

CHAPTER 53

Still smiling to himself at Will's high spirits, John was about to go back into the house when his attention was drawn to a horse and cab that was entering the street. He waited, curious to see at whose house it might stop and was surprised when it came all the way along to his own door.

The driver reined in the horse then jumped down and went to assist a woman from the cab. John couldn't see who she was. She held a baby tightly wrapped in a plaid shawl but when she instructed the man to lift down her luggage John heard a quality in her voice that was familiar to him.

Mary Ann came from the kitchen to stand behind him.

'Have we a visitor?' She said, coming closer to peer into the shadows.

The woman's head was bent over the baby as she trudged towards the steps but she look up and the light coming from the house revealed her features.

'Thank God I've got here.' Her voice was heavy with weariness.

John heard Mary Ann gasp as he went down to help Elvira and the baby into the house.

Except for the children, who came from all parts of the house to see their aunt and their new cousin, no one got to bed until midnight. Jack was sent to fetch Annie from her mother's house and she quickly responded to the emergency. From the kitchen fire she brought a heap of smouldering embers balanced precariously on a shovel and took it up the stairs to get a fire going to warm the back bedroom. A trail of white ash lay on the floor tiles in the hall, and a slightly sulphurous odour hung about in the stair well. But the fire was quickly ablaze in the grate and Annie brought blankets and sheets to make up the bed, airing them first on the clotheshorse in the warmth of the room. John brought a crib from the attic, while Mary Ann attended to the more immediate needs of the mother and child.

When the children were in bed and the house quiet John sat down beside his sister-in-law.

'Tell me Elvira why are you here and where is Charles?'

'Charles and I have separated,' she replied.

She was pale and drawn and there were tears in her eyes as she explained that while Charles was in Philadelphia to organise the company's opening there, she'd taken the opportunity to arrange a passage on a steamer to England for her baby daughter and herself.

'He's a changed man,' she said. 'Success has affected his judgement. The good reception we were given in New York has turned his head. The company is the most important thing in his life now. Nothing matters to Charles except that it prospers.'

Mary Ann had the baby in her arms. 'I can hardly believe that, Elvira,' she said. 'Especially now he has a daughter.'

‘Would you believe that he tried to trade me off—yes he did, to a despicable man in return for financial backing for the company?’

John stared at her, serious and frowning. ‘I find that incredible, Elvira. Surely Charles can’t have changed so drastically. You must be mistaken. He wrote to tell me how overjoyed he was to become a father and proud to have a wife so gifted and successful. That doesn’t sound like a man who has no interest in his family. What about Maude and the rest of the company? Surely they wouldn’t stand by and let him treat you so badly?’

Her laughter was without mirth. ‘John, they are all of the same mind, even Maude. They have no time for a mother and her baby. First and foremost comes the performance, nothing must take precedence over that.’ She threw her hands up in a gesture of despair.

‘Tell us about your journey?’ Mary Ann said, drawing the conversation into what she hoped would be safer waters.

Elvira explained that she had disembarked in Liverpool and stayed with Maggie and Tom for a few days, resting before her journey North. She’d posted a letter in Liverpool warning John of her intention to come but she’d supposed, when there was no one to meet her at the station, the letter had not been delivered.

Hero slept in Mary Ann’s arms as they continued to talk, but towards midnight with nothing resolved, Mary Ann put the sleeping babe into her mother’s arms.

‘Take her to bed,’ she said, ‘while I warm some milk for you. It will help you to sleep.’

John led the way upstairs. ‘We’ll talk again tomorrow when you are rested, Elvira. You must stay with us, my dear, until things are sorted out.’ He tried to make the words ring true.

The next morning over a late breakfast in the kitchen MaryAnn and Elvira were talking again. The children had left for school and John too had gone to work. The sounds of scrubbing and dollying came from the scullery where Annie and her mother were doing the Monday wash.

‘Do you suppose John will let me stay for a few weeks?’ Elvira said. ‘I wouldn’t be here for long. I have plans to set myself up in a place of my own.’

‘I’m sure he won’t refuse you.’ Mary Ann replied. ‘Tell me about your plans Elvira. Do you intend to go back to London?’

