

CHAPTER 8

Liverpool

The scene at Lime Street Station differed little from that at King's Cross. Judging by the density of the crowds on the platforms in both stations, one might conclude that travel by train was just as popular in Liverpool as it was in London.

No one gave a second glance to Maggie and Tom Ritchie as they entered the railway station at Lime Street.

'Don't upset yourself, Maggie.' Tom looked down at her. 'You'll be fine once you're on the train.'

They jostled through the busy station, Tom tall and straight, with the bearing of a military man, ushering Maggie safely and efficiently towards the train that would take her to Northumberland. Maggie, neat in a grey woollen dress topped by a plain black cape, wore a black bonnet which concealed almost all of her dark brown hair. An observer might have noticed the paleness of her face that accentuated the intensity of her dark eyes, giving her a bird-like appearance.

Edging their way through the crowds of passengers past a mighty engine where a red-eyed, black-faced fireman shovelled coal into the glowing furnace they moved along the platform. A surge of steam from the boiler blasted out, reverberating through the station buildings, making the passengers leap with alarm. Maggie's grip tightened on her husband's arm.

He urged her on. 'Come on, Maggie. We'll find you a seat with your back to the engine.'

They boarded the train and when she was comfortably seated Tom hoisted her small carpetbag into the luggage rack. 'Have you got everything you need?' he asked.

Maggie thought he looked awkward standing there while other passengers pushed past him, his bulky frame getting in the way of their luggage and belongings. But leaning over with one hand on the panelling behind her, he said, 'Whatever you decide while you're there—I'll go along with it.'

She nodded. 'You should go now,' she said. 'Remember you are on duty in less than an hour.'

He checked his watch. 'The train's due out in a few minutes.'

She pulled him closer to kiss him on the mouth and when she pushed him away there were tears in her eyes. He left the train but stood for a moment outside looking at her through the window before turning to walk back along the platform.

Watching Tom stride away Maggie thought of how he'd changed he'd since she first knew him as a lanky, ungainly lad. They'd lived near each other in Lowcarr where, as a boy, Tom had worked in the Jane Pit. He'd hated it. He told her that in wintertime he never saw the light of day, starting work before daybreak and not finishing until after the sun had gone down. He'd used his meagre pocket

money to pay for lessons in reading and writing, hoping to move on to better things. When he was old enough he joined the army and within weeks was sending letters to Maggie that, because of her own lack of learning, she'd struggled to read. Sometimes she replied to him, writing in a laboured, childish hand, trying hard to overcome the limitations that curbed the expression of her true feelings for him.

At fifteen Maggie was placed as kitchen maid in the house of a wealthy solicitor in Jesmond. The work was hard, the hours long but compared to life in Lowcarr, there was at least a modicum of comfort there. She enjoyed the company of the other servants, especially Ivy, a maidservant, with whom she shared a warm bed in a cold attic.

Maggie expected to spend the rest of her life at that house but one day, when she'd been there for almost ten years, her sister Sarah, riding on a delivery cart, brought a letter that had been posted in Liverpool. It was from Tom Ritchie, to say he was discharged from the army and had joined the Liverpool Police Force. He asked her to become his wife and offered her his love and protection.

The train jerked into life, interrupting Maggie's reverie. Through the window she saw Tom turn and wave and it was not long before the engine was steaming towards Manchester, hurtling over the tracks, past fields, meadows and copses stained with autumn colours of brown and gold. Maggie took off her bonnet and untied the ribbons of her cape. She glanced at the other occupants of the compartment. An old lady sat in the far corner, and sitting opposite was a stout woman and a small boy. The woman was friendly and chatted to Maggie about the weather. The little boy, urged by his mother, offered her a piece of toffee from a paper twist. She found herself talking to the woman, explaining the reason for her journey to the north, and marvelled at how easy it was to unburden oneself to a stranger. After a while the boy slept, and lulled by the movement and rhythm of the train Maggie slept too.

