles.

The West family lived nearby in a farm cottage and the Dene was a playground for Sarah and her sister and brothers. John remembered her in grubby, ragged clothes that were either outgrown or too big. In the summer she often went barefooted and sometimes in the winter too. He pictured her as she was then, hair loose and flying, dark eyes flashing as she ran and skipped and danced. She was a puny, undernourished child but she was unfettered and alive. John had watched her romp and tumble with her brothers and had longed to join in.

His mother told him not to play with the West children. 'They're tinkers, gipsies. They'd cut your throat for tuppence,' she said.

He knew they weren't gipsies; Sarah's father was a farm labourer.

As they grew up he saw her less often and later, occupied with classes at the Mechanic's Institute, hardly ever. Sometimes he'd catch sight of her in the town, still vibrant with life in spite of her shabby clothes and gaunt, hungry look. Then one day she came into the shop looking so appealing in a new bonnet and shawl that, before she left, he'd promised to meet her on the bridle path the following Sunday.

When the gold ring was on Sarah's finger and they were pronounced man and wife, John proudly led his bride to the vestry to sign the register. The rest of the congregation followed on.

Taking her seat at the desk Sarah picked up the pen. 'Where do I sign?' she said.

The vicar pointed to the place on the register and she leaned forward shielding the book like a schoolchild, with her arm. John, hardly able to conceal his joy, stood behind looking over her shoulder. But the smile suddenly left his lips when, staring with disbelief, he saw her sign the register with a cross.

'No, no, Sarah! Your name! You must write your name,' he said.

Her head was bowed. 'I can't,' she whispered.

Their fingers touched as he took the pen from her to put his own signature above her mark and he felt her flinch away from him as though she sensed his humiliation.

Her father, self-conscious and grimy, came to the desk to make his mark and John could not help but compare him with his own father, who was neatly dressed in the well-worn clothes that he referred to as, *for better days than Sundays*. Except for the black creases around his eyes, a legacy from the coalmine that no amount of soap and water could eradicate, James was fresh and clean.

John helped Sarah to her feet and afraid his disappointment might be apparent, kept his face turned away from his parents and his brother.

Afterwards, outside in the churchyard, Sarah's family left quickly without a word to anyone. When they had gone Charles gave his new sister-in-law a kiss and James did the same. Hannah offered her daughter-in-law a rigid hand that the young woman barely touched. John kissed his mother's cheek

and then, with Sarah's arm tucked into his own, they went off together. They walked through the damp streets; so intent upon one another other they were heedless of the curious glances that came their way, hardly aware of the drizzling rain that dampened the muslin of Sarah's dress so that the cotton clung to her like a rag.

The shop, on a corner between two streets, was shuttered and deserted, closed for the day. John took Sarah through a passageway into the yard behind. There was a straw bag propped up against the back door.

'It's my things,' Sarah said. 'Bobbie brought them round first thing.'

John picked the bag up and was surprised at how light it was but knowing it contained Sarah's entire wardrobe he said nothing. They went upstairs.

Sarah hadn't seen the rooms before and she moved about, touching the furniture, smiling with pleasure. But the Logans had taken the better pieces to their home in Tynemouth and John was ashamed at the sparse furnishings.

'We'll buy new things, Sarah,' he said. 'We can save a bit to pay for them. And I've got ideas to make more money. You'll see, this place will be a little palace.'

She scowled at him. 'Palace! What do I want with a palace? What's wrong with it as it is? There's more than enough here to keep me busy.'

He asked her why she hadn't told him she couldn't read or write. She tossed her head. 'It doesn't matter. Not everybody learns to read and write.'

'I know that,' he said, 'but I thought you could.'

She turned her back on him and he stood behind her and wrapped her in his arms. 'You could learn now,' he whispered in her ear. 'I could help you.'

'There's no need.' She wriggled away from him. 'I can manage without.'

Rudely, she pushed past him and went into the bedroom, closing the door firmly behind her.

John sat at the table and held his head in his hands. *Well, it seems she's not interested in the furniture,* he thought. He took out his purse and shook some coins on to the table. There were enough to pay for a new dress. He remembered a dressmaker in the High Street that his mother used occasionally. The baby was not due for months, plenty of time for Sarah to wear a dress—plenty of time to learn to read and write. She could visit the dressmaker tomorrow.

CHAPTER 2

OCTOBER 1877

‘Watch it man!’

The cab driver reined in his horse, pulling it quickly to a stop as John Herrington stepped backwards into the road. Looking absent-mindedly over his shoulder, he raised an acknowledging hand and stepped forward out of danger. He heard the crack of the whip behind him as the horse was urged forward, and winced at the string of curses that the driver hurled in his direction.