‘No, not London. I came here to be near to family and friends. My London friends are all connected to the theatre and I want to escape from that. I’m drawn to the North—the place, the people, the climate, everything. You know what to expect in the North. There is more honesty, less show. Things don’t change here.’

‘It’s an illusion, Elvira, things do change here.’ Mary Ann said. ‘Perhaps not so obviously as they do elsewhere or maybe not in the dramatic way they do in the theatre but nevertheless, there are

changes.'

'Oh, the theatre,' Elvira was derisive. 'Everything changes there. The scenery, the plays, the actors themselves. And, as for illusion—that's the theatre's stock in trade. Nothing is what it seems.'

'But Elvira, you've been an actress long enough to know all that. Why does that worry you now?'

'Because until Hero was born, there was nothing constant in my life. I hoped, when Charles and I married, to find permanence and stability as his wife. Of course, he was playing in London and I was on tour but I thought that once we had our own touring company we'd never have to part. But it's not like that. When we are together his thoughts are elsewhere and now he's talking of starting up another company.'

Mary Ann sipped her tea, still listening to what her friend was saying.

'I once played *Portia*, in *Julius Caesar*,' Elvira went on. 'I sometimes think of *Caesar's* speech in the third act, *But I am constant as the northern star, of whose true-fixed and resting quality there is no fellow in the firmament.*'

'But if I remember rightly,' Mary Ann said, 'in the play, *Caesar's* constancy was his undoing. His enemies killed him for it.'

'That is correct, my dear, but Shakespeare's words are true of the North Star. Its constant light is a guide for travellers.'

'Oh, Elvira, you goose,' Mary Ann said. 'Of course it's always there, dimly glowing, but you can only see it if the skies are clear.' She couldn't help laughing and was pleased when Elvira did too.

'It's good to see you smile,' she said. 'Now tell me about your plans'

Elvira intended to look for a small house to rent. 'I've enough money to last for a few months. There is some furniture in the London house that I can have brought here, and the piano. I shall give music lessons, pianoforte and singing lessons. In a while, when Hero is a little older I shall coach budding actors in stagecraft and voice production.'

'London might be better,' Mary Ann said. 'Charles already rents a house in Kensington and surely you'd find more opportunities for work there.'

'No, I want to stay here in the North with the family. Hero's family is here, her uncle, her cousins and her grandmother. I want Hero to know where she belongs, to have stability in her life.'

'Many women would envy your roving life, Elvira. Few women have the means to change their lives. Some are trapped in loveless marriages and have, unlike you, no means of escape and some don't get the chance of a husband and family of their own.' Avoiding Elvira's intense gaze, Mary Ann lowered her eyes.

'What is it, my dear? Has something happened?' Elvira reached across the table to touch her friend's hand.

‘Nothing has happened, Elvira, except that John has asked me to marry him.’

‘Ah!’ Elvira said. ‘I wondered how long it would be before he thought of that.’ There was a pause and then very gently she asked, ‘And do you love him?’

Mary Ann was slow to answer. ‘Would you be surprised Elvira, if I told you that I’ve loved him since our first meeting? Why else do you think I accepted this position? It’s not the sort of work I’d planned on doing.’

‘Does he love you?’

‘He tells me he does?’

‘So why are you hesitating? Are you afraid of being trapped?’

‘No, not trapped. I don’t believe he’d want to trap me.’ She sighed deeply. ‘You see, Elvira, John Herrington is a man of mystery. He’s not what he seems. Have you noticed the scar on his face?’

Elvira nodded. ‘I knew he’d been the victim an assault. I assumed the scar to be a result of that.’

‘You’re right, Elvira. But I think there’s more to that episode than he’s willing to reveal. His own theories about what happened that night have been disproved. Now, he tells me it was just a random assault and robbery. I know that happens often enough, but not, I think in this case.’

‘Why do you doubt him, Mary Ann?’

‘Because he said his watch was taken that night, but that watch is still in his possession. Annie found it on top of the tallboy when she dusted his bedroom. She brought it out and showed it to me. She wondered if he’d mislaid it and then mistakenly thought that it had been stolen.’

‘How strange,’ Elvira said. ‘I should think it unlikely that John would have forgotten where he had put his watch.’

‘But that’s not all.’ Mary Ann lowered her voice to a whisper. ‘I think there’s a woman involved.’

