

# Border End

By Len Maynard & Mick Sims

Today is my fortieth birthday, and I find myself dwelling in the past. To assess my life is shortly done. I have enjoyed moderate success as an illustrator of children's books, I have married a kind, tolerant woman, and we have a son; a fine boy approaching his teens. Yet I carry with me a sense of loss. There is a nagging doubt that an opportunity has been missed, and I shall not be able to fulfil the purpose that I otherwise might have done. No episode now stands more prominent in my thoughts than the period of time I spent with my Aunt Madeleine, in her dreadfully dark old house in Cornwall. Well do I remember that day, my thirteenth birthday, when the summons to Border End arrived, so innocuous in its pale pink envelope.

I scrambled down the stairs in the excitement brought about by the familiar rattle of the letterbox. My sister, Ellen, five years older than me and a wicked tease, stood at the door inspecting the small bundle of cards which she held in her hand. She examined each in turn, musing over the postmarks, shaking each envelope to discover whether any cash had been included, tutting disdainfully if there was none, cooing when the sound of loose coins could be heard from within.

'I've decided to cancel your birthday,' she said, as I reached the bottom of the stairs. 'I think I shall open the cards myself. A much more sensible idea, don't you agree dear boy?' Adopting an aristocratic mien was just one of the devices my sister would use to taunt me.

'No!' I said, and made a snatch for the cards. Ellen avoided my hand and held the cards aloft, out of my reach. I was quite small for my age, and obviously the sight of me jumping like an excited poodle in a vain attempt to recapture my cards was most amusing to her, for she broke into a fit of uncontrollable giggles, all the while keeping my objective tantalisingly out of grasping range. So absorbed was she in her game that she failed to hear the cheerful whistle of the postman as he walked briskly up our front-garden path. Evidently one of my birthday cards had been overlooked on his first trip, causing him to call again. As the envelope touched the mat I pounced triumphantly.

'There,' I said. 'Keep the rest. You're welcome to them.' I recognised the stylish writing emblazoned across the pink envelope in ink of the most vivid green. The Cornwall postmark dismissed any doubts that remained. 'It's from Aunt Madeleine, and she always sends me money,' I paused to get full dramatic effect. 'Usually a pound note.' I thought about adding a, 'so there', but decided against it upon seeing the expression on Ellen's face. Her giggling ceased abruptly on my announcement, and the colour vanished from her face as if sucked away from inside. The game was over. She handed me the cards and took the newest arrival from me. Something about her manner stopped me arguing.

She studied the pink envelope intently for a moment, then turned on her heels and walked quickly out to the kitchen, where our mother was preparing breakfast. Unmoved by my sister's apparent contrariness I returned to my room, where I spent the next few minutes opening my cards.

The scene when I entered the kitchen was one of utmost normality. Not that I was expecting anything different, but the atmosphere was such that it conveyed, even to my still immature mind, a sense of unreality, almost as if my mother and sister were having to work at appearing normal.

They both looked up as I walked in, both smiled, both said, 'Happy birthday.' Mother came over and kissed me, and ruffling my hair, said: 'How's my birthday boy, then?' I shrugged in embarrassment, hating it whenever my mother treated me like a child.

Since the death of my father two years previously, I had come to look upon myself as the man of the house. Consequently I expected the other members of the family to view me in the same light. When mother petted me, or Ellen teased, it seemed to me that they were undermining my position. I decided that now was the time to assert myself, to show them once and for all that I deserved to be given some respect. Aunt Madeleine's card was folded and tucked inside the pocket of mother's apron. 'I would like to see Aunt Maddy's card please.' Maddy was father's pet name for my aunt; to the children of the family, of course, she was always known as Aunt Madeleine.

My mother's expression was bland. 'Card, dear? There was no card, only a letter addressed to me.' So now it was her turn to tease.

'I would like to see the card please, Mother,' I said, thrusting out my hand and fixing her with a childishly commanding stare.

'Really, Jonathan, is that any way to talk? Just because it's your birthday doesn't mean you can be rude. I told you, it was a letter addressed to me.'

I said nothing but changed my expression to one of doubt. Mother's temper flared suddenly. 'Here,' she said, taking the envelope from her apron. 'As you choose not to believe me you'd better read it for yourself.' She slapped the envelope down hard onto my outstretched hand and wheeled round to face the sink.

The envelope read 'Jonathan Walters' sure enough, but the prefix was not 'Mr' or even 'Master': 'Mrs Jonathan Walters' the bold green script proclaimed. In the excitement of the game with Ellen it hadn't occurred to me that my father's name had also been Jonathan, and that most of the letters sent to my mother were addressed in this way.

'I'm sorry,' I said, gulping down my pride. 'I...I...'

'I should think so too,' Mother said, turning to face me, smiling tolerantly. 'And just remember, young man, that you are not too big to go over my knee.'

'Are you going to tell him, Mother?' Ellen said from the breakfast table.

'Yes,' Mother said in reply, giving my sister a look, the portent of which was beyond me. Then, taking my hand, she led me across to the table and nodded towards a chair. Still suffering from my humiliation I sat without question, although I was in slight confusion as to what exactly had happened between my mother and my sister while I had been upstairs dressing. Things soon became clear to me as Mother sat down on a chair next to mine and took my hand again, this time holding it firmly between both of hers.

'Jonny,' she began, 'Aunt Madeleine wants you to go down to her house and spend some time with her.' As she spoke she looked deep into my eyes, as if seeking some silent response. If there was any reaction to be found there it could only have been disappointment.

'Must I?' I said.

'Of course.' Mother's answer came like a volley from a rifle, sharp and severe.

'But why? And when must I go? Surely not this holiday?'

Mother returned to her former gentle self. She spoke quietly: 'You must, because Aunt Madeleine has asked to see you, and it would be very impolite to say that you didn't want to go. You have to remember Aunt Madeleine was very kind to us when father died. If it hadn't been for

her...well I don't know how we would have managed. And as for when; you will travel down at the weekend.'

'But...' I began a token protest, knowing from the solemnity in my mother's voice that it was in vain.

'Please, Jonny, I don't want to hear another word on the matter. It has been decided and there is nothing more to be said.'

With a harsh note of finality hanging in the air she rose from the table and walked out of the room.

It was Ellen who broke the silence left by Mother's departure. 'Happy birthday, Peabrain,' she said, leaning across the table and thrusting a small gift-wrapped parcel into my hand.

I unwrapped it quickly. Inside was a box and inside this was a brightly painted toy locomotive.

'Thanks, Sis.' I leaned across and kissed her. 'All I need now is some track to run it on.' I did not mean to sound sarcastic, but it came out like that.

'Well, that's gratitude for you,' Ellen said huffily.

I tried quickly to make amends. 'I'm sorry, Ellen, it's really super, just what I wanted.' But Ellen was not listening. Instead she was looking beyond me, a broad grin across her face. I turned sharply. Mother was standing in the doorway holding a huge parcel, wrapped similarly to Ellen's. The realisation suddenly dawned and I was across the room and at Mother's side before she could speak. She handed me the present, and I tore at the paper in a frenzy, knowing full well what I would find inside. It was the most magnificent train set I had ever seen, it must have cost my mother a small fortune, far beyond, I was sure, what she could afford. Words of gratitude were inadequate, instead I put my arms around her waist and hugged her.

She kissed the top of my head. 'A special present for a special day.'

'I don't really mind about going to Aunt Madeleine's,' I said.

I spent most of the day up in my room playing with my new toy, stopping only for lunch. At about four I packed it away in its box and looked around for something else with which to amuse myself. Outside, the day was fine, hot and sunny. From my bedroom window I could see my sister sitting beneath a sunshade on the lawn, reading. I wandered downstairs and out into the back garden. I went across to the swing, which hung from a stout bough on the old apple tree, and sat there for a while. Ellen looked up momentarily and acknowledged my presence, then returned her attention to her book. Eventually, tiring of the swing, I sauntered across to where she sat.

'Good read?' I began. 'What is it, adventure or love story? Probably the latter, knowing you.'

'Go away, little boy,' she said coldly, the way sisters can to brothers.

I sat down on the grass by her side and made great play of trying to see the title of the book. She swivelled around so that her back was towards me. I lay back and plucked a long stem of grass from the lawn to chew.

'You once went down to Aunt Maddy's, didn't you, Sis?' I said at length.

'Yes,' she said, not looking up from the page. 'And she's Aunt Madeleine to you.'

'And to you,' I countered, irritated by this show of age. A few wispy clouds drifted slowly across the sky making candyfloss shapes against the blue background. I undid my shirt buttons and bared my chest to the sun. 'How long ago is it since you went?'

She made an impatient sweep with her hand and ran the fingers through her short blonde hair. 'Five years.'

I thought back. I couldn't remember her actually going down to Border End but I had a feeling that on her return she had changed in some way. I thought about this for a long while as I laid there on the grass, listening to the bees buzzing in the flowers, and the occasional rustle of paper as Ellen turned over the pages of her book. Yes, there had been a change in Ellen, perhaps so slight as to be unnoticeable to my parents, but to me it was as if in that short time spent with Aunt Madeleine my sister had grown up. On her return I found that she would no longer join me in play; games (apart from her constant teasing) were a thing of the past; her dolls, of which there were countless numbers of every size and description imaginable, all found new homes with younger friends and relatives. It was almost as if the childhood part of her life was over.

I was a fairly solitary child; my parents for some reason decided that the local children were not suitable companions for their son, and so I found the sudden change in Ellen that much more difficult to accept. Was it, I wondered as I lay there chewing another blade of grass, Border End that had brought about the change in her, or was it simply a natural stage in her development, highlighted for me by the fact that she had been absent from my life for the duration of her holiday?

'What happened at Aunt Madeleine's when you were down there?' I asked.

She looked up from her book. 'What do you mean?' Her face showed concern.

'Well...' I began, not certain how to phrase the question. 'Did anything happen while you were down there, to you I mean?'

'I'm sure I haven't the remotest idea what you are talking about. If you are going to keep asking ridiculous questions I'm going indoors.' I couldn't see why her reaction was so strong.

She slammed her book shut, stood up, and stalked away across the lawn towards the house. At the door she paused and turned back to look at me. 'Of course nothing happened,' she said, then disappeared into the shadow of the doorway.

The weekend came all too quickly. Early on Saturday morning a taxi arrived at the door ready to sweep me off to Paddington station, where I would then board a train for Plymouth, the nearest mainline station to my Aunt's house just over the county border. The cab fare was paid with the money Aunt Madeleine had enclosed with the letter (the budget that my mother managed on would never have run to such luxuries, especially after the purchase of the train set). I couldn't help a fleeting thought that had I not been going to see my Aunt the money would have instead been sent to me.

The farewells to my family were surprisingly tearful; Mother was weeping, as was Ellen, but at least she had the dignity to pretend she had hayfever, an ailment from which she never usually suffered. I said my goodbyes quickly, in case the cabbie should see the fuss that was being made, and soon I was racing across London. The cabbie, a tough looking, but extremely affable cockney, waited with me at Paddington and saw me safely onto the train, despite my protestations that I was quite capable of looking after myself.