It was mid-afternoon when the train slowed up to cross the High Level Bridge, past the blackened old castle that stood guard over the dark waters of the Tyne and on into the Central Station.

Maggie lifted her bag down from the rack, stretched her cramped limbs, and prepared to get off the train. A surge of excitement and anticipation began to flow over her at the prospect of *coming home*, but reminding herself of the reason for her being there, she stifled the feeling. There was no one to meet her and rather than face the short train journey to Lowcarr she decided to take the horse bus instead and then walk to the farm cottage where her brothers, still working as farm labourers, had held the tenancy since the death of their parents.

The route passed close to Herrington's shop where, until a few months ago, her sister Sarah had lived with her young family. From the window of the bus Maggie saw customers entering the shop and imagined she could hear the sound of the cracked bell above the door. She dried her eyes, glad

when the horses moved on but as she was transported through the familiar streets, the pleasure of her homecoming returned and no matter how she tried to disown it the feeling remained, until at last she allowed herself to dwell on the joy that could come from sorrow, if only John Herrington would agree to her request.

CHAPTER 9

On the morning of her mother's funeral Sally was perplexed. The usual household routine seemed to have given way to a kind of restrained chaos. Nothing made sense. She was pleased that Aunt Elvira and Uncle Charles were here but a little ashamed of such feelings on the day of her mother's funeral. Her aunt and uncle had arrived two days ago, coming from the station in a cab so loaded with luggage it seemed they might stay forever. Aunt Elvira had hugged all the children and cried over them and Uncle Charles had patted their heads. Sally couldn't remember having ever seen either of them before.

From the bedroom she'd seen someone in a house opposite open the curtains and close them again just as quickly. Her grandma had drawn her away from the window and readjusted their own curtains.

'Why are they doing that, Grandma?'

'They're biding their time until it's more seemly to come out,' she said.

There was straw on the road outside the house and even Annie couldn't explain why it was there.

'Ridley's stable boy came with it on a handcart early this morning,' the girl said. 'He took no notice when I told him there was a funeral here today. He just went on spreading it,'

Hearing her father moving in his bedroom Sally went to put the question to him. He was standing in front of the washstand with his back to her, holding a handkerchief to his nose. He turned and she saw his eyes, puffed and red.

'The straw is to muffle the sound of the horse's hooves when they come to take your mother to the cemetery,' he explained.

She had more questions to ask but something in her father's voice stopped her. She stared at him for a moment, wanting to touch him, then turned quickly and ran from the room.

At half-past eleven the mourners began to arrive. They assembled in the drawing room and when that overflowed stood around in the hall. Sally watched them from between the banister rails, full of wonder at how quiet they were.

Everything seemed strange and different. The house, darkened and cold, was full of people she didn't know. Even the smell of it was peculiar. Wreaths of dark evergreens and white flowers were arranged on the floor tiles at the side of the carpet in the hall. The heavy scent of lilies and chrysanthemums filtered through the ground floor rooms and drifted up the staircase to hang in the cold air on the landing. Behind her William stifled a sneeze with his fingers.

Aunt Elvira came to take Sally to the bedroom where a flustered Annie and Grandma were making

sure the children were properly turned out. Sally stood still while her grandmother adjusted the black taffeta ribbons to make a bow at the side of her bonnet. The girls were dressed alike in black bonnets and capes. Jack and William, self-conscious in dark Norfolk jackets held matching caps in their hands. They glanced around uneasily twisting the caps in their hands. Elvira reassured them with a pat on their shoulders and took William's hand in hers but it was Annie who whispered to them. 'Just watch yer father, lads, he'll show you what to do.'

Hannah was wearing her black mantle. 'I bought this when your grandfather died, two years since,' she whispered. 'It's been put away all summer. I was in mourning for him until then. I didn't think I'd be wearing it again so soon.' She beckoned to Jack and sighed resignedly. 'Come on, me bonny lad.'

Jack moved to her side and William, slipping away from Elvira, went to stand beside his brother. Elvira pulled on her gloves and began to guide the girls down the stairs.