Elvira stared. ‘A woman! What makes you say that?’

‘Well, until the night of the attack, he often went out in the evenings and didn’t return until the early hours. Sometimes he didn’t come back at all and I had the strong impression he was visiting a woman. Of course, it was not my business and he told me nothing. After the attack, everything changed and now since recovering from his injuries, he hardly ever goes out at night.’

Elvira shrugged. ‘Perhaps he’s afraid.’

‘Maybe,’ said Mary Ann, ‘but there’s more. A few weeks ago, Sally answered the door to a woman. The child was confused over the woman’s identity and I could make nothing of the description she gave. However, I am fairly certain that she passed on some kind of a message to her father. The following evening he left the house without a word to anyone. It was not late when he returned, but he appeared to be extremely agitated and went straight to his bedroom. I heard him pacing the floor until morning.’

'What, on earth do you think might have happened, Mary Ann?'

'I don't know—?' Her words were lost in a cloud of steam that swirled into the room from the scullery. The women stared at the open door, the vapour gusting towards them and as it began to disperse in the warmth of the kitchen so Hannah's figure began to materialise.

CHAPTER 54

Charles' letter, driven from John's mind by the unexpected arrival of Elvira and Hero, lay forgotten on the hall table all night. It was overlooked on Monday morning too, for John, his rest disturbed by the crying of the baby, had risen early and left the house before anyone else was stirring.

To himself he excused his early departure by pleading a heavy workload but in fact his day was less busy than usual and after spending part of the morning with Carruthers he had time on his hands. At noon in the workmen's café near the station he lingered over a bowl of soup while considering Elvira's predicament. He hoped that, away from the intense atmosphere of the theatre, his sister-in-law might be able to see things more clearly and come to realise that her place was at her husband's side. When allowing himself to imagine the situation from Charles' point of view, he found his sympathies veering away from Elvira.

John finished his soup and pushed the bowl to one side wondering, as he counted out some coins on to the table to pay for the meal, how his mother might react to the rift between Charles and Elvira. There was no doubt that Hannah would be unhappy if the separation became permanent and ended in divorce. He knew that in the world of the theatre divorce was not unheard of and although he considered himself to be a man of the world, John could imagine the disapproval of some of his friends and acquaintances to an outcome of that kind. His own business might be affected, and what of his standing with Mary Ann? Her father might draw the line at letting his daughter become part of a family besmirched by divorce.

He'd have stayed in the café longer but for a grubby fingered boy who, employed to clear the tables, picked up the money and snatched the empty bowl away. On his way out he eased himself past a group of railwaymen who faced each other over a long table. They were a lively company, laughing and shouting to each other between mouthfuls of food. John envied their easy-going camaraderie and wished his own life were as uncomplicated as theirs seemed to be.

That afternoon he visited the printing works in Low Friar and later went on to the Percy Street shop where Jardine greeted him with a face still sour from yesterday's unexpected labour. He passed some time with work on the account books and then rechecked the contents of the brown attaché case but at four o'clock, unable to spin out the work any longer, he left the shop. There was time to spare before the next train home and he dawdled through the city streets, stopping now and then to look in the shop windows.

The afternoon light was fading when the train pulled in to Sandwell station and John, postponing for as long as he could his return home, walked slowly. It was almost dark when he reached Grange Terrace but there was light enough for him to see a cab waiting outside his door. Groaning inwardly

at the thought of yet another visitor, he slowed up even more. The cabman who leaned against one of the stone pillars at the bottom of the steps was lighting his pipe as though anticipating a long wait. John glowered at him as he passed.

Inside the house, the low, resonant tone of a man's voice drifted towards him from the drawing room and although unable to identify the speaker he could not mistake Mary Ann's response. Her clear, melodic voice was instantly recognisable. Entering the drawing room he was amazed to see Isaac Leuven being entertained with tea and cake. The scene was one of friendly domesticity but past uncertainties about Leuven left John unsure of himself.

As he came in, Leuven stood up. 'I hope you'll forgive this intrusion, John. I shouldn't have disturbed your privacy except for a matter of some urgency.'

John took off his hat and coat and threw them on to the sofa. 'You're the last person I expected to see,' he grumbled, waving Leuven to sit down.