'I've been paid to do it,' he said. 'What would you have me do, break my word to your mother?' As I stepped aboard the train he pressed a sixpence into my hand and gave me a playful cuff across the ear. 'And you see you behave yourself.' I watched him from the open window as the train pulled sluggishly out of the station. He took off his cap and waved. I waved back until the train picked up speed and he became a speck in the distance.

So this was it, I thought as I sat down on the seat, I was on my way to Cornwall and I wouldn't see London again for a fortnight. It seemed an eternity away. That thought battered down my carefully built wall of reserve, and for the first time in months I began to cry. An elderly man in a

pinstripe suit and bowler hat sat in the far corner of the compartment. He must have heard me, for he looked across and cleared his throat to attract my attention. I ignored him, lost in my own personal misery. A moment later he said: 'Is there anything wrong, sonny?'

I sniffed back the tears and said: 'Hayfever.'

'Oh,' he said blithely. 'I suffer from that myself occasionally. It's really surprising how many of us chaps do, you know, only most won't admit to it. It just so happens that I know a very effective cure for it.' He was fishing in the pocket of his jacket. From it he produced a small paper bag. 'Have a bullseye.'

The bag hadn't travelled well, but its contents were individually wrapped in cellophane so it mattered not. The cure worked, and soon I had recovered myself sufficiently to join him in a pleasant conversation. He was a good-natured type with a never-ending supply of stories and, it seemed, bullseyes, and with his easy company the journey seemed to go quickly. Actually it was early afternoon before the train rolled into Plymouth station.

We stepped from the train and walked to the ticket barrier. Here we stopped and shook hands. 'It's been a pleasure meeting you, Jonny,' he said. 'Have a nice time with that aunt of yours. Here.' He screwed up the bag of bullseyes and thrust them into my hand before he departed, leaving me to the crowded loneliness of the station.

It had been arranged that Cartwright, my aunt's chauffeur, would meet me, and I stood for a long while waiting by the barrier for him to emerge from the milling crowd of commuters and holidaymakers. After a good half an hour of standing around, all the while becoming more and more apprehensive about the impending two weeks, I ventured outside. There, parked at the side of the road, sat a magnificent old Bentley, its black and tan paintwork shining majestically in the afternoon sun.

Sitting on the running-board was a swarthy looking man dressed in uniform, reading a newspaper. He sat perusing the racing page, peaked cap perched on the back of his head, eyes scanning the print with a concentration equal to that of an accountant studying a ledger. He didn't notice me approach. I was hesitant, not sure what to do or say. I circled the car peering inside, marvelling at the rich leather upholstery, and the brightly polished chrome. I stared with a mixture of curiosity and awe at the mass of knobs and dials that made up the dashboard, excited by the prospect of actually riding in such a wonderful machine.

A strong hand gripped my shoulder and spun me around. 'And what do you think you're doing, young scamp?' I stared up into the steel grey eyes of the chauffeur.

'Cartwright?' I stammered. The man nodded slowly, seemingly expecting a trick of some kind. 'I'm Jonathan Walters.' He let go his grasp immediately, almost as if my shoulder had become red-hot, and took a pace backwards.

'Your aunt's expecting you,' he said, his voice now almost devoid of its previous Cornish lilt. He opened the back door of the Bentley and ushered me inside, then, closing the door behind me, got in himself and started the engine. The car gave a purr of sumptuous power and rolled smoothly away from the kerb.

Soon we had left Devonshire behind and were into Cornwall. We drove northwards for a while before reaching a small town, where we turned off, forsaking the main road in favour of narrow lanes. Cartwright took these at speed, causing me to grip the seat to steady myself as the old car swung and heaved around tight corners. The road widened suddenly and became a series of undulating hills and slopes. The trees and hedgerows flashed by, a blur of green and brown.

A glass partition separated the driver's seat from the rear. I pressed my face to it and peered over Cartwright's shoulder at the speedometer. To my horror I saw that the needle was stuck on the '70'. I rapped the glass with my fist to try and catch the chauffeur's attention. All this seemed to do was to determine him to go even faster, and I listened with a rising feeling of panic as the purr of the engine grew to a roar. The car swerved sharply to avoid something in the road; it may have been a rabbit, but I didn't see for I was thrown to the floor by the sudden manoeuvre. I scrambled to my feet, shaken but otherwise unhurt, and began to pummel the glass. He responded by jerking his thumb back over his shoulder, indicating the speaking tube, which hung suspended by a chain on my side of the partition.

'Slow down!' I shouted into it. 'We'll crash.'

I watched him, eagerly awaiting a reaction to my plea. There was none; instead he kept his eyes firmly fixed on the road, his knuckles white as he gripped the steering wheel. I shouted again, but once more to no avail. Then I noticed that the mouthpiece on his end of the speaking tube was blocked with a brass capped bung. My efforts had been pointless. I collapsed onto the seat and closed my eyes, praying that this nightmare journey would soon be over.

Some while later I opened my eyes and looked out of the window. The landscape had altered. Purple carpeted moorland surrounded us. Dwarf shrubs covered much of the treeless terrain, along with prolific heather and untamed grasses, and towards the skyline to the west stood huge outcrops of rock, boulder towers standing sentinel over the land. To the east a river cut across the moor, tumbling over natural dams, twisting and turning its course before narrowing and disappearing beneath the ground, only to reappear in the form of a small lake half a mile away to the north.

As we crossed that desolate expanse of land I occupied my mind with thoughts of home. It was barely seven hours since I had left, but already I was missing it dreadfully. The thought of arriving at Border End was cold comfort indeed when I could picture myself in the cosy atmosphere of our drawing room eating a jam and scone tea with Mother and Ellen.

We left the moor behind and entered yet another lane. To my relief we had slowed to a steady thirty, and at that speed I found it possible to relax and enjoy the ride. After about three miles we came to a fork in the road. There was a sign post, which I managed to read as we passed. The right hand pointed to a place called Pengarth, whilst the left bore the legend 'Border End.'

The lane was severed half way along by a pair of massive wrought-iron gates. From one of these hung a large brown board on which was printed the message: 'Private Property. Trespassers will be prosecuted.' The Bentley stopped, and Cartwright got out to swing open the gates. After driving the car through he stopped again, just inside the grounds, to close the gates behind us. Following this performance we proceeded along the lane until it became a long gravel drive which led to an oval forecourt.

As I stepped out of the car I took my first look at Border End. I had been expecting a rather grand mansion, instead I was confronted by a large rambling Victorian house which sprawled across my vision, a folly of Gothic excess. There was an aura of neglect and decay about the place. It was this sense of impending ruin, which became my first impression.

Cartwright took my bag and led me round the side of the house. 'Mistress takes her tea on the lawn when the weather's fine,' he said, by way of explanation.

I followed him past a ramshackle conservatory, which leaned precariously against the west side of the house. We stopped at the edge of a magnificent lawn, which swept down a gradual slope before culminating at an orchard of apple and cherry trees. In the centre of the lawn stood a

white garden table, set with the evidence of a high tea in progress. Seated at the table were two women; one middle-aged, possessed of a sallow complexion and gaunt features; the other, elderly, her grey hair piled high on her head, and secured with a comb which was obviously set with stones, for it glinted in the afternoon sun.

The younger woman must have alerted the other to our arrival for she twisted her head slightly and made a quick beckoning movement with her hand. Drawing my courage in a breath I strode briskly across the grass and presented myself at their table.

I studied each of the women in turn. The face of the younger woman was severe, the eyes small and dark, set close together. Her forehead was high, the nose long and straight, the mouth thin, with a suggestion of dark hair above the top lip. Her hair was black and flecked with grey, close cropped and shaped like a cap about her face. She was rather mannish in appearance.

I turned my attention to the elder of the pair. This I decided was my aunt. The face held a noble quality, although it was heavily lined, and those lines had been poorly disguised by a surfeit of make-up. But here was a face of great strength and character; a face that matched perfectly that firm, confident script that was to be found on her letters. Her eyes were of the palest blue, and were shielded from the sun by a green plastic visor that she wore around her head in similar fashion to those worn by riverboat gamblers in the western movies I had seen at our local cinema. This comparison brought an ill-advised smile to my lips.

The younger woman spoke sharply. 'Is it the custom at home to stare and laugh at your elders?'

I stammered an apology, which brought a forgiving nod from my aunt.

'Well, sit down, boy...Jonathan, isn't it?' The younger woman got to her feet. 'I'll go and tell Cartwright where he is to put your nephew's bags, Madam. I will send Alice out presently with another pot of tea and a few more rounds of sandwiches. Is there anything else you will be requiring?' Aunt Madeleine shook her head and the other woman departed.

After she had gone I sat and waited for my aunt to speak. Minutes passed in silence, and at one point I thought perhaps she had dozed off, but after a furtive glance at her face I saw that her sun-visor had cast a shadow across her eyes, only making them appear closed. Instead they were open and looking beyond me in the direction of the orchard.

It was then that I was struck with the impression of being in the presence of someone of almost infinite years. I had no real idea how old she was but the impression she gave at that first meeting was of immense, and to my young mind, immeasurable age. Suddenly she turned to look at me, and her eyes seemed to cast a spell over me. My head spun and my sight dimmed, and I felt myself slipping from the chair. Then came voices. Ellen's voice, urgent, whispered: 'Jonathan.' Aunt Madeleine's sibilant: 'Listen, Jonathan. Can you hear them? Listen to what they tell you.' Then other voices, children's voices, all talking at once, an excited cacophony of yells and shouts. Excited but not happy, shouting but from fear not joy.

I opened my eyes and looked up at two pale blue suns. I blinked, my vision cleared, and the suns became Aunt Madeleine's eyes, staring down at me, bewitching, concerned.

'Jonathan...Jonathan. Are you all right, child? Are you all right?'

Then I heard feet running on the grass and felt something cool being laid across my forehead. 'We had better get him inside, Madam. It must be the heat, that and the journey, together with lack of food, must have brought on the faint. He will be better inside in the shade. It is too soon.' The younger woman had returned. With her she had brought Cartwright. He slipped his arms underneath me and picked me up; I could feel the tensing of his muscles beneath the serge of his

uniform. At a signal from my aunt he carried me towards the house. Slowly I felt a wave of tiredness ebb over me and I slept.

I awoke in a large ornately furnished room. I was lying on a chaise lounge with a blanket across my legs and a pillow beneath my head. I propped myself up on my elbow and surveyed the room. A dull evening light entered through a high bay window and diffused into the room, casting much of the furniture into shadow. I could make out a grandfather clock and various other bits and pieces. The fireplace was framed by an elaborately carved mantelpiece which was, in turn, bedecked with numerous ornaments and objets d'art. In front of the hearth with its back to me stood a tall leather wing chair. I threw the blanket from my legs and sat up.