He stood some six or seven feet from the building, his head tilted back to get a good view of the sign above the plate-glass windows of the double-fronted shop. The sign, newly erected, with gold lettering and scrolls on a green background, proclaimed to the world, or at least those people who frequented Percy Street, that John Herrington had established his high class grocery business there in 1875.

At thirty-three John was coming up in the world. He liked to present an image in keeping with his position. It pleased him to think that the spring in his step, the set of his shoulders and the cut of his clothes pointed him out as a successful man.

He owned two thriving grocery shops now, one in the district of Lowcarr, near to the coalmines and shipyards, and this one in Percy Street. It occupied a good position, close to the town centre, within reach of those who lived in the prosperous, residential suburb of Jesmond and near to the handsome houses in Leazes Park.

He had good reason to be proud of his achievements. In the face of an economic recession that held the North East, as well as the rest of the country, in its grip, he’d gone ahead with the expansion of his business. In the towns that clustered along the banks of the River Tyne all kinds of businesses were closing down and he’d watched as many small retail grocers ceased to trade. He’d needed all the ingenuity he could muster to keep the Lowcarr shop out of trouble and it was a brave decision to open the new shop in such hard times. John didn’t consider himself to be a gambling man but had staked all his previous achievements on the success of the new enterprise.

‘This is not the time to expand,’ his business friends in the city advised. Even his solicitor said it was foolhardy to proceed with the scheme during such an unsettled period. But foolhardy or not, using all his reserves, he’d gone ahead with his plan. He looked upon the new shop as an insurance against the Lowcarr business where, in competition with a thriving Cooperative Society, the danger of business failure was real. He’d risked everything in the belief that those who might patronise the Percy Street shop were unlikely to want to be seen shopping in the Cooperative Stores. Now, two

years on, he thought his decision was justified.

He was still admiring the new sign when he saw Albert Jardine, the shop manager, escorting a lady to a carriage that waited at the roadside. He waited until the carriage pulled away.

‘That was Mrs Leopold Fothersgill-Child.’ Jardine’s tone was respectful. ‘This is not the first time she has shopped here in person.’

‘What did she buy?’ John asked. ‘Seemed little enough to me.’

‘Half a pound of our finest coffee,’ Jardine confided. ‘Just think of the prestige such a personage brings.’

Inside the shop John inspected the shelves. ‘Those preserved fruits I ordered from France—have they gone?’

‘In less than a week,’ Jardine said. ‘They sold themselves, Mr Herrington. The sugared almonds too — better quality than those made locally.’

‘Make a note of those items that are popular,’ John said, ‘and I’ll buy more on my next visit to the Continent.’ He stopped for a moment. ‘On second thoughts, perhaps we should order by post. It might be some weeks before I can get away.’

‘Of course, sir. I trust all is well at home?’

It was not John’s policy to discuss domestic issues with his employees. But he could see, from Jardine’s thoughtful frown, that the man obviously expected a reply. ‘My wife isn’t well after her confinement,’ he said. ‘I don’t want to travel too far until she is on her feet again.’

‘Of course, your first concern must be for your wife and child, Mr Herrington. Perhaps you might leave the re-ordering of the stock to me for the next few weeks.’

‘Well let’s hope it won’t come to that.’ John was not prepared to relinquish his own grasp on the business.

In the stockroom John took an account book from the desk while, from the doorway the manager looked on with apprehension.

‘I think you’ll find everything’s up to date,’ he said.

‘I expect it is. But I like to check for myself.’

Jardine turned to go but John was not quite finished with him. ‘The books at Lowcarr are showing a healthy balance,’ he said, glancing up mischievously to gauge the man’s reaction. Jardine’s hands were clenched, his brows drawn in. ‘Mind you,’ John went on, ‘the overheads there are low. Not such a high a rent as here and although Henderson’s a good manager, he costs me less than you do.’

Jardine flushed to the roots of his gingery hair, but held on to his composure. ‘Well,’ he countered, ‘you’ve got to give Henderson credit. He does manage to dispose of our less desirable stock.’

John scowled. 'I'd remind you that it is good business to transfer our surplus stock to Lowcarr. The customers there are glad to buy quality goods at reduced prices. They appreciate a bargain.' He turned his attention to the book while Jardine took advantage of the distraction to retreat hastily into the shop.

Closing the door between the stockroom and the shop John felt irritated by Jardine's implication that the Lowcarr shop was of less value than this city establishment. That business, built up over the years first by Mr Logan and then John, continued to thrive. It was a matter of pride to John to know what his customers wanted. His success was built on that premise. *An egg is an egg to the people in Lowcarr, he thought, and if it is a little less than fresh, or even cracked, nobody worries if the price is right.* Henderson, the Lowcarr manager understood that too.