Behind Leuven's back, Mary Ann was tight lipped, showing her disapproval of his churlishness. She gathered up his hat and coat and left the room.

Leuven seemed to pay little attention to his host's unmannerly greeting. He said, 'Carruthers tells me you'll be visiting Paris again next month.'

'Yes, I'm going to Paris.' John slumped into a chair. He knew what was coming, could almost guess the man's next words.

'Would you consider going to Antwerp again?'

John did not reply at once. Even though their differences were settled, the memory of that last assignment made him uneasy. Leuven, obviously perceiving John's anxiety, leaned forward in an intimate, companionable way.

'There'd be no danger or secrecy involved, I can assure you of that. And I'd pay you well,' he said.

John was only half listening. Another voice in his head was clamouring for attention, reminding him, that under present circumstances, it was crucial to keep a healthy balance in his bank account. The offer was tempting.

Leuven seemed to understand. 'Now, John,' he wheedled, 'you know it would be open and above board. The last occasion was unique. This time you'd be fully informed from the beginning.'

John could think of no grounds on which to refuse. Leuven was a generous employer and the extra work was of no account. It wouldn't hurt to accept this one, last assignment.

He replied with a half-hearted, 'Very well,' and qualified the acceptance with, 'only if Carruthers agrees to it.'

Leuven helped himself to more cake. 'I can't imagine that Carruthers would object. You won't regret it John and Sluter will be pleased to see you.'

'Is that why you came to see me?' John eased himself up in his chair. 'I could have met you in town. Saved you the journey here.'

'I wanted to get the matter settled quickly and Carruthers said he wasn't expecting to see you before next week.'

'When did you see Carruthers?'

'I met him today. He tells me you are about to start your new business.'

'Carruthers told you that?' He couldn't hide his disappointment at what seemed to be a breach of confidence.

'I gathered it was an open secret.' Leuven said.

John glared. 'Carruthers is one of only a few who know. I'm just beginning to make initial inquiries. I haven't even got premises yet.'

'I might be able to help you with that,' Leuven said. 'There's a place on Westgate Road. It's quite spacious, on two floors. Only yesterday I spoke to the owner. I gather he'd be pleased to either rent or sell.'

'Westgate Road, aye?' John couldn't deny his interest. 'Good location for what I want. Is there access for a dispatch and delivery area?'

'There's a yard at the back of the building. Tell you what, John. Let me arrange for you to view it before anyone else gets wind of it.'

He stood up and so did John. But Leuven made no attempt to go. He moved to the mantelpiece and stood with his back to John while he examined the photographs there.

'Might you be looking for a buyer for one of your shops?' He turned a little so that his words, spoken casually, seemed to be thrown over his shoulder.

John felt exposed, defenceless against the man's knowledge of his private affairs. 'I suppose Carruthers gave you that information too.'

From behind a closed door upstairs, John heard Elvira's baby cry. The sound stopped almost as soon as it had begun and he wondered if Leuven had heard it. The last thing he wanted was to have to explain the state of his domestic arrangements.

Leuven gave no sign of having heard. 'No, no,' he said. 'It's just my own idea. I presumed, in view of your plans, that you might be considering the sale of one of your shops—or perhaps both.'

'Mr Leuven.' John's voice was strained. 'I'm surprised at your interest in my affairs.'

Surely you're not going to tell me you want to purchase one of my shops?' Leuven lifted one of the photographs from the mantelpiece and began to examine it closely. 'Well, if the Lowcarr shop was to be sold I might be interested,' he said, pausing as if to let John absorb the idea. But his next words, almost thrown away, were as smooth as a dagger. 'Especially if it came with that other part of your

Sandwell interests.'

The allusion to the money lending business astounded John but, although Leuven must have seen his shocked expression, he was not deterred.

'Do you want to discuss it now, John? Or shall we arrange another meeting?'

John fingers drummed against his thigh. 'There's no point in discussing that matter at all.' His anger was barely controlled. 'If I decide to sell the Lowcarr shop—and that is an unlikely event—I already have a buyer for it. My other interest, as you describe it, will remain with me.'

He saw Leuven's mouth twist with disappointment but gave him no chance to reply. Moving to the door, he opened it and called out 'Annie, fetch Mr Leuven's coat, he is about to go.'