Almost at once the small noise I made in doing this provoked a reaction from the direction of the fireplace. There came a faint rustling and the sound of a stick being scraped on the floor. From the high-backed chair Aunt Madeleine rose. I caught my breath in a gasp of surprise, as I had believed myself alone in the room. She crossed the floor, walking with the aid of a stout ebony cane, then sat down next to me on the chaise lounge.

'Well, Jonathan,' she said, rubbing a hand across my brow. 'How are you feeling now? Do you remember what happened?'

'I think I fainted,' I said, aware of the coolness of her palm as it stroked the hair from my eyes.

'You did indeed. I must say you had me quite worried.'

'I'm sorry, Aunt...' I began.

'No, no, there's no need to apologise. It could not be helped. It is at times like this that I am thankful for Miss Tregear; she is a trained nurse, you know.'

'Was she the lady taking tea with you?' I asked. My aunt's gentle manner was making me feel easier about this holiday. She was nothing like the harridan I had been expecting to meet.

'Yes, she serves me as housekeeper here at Border End. She is also my companion...' A sharp tap at the door interrupted her. 'Come.'

The door was opened and Miss Tregear entered the room. 'And how is the patient now?' she said. Her voice was still stern but it had lost some of its edge.

'Fine.' Aunt Madeleine answered for me. 'I think he might just manage some food now.'

'That is what I came to tell you, madam. I have served dinner.'

'Very well, Elizabeth. We shall be along shortly.' Aunt Madeleine turned to me as Miss Tregear left the room. 'Do you feel well enough to eat, Jonathan?'

I nodded eagerly. The last food I had tasted had been the bullseyes and there was now a hunger pain gnawing at my stomach.

'Splendid. Here, you can give me your shoulder for support. These legs of mine do not work as I should like them to.'

We walked together to the dining room, Aunt Madeleine leaning heavily on my shoulder as we made our way. The table in the dining room was a large rectangle of burnished mahogany. Two places had been set at the far end. In the centre of the table a silver candelabra burned, its candles scented with sandalwood.

During a meal of roast chicken my aunt said little, and if I spoke at all she tapped her plate with her knife and gestured for me to be quiet. It was obvious that Aunt Madeleine had certain disciplines that were to be adhered to, and although no words of admonishment ever issued from her mouth, she expected her company to follow her example. At the end of the meal I sat silent, and waited for her to take the initiative. After we had finished a sweet of fresh fruit salad, she finally spoke.

'I believe that eating, and eating well, is a communion with the soul, and not something to be taken lightly.' She peered at me across the table as if waiting for me to agree. I said nothing, feeling this to be the safer course.

'No doubt, my young nephew, you have heard stories about me.' I shook my head but she waved a dismissive finger. 'Now be honest with me, Jonathan. When you received my invitation I expect you wondered why an old woman should want to be bothered with having a young boy like yourself down to stay with her. Tell me, did your sister, or mother, tell you why I like the children of the family to visit me?'

'They said nothing, Aunt, honestly. I believed I was coming here for a holiday, nothing more.'

She smiled, nodding slowly. 'And so you are, nephew, so you are. Come, I want to show you something.' She got to her feet and walked across to the sideboard. She bent over and unlocked the door. She took out a small wooden casket and placed it on top of the sideboard. I stood close at her side and watched as she opened it. Inside was a red velvet tray and on this were rows of small gold locket. There were dozens of them. 'Here,' she said, and removed the tray revealing another tier below. 'And here.'

Each locket lay in its own curl of chain, and each was engraved with an intricate floral pattern and a name. Just glancing over them I recognised a few: Norman, a cousin, Ellen was there, another cousin, Patricia. The lockets, in fact, formed an almost complete family tree. Aunts, uncles, all were represented there in gold. I even saw one for my father.

'And here is you.' Aunt Madeleine undid the top button of her dress and produced yet another locket, this one engraved with the name Jonathan. 'This is ready for when you join us.' She took one from the casket, the one with Ellen's name inscribed upon it and ran the chain through her fingers. 'Dear Ellen, it seems such a time since she was here.'

'Don't you ever get lonely here, Aunt? Living in so remote an area, I mean.'

She laughed. 'Good heavens, no. How could I possibly be lonely when there are so many of you here.'

This answer confused me and I was about to ask her what she meant by it when Alice the maid entered. She was a pretty, local girl, about sixteen, small and on the pleasant side of plump. Her curly dark hair was pinned up and held precariously under a white linen cap. 'Miss Tregear said I should clear away the dinner things, Ma'am,' she said, curtsying slightly.

'Not now you stupid girl. Can't you see I do not want to be disturbed?' The sudden anger in my aunt's tone surprised me, and I moved away slightly. Alice, either from foolishness or from an uncommonly plucky streak, stood her ground and even had the temerity to answer back.

'Begging your pardon, Ma'am, but Miss Tregear also told me to tell you that Master Jonathan's bed's been made ready. She's put him in the Blue Room, like you told her.'

For one awful moment I thought Aunt Madeleine would explode. Her whole body shook with silent rage, and her hands gripped the edge of the sideboard so tightly that her long fingernails actually marked the wood. Alice stood firm, fixing my aunt with a defiant stare that I thought would not have been so cocky had Aunt Madeleine been facing her; still I admired her courage.

A tremor swept through my aunt's body and she gave a long sigh. Her voice when it came, was firm but carefully controlled.

'Very well, carry out your instructions,' and then to me: 'Jonathan, it's time for bed. Can you find your way or would you like me to ask Miss Tregear to take you?'

I did not know the way but neither did I relish the housekeeper's company. 'I'm sure I can find it,' I said.

‘Good night then, and...’ she paused and stole a look at the maid, who was busy clearing the crockery.

‘Yes, Aunt?’

‘We shall talk of these things again, another time. Good night, dear.’ She bent and kissed my cheek. She smelt of lavender water.

‘Good night, Aunt,’ I said, and walked towards the door. ‘Good night, Alice.’

‘Good night, Master Jonathan,’ she said, and smiled.

‘Jonathan!’ Aunt Madeleine’s voice arrested me at the door. I turned slowly, fearing a reprimand for talking to the maid. ‘Sleep well.’ I left the dining room whistling long and low under my breath.

Once upstairs I found that my confidence about finding the way to my bedroom had been misplaced, and I soon found myself going round and round in circles, lost in a maze of dark winding passages and narrow stairways. I tried several doors and found myself in all manner of rooms, none of which appeared to be mine. Several of the doors were locked, whetting my curiosity, and resolving me to explore the place more thoroughly during my stay.

After half an hour of wandering along corridors and trying doors, I had still not found one which remotely resembled a ‘blue room’, and I was about to admit defeat and make my way downstairs again when I saw rescue approaching in the shape of Alice, who was coming along the passage in the opposite direction. She was carrying bed linen. ‘Can I help you with those?’ I said.

She smiled. ‘I thought the mistress sent you to bed a while since.’

‘So she did, but it’s early. I usually go to bed much later at home.’ I added, feeling that this would impress her. She cocked her head to one side.

‘Really?’ She handed me the bed linen. ‘Here, as you’re not tired you can give me a hand.’

‘Where do they go?’

‘There’s a cupboard on the landing upstairs. You can take them up for me. Only don’t let Miss Tregear find out or she’ll be down on me something shocking.’

As we walked along the passage and up the stairs we talked. She spoke freely and openly, telling me that she had been maid at the house for the past two years. Before this she lived in the nearest village, Pengarth. (I remembered the name from the road sign.) Her parents owned a small provisions shop there, but after she had left school they had told her that she would have to find herself a job as there wasn’t enough work at the shop. The shop was where Miss Tregear bought food and other goods for the house, and upon hearing of Alice’s need for employment offered her a position at Border End. At first Alice had politely refused the offer, seemingly the house had a bad reputation in the village, probably, I thought, to do more with the architecture than anything else, but after a great deal of pressure had been brought to bear by her parents who were solid, no-nonsense folk, she finally accepted. A year later both her parents died from what Alice described as ‘flu.

We had reached the cupboard. Alice took the linen from me and opened the door. ‘Anyway you don’t want to hear about my troubles. Best get you to your room before someone catches us. Come on, it’s downstairs, at the back.’

When I finally saw the room that I had been given I wondered why it had earned the name, the Blue Room, for of that particular colour it was totally devoid. It was dark and dingy, even after Alice had switched on the light. The electric lamp flickered and quavered for a moment before settling to an anaemic glow that offered little in the way of practical illumination.

'It's the generator,' Alice explained. 'There's no mains power, you see. It's always going wrong. It's really Cartwright's responsibility, lazy good-for-nothing he is though. Shouldn't be surprised if he's in his room above the garage getting pie-eyed. Probably got some tart in from the village.' She gave a bubbling laugh. 'Old Tregear calls 'em Cartwright's fallen women.'

I stared at her incredulously, wondering if such things really did occur in my aunt's house. Alice noticed the expression on my face.

'Anyway you're too young to be told of such things.'

'I'm not,' I protested. 'I'm thirteen.'

'Yes, I know,' she said, with what seemed a sudden sadness. 'They all are when they arrive.' She went across to the bed and turned down the sheet. 'There you are, Master Jonathan. Into bed now before you get us both shot. I'll leave you to it.'

She began to walk towards the door. Suddenly I didn't want her to go. I was in strange surroundings with an aunt I barely knew, and a woman, Miss Tregear, to whom I had taken an extreme dislike. Alice, the maid, was an island of warmth and friendship in such cold, impersonal waters.

'Will you come back and say good night, when I'm in bed, I mean?' I blushed despite myself.

'Very well,' she said kindly. 'I'll give you five minutes, all right?'

She left my room and I undressed. Within two minutes I was in bed and waiting for her return. After what seemed an age the door opened and she walked in, holding something behind her back. 'All tucked in then?' She bent down and tucked a stray corner of sheet under the mattress, clicking her tongue in mock despair. 'Men are helpless. Can't do anything properly.'

She stood at my bedside for a long moment, looking down at me, as if wanting to say something but being unable to find the right words. Then with a swift movement she produced what she had been holding behind her back. It was a rag doll, long and thin, with black wool for hair and a face that had once been sewn in livid colours but had now faded.

'This is Jermimah. I know boys aren't meant to like dolls...think they're sissy...but when I first came to live here, Jermimah was a very good friend to me. She kept me company, if you know what I mean. Well I was thinking that you...well you might like her...Here,' she handed me the doll. 'Throw her under the bed if you like. I thought she could keep you company just for tonight.' It was Alice's turn to blush.

'Thank you,' I said, settling the doll beside me. 'I'll give her back to you tomorrow.'

'Yes, well good night then.' she said walking to the door. She paused, her hand on the light switch, then turned and blew me a kiss, 'Sleep well.'

I watched her go, then slid down further beneath the sheets and closed my eyes. I felt the soft material of the doll beside me, and, reassured, I fell asleep.