The Percy Street enterprise was different and challenging. It was the main reason for John's excursions to France. The shelves were stocked with the highest quality of goods. Special cheeses from Holland and France, spices and flavourings from exotic climes took their place alongside the best quality blends of tea from India and China. The patrons of the Percy Street shop were willing to pay the high prices charged for the service and after two years the books were showing a sizable profit.

Casting a practiced eye around the storeroom he saw it was spotlessly clean and tidy. The floor was swept, the shelves neatly stacked. Knowing that Jardine's wife lent a hand in the back premises he made a mental note to reward her when the Christmas was near. Of course, unlike Sarah, Mrs Jardine, having no children, had time on her hands.

Sitting at the desk to study the account books John examined the neat columns of figures and meticulous handwriting. He couldn't deny that Albert Jardine was an excellent manager. The man had come with a wealth of experience and first class testimonials and John felt pleased to have engaged him when he had the chance. Reaching down to where a small, shabby attaché case was propped against the side of the desk he lifted it to the desktop and taking a little key from his waistcoat pocket he unlocked the case and snapped it open. Then, listening to make sure that Jardine was busy and unlikely to interrupt, he took the contents from the case and made room for them on the desk. The untidy array of grubby notebooks that lay there represented a part of his business dealings that over the years had served him well. No copperplate handwriting here. Names pencilled in, often misspelt and some crossed out. Smudged figures in imprecise columns were corrected with a blackness that suggested a pencil moistened on the tongue. As he turned the pages, John reminded himself that without the revenue represented here there would have been no place for Jardine, indeed no business for Herrington in Percy Street.

Work on the books occupied him for some time and it wasn't until he became aware of Jardine,

polishing his glasses and squinting short-sightedly at him from the doorway, that he realised the lateness of the hour. From the rooms above there came an appetising aroma of mutton chops and mint sauce.

‘What is it, man? Don’t hang around there—come in,’ John said.

Jardine replaced his glasses. ‘Is everything in order, Mr Herrington?’

‘Don’t worry, man,’ John said rubbing his own eyes. ‘Everything’s as it should be.’ He put the books back in the case before locking it and pocketing the key. ‘I think your dinner’s ready, Jardine, so I’ll be off now. You may as well lock up when I’ve gone. Nobody’s likely to turn up so late on a Saturday evening.’

He heard Mrs Jardine in her kitchen upstairs. The chink of cutlery and crockery had a comforting sound and the food smelt good. He thought there was something to be said for a childless marriage. His own children were dear to him but somehow, perhaps because he’d been brought up with just one brother, he’d not bargained for a large family of his own. In thirteen years of marriage Sarah had borne six children and until this last one she seemed to have taken it all in her stride. Of course, he’d never doubted that she’d used the children as an excuse for her lack of interest in the business and for her half-hearted attitude towards housekeeping.

‘I’m taking the bairns out,’ she’d say whenever he asked for her help in the shop. ‘You can’t keep them indoors all day.’ And setting off in all weathers, she’d roam the streets and lanes and wherever else her fancies took her. The children scampered around her skirts like a litter of puppies and in the spring and summer they’d come home with bunches of flowers and grass. It had to be said that mother and children usually returned from their outings glowing with health and high spirits. But there’d been times when he’d worried that his children might become as untamed as their mother had been in her own childhood. Even now he had to be firm about their schooling because Sarah would keep them away on whatever pretext she could find.

He tidied up the last of the books and stood up. Jardine, obviously impatient, was shuffling his feet, wanting him to go. The piquant aroma from above made John lick his lips. He couldn’t remember when he had last gone home to a good meal.

Jardine waited by the door, holding it open while John buttoned up his coat and nodding deferentially as his employer left the shop. But John was scarcely clear of the door when it was slammed with a bang behind him.

CHAPTER 3

At half-past-seven, except for a lamp outside the Haymarket public house, it was quite dark in Percy Street. Cabs lined up in a row on the opposite side of the road but John, drawn towards the light, turned into the hostelry doorway. Standing at the bar while he quenched his thirst with a glass of ale, he silently justified his self-indulgence on the grounds that he had worked hard all afternoon and deserved some time to himself. But thoughts of Sarah's indisposition disturbed his peace of mind. *Our other children came into the world without any fuss or bother*, he thought. *So what is different this time?* But he knew what was different. Sarah had set her mind against the new house. She hadn't wanted to leave the rooms over the shop and to John that seemed to be irrational. With five children and another on the way, living in those rooms had become impossible. Her opposition mystified him. Had there been a close friend that she couldn't bear to leave, he might have understood. But, as far as he knew, she had no close friends in Lowcarr.