Later, he told Mary Ann that he thought the offer of a trip to Antwerp was just an excuse for Leuven to put in a bid for the shop.

'Oh, surely not,' she said. 'He could have inquired about the shop without going to such trouble.'

'No, he couldn't, Mary Ann, because he wanted to be first. He needed to act fast. What I can't understand is how he got to hear of it. Surely Carruthers wouldn't break a confidence so easily.'

'Perhaps Mr Carruthers let it slip without thinking. It's hardly a state secret. But why are you so set against selling to him? It might be a good way to dispose of the money-lending business.'

John breathed in sharply. He couldn't remember having ever mentioned money lending to her. 'You've been talking to your father,' he said.

Annie came in to collect the tea tray. 'The dinner's ready, Miss Ridley. It'll spoil if it's not served up now.'

Mary Ann turned to John. 'I've had no chance to tell you that your mother is staying for dinner tonight.' Her face was solemn and matter-of-fact. 'I think she wants to talk to you about Elvira and the baby.'

There was no twinkle in her eye, but the slight twitch at the corner of her mouth made him think she was suppressing a smile.

At Elvira's request Mary Ann sat with the others at the table and when John had carved what was left of Sunday's joint they all helped themselves to vegetables. At first they ate in silence but soon Hannah put down her knife and fork.

'Now John,' she said. 'I'm told that Miss Ridley is privy to Elvira's affairs so I can speak freely. What's to become of this lassie and the bairn? She needs a word from you to assure her that she's welcome here.'

Elvira, apparently on the verge of tears, was not eating her food.

'She tells me her husband has abandoned her,' Hannah raised her hand to ward off interruption. 'I

can't believe that, but something has happened and—I'll say this for her—she's come to the right place. What I'm saying son, is that it is up to you to make sure she's looked after until the worst blows over.'

Elvira began to weep and Mary Ann got up to comfort her.

John stopped eating. The sight of a woman's tears always unnerved him. He tried to echo his mother's words, to assure Elvira that there was a place for her under his roof, but the women were all talking at once and no one seemed to be listening to what he said. Elvira's speech was punctuated with hysterical sobs and Mary Ann was soothing her. Hannah was giving forth on her own theory that men never did understand the depths of feeling that women were prone to after giving birth.

Suddenly he could bear it no longer. He thumped the table with his fist so that the cutlery and plates clattered. The women stopped talking to stare at him.

'Will you all be quiet! I have never—' his voice trailed away at the sight of their frozen, hostile faces.

He got up, went into the hall, and put on his coat and hat. Slamming the door on his way out, he marched to the nearest alehouse and stayed there until he was sure they'd all be in bed. Returning, much later, to a house in darkness he crept past the hall table where Charles' letter still lay unnoticed.

On Tuesday morning, before anyone was awake, John was washed, dressed and on his way to work. He needed no excuse today for his early start. This was the day set aside to do the rounds of the suppliers, to order goods for both shops, and to settle bills for previous orders. Unless he was abroad, he always kept to this routine.

A long-standing arrangement with the blacksmith in Sandwell meant that on Tuesdays, whenever he wanted it, he could hire a pony and trap for the day. His suppliers, two of whom were local farmers, were situated within a three or four mile radius of the forge. The stalwart animal knew its way to most of the places that John wanted to go and when the weather was good, as seemed likely today, the pony gave every sign that it enjoyed the work.

Soon after half-past seven John's journey began. The little horse trotted along towards Stack Farm his first call. The route led past the Sandwell cemetery and then out of the town and John had just one stop to make before going to the farm.

At the cemetery gates he reined the horse in, climbed down and fastened it to a tethering post. The sun, not long risen, had had no time to take the chill from the morning air and John turned up his coat collar as he walked along the path under the trees towards Sarah's grave. It was less than two weeks until the family gathering to commemorate Sarah's passing and he wanted to inspect the site to make sure that the stone curb that marked out the double plot was in place. Even before

reaching the grave he could see that everything was in order, but as he drew closer he saw something else that disturbed him. There were flowers on the grave.