The next morning I awoke to find that it had been raining during the night. I stood at the window and looked out onto the back garden. The rain had stopped, but the flattened flowers in the beds that ran parallel to the lawn, bore witness to its force. As I was usually a very light sleeper I was mildly surprised that I had managed to sleep through it. I put this down to the change of air, and the fact that the journey to Cornwall, and the arrival at Border End, had tired me more than I realised.

The rain had done the garden good; the lawn looked fresh and green, and leaves on the orchard trees seemed healthier than they had the previous day. This was very pleasant but I guessed that the weather threw serious doubts about me being allowed out to play, and the prospect of being

confined to the house depressed me. Consequently I spent a long time readying myself for breakfast, and it was after nine before I made an appearance downstairs.

I soon discovered that breakfast at Border End was taken in the Morning Room, an airy, high-ceilinged room at the front of the house. Not sure of the etiquette in such matters I made myself comfortable at the small oval table which was laid out with plates, a toast rack and cereal bowls, along with a butter dish and several jars of preserves, and waited for someone to notice me. That someone was a long time in coming and after about fifteen minutes of sitting, staring wistfully at the things on the table, I finally plucked up courage to pull the cord that hung down at the side of the fireplace and which, I supposed, rang a bell somewhere in the servants quarters. Reaction to this was almost immediate. Alice rushed into the room looking flustered and carrying a full rack of toast and a cereal packet. Seeing me sitting there like the master of the house made her stop in her tracks.

‘Master Jonathan!’ she said. ‘Was it you who rung the bell? I thought the Mistress had come down early.’

‘Yes,’ I said not sure of her mood. ‘I’m sorry but it is after nine. I thought everyone would be up by now.’

‘No one stirs in this house till well past ten, ‘cept me and Miss Tregear of course. Still you weren’t to know that. Not to worry, I’d done the toast for myself, just as well, eh?’

‘Thank you,’ I said. ‘I hope I haven’t put anyone out.’

‘Don’t you worry about that.’ She smiled for the first time that morning. ‘Miss Tregear’s gone to church, Cartwright takes her in the car, so there’s only me, and I’ve been at this house long enough to let nothing put me out. No, you go ahead and enjoy yourself. While the cat’s away, eh?’ She winked as she set the toast and cereal down on the table. As she walked to the door she looked over her shoulder and said: ‘And if there’s anything else you want just ring.’

I ate my breakfast quickly and toyed with the idea of pulling the bell again to summon Alice, but without a good reason I decided not to, and amused myself instead with an exploration of the room. This did not take as long as I had expected for although there was an interesting looking bureau complete with roller top and several drawers, I found, on inspection, that it was securely locked. The rest of the room yielded little to the curiosity of a thirteen-year-old boy and so, eventually growing bored, I went out to find the kitchen.

The Morning Room gave onto the entrance hall, a spacious area containing the stairs to the upper storeys. On one side, set in the wall were two alcoves; in one was placed a semi-circular mahogany table on which stood a hideous blue china vase. Several wilting flowers drooped over its edge and dropped their petals into a brown decaying ring on the table. Miss Tregear, I thought, was a little less than the perfect housekeeper. In the other alcove was a chair upholstered in dark green hide and studded with brass tacks.

‘Finished your breakfast then? You should have rung the bell.’

I wheeled round in time to see Alice emerge from the passage that ran alongside the staircase and disappear into the Morning Room. I followed her. When I entered she was already in the process of clearing away the used crockery, I went across to the table and began to tidy the jam pots.

‘Got nothing to do?’ she asked, as she brushed the toast crumbs into a tiny silver dust-pan. I shook my head. ‘Why don’t you go and play in the garden? It’s a fine day out there now.’

‘I didn’t think I’d be allowed to,’ I said.

‘Can’t see that anyone will mind. Come on, it’s quicker to go through the kitchen.’

Alice led the way out of the room and along the passage. Half way along it bent sharply to the left, then narrowed until finally there was room for one-way traffic only. The passage opened out into a large kitchen. An oak refectory table, littered with various pots and pans and an assortment of cooking utensils, stood in the centre of the room. Against the far wall stood a black-leaded cooking range that shone impressively in a shaft of sunlight that poured in through an oval window set in the adjacent wall. The floor was quarry-tiled and felt cold even through the soles of my shoes. Alice's heels clicked over the tiles as she crossed quickly to the sink and deposited her tray on the draining board.

'Better get these things washed up before Miss Tregear gets back.' She began rolling up her sleeves. 'Can you fetch me some water?' She picked up a bucket from beside the sink and held it out to me.

'Pardon?' I said, not realising that Border End was not served by the mains.

'Water...from the pump. It's just outside the door.'

'Oh, yes, of course.'

'And there's no sewer connection either,' Alice said as I returned from filling the bucket. 'You'd expect a house like this to have all the proper amenities; I don't know, messing around with pumps and septic tanks. And as for heating...you want to be here in the winter, Master Jonathan, it's as much as I can do to keep from freezing.'

'Do you enjoy living here?' I said, but the question was drowned by the sound of car wheels crunching on the gravel drive.

'You'd best be getting along, Master Jonathan. You don't want Miss Tregear finding you here. She'd say you were keeping me from my work.'

Still wanting to talk to Alice, and yet not wishing to get her into any trouble with the housekeeper, I reluctantly went out into the garden and closed the kitchen door behind me.

The rest of the day passed as slowly as it had begun. Aunt Madeleine did not come down for breakfast, and according to Miss Tregear, who called me in from the garden at lunchtime, was suffering from a headache, which would keep her confined to her room. In fact I saw my aunt only once that Sunday, and that was in the afternoon when, playing amongst the trees in the orchard, I looked up at the house and saw her standing at her bedroom window. It struck me that she did not appear to be ill, at least not ill enough to be confined to bed.

She stood at the window fully dressed, as elegantly as she had been the day before, and even from where I was standing, in the shadows of the cherry tree, I could see that she was smiling. Smiling and waving, at first, I thought to me, but as I emerged from the shadow and stood in full view in the centre of the garden, it became obvious that she was completely unaware of my presence. Instead it seemed that she looked straight through or beyond me, to the orchard. I returned her wave a few times, and once even called out to her but to no avail.

Eventually I turned away and peered into the orchard where my aunt's attention was so firmly riveted. Perhaps it was a trick of the light, or perhaps a cloud passed in front of the sun at that precise moment. As I looked between the trees it seemed that the orchard grew suddenly darker; much darker and immersed in shadow than it had been minutes before when I had been playing there. When I began to see shadows gliding and weaving between the trees at the very back of the orchard I decided that my eyes were playing tricks on me. But tricks or no tricks the desire I had to get away from the trees and shadows was very real, and I did not question the impulse. I turned and ran at full speed towards the house. I stopped at the back door and looked towards

the bottom of the garden. The shapes had gone and the apple and cherry trees were bathed in sunlight.

On the way back to my room I scoffed at my fanciful notions and resolved not to let my imagination get the better of me, but despite this, as I laid in bed that night listening to the creaks and groans of the house as it settled, my thoughts turned against me and not even the rag-doll could provide the comfort of mind needed to sleep. Instead I lay awake until the clock in the drawing room had struck two. Soon after I fell into a fitful doze.

In the ensuing days I found that I became more and more reliant upon Alice to supply companionship. My aunt had never re-emerged downstairs after her supposed headache; she took all her meals in her room, and it seemed that Miss Tregear spent the majority of her time trudging up and down the stairs, in answer to Aunt Madeleine's every beck and call. Consequently she had little time for me and, apart from preparing my meals, seemed to forget me entirely. She answered my questions regarding my aunt's health curtly but forbade me to visit her. Miss Tregear's neglect bothered me little. I had taken a strong dislike to the woman on our first meeting and more than suspected that the feeling was mutual. But with her time so occupied, Alice and I found that we could meet and talk without fear of receiving a reprimand from her acid tongue.

And meet we did, frequently. It rather surprised me how much free time Alice was allowed. She worked in the morning from when she rose at six until two in the afternoon, then, after washing up the lunchtime crockery, her time was her own until dinner in the evening. A strict curfew prevailed at Border End, and every light in the house was extinguished promptly at half past nine. Cartwright was the only exception to this rule, and often the light in the room he occupied above the garage could be seen burning well into the early hours of the morning.

One afternoon Alice and I went for a walk in the woods that all but surrounded the house. The day was sweltering and the woods provided a welcome respite from the heat. We kept mainly to the paths, using the shade afforded by the thick canopy of leaves above our heads. Out of her maid's uniform, Alice looked entirely different. She wore a becoming pink frock that matched her complexion. Her hair hung loose and tumbled down her back, a mass of curls that caught the rays of the sun and flecked from auburn to chestnut to dark brown with each toss of her head. Altogether the effect was extremely pleasant.

'Do you know why Aunt Madeleine stays in her room?' I asked, as we sat down on the bank of a small lake we had come across deep in the woods. Alice slipped off her shoes and dangled her feet in the water. She gave a shiver of delight as her toes broke the surface.

'Not really,' she said after a while. 'I think she may have had one of her attacks, she gets them occasionally. Usually when she has children to visit, funnily enough. I don't think they're that serious...At least, not serious enough to call in the doctor.'

I followed Alice's example and removed my shoes. Soon the pleasing chill of the water lapped over my feet. 'What are these attacks? Have you ever been there when she's having one?'

'My, you ask some questions, don't you?'

'I'm interested, she's my aunt after all, and if she's ill I should know about it.'

'Well it's no use asking me, I'm as much in the dark as you. She takes to her bed as soon as the children arrive, just like she's done now, and doesn't make an appearance for days. I don't know why, I only know what Miss Tregear chooses to tell me, and who's to say that's true.'

'Do you think she'd lie to you?'

Alice shrugged noncommittally. 'What's it like living in London?' she said, as she lay back on the bank. 'Is it really as grand as it is in books?'

I lay down beside her. 'I don't actually live in London, not in the city.'

'Oh,' she said disappointedly. 'I've always dreamed of going there. When the old man was alive he used to tell me stories about it. He lived there for a while when he was young. Some of the yarns he'd spin.' She paused for a moment lost in her thoughts. 'Don't suppose any of them were true,' she said suddenly, and sat up, drawing her knees up to her chin.

'I have been to London, though,' I said. 'Of course it was only to go to museums and places like that. The Tower of London was interesting, I saw the Crown Jewels there. And armour, and weapons they used in olden days.' I pulled my feet from the water and stood. Running to the trees I found a long branch of ash, and tucking this under my arm in the fashion of a lance, galloped back to where Alice sat. I halted a foot or so away from her and made a whinnying sound.

'Sit down you fool,' said Alice laughing. 'You know, you're not like the others that have been here.'

'Do many people visit the house?'

'No, not really. I suppose it's a bit out of the way. I don't know what it was like before I came to work here, but in my time there have been three. Two boys and a girl. Funny that, you'd think with your aunt living in such a big house she'd invite families to stay with her, but she doesn't. It's always children, just the children, and always your age, just turned thirteen or thereabouts. I feel sorry for her. Can't be much of a life for her when you think about it.'