The door to the street was open and from the staircase Sally could see the glass hearse. Holding Lizzie's hand, she felt her sister's grip tighten. In the hall below, a black-coated attendant was taking the wreaths outside, while the mourners, now crammed into the drawing room, still waited silently. As the children came down the stairs a dreadful hush lay, like a fall of snow, over the rooms.

Suddenly, without warning a loud hammering noise shattered the silence. Sally put her hands over her ears, dislodging her bonnet so that it hung by its ribbons at the back of her neck. Her sisters shivered with fright while the boys, standing straight, like sentries tried to still their trembling lips. The awful sound echoed through the house and into the street, snatching away any illusions of dignity and propriety.

Glancing around gingerly, Sally wanted to see how others were reacting to the terrible banging. But apart from her own terrified brothers and sisters, no one seemed to be heeding it.

'What is it?' she gasped.

'They're putting the lid on your mother's coffin,' her grandmother whispered.

By the time her bonnet was replaced and the children calmed, four strong men were carrying the coffin through the hall on their shoulders. A state of peacefulness was restored.

Mr Ridley, the undertaker, stepped forward to shake their father's hand and the children waited quietly beside their grandmother and their aunt. Sally standing on tip-toe to get a better view saw that her father, dry eyed now, was calm. He stood straight, taller than all of those people around him and she felt proud to belong to him. She longed to be by his side but as he passed, it was Jack's eye he caught. Hannah pushed the boy forward and whispered to William to go too. Uncle Charles followed and they went outside together. She saw her uncles Bob and Albert waiting uncertainly on the pavement until Mr Ridley waved them forward to take their place behind her father.

Then Hannah, Elvira and the girls went out to the carriage. Aunt Maggie followed them from the

house but on the steps she hesitated. Mr Ridley, holding his black silk hat and flourishing a matching handkerchief, persuaded her to get into the carriage. She sat down between Elvira and Sally.

'Am I taking someone's place?' she whispered.

'Of course, you are not, my dear.' Elvira's tone was warm. 'You are Sarah's sister, are you not?'

When they reached the churchyard, the girls left the carriage to join the procession. Sally stared at the long narrow box before her, the box that held the joys and sorrows of her early years. Yesterday she'd stood on tiptoe to look into the coffin that rested on trestles in the dining room. In the shaded light, she'd seen the face and the hands that were so familiar and yet so strange. It was not her mother who lay there. She thought it was a doll or even a picture that resembled her mother.

Although the box was closed now, nailed down forever, Sally couldn't imagine that her mother was gone. Once, in the town, she'd strayed from her mother's side, mistakenly reaching up to take the hand of stranger whose shawl seemed familiar. The face that looked down at her was friendly and amused but Sally, snatching her hand away, had run off screaming and frantic. When, a few minutes later, she was reunited with her mother, she'd flung herself into those loving arms that held her close until her crying stopped.

At the chancel steps the pallbearers lowered the coffin on to the trestles that had been placed in the aisle. Along with her sisters Sally was ushered into a pew. She felt cold, frozen, as if she too had died; only her eyes burned with tears that she would not, could not, let fall.

When the short service was over and the mourners were straggling in an untidy line to the cemetery, the sun made a brief appearance, shining coldly between trees that were almost bereft of their leaves.

The undertaker had advised the purchase of a double plot.

'A successful business man, such as yourself,' Ridley said, 'would be expected to provide for his wife, in death as in life.'

John had placed an order with the Heworth monumental masons for a large engraved headstone to be erected when the time was right.

At a discreet distance a gravedigger, spade in hand, waited to replace the soil after the coffin had been lowered, and the mourners joined the vicar to say their final prayers and pay their last respects.