The sprays of large white daisies were tied in a bunch with a white silk cord and the sight of them made him unreasonably angry. He felt the heat rising under his collar and spreading to his face. He snatched at the flowers to look for a card or a message but there was nothing and he felt the delicate stems breaking in his savage grasp. He'd have flung them away but a sound behind him made him turn to look between the tree trunks. A gravedigger, preparing a new grave, was standing low in a half dug trench. The man nodded and called out an indecipherable greeting and John, still holding the flowers, picked his way over the grass towards him.

Pointing to Sarah's grave, he said, 'My wife is buried there.'

'Aye, she is,' the man replied.

'These flowers—they're not mine. I haven't put them on her grave.'

He wondered if his words made any sense to the man but the gravedigger looked up from the trench, his red face creased and cracked, his eyes brown and solemn. 'Ah know,' he said.

'Well.' John spoke as he might to a small child. 'If you know that I didn't put them there, then do you know who did?'

The gravedigger gave him a look of contempt. 'The vicar!' He threw out the information like a spadeful of earth and then went back to his digging.

'The vicar?' John addressed the man's bent back. 'Why would the vicar want to put flowers on my wife's grave?'

'Diven't ask me,' the man said. His head was down and wet clay from the spade flew over his shoulder to land not far from John's feet.

John backed away and as he passed Sarah's grave he hurled the flowers at it so that they lay twisted and broken on the earth. He hurried back to the road.

It was late when John got home and the evening meal was over. One place was set at the dining table and Annie came to ask if she was to bring his dinner.

'Give me ten minutes,' he said. 'To change my clothes and have a wash.'

He picked up two letters from the table in the hall and took them upstairs with him. Sitting on his bed he read the first letter. It was from his solicitor arranging a business meeting. The second was from Charles and John remembered that it had been there since Sunday night.

He tore it open and pulled out a page covered in Charles' distinctive scrawl.

My dear brother,

Yesterday I returned from Philadelphia to find my wife had left me. There was a letter to tell me, that while I was away, she had booked a passage on a steamer to England for herself and our

daughter Hero. I made enquiries at the steamship office and they told me that Elvira was on board the S.S. Britannia bound for Liverpool. By the time you get this, the ship is likely to have docked.

John, I am at my wits end. I think she will most likely go to our house in Kensington but there is a possibility that she might come to you. If she does, will you impress upon her that she is needed here. The show cannot run without her. Elvira is our main attraction. We have let it be known that she is suffering from exhaustion, following the run in New York so soon after the baby was born. Lucy Golightly is ready to stand in for her in Philadelphia.

This is so unlike Elvira. Everyone here feels totally let down by her disappearance. Everything was going so well before this happened. Of course, I blame myself for the trouble. Had the formation of the new company not taken up so much of my time I might have seen what lay ahead.

If Elvira does not come to you, John, perhaps you could find her. If necessary you could go to London yourself. I would be forever grateful. If she needs money for her return to America, will you give it her? I will repay you when I can.

Charles

John stared at the writing. This was not the usual friendly note he received from his brother. He sensed that the formal style was an indication of Charles' worried state of mind, and felt a rush of sympathy towards him. He folded it, replaced it in its envelope and stuffed it into his pocket.

He washed and changed before going downstairs. Annie brought his dinner to the dining table and he ate alone. From the drawing room came the voices of Mary Ann and Elvira as they chatted to each other and whenever the kitchen door was opened he thought he could hear his mother singing, no doubt to the baby.

After a while Annie came in to collect his empty plate. 'Would you like anything more, Mr Herrington?' she said.

He asked for a cup of tea.

There was no fire in the grate and John, knowing that the rest of the house was warm, felt neglected. Since Elvira's arrival Mary Ann no longer kept him company in the evenings and he'd noticed a change in her. Her manner towards him was different, she seemed cold and there'd been no mention of his offer of marriage. He wanted talk to her about Sarah's grave and the gravedigger's strange information, but she seemed to be wrapped up with Elvira and his mother in a world that excluded him.

When Annie brought his tea, Jack was behind her. He stood in the doorway, unintentionally blocking her way out.

'Come in, Jack. Can't you see you're in Annie's way? Do you want to see me?' The boy moved forward, his hands and wrists, protruding from outgrown sleeves, flailing almost out of control.

'I want to tell you about school, father. The Head sent for me today.'

'You're not in trouble, are you?'