But I didn't want to think about it. Sitting by the lake I resolved to put all thoughts of my aunt from my mind. This was, after all, my holiday. In a short while it would be over and I would once more be back at school, poring over text books, swatting for exams, and generally having a miserable time of it. I was beginning to enjoy Border End. The place had its merits; one of them, and as far as I was concerned the most important, being Alice, with whom, I realised in a gush of adolescent embarrassment, I was infatuated, if not in love.

'You've caught the sun on your face,' she said, getting to her feet and slipping on her shoes.

'I burn easily,' I lied.

'Let's go to the old mill,' she said, pulling me to my feet. 'It's not far from here and we can see it before we have to be getting back.'

She kept hold of my hand and led me through the trees via an overgrown, obviously rarely used path.

'I remember something I heard at school about St Paul's Cathedral,' she said, once more returning to the subject of London. 'Have you ever been there?'

I picked my way carefully through a large patch of stinging nettles. 'Yes. My parents took me there a couple of years ago. It's very impressive. It was designed by Wren, you know,' I said, resorting to my school-learnt knowledge. But Alice wasn't interested in such details, and she interrupted me as I described how Wren planned the rebuilding of the cathedral after the Great Fire.

'About a place in there where two people could sit, and it didn't matter how far apart they were, or even if they couldn't see each other, if one whispered the other could hear.'

'It's called the Whispering Gallery. I think it's to do with the shape of the walls, the way they curve. Oh, you should come to London, Alice. There's so much to see.'

'I wouldn't know where to begin. I'd be lost before I left the station.'

‘Not if you had someone to show you around: a guide.’

‘And I dare say guides come expensive.’

‘I wouldn't charge you a penny.’

‘Is that an offer, Jonny?’ She had dropped the ‘Master Jonathan’ in deference of our friendship.

‘Yes. You could stay at our house. I'm sure Mother would be pleased to meet you; and there's Ellen as well, my sister. She could show you all the really posh shops where royalty and film stars buy their clothes.’

‘And I could have my hair done in one of those swanky salons.’ She ran her fingers through her curls. ‘I can imagine what Miss Tregear would say if I came back all done up like a dog's dinner: ‘Oh, Alice, you look just like one of Mr Cartwright's fallen women!’“ She managed a fair imitation of the housekeeper's voice. ‘Run along girl and wipe that muck off your face: tut, tut, lipstick and rouge, really, Alice!’

We both collapsed into fits of uncontrolled giggles. Then, suddenly, she fell silent.

‘Alice?’ I said, and squeezed her hand.

She gave a toss of her head. ‘No,’ she said. ‘Can't really see myself in London somehow. Might have been different once upon a time but no, not now.’

I was about to say something to cheer her out of her sudden gloom, when she let go of my hand and ran off through the ferns.

‘Come on, slowcoach. We're almost at the mill. Look, there it is.’

I ran to catch her up but before I could reach her she took off again, leaving me and the woods behind, running across a patch of barren land towards the water mill which loomed like a shipwrecked paddle-steamer in the distance.

It was obvious from my initial inspection of the mill that it had long been in disuse. The large wooden water wheel was missing several paddles, and in places was rotting. The slatted door which led into the actual mill had been sorely neglected, and its split and weather beaten palings came away from the frame as I touched them.

‘Careful,’ said Alice, as one of the timbers fell with a clatter to the ground. ‘Don't want any accidents. Let's go inside, but watch yourself, the floor's not as strong as it could be.’ I made as if to get through the doorway. ‘No, not that way. I usually get in round here.’ She jumped down into the ditch that had once carried the water to the wheel, and ran along the side of the mill. We reached the side of the building and Alice busied herself prising open a window, the panes of which had long since been removed.

‘Let me,’ I said, taking a step forward.

‘I can do it,’ she said, and shot me a glance that told me I'd be foolish to argue. ‘Done it enough times.’ She drew in her breath and pitted her strength against that of the unyielding window. ‘There,’ she said, as the wood gave a mighty squeal of protest and shot upwards. ‘Come on then. Give me a leg up.’

I intertwined my hands, as acrobats do, and bent so that she could get a foothold. With little effort she was up and through the window. I followed, slower and more deliberate.

It was cool inside the mill, but there was a certain mustiness in the air: a smell of damp and rot. I pulled a face.

‘You get used to it after a while,’ Alice said, smiling at my discomfort. ‘It's because it hasn't been used for ages. Sad really, the way they've let it go.’

I wondered aloud who was meant by ‘they’.

'I'm not sure who owns it. I don't know, I always feel a little sad when I come here. There's something about this place; I even felt it when I was small and used to come here with some of the kids from school. I suppose to them it was just a place to come and play, and some of them used to come here, instead of going to school. It's never been like that for me. When I come here I feel...I don't know...as if I belong, do you know what I mean? Have you got a place, y'know a place of your own, where you go when you want to get away from people; a private place?'

'I have my own room at home, but that doesn't really count; Mother sometimes comes in, or Ellen. There's very little privacy.'

'Hmm. Come on, I'll show you the mill-wheels, they're about the only things in this place that never seem to change...don't rot or fall apart. When this place is just a heap of rubble they'll still be here, dare say they won't be where they are now, but they'll never be destroyed, not by nature anyway.' She walked across to a crumbling wooden staircase and put her foot on the first step, pressing down with all her weight, testing its firmness. Satisfied it would bear her, she stepped up and repeated the procedure with the next. 'The stairs are a bit tricky,' she said as I joined her. 'Got to be careful, you especially, Jonny. Mistress would skin me alive if anything happened to you.'

'Don't worry about me,' I said, and took the entire flight in three bounds. Upon reaching the top safely I turned and grinned down at Alice who stood open-mouthed, gaping at me in surprise and annoyance.

'I told you to be careful,' she said, as she took the top stair.

'And I told you not to worry about me.' I walked across and examined the massive mill-stones and the muddle of cogs and gears that had once worked them. Alice came over and sat on the stones.

'What did you mean when you said that I wasn't like anyone else you'd had at the house,' I said, after a while.

She pushed a curl of hair out of her eyes. 'I don't know really,' she said. 'I suppose it's because none of the others ever spoke much to me. The last one we had down, Simon, I think his name was, proper little snob he was.' Once again she turned to mimicry. 'Run me a bath, Alice. Fetch my pyjamas, Alice.' Proper Lord Fauntleroy, if you ask me. Is he related to you? Silly, of course he must be seeing how you've both got the same aunt.'

'We may be related but it doesn't necessarily follow that I know him. Our family is very large; there are cousins and second cousins that I have heard about but never set eyes on. It all gets rather confusing. To be honest, I'm not even sure how I'm related to my aunt.'

'But that's silly, if she's your aunt...'

'No, you don't understand. I know she's my aunt but I don't really know how she fits into the family tree. Of course she must fit in somewhere, and it must be on my father's side because her name is Walters, but she is far too old to be my father's sister, and as far as I know my grandfather was an only child.'

'Well, you've certainly confused me. Why don't you ask someone if it bothers you so much - your father?'

'He's dead.' The words took on a horrible starkness as they reverberated around the walls of the old mill.

'Oh,' Alice quietly said, and let the matter drop.

In the wall there was an opening about the size of the window below. We stretched out on the millstone and gazed at the surrounding countryside. The day was peaceful, only the occasional call of a bird disturbed the serenity.

'I can see why you like it here,' I said after a while. 'It's so quiet, you can almost hear the silence. Would you really give all this up to go to London?'

There was no reply. I twisted round to look at her but she was getting to her feet. There was the strangest expression on her face; a mixture of bewilderment and fear, mingling together to create an ashen mask.

'Is there something wrong?' I asked, but she didn't seem to hear. Instead she jumped down from the mill-wheel, and ran towards the stairs. She made only two steps down, when the sickening sound of splintering wood rent the air.

'Alice!' I shouted, but my voice was lost in her scream and the creaking and snapping of timber, as the stairs gave out beneath her. There was a dull thud and a groan, followed by a cloud of white dust which swirled upwards and filled the room.

I sat rigid with shock until the disaster registered in my brain, and then I was on my feet running, leaping across the hole in the stairs. When I reached her she was already pulling herself upright. Then she was standing, dusting off her dress with brisk fussy movements of her hand.

'Are you hurt, badly hurt?' was all I could find to say.

'Course not,' she snapped, but followed the denial with a grunt of pain as a long piece of wood dislodged itself from the debris and fell against her leg, tearing a gash in her calf. She stared down at the wound and wavered. I caught her as she fell forwards.

I pulled her clear of the mess, and laid her down on the floor, taking off my shirt and rolling it into a ball which I then slipped under her head as a cushion. I dashed from the mill in search of some water with which to bathe her wound and bring her round. Thankfully my search was short, for at the back of the mill was a well, a low circular brick affair complete with winch and bucket. As I turned the handle to lower the bucket I prayed; prayed that the well would not be dry; prayed that Alice would be all right.

My first prayer was answered as the bucket came up filled to the brim with water as clear as crystal - it must have been fed by an underground spring for it to be so fresh - and I carried it back to the mill, careful not to spill a drop of the precious liquid.

Once inside I hunted for a piece of cloth. In the corner of the lower room, on the far side of the wreckage of the stairs, was a pile of old flour sacks. The first two on the top of the pile were infested with lice and these I hurled across the room. They settled on the heap of rubble, sending another cloud of dust eddying upwards. The rest of the sacks, save for the bottom one which showed signs of damp and mould, were dry and clean, at least as clean as I dared hope.

I returned to where Alice was lying and tore one of the sacks into usable pieces. I immersed them in the bucket, then removed one and wrung off the excess water. I formed the cloth into a pad and pressed it against her forehead, all the while imploring her to open her eyes. When after an age had passed there was no improvement in her condition, I took another cloth from the bucket and this time wrung the water out above her face, opening her lips and letting the water trickle through her teeth into her mouth. A thought formed itself in my mind and began to gnaw at me; how on earth were we to explain all this when we eventually returned to Border End?

Alice moaned and opened her eyes. The pad of wet sacking was still pressed against her brow. She brought up her arm and pushed it away, then sat up and looked around at the damage. 'Sweet Jesus,' she said softly.

‘Your leg, it looks bad,’ I said, half-expecting her to faint once more.

Gingerly she began to feel herself all over, checking for further injuries. Satisfied there were no bones broken, she lay down and stared up at the ceiling.

‘Are you sure you're all right?’ I asked, and then began to think about how her mood had changed just before she had fallen. ‘Whatever made you take off like that? It was as if the devil himself was at your heels.’

She said nothing but continued to stare upwards. A small tear formed in the corner of her eye and rolled down her cheek.

‘What is it, Alice? Please, you can tell me, I am your friend.’

‘I saw them,’ she said, her voice almost a whisper. ‘Just standing there looking up at me.’

‘Who were? Where?’

‘You didn't see them?’