As the coffin came to rest on the cold, wet clay a cold draught made John shiver and he looked away from the open grave and saw a man standing next to the gravedigger. He recognised the curate from the church at Lowcarr, remembering him from the time he officiated at his mother-in-law's funeral. Since his wedding day John had rarely attended that church, and Sarah, who professed to be a member there, had been an infrequent worshipper. He wondered why the man had come. The Reverend Walter Blandford was not someone John had taken to. He thought him effeminate and

somewhat vain. But now, despite Blandford's shortcomings, John was touched that he had taken the trouble to attend his former parishioner's funeral. He made up his mind to shake the man's hand, when the opportunity arose. But now was not the time for that. The prayers were finished and people moving away.

'Come on, son.' Hannah was at his side, urging him to move.

'Leave me be, mother. Go home with the others. I want to stay awhile.'

When everyone had gone he looked down into the pit where Sarah lay. He found it hard, even here at her graveside, to accept that she was dead. Her inherent independence, her stubborn refusal to better herself and her natural beauty had made her seem indestructible. Only these last weeks had her wild spirit been subdued and John blamed himself for that. He'd thought he could change her, make her into the sort of wife he needed. He remembered a time when his love for her was passionate, but he knew she'd never belonged to him. She'd not wanted what he had to offer.

He dragged himself away from the grave and trudged to the gate, the scraping of the gravedigger's spade jarring his ears as the man commenced his work. Charles was waiting for him outside the cemetery gates and they walked home in silence.

CHAPTER 10

Returning to a house that was warm now and no longer quiet. John could hear the chink of teacups over the buzz of conversation and see the glow of firelight coming from the rooms. But the sense of emptiness and unreality still clung to him and he longed for the solitude of his own room. He turned towards the staircase but Charles drew him back.

'Give me your overcoat, John,' Charles said. 'People will want to see you now. They'll want to offer their condolences.'

Lacking the energy to do otherwise, John did as he was bid.

The dining room, now that the coffin and trestles had been removed, was restored to order. The carved mahogany dining table was back in its rightful place in the centre of the room and covered with a pristine damask tablecloth. It was set with fine china and silverware, laden with plates of sandwiches, pies, cakes, scones and butter. The sideboard cleared of its usual clutter of ornaments was now arrayed with decanters of wine and spirits and there was a tray of drinking glasses within easy reach of those who preferred something stronger than tea.

Mrs Atkinson, dispensing tea from a bright copper kettle, promised to replenish the cups as soon as they were empty and Annie Gillis, neat in a black dress and spotless apron, handed plates of food around to the mourners.

Charles poured out two glasses of whisky and handed him one. 'Here, John, get this down. Have you seen Maggie yet? She's anxious to speak to you.'

'No, not yet.' John took a gulp from the glass. 'Will you pour a glass of whisky for Mr Ridley, Charles? And the vicar— I think he takes a dram.'

He took his whisky to the window where Sarah's brothers, Albert and Bob were standing. The men looked ill at ease.

'Have you got a drink?' he asked. 'Help yourself to whatever you prefer.'

Bob nodded. 'Has wor Maggie said anything yet?' His dialect was thick.

'I've not had the opportunity to speak to her,' John replied. 'What is it? Do you know what it's about?'

'Aye—ah do, but ah think ye should ask her.' Bob looked uncomfortable and turned to his brother for support, but Albert was giving his full attention to a picture of a fresh faced boy in a blue velvet suit that hung in the alcove next to the fireplace.

Maggie was in the drawing room, deep in conversation with Elvira when John found her. She looked up and he noticed the strong resemblance she bore to her sister. The cold air of the cemetery had brought a little colour into her cheeks, giving her face a wildflower look that reminded him of Sarah.

'I believe you wish to speak to me, Maggie?' He tried to be formal but kind.

‘Yes John, I do.’ She glanced around her as if to convey that this was to be a private conversation. ‘I can come back tonight, if you like,’ she said

There was an assurance in her tone that surprised him. Whenever they had met before, she’d given the impression that she was a little in awe of him.

Elvira spoke up. ‘Why not stay, Maggie, until our guests have gone? It would give you a chance to spend some time with your nieces and nephews—and the baby.’