'I'll never cope with a big place like that,' she complained when he had taken her to see the house. 'All those bedrooms and two flights of stairs—it's too much to expect, John.'

'Supposing we get someone in to help,' he'd suggested.

'Help!' She'd seemed exasperated. 'How can we afford to pay somebody to help?'

He could never get Sarah to understand that nowadays money was not a problem. Unwilling to spend either on herself or the children she passed garments down from one child to the next and let them wear boots that were outgrown. His early hopes that she might accompany him on social or business occasions had long been forgotten. Sarah, still as darkly beautiful as ever, refused to dress in anything that could be thought of as fashionable. A simple skirt and blouse, covered with a shawl for outdoors, was all she'd consider. Once he'd chosen a blue silk gown for her but as far as he knew, it still hung unworn in the wardrobe. It was as if she resented his rise in the world and wanted no part of it.

Hannah, John's mother, had tried to resolve Sarah's worries by recommending Annie Gillis as a daily help. 'She's a strong healthy girl. Only sixteen, but the eldest of six and used to children. And she's respectable—I know the family well.'

Surprisingly Sarah had taken to the girl at once. Annie was offered the job of daily help and accepted it. But though the question of help in the house was settled, Sarah still had misgivings about moving there. John pointed out the advantages of living in that part of Sandwell. He'd explained that it was a select district, further away from the river and healthier for the children.

'But why go to Sandwell?' she said. 'Are there no houses in Lowcarr?'

'It's a good house for us, Sarah, a family house. Now that Jack is twelve, the boys need a room of

their own. And it's close to my mother's house. She'll enjoy having her grandchildren nearby and, now that your own mother's gone, Hannah will be company for you when I'm away. The house is only fifteen minutes' walk from Lowcarr. It's not as if we were moving miles away.'

In the end, obviously weary of the arguments, she'd given in to his wishes but after they'd taken up residence, she'd withdrawn into herself. The spaciousness of the rooms seemed to have diminished her in some way and the spirit she had shown in the past faded.

Noticing the change in her daughter-in-law, Hannah tried to pinpoint the cause. 'She'll soon get used to the place after the bairn is born. Women in her state of health often get strange fancies,' she'd said.

Well, the bairn is born now, John thought. *So we shall see.* But he knew the fever that burned in Sarah's frail body last night had nothing to do with strange fancies. This morning, twenty-four hours after the birth, Sarah had lain exhausted on a tumbled bed, damp tendrils of dark hair clinging to an ashen brow.

'You'll be all right,' he told her before he left the house. 'I'll send Jack to fetch his grandmother.' Without a word, Sarah had turned to face the wall.

When the cab that brought him home reached Grange Terrace and his house came into view, a glow of pride went some way to help John to put his anxiety aside. The terrace, set on a gentle rise on the north side of the town, lorded it over those humbler dwellings that occupied the lower regions closer to the river. His was the tallest house in the terrace, three storey's high with a basement beneath. In the dim light of the street lamps, it looked more imposing than its neighbours. He thought of the improvements he'd made. New wallpaper was hung, doors varnished and ceilings painted. He'd spent a small fortune on having gas lighting brought to every room and there was a new water closet housed in the back yard. Not many of the other properties in Grange Terrace could boast of such modernisation.

As the cab drove away John climbed the three, broad stone steps to the front door. Inside, the hall was in darkness and there was no welcoming aroma of food. He trudged upstairs to the bedroom where Sarah and the new baby lay.

'Are you alone?' he asked her.

She nodded, whispering that Annie had taken the children to his mother's house for the night.

Except for the round, burning patches on her cheeks Sarah's face was pallid, her dark eyes bright and hard. He saw the baby lying at her mother's side, her tiny face looking as if it had been carved in alabaster. Seeming to sense his presence she stirred and her eyelids twitched.

'Have you had anything to eat, Sarah?' he asked. 'Shall I get you something?'

Her head moved wearily on the pillow and she whispered, 'No, thank you.'

A few pieces of coal from the scuttle soon revived the fire and then he went downstairs to get some food for himself. Later, lying beside his restless wife he found it hard to sleep and during the night. Disturbed by the baby's cries, he got up to bring a drink for Sarah as, propped against the pillows, she put the child to her breast. In the candlelight he watched a pulse beating on the babe's downy head. There had been moments like this before, when his other children had been infants, when he had realised their vulnerability and his role as their father and protector. But this child stirred no such response and that concerned him. *It's because I am worried about her mother,* he thought. *My feelings will change when Sarah is better.*