‘See who?’

‘The children. They were standing by the edge of the wood, beckoning to me. They wanted me to go with them. And I wanted to go, Jonny, I wanted to be with them.’ The fear returned to her eyes. ‘She was there too. Your aunt. I couldn't see her, but she was there, in the shadows, telling them what to do. I could feel her there.’

I was bemused. ‘But there was no-one there, Alice. I would have seen them too.’

‘I know.’ Her body trembled, then shook with a convulsive sob. ‘I know, I know, I know. But I saw them, Jonny, I swear. They scared me. Two of them were the boys who were here a couple of years ago.’

She sat up and stared into my eyes as if searching for some confirmation. ‘I don't understand it, Jonny. I don't understand.’ And she was in my arms, head upon my shoulder crying, her body shaking. Words were useless. I stroked her hair and let her get the shock out of her system.

It was some while before we left the mill. The damage to Alice's leg was not as serious as it had first appeared, and after she had bathed it with a piece of calico torn from her petticoat, and more water from the well it hardly noticed. She tidied her dress as best she could, and shook the dust from her hair. After wiping the dirt from our faces with the cloth she said: ‘We'd better get back, it's getting late. I'm going to catch it from old Tregear, something shocking.’

‘But I'll explain,’ I said.

‘There's no explaining to that one, besides she'll tell me off for bringing you here in the first place.’

‘Then we won't tell her.’

‘But...’

‘There's no need. If she asks how you hurt your leg you can say you tripped over a tree stump or something. Agreed?’ She nodded. ‘Look Alice, about what you saw.’

‘Let's forget it, eh. I've probably had too much sun.’

‘But you saw them.’

‘Please, I'd rather not say any more about it,’ she said, then crossed to the window and climbed through.

When we reached Border End we were dismayed to find Miss Tregear standing in the doorway, obviously waiting for us. She made a show of studying her watch as we approached, but as we got to the doorway, instead of the tirade we had been expecting she said simply: ‘Your aunt wishes to see you, Jonathan,’ and then to Alice: ‘It is time to prepare dinner.’ Then she swept into the house leaving us to exchange disbelieving glances on the doorstep. By the time I said

goodbye to Alice, and entered the house Miss Tregear was already across the hall and half way up the stairs. She stopped and waited for me, then together we made our way up the rest of the stairs and along the landing to Aunt Madeleine's room.

The housekeeper tapped lightly on the door, and upon receiving a curt, 'Enter' from within, turned the handle and opened the door wide. She all but pushed me inside and closed the door behind me, leaving me alone with my aunt.

The room was large and decorous. The furniture was Regency in design but I wasn't to know whether they were genuine antiques or just good reproductions. Several paintings hung from the walls, together with an oval gilt-framed mirror. The dressing table was cluttered with an assortment of bottles and old-fashioned looking blue glass jars containing who-knows-what. But the focal point of the room, the object to which my eyes were drawn, was a large mahogany four-poster, a magnificent testament to the carpenter's skill, resplendent with intricately carved posts, a frilled canopy, and lavishly embroidered silk hangings which were tied back to the posts. It was on this luxuriant bed that Aunt Madeleine reclined majestically, like some fabulously opulent figure out of history.

On closer inspection, however my aunt was not as she first appeared. While her dress was as immaculate as ever, and her hair was neatly pinned, there was about her an aura of sickness. Her face seemed more wrinkled, her eyes, still like pale sapphires, only duller this time, sunken into dark sockets. And not even the make-up that was applied more heavily than before could do much but enhance this emaciation. My first impulse to go to the bed and kiss her was stifled by an apprehension, almost a fear, of her. It was as if something had drained the life-force out of her. I hung back by the door and said nothing.

'Well, Jonathan,' her speech was hoarse, a croak more than a voice. 'Will you not come and say hello to your Aunt Madeleine?'

On the bed beside her, I noticed, was the same wooden casket she had shown me before. The lid was open and the two trays of lockets had been lifted out and now lay on the bedside table. She noted my interest. Reaching across to the table she took one of the trays and offered it to me. I advanced towards the bed, somehow fascinated by the gold on the velvet. As I stretched out my hand to take the tray she let it fall onto the bed and grabbed my wrist. The strength in those old withered hands was awesome, and the pain as her nails dug into my flesh recalled to my mind the marks she had left on the sideboard the time Alice had annoyed her. So great was her strength, and so great was my surprise, that when I found myself being drawn to, and forced to sit upon, the bed, I could do absolutely nothing to resist. As soon as I was firmly seated on the bed she released her grasp, but kept her hand by my side in readiness lest I should try to escape.

'Now, isn't that better? Silly boy, you're not afraid of your old aunt, are you?' I shook my head vigorously, too vigorously it seemed, for she gave a hacking laugh and said. 'Silly, foolish boy,' and pulled me closer to her, forcing my head down upon her bosom. The scent she was wearing, jasmine, was overpowering at such close quarters and I coughed. Violently she pushed me away and glared. 'You're not ill, are you, boy?' The vehemence in her voice sent a fresh chill of fear crawling up my spine.

'No,' I said, as calmly as I could manage. 'I'm not ill.'

'No colds or chills?' She eyed me suspiciously. 'The change of air can upset some people. I sense you are like your father in more ways than just name. A weak constitution I am sure. You wouldn't lie to your aunt, would you?'

'No, Aunt Madeleine. I promise you I'm not ill.'

She nodded her head slowly, as if satisfied with my answer. 'I shall take your word, Jonathan. It is important you are strong for the next part of the journey.' She laid back against the pillow and closed her eyes, exhausted it seemed, by our conversation, if conversation it could be called. Thinking she had fallen asleep, after several minutes had passed without her moving, all the while her breathing getting deeper and more prolonged, I made to slide from the bed. My first, almost imperceptible movement, was noticed, and she flicked open an eye, fixing me to the spot with a steady gaze. Her mouth opened and whispered words slid out. 'You cannot go,' they said.

I sat there under the baleful gaze for what seemed an eternity but, in truth, could only have been a matter of seconds. Then she leaned slowly forwards and opened both eyes wide, a broad smile spread over her ruby painted lips. 'You're a good boy at heart, Jonathan, just like your father when he came to me at your age.'

I ventured a question. 'Do you invite all of our family to stay with you?'

'And quick-witted too.' Once again that awful laugh. 'Yes, to answer your question. Everyone in the family has visited or will visit me at some time. Pick up the tray from the bed and give it to me.'

I obeyed. I was thinking that her mind must have been affected by whatever ailed her. Even in my frightened state of mind I had realised that if my father had visited her as a boy my age, she must have been older than she seemed. Far older than she could possibly be.

'Look at these and you will see the entire Walters' family, all those except for the ones younger than yourself. And they too will find a place here some day. Your father, his father, and before him too.' She took a locket from the tray and fumbled with it for a few moments, then with a sigh of defeat handed it to me. 'Open it for me, Jonathan. Your fingers are more nimble than mine.'

I took the locket from her and soon found the small indentation between its two halves. Slipping a thumbnail into it I prised it open and gave it back to my aunt. 'Did you see what was inside?' she said. I shook my head, and she held the thing out for me to see. Curled inside was a lock of yellow hair dull and lifeless, marked with a small brown stain, but I recognised the colour to be that of my own, and Ellen's. 'This is the locket I keep to remind me of your grandfather, Elias Walters. A sea-faring man, but a gentleman nonetheless.'

She closed the locket and placed it carefully back in its place on the velvet tray. She took up another and gave it to me to undo. I didn't want to antagonise her. What she was telling me was impossible, I realised. How could my grandfather have visited her as well?

'This is your sister, such pretty hair she has.'

'She had it cut off at the beginning of the summer, said it made her head too hot.'

Aunt Madeleine clicked her tongue. 'Foolish girl, to follow fad and fashion.'

I had always suspected that Ellen had her hair cropped to bring her up to date with current trends, and that her claim that her hair, as she put it, 'got in her way', was just an excuse. Aunt Madeleine's insight into the workings of my sister's mind surprised me. She snapped the locket shut.

'And now to you, Jonathan.' She put her hands behind her neck, unhooked the chain and drew out the locket inscribed with my name. I opened it. 'Now come closer.' As I did she ran her fingers through my hair. They were as cool as I remembered them to be and my scalp tingled under their almost icy touch. I caught a glimpse of something glinting in her hand, then heard a snipping sound. I pulled away and saw a lock of my own hair grasped tightly between her fingers.

Although she had denounced her fingers as being clumsy, they showed nothing of this in the procedure that followed. Deftly they manipulated the hair into a tight curl and, as part of the same movement, slipped the curl into the locket.

After doing this she set her scissors down on the bedside table and picked up something the sight of which alarmed me. She rolled a long, wicked looking hatpin between her fingers. 'Hold out your hand.' It was a command that I thought would be unwise to ignore. I proffered my right hand. 'No, the other,' she said. My left hand trembled as I held it out. She took hold of the third finger and, with a movement so fast as to be a blur, stabbed it at the tip and held it, squeezing firmly, until a small globule of blood emerged. When this was of sufficient volume she held my finger over the open locket. The blood dripped and mingled with the hair. Aunt Madeleine began to mutter under her breath. What she was actually saying wasn't clear, but the timbre of the words sounded Latin. It sounded like a prayer but it wasn't one I had heard in our church. She then replaced the locket around her neck.

I put my finger into my mouth and tried to suck away the sting. In the meantime she put the trays back in the casket and closed the lid. I was about to ask the significance of this performance - for performance it was, so practised were her movements - when she pre-empted my words with some of her own.

'You may leave now, Jonathan. I am tired and must rest to prepare myself.' She laid back on the pillow and closed her eyes with complete finality.

To prepare herself for what, I did not know. I stood watching her for a few moments before walking to the door.

When Alice served dinner that evening I noticed that she was in an unusually subdued mood. Her light amusing conversation was replaced by reserve, and her responses to anything I said were confined to words rarely longer than one syllable. It was obvious that the incident at the mill had affected her more deeply than she cared to admit. During the course of the meal I endeavoured to talk to her, to try and lift her out of her depression, but with Miss Tregear constantly in and out of the room my task proved hopeless. It was almost as if the housekeeper was deliberately trying to come between us with her incessant fussing. Eventually I gave up and finished dinner in silence.

Afterwards I leaned back in my chair, feeling thoroughly useless. I was certainly a poor friend if I could offer no comfort to Alice. I became aware of a dull throbbing in my finger. Examining it closely I saw that surrounding the mark where the hatpin had entered was a slight inflammation. I brought my finger across and pressed lightly on the spot, an action which resulted in sending a shaft of pain searing up my arm. I plunged my finger into my mouth once more and silently cursed Aunt Madeleine and her ridiculous customs.

I was usually quite adept at amusing myself. At home I had my toys and books, and other equally pleasant diversions, but at Border End there was little to interest me. The books in the library were dull, nearly all antiquated and written in Early English or Latin, and I had neither the patience nor the learning to attempt a journey through their pages. Toys were conspicuous by their absence. Considering that Aunt Madeleine made it her business to invite the children of the family down here I found it surprising that there was no provision made for their entertainment.