‘Yes, Maggie, stay if you want.’ John heard the lack of conviction in his own words. He couldn’t be certain where this polite exchange might be leading. The phrase *your nieces and nephews* suggested a belonging or a claim of some kind. He felt vaguely threatened by the friendship that seemed to have sprung up between Elvira and Maggie, as if they were up to something, conspiring against him, making a fool of him. Suddenly, he felt out of control—angry.

‘You can tell your brothers that I’ll see you home safely this evening.’ He couldn’t keep the coldness from his voice. He turned away abruptly, leaving the women to entertain each other.

Wandering aimlessly from room to room, exchanging meaningless chitchat with first one and then another of his guests, John’s weariness became almost unbearable. *Who are these people*, he thought, angrily. *I never see them from one year’s end to the next. Why can’t they go home now?*

Pouring out another whisky he swallowed it in one gulp, but it burned rather than soothed. He felt as if the day would never end.

The sky was growing dark as the guests began to leave. But then there was the rigmarole of shaking hands and listening to the empty platitudes again. John could barely summon up the energy to be genial and even when the majority of the guests had gone a few die-hards remained. They occupied the chairs in the dining room hoping, no doubt, for yet another cup of tea or perhaps for something a bit stronger. He was relieved when the women came up from the kitchen to tidy the rooms. They bustled about and frequently asked the guests to move to another chair until those who were still there began to collect their belongings and get ready to go.

John and Charles, kept out of the way in the drawing room, and before long Annie came in to build up the fire.

‘Can I bring you a cup of tea, Mr Herrington?’ she said.

He nodded. ‘Make it strong and sweet.’

Sprawling in his armchair he looked up to where Charles stood with his back to the fire and felt easy in his company. For the first time in days the tension that had built up since his wife’s death began to ease. The brothers talked quietly to one another, going over the events of the day and exchanging snippets of information picked up from friends and family.

The tea tasted like nectar on John’s lips and the strains of the day began to subside. But when

Hannah came in the atmosphere changed again.

'Well son,' she said. 'She had a good send off. Nobody can say different.'

His mother's words irritated him. *She is always so predictable*, he thought. He clattered the cup down it down so that it rocked in the saucer and at the same time was ashamed because he knew that she meant well.

Unaware of his distress she continued. 'Her sister is still here, you know. She's waiting to see you. I can't imagine what she wants.'

He stifled a sigh of annoyance. 'I expect she wants some of Sarah's clothing and jewellery,' he said.

Charles said, 'Well, that's only natural, John. She'll want a memento, something to remind her of her sister.'

Hannah moved towards the door. 'I'll go upstairs and sort something out. You don't need to see her, John. I'll give her something and then she can go home.'

'No, mother.' John was abrupt. 'I'll speak to her myself and decide what she is to have. And I've promised to see her home safely so I'll be going out shortly.'

Hannah, obviously offended by his sharpness, left the room without a word and Charles got up to follow her. 'I'll bring Maggie in to see you, John,' he said.

Presently Maggie came into the drawing room and accepted John's invitation to sit down. Her face was still flushed from the heat of the kitchen and she sat up straight to face him. It had been a year or more since last they'd met last and he was aware of a change in her. That delicate uncertainty of manner that she'd shown in the past was gone. The even features, clear eyes and dark hair still reminded him of his late wife, but there was a determination in the lines of Maggie's mouth that set her apart from Sarah. He felt the words he was about to utter dry up in his mouth.

'Thank you John, for finding time to see me.' Maggie had the first word while he hesitated. 'You see, I have a proposition to put to you.' She spoke clearly, the dialect of her earlier years, except for a certain intonation, almost undetectable.

'I may as well come straight to the point,' she said. 'I want to take the baby, back to Liverpool to bring up as my own child.' She paused, waiting for his response.

'To Liverpool?' He was shocked, unable to understand. 'Why would you want to do that, Maggie?'