Jack shook his head.

Glad of his son's company this evening, John was hopeful that Jack's resentment over the Blandford affair was at an end.

'Well sit down, Jack, I'd like to hear what Mr Noble had to say.'

Jack sat opposite. He fidgeted, stroking the sleeve of his jacket, pulling at the cuff of his shirt. His tousled hair hung over his brow and partially covered his eyes. It was obviously an effort for him to speak.

'Mr Patterson, he takes us for drawing, showed one of my sketches to the Head. It was a drawing of a heron that I saw on my day out at the tarn.'

The memory of that incident made John flinch and Jack hesitated before continuing, only resuming when he saw his father's nod of encouragement.

'Mr Noble said that it was an exceptionally good sketch. He said I had talent.'

'That sounds like high praise, coming from him, Jack. I'm proud of you.'

'Thank you.' He glanced furtively at his father. 'Mr Noble said it was a talent that wouldn't be of much use to a grocer and asked what else I was good at.'

Now that he could see where all this was leading John was cautious.

'And what are you good at, son?' he said.

'I'm good at mathematics, father. I told Mr Noble that.'

Sipping his tea, John observed the boy over the rim of his cup. The child seemed watchful and he recognised the look. There had been times when Sarah had looked at him in that way. As if sensing danger, she was preparing to fly.

'You are my firstborn child, Jack—my eldest son,' he pleaded. 'All I want is to give you the start in life that I had to fight for.'

Jack's wariness was quickly replaced with an expression of resignation.

'Oh, I know you've heard it all before,' John said. 'But hear me out. You are to keep on going to the shop on Saturdays. It earns you a bit of pocket money and it's experience that will stand you in good stead later in your life.' He leaned back and clasped his hands over his stomach. When he spoke again his tone was lighter. 'Now, Jack, let me tell you about the new business that I am hoping to start up in the near future. It is a packaging concern and will be drysaltery, not grocery. If all goes to plan it will bring opportunities that we've not dreamt of before now.'

Jack's eyes, focussed on the wall behind John, gave no indication that he was paying attention.

'Listen, Jack. I'll pay a visit to Mr Noble, soon. I've given some thought to your future and I'd like to

talk it over with him. The new business will require the skills of a pharmacist and Mr Noble may be able to advise me about starting you off in that direction. I know it will be a few years before your training is complete, but just imagine, son, as a pharmacist you would be a professional man as well as being the king-pin of your father's business.'

Ignoring the boy's silence he continued. 'In the meantime, you must go on working at the shop. Being good at sketching is all very well, but after all, it's really only a hobby.'

In the drawing room the ladies had arranged the sofa and chairs into a cosy circle and John, coming to join them, could see no place for himself. Grudgingly, Hannah moved along on the sofa to make room for him.

'I have a letter from Charles,' he said, taking it from his pocket. 'I think it came on Saturday but I've only just opened it this evening.'

He gave the letter to Elvira and when she'd read it she passed it over to Hannah. 'See for yourself,' she said. 'There's no mention of love. He writes only of the company and of how valuable I am to it.'

Hannah read it and gave it back. 'It's addressed to John, Elvira. He's hardly likely to be writing of his love for you in this.' She looked directly at her daughter-in-law. 'Tell me,' she said, 'would you go back, if Charles said he loved you?'

'I don't know what I'd do. My world is upside down. My thoughts are in a turmoil and my husband, it seems, has interests elsewhere.' Elvira stood up, smoothed down her skirt with her hands, and flounced from the room.

John thought it was an exit worthy of any stage production.

Hannah shook her head, and then spoke to Mary Ann. 'You know, women do get very weepy and often feel low after having a baby. It takes a few months to sort itself out. You can't hurry things, even for a company of actors.'

Mary Ann turned to him. 'Do you think that's all it is, John,' she said.

He shrugged, more interested in the friendly way in which she had addressed him, amused at his mother's surprise on hearing Mary Ann use his first name.

It was time for Hannah to go home and John took her hand to help her to her feet, at the same time stealing a sly glance at Mary Ann who responded with a knowing smile.

'This state of affairs is beyond me,' he said following his mother from the room then, guessing what the topic of conversation would be as he walked her home, he said: 'I want your advice, Mother, on what to do about Jack.'