This problem was compounded for me by the fact that Border End was almost entirely self-sufficient. All the main services were catered for, and because of the distance between the house and Pengarth, the postman did not deliver, choosing instead to leave any mail at the post office for Miss Tregear to collect when she went to the village to fetch the groceries; an excursion

Cartwright would make use of to replenish the supply of fuel needed to keep the generator functioning. Consequently there were no callers at the house. Since my arrival I had not strayed outside the confines of the estate (save for that one visit to the water-mill) and as I entered the second week of my holiday a feeling of boredom began to creep over me. I realised that I was tiring of the insularity of the place and decided it was time to explore new territories.

The day was blustery but not cold. The wind came as a welcome contrast to the sultry weather that had followed the summer storm the previous week. I set off early one morning alone, Alice refusing my offer of a walk together. This was becoming quite common now. Since that day at the mill, either by her own design, or that of Miss Tregear, we had seen very little of each other, and we had spoken even less. The friendship that had developed over the first week now appeared to be waning, and this I regretted, for I was sure that had I made a more concerted effort to discuss the matter with her, the decline in our relationship could have been avoided.

I took a path through the wood travelling north, the opposite direction to the way I had gone with Alice. It was not an easy route as I found to my cost. The trees were set close together and the undergrowth was dense, so dense that I had to fight my way through in places. I found a stout stick and used it to beat back the bracken and brambles that spilled out across the path. I made slow progress. If the brambles failed to impede me, sly tree roots lurking hidden beneath the thick layers of ferns took on the task, and tripped me mercilessly, scratching my ankles with their jagged bark. Further on, the path all but disappeared.

The cover of the trees was almost complete, and very little sunlight reached the ground. Whereas before I had been walking on firm dry soil, now my feet sank into mud. Dark stagnant pools lined what remained of the path, and I trod warily, for fear of getting stuck in a mire. Above my head the trees were alive with birdsong, but not the sweet tones it is so pleasant to hear, these songs were harsh, shrill. I began to feel that the wood was closing in on me, stretching its branches towards me and dragging me to its heart. I would be glad to be rid of the place. The idea that I could get away from the gloom of Border End by taking a walk in the grounds was completely misguided. The house was reaching out and tainting its surroundings with a single touch.

With some relief I reached a barbed wire fence, and with it the end of the wood. Beyond the fence was open ground, a rocky, boulder-strewn area which covered several acres, rising gradually in the distance to form a high tor. I made an opening in the wire and climbed through, and was at once struck by a sense of freedom. With a loud whoop of delight I bounded across the plain, skipping over rocks, running through thick clumps of purple heather.

I played in this fashion for a while, before deciding to make an assault on the tor. It was a difficult climb; I could imagine that even stronger legs than mine would make heavy going of the hill. In places patches of grass made convenient handholds, but the advantage these gave me was off-set by the loose rubble that slipped constantly beneath my feet. Reaching the summit after an hour's labour was a moment of personal triumph. I sat down to get back my breath and surveyed what I now considered to be my kingdom.

I only realised how high up I actually was when I looked back in the direction of the house, and found to my surprise that I had a clear view over the tops of the trees and could see Border End itself. Unbeknown to me I had been climbing steadily since leaving the house, and it was to this incline that my excellent vantage point could be attributed.

My `breath' was a long time returning to me, disturbingly so. I was not, as my aunt had suggested, the owner of a weak constitution. This could not be further from the case; at school I

was the junior cross-country champion. Climbing the hill, I knew, was quite within my capabilities. Then why did I feel so exhausted? I remembered how I had woken those mornings that had passed since my last encounter with Aunt Madeleine. Unrefreshed, weary, a dull ache throbbing in my arm. This morning had been no exception; I had felt a little dizzy upon rising from my bed.

I had thought nothing of it at the time but as I sat atop the hill I began to wonder if I was ailing in some way. The most logical thought that came to mind was that the hatpin with which she had stabbed my finger had not been particularly sterile, and I had picked up a germ as a result. Blood poisoning was also a thought that nagged at me. The possibility of this seemed remote, but I decided that when I returned to Border End I would ask Miss Tregear and mention that I was feeling unwell. Although I had no time for the woman she was a trained nurse, and at least she could put my mind at rest. I lay back against a boulder and squinted up at the sun.

How long I stayed in this position I cannot say for I did not possess a wristwatch, and I had no idea how to judge time by the movement of the sun. Gradually my strength returned and I sat up and looked out across the top of the wood. At such a distance Border End showed none of the signs of decay that were in truth so evident when close to. The Gothic tower and countless windows gave the place a rather noble well-to-do look. I could see much of the lawn but the orchard was hidden from view by the wood. The grass was lush and green and from where I sat the flower beds, which from the house seemed rather drab, took on a distant beauty. I was contemplating these new found pleasures when I saw a movement by the old conservatory.

I peered across with interest, and was startled when Aunt Madeleine herself emerged from the house. She was walking across the lawn with the aid of two sticks. When she reached the centre she halted and spread her arms wide. What happened next startled me more than the mere presence of my aunt. A child came running across the lawn towards her, from the direction of the orchard. As the child reached Aunt Madeleine she enwrapped him or her, I could not be sure which, in her arms. Soon another child appeared and then another. Within a matter of minutes a small group of them milled around my aunt, who I could see was bending forwards, perhaps to talk to them. I wished then that I was nearer or that I had a telescope or some other device to enable me to watch the scene more closely, in greater detail. My curiosity was overwhelming. Who were these children who had appeared seemingly from nowhere? How was it that while Aunt Madeleine professed to be too ill to leave her room she could present herself in the garden merely to benefit them?

My desire to seek answers to these questions was so great that I scrambled carelessly down the tor, oblivious to the danger of a fall. I raced across the rocks at the bottom and reached the barbed-wire fence. Soon I was galloping through the ferns and brambles where I had but a short time ago picked my way so carefully. I emerged from the wood scratched and muddied, panting for breath, only to find that I was too late. The garden was empty, the children gone. When I looked up at the window of Aunt Madeleine's room I saw that the curtains were closed. I muttered a curse to myself as I crossed the lawn and entered the house through the kitchen door.

Alice was standing by the sink up to her elbows in washing. An antiquated copper stood in the centre of the room hissing and bubbling, sending clouds of steam rolling across the ceiling. Miss Tregear occupied a seat by the window and was sewing industriously. She looked up as I closed the door behind me.

'Great heavens, Jonathan! What have you been doing? Where have you been?'

My dash back from the tor had left me drained of strength, the steam which filled the kitchen made my breathing more painful still. 'In the wood,' I gasped. I looked down at myself. My shoes were hidden beneath thick cakes of mud, my trousers were a mass of catches and hanging threads, my freshly laundered white shirt had a large green stain running down one side, the battle scar of a collision with a moss covered tree. I hid my begrimed hands in my trouser pockets and stared at the floor, not daring to look up at the scowling face of the housekeeper as she approached, circling me like a dog ready to pounce.

'Alice, fetch Master Jonathan a chair. Why have you been running, boy?'

I flopped down in the chair. 'I wanted to see the children.'

The housekeeper looked at me askance. 'Children? What children?'

'The children in the garden with Aunt Madeleine.'

'The Mistress? What nonsense is this, boy? Your aunt has not left her room today. Surely you know she has been ill? Why, only this morning she had another attack. She has been heavily sedated since then. What you say is nonsense, pure nonsense. Children indeed. If you ask me, boy, you've been letting your imagination get the better of you.'

'But I did see them,' I protested. 'There were twenty or more, and Aunt Madeleine was there with them.'

'Does that then make me a liar when I say that your aunt has been too ill to leave her room.' She brought her face close to mine and stared challengingly into my eyes. I looked away. 'Very well. Let us have no more of these games. Now you will go upstairs to your room and change out of those filthy clothes. There is plenty of water in the copper so you will be able to have a bath, Heaven knows you're sorely in need of one. Alice!' She beckoned Alice across to her and instructed her to prepare my bath.

I made my way up to my room, forgetting even to mention the pain in my arm and the general malaise that accompanied it.

The bath, like everything else at Border End, was of a previous century. Cold, white, enamelled cast-iron, which made me shiver when I stepped into it despite the warmth of the water. It was small, almost a hip-bath, and I was forced to pull my knees up before I could immerse myself completely. I had been spoilt by the luxury of home where a bath meant a chance to lie back and relax, a chance to daydream whilst having a good soak. This bath was purgatory by comparison, uncomfortable and cramped, without even the benefit of hot running water to atone for its shortcomings.

Thinking of home prompted me to wonder why I had received no word from mother. On my third day here I had written to her informing her of my safe arrival, and as yet I had received no reply. I had given my letter to Cartwright to post on his next visit to Pengarth, and since then he had to my knowledge made at least two trips to the village. I decided that it was quite within the realms of possibility that the chauffeur, having slipped the letter into the pocket of his uniform, had forgotten to post it. I would make a point of speaking to him the next day to find out if this was indeed the case.

I did not linger in the bath, the chill of the iron quickly cooled the water until it became slightly less than tepid. I emerged with most of the dirt thoroughly washed away, at least enough, I hoped, to satisfy Miss Tregear should she decide to inspect the results of my bath later on. I dried myself briskly and dressed in the clean clothes I had brought from my bedroom. The picture of the garden I had seen from the top of the tor still intrigued me. Surely my slight illness couldn't have brought on such a vivid hallucination?

The bathroom door swung open and Miss Tregear entered. In the time it had taken me to bathe and change my clothes she had also effected a change of attire. Whereas upon my return from the wood she had been wearing her customary tweed suit, she now wore a plain black dress, high collared but otherwise shapeless. It did not suit her, accentuating her gauntness and making her look more forbidding than ever before. My eyes bypassed the blandness of the dress and focused on something much more fascinating. Suspended by a thin gold chain about her neck was one of my aunt's lockets. She eyed me appraisingly for a few moments, then, apparently satisfied that I fulfilled her specifications of cleanliness, said: 'If you have finished you shall go to your room and wait there until dinner.'

I was about to say that I hadn't yet had lunch when she fixed me with one of her cold, commanding looks and said: 'That is your punishment for getting filthy and suggesting that I am a liar.'

I could only stare at her agape. I had purposely avoided answering the heavily weighted question she had put to me in the kitchen. Now, despite my careful reticence, I was to be punished regardless. She strode out of the bathroom and along the landing to Aunt Madeleine's room. Pausing at the door she turned and shot me a warning glance before entering the room and locking the door behind her.