She was ready with an answer. 'Tom and I have no children of our own. We could give Emily all the love and care that she would have got had Sarah lived.'

John bristled. 'I'd remind you that the baby still has her father and her brothers and sisters. Do you think she'd not be loved here?'

She looked contrite and moderated her tone of voice. 'Forgive me, John. I know she'd be loved. But you have your business to attend to. It won't be easy for you to bring up a family without their

mother. I could help you by taking the baby.'

John was silent. In his heart he knew she was right. He'd not even looked at the baby since Mrs Atkinson had carried her off to be fed and cared for by Mrs Gillis. The child had been brought back to the house each day and although he was aware of her presence, had heard her cries and smelt the milky scent of her, he had no desire to hold her. Her presence was a constant reminder of her mother's death.

Maggie seemed to sense his discomfort. 'I'm sorry, John,' she said. 'Please forgive my impatience. I should give you more time to consider what is best.'

'Yes,' he said, not looking at her. 'I need more time.' He didn't want to go on talking about the baby. He stood up. 'Get your cloak, Maggie. I'll see you home.' He hoped that a walk in the night air might ease his headache.

CHAPTER 11

From behind his bedroom door John could hear his daughters quarrelling quietly on the landing. He put down his shaving brush and paused to listen. The sound of their subdued anger saddened

him but he understood the reason for their inhibitions. Just over a week since Sarah had been laid to rest, the member's household had not yet come to terms with their loss.

Except for a brief visit to each of his shops he'd not left the house since the funeral and was beginning to think that his constant presence was causing his children some discomfort. Jack seemed to be keeping out of his way and William had twice asked when they might return to school.

Not only were the children affected by the gloom. Charles, in spite of his care and kindness, was becoming restless, anxious to return to London but Elvira, who appeared to be enjoying the company of her nieces and nephews, was suggesting that a change of scenery might do everyone some good. Of course, his mother soon put a stop to any such ideas and quick to remind her daughter-in-law that English people, especially those in the North, expected a lengthy period of mourning after a bereavement.

The turn of conversation at the dinner table the previous evening had taken John by surprise. Fortunately Hannah had not been present to hear what Charles had to say.

'I take it, John, you'd have no objection if Elvira and I want to spend a weekend with some of our friends.' He'd explained that a group of fellow actors touring in the North East of England were booked to perform at the Lyceum Theatre in Sunderland in a week or so. 'We thought we might go on Friday evening and return on Sunday afternoon.'

'Of course you must go,' John said, 'but you'd better not tell Mother that it's the theatre you're going to. I doubt if she'd approve.'

Everyone laughed and Charles said, 'Why don't you ask mother to help you with the children while we are gone?'

'There's no need to ask Mother,' John replied a little too quickly. 'I've been talking to Annie and she's willing to stay over on Fridays and Saturdays whenever she's needed.'

'That seems to be a good idea, John,' Charles said. 'You'll need extra help when Elvira and I have returned to London. Annie's a sensible girl and good with the children. Might you give her a rise in wages?'

Through a mist of cigar smoke John had glanced up at his brother. *That's my business*, he thought. But he said, 'I've promised her a day off in lieu. We'll have to wait and see how she does, won't we?'

Two weeks later, after Charles and Elvira left for Sunderland, the house seemed quieter than ever. Only the sound of Annie clattering the pots and pans in the kitchen broke the silence and when the evening meal was ready she served it in the kitchen as her employer had instructed.

'Set a place for yourself, girl,' John said, tapping the end of the table to show that he wanted Annie to sit down with the family.

The girl looked uncomfortable but did as she was told. The children saw the look on their father's

face and dared not smile.

But during the meal John tried to amuse the children with stories from his own childhood and even Annie smiled when he recalled some of the pranks that he and Charles had got up to as boys. Happy to eat his meal with the children in the kitchen he was glad to have included Annie. Everyone seemed to enjoy the meal and even Sally, who was sometimes picky, left a clean plate.

They were still sitting at the table when there was a knock at the front door. Annie went to open it and John heard her talking to someone in the lobby. Then, in a clear voice she called out, 'It's Mr Carruthers.'

John was on his feet in an instant. 'Well, bring him in, Annie.' He hurried to the hall to welcome his guest. 'Come in, sir. I'll show you into the drawing room.'

He went ahead of his visitor to light the gas in the room and while he did so Carruthers divested himself of his out-door clothing. Annie was waiting at the door and John snapped his fingers for her to take the coat and hat.

'See that we are not disturbed, girl,' he said.

Before she turned away he saw a red flush spreading upwards from her neck.

At almost ten o'clock Carruthers rose to go and John, opening the door to call for Annie, saw her shepherding the children up the stairs.

He helped his guest into his coat and handed him the hat.

'Goodnight, sir,' he said politely as he let Carruthers out through the front door to go outside where a cab awaited him.

As he shut the door John saw Annie and the children peering through the banisters on the landing.

'Annie,' he bellowed. 'This won't do. You should have had the children in bed long ago.'

During the day Annie had been at pains to point out to the young Herringtons that from now on they were to regard Friday night as bath night. She'd explained that it was a routine that was followed in her own home. Jack was of the opinion that she was taking her new responsibilities a little too far, but he kept his thoughts to himself. His mother, he recalled, had never been a stickler for routine. Usually she had put the children, two by two, into the soapy water of the washtub after the washing was done. Only on rare occasions did she bring out the bathtub.

In the afternoon Jack and William had been enlisted as boiler men. Under Annie's watchful eye they'd filled the set-pot in the scullery with cold water. She'd laid a fire in the stone cavity beneath the copper pot and let Jack light it with a burning taper. Later, after the fire had burned low, there was a plentiful supply of hot water and when the meal was over and his father out of the way the kitchen was prepared for action. Jack and William were sent out to fetch the bathtub from where it hung from a nail on the back-yard wall and the girls were instructed to fetch the towels and soap and

their nightwear.

Annie placed a screen strategically, explaining it was to preserve modesty and protect the bathers from draughts. Then she put the galvanised tin bath near the fire and filled it with warm water.

Promising to call them as soon as the girls had finished Annie sent the boys upstairs to wait their turn and later, when the girls were in their nightgowns drying their hair by the fire, the boys bathed together behind the screen. There was much laughing and splashing until Annie put a stop to it by threatening to intervene. Then, as they were drying themselves, Jack heard Sally talking to Annie. The wistfulness in his little sister's voice made him stand still to listen.

'Annie, when are we going home?'

Annie's reply was tender and patient. 'Sally, pet—you are home. This is your home, where you live.'

'Is this our baby sister's home too?'

Jack pulled on his nightshirt and came out from behind the screen. He wanted to hear Annie's reply.

'Yes, of course it is—well, it is at present.' Annie floundered, as if unsure of herself.

Jack too was intrigued about the arrangements for his new sister. At present she was being cared for by Annie's mother in Annie's home and being brought back here only for a short time each day.

'Is the baby going to live with Aunt Maggie?' Lizzie, always direct, spoke up.

Annie fielded the question. 'Ask your father. He'll tell you all about it.'

For a moment Annie faced the staring children, then she sat down heavily on the nearest chair.

'Your Aunt Maggie *may* be going to look after the baby. That's why she's been coming here each day and why my Mam brings the baby to see her. Your aunt has no children of her own, you know. She has to learn—and your father is thinking—well I don't know what he's thinking.' Her mouth snapped shut.

The children waited, but getting up quickly she said, 'Come on, hurry up. 'I'll never get you bairns to bed at this rate.'

They were all going up the stairs when the drawing room door opened and Jack, lagging behind, saw his father and Mr Carruthers come out. He went back into the kitchen to wait until the way was clear.

But from the kitchen doorway he heard his father calling angrily to Annie who was upstairs. Jack thought it was unfair after all the hard work she'd done.