Crestfallen and close to tears I crossed the landing to my room. I laid down on the bed, and tried to submerge my misery with thoughts of London. How I wished to be back there, anywhere rather than being confined under the same roof as that awful housekeeper who was successfully ruining my holiday. It wasn't long before my melancholy gave way to anger as I thought of how badly the woman treated me. What right had she to order me about? Wasn't I, after all, my aunt's responsibility and so accountable to her and her alone? While Aunt Madeleine was in her room I was totally without recourse, and Miss Tregear could behave towards me in whatever way she saw fit. My aunt, while she might be slightly eccentric, would, I was sure, support me if I went to her with a complaint about the woman.

But how was I to reach her? Miss Tregear guarded her patient closely; any approach I made would have to meet with her approval first. I knew that unless Aunt Madeleine specifically asked to see me the chances of speaking to her were remote. Perhaps if I went boldly to her room and demanded to see her the housekeeper couldn't refuse. If she did, then surely my aunt would want to know why. I smiled to myself. Even if this action couldn't guarantee immediate access to Aunt Madeleine at least I would have the satisfaction of seeing Miss Tregear squirming in an effort to justify herself.

I slid silently from the bed and tiptoed across to the door. Opening it gently I crept outside, pulling back sharply upon seeing a figure further along the landing. My heart raced then missed a beat, before settling, when I realised that it was only Alice. She was standing outside my aunt's room with her ear pressed firmly against the door. She started visibly when she saw me approach. I was about to speak when she put her finger to her lips in a gesture of silence.

'Listen,' she hissed, and beckoned me towards the door. Following her I pressed my ear against it and listened, not knowing what it was I was meant to be hearing.

It was faint at first but growing louder. When it finally reached my ears it made me shudder. Coming from within was the low, rasping sound of the most unnatural breathing. A horrible noise. Together with this was a murmured voice that I recognised to be that of the housekeeper. What she was saying was unintelligible. On and on it droned, a psalm or chant, a flat monotone, almost hypnotic in effect. My aunt's voice, amidst the breathing, was murmuring some kind of

incantation, while Miss Tregear was chanting in a kind of foreign language. Suddenly I wanted to flee, to be away from the awful sounds, but as I turned away Alice held my arm.

‘We must talk,’ she whispered. ‘But not here. Come to my room.’

Moving as one, we edged away from the door and along the landing towards the attic stairs which led up to her room. Once inside I closed the door; had the lock possessed a key I most surely would have used it.

‘Keep your voice low,’ she whispered, as she led me across to the bed beneath the window. ‘Walls have ears...and eyes too in this house.’ She sat down on the bed, and as she did the light from the window caught her face, glinting off small beads of perspiration which saturated her forehead.

‘Jonny,’ she began, her voice urgent. ‘I’m leaving Border End and if you want my advice you should too.’

‘Leaving?’ my voice rose in surprise. ‘But where will you go? And why should I leave here?’

Nervously she twisted a strand of her hair between her fingers. ‘I’m not sure why it’s important for you to get away; all I know is that if you don’t something will happen to you, Jonny, I know it will, just as it happened to the others.’

‘But what? You aren’t making any sense. What have I got to fear?’

‘I don’t know, honestly I don’t, but I’ve seen it happen before, it’s always the same. First your aunt becomes ill and shuts herself away in her room; then Miss Tregear goes in there and that horrible noise starts. Tell me, have you been feeling ill?’

This question shook me. How could Alice have known about that? ‘Yes,’ I answered, and went on to tell her how the illness had affected me. When I had finished she said: ‘There, don’t you see? It’s exactly what happened the last time one of you stayed here, exactly the same. They all got ill too. It’s like they drain the life out of the children.’

I stared at her incredulously. ‘But surely the children are all right?’ I thought of my sister. She had returned from Border End safely, although I had to admit she was much changed. I hadn’t fully realised it before, but now that I was here I could see clearly what had been different about Ellen. It was as if she had left her childhood behind at Border End.

‘You don’t believe me do you, Jonny?’ Alice said calmly.

I scratched my head, puzzled and confused by the events that had now completely overtaken me. ‘I don’t know what to believe or what to think. So many strange things have happened since I arrived. So far I have tried to find logical explanations for them, but now...’ My words were curtailed by a gasp from Alice. She jerked to her feet. Her mouth opened and a harrowing scream of pain filled the room as she clutched at her stomach and doubled forwards. She fell in a crumpled heap at my feet and laid there moaning, her face convulsed, her whole body twitching spasmodically as each wave of pain passed through it. Like a doll that had suddenly lost its stuffing she lay whilst I looked on, frozen into immobility, watching as her fingertips took on a bluish tinge which spread quickly to the rest of her body.

I gazed upon her, curiously detached from what I was witnessing, aware more of the pain that had now begun to throb in my arm. Her breathing became more and more laboured, her eyes rolled in their sockets until finally only the whites showed; gradually her lips purpled and drained of blood. As if motivated by some unseen force I turned away from her and left the room.

I found myself outside Aunt Madeleine’s room. The door was open. The pain in my arm had increased and was now a ravaging flame of agony, but the pain thrilled me with its intensity; never before had I experienced a sensation like it; I wanted to scream, and at the same time I wished the

pain would engulf me completely. I walked stiffly into the room, my legs moving of their own volition. Through unblinking eyes I observed the room. The four-poster bed dominant, its hangings drawn tightly around. Miss Tregear, a million miles away in the corner, kneeling, eyes closed, hands together in a position of prayer. My legs guided me to the bed and I stood, waiting for a sign. I turned my head towards the housekeeper who gave an almost imperceptible nod. My fingers grasped the hangings, feeling the smoothness of the silk. From beyond the curtains came the sound of stertorous breathing, rising and falling in its dreadful cadence. Within moments my own breathing fell into the rhythm, and I felt myself sinking, being submerged as gradually blackness drew like a net around me. With a suddenness that ripped the silk from my fingers the hangings were pulled back.

‘Come and play, Jonny.’

I looked up at Ellen from where I sat on the grass. Her pale face was smiling kindly, her flowing yellow hair tumbled over her shoulders, in places merging with the patterns on her summer frock. She offered me a hand which I took and she pulled me to my feet. Over her shoulder, in the distance, I could see the water-mill, its huge wheel turning, pushed round by the foaming water of the stream.

‘The others will be here soon,’ she said as we walked across the grass to the mill. As we approached, a low rumbling sound filled the warm still air, and as we got nearer the sound became more defined, the cranking of slowly rotating cogs and the grinding of mill-stones.

A boy no older than me darted from behind the cover at the back of the building and waved. Ellen returned his welcome and bade me to do the same. ‘Are we all here?’ she called. The boy nodded slowly. He was my age, but dressed in an old fashioned way in grey shorts and a red and white checked shirt. His face was tanned from the sun but showed the signs of freckles that were in keeping with the shock of ginger hair that sprang untidily from his head. He eyed me warily for some moments before taking a step forwards. He turned his head to one side and whispered something in Ellen's ear. ‘He will be, soon,’ she said, in answer to the question that had been unheard by me. ‘It's Jonny, my brother. Surely you recognise him?’

The boy shook his head. ‘After my time,’ he said, his voice betraying a Northern origin. He extended a hand. ‘Paul,’ by way of introduction.

I took the proffered hand and shook it as firmly as I could, not wishing him to get a first impression of me as a weakling. Without another word he turned away from us and ran to the rear of the mill, crossing the stream by a small neatly built foot bridge.

‘You'll get used to Paul. He comes from a distant strain of the family, Yorkshire, I think.’

‘I'm not staying. I must get back,’ I said, the words sounding far away.

‘But that's silly, of course you're staying, you have to. There's no choice. Anyway, why would you want to go back there?’

‘I must go back...Someone needs me, needs my help.’

‘Poppycock, Peabrain. You can't help Alice now. Come on, let's find the others.’ She ran to the bridge and, seeing that I hadn't moved, stopped. ‘Come on, you don't want to be late. By the way, do you see that boy over there?’ She pointed to a boy who, although quite tall, was the same age as all of us.

‘What about him?’ I asked.

‘He's our father.’

I walked towards the bridge, to where my father as a boy was standing, the noise from the mill like distant thunder, drowning my thoughts. I had to get back. What could I say to my father? My father was dead. How could I see him as a boy?

The children clustered around the well at the back of the mill. There were many, too many to count. Although they were laughing it wasn't a happy sound. It was as if they were trying too hard to smile, too eager to beckon me to them.

The red haired boy jumped up onto the surround of the well and looked down into the water. 'She's coming,' he yelled. 'She's coming.'

There followed a confusion as the children gathered around me, their voices babbling at once. They surged forwards and I felt myself being lifted onto the wall.

'Look down, Jonny,' Ellen shouted above the noise. 'Look down into the water.'

I wouldn't, I had to get away from here. I stared out into the distance at the wood. Tall elms and beeches wavered gently in a soft breeze. Here was my escape. If I could only get to the wood then I was sure I could find my way back.

'Hold him, he's going to run.' The warning had been sounded and action taken before I could move. My thoughts had betrayed me. The children held me tightly.

I saw her then. Standing in the shadow of an ancient oak. A girl...Alice, she made a frantic beckoning motion urging me to go with her. If only I could, but the hold on me by the other children was too strong to be broken. My eyes began to lower. No! Alice mouthed the word. Lower. Crystal water lapped against the side of the well. Lower. A face deep in the water. My own? Two faces merging into one. The other face lined, old. Pale blue suns burning up at me. Closer, closer. Two hungry eyes to take from me what they needed. Coming up through the water to take me. My eyes closed, in acceptance of the inevitable.

'He's coming round.' The voice, half-heard, belonged to Miss Tregear. A cold compress was pressed against my brow, the chill of it making me shiver.

'Is he over the worst?' Aunt Madeleine, concerned, anxious.

'He'll be fine now. He has passed across.' A hand shook my shoulder. 'Wake up, young man. Wake up.'

I opened my eyes. I was in my room. The curtains were drawn, shutting out much of the light. By my bedside sat the housekeeper, on the cabinet next to her was a bowl containing water. She removed the compress and dropped it back into the bowl where it floated for a second or two before sinking.

Aunt Madeleine sat at the foot of the bed. She smiled as I looked down at her. 'Are you feeling better, Jonathan?'

I was. The pain in my arm had gone and I felt remarkably refreshed, as if I had just woken from a very deep restful sleep. I tried to speak, to tell my aunt that I was feeling fine, but for some reason the words wouldn't come. Instead I nodded my head.

'Splendid, splendid. I must say, young man, you were beginning to worry us. Isn't that right, Elizabeth?'

'Yes, Madam,' said Miss Tregear, taking my wrist and checking my pulse against her watch.

I continued to stare at Aunt Madeleine. In the dim, sepia light of the room she looked years younger than when I had last seen her. She was dressed in the same elegant manner, but there was a marked difference in her. Her hair, for one thing, was now stylishly coiffured, and seemed less white than before, more silver, I thought. Her face was devoid of the garish make-up, natural

hues coloured her cheeks, and the flesh was fuller, skin tighter and less wrinkled, as if she had regained a part of her youth. Around her neck hung a gold locket and she fingered it absently.

I found my voice. 'What happened?'

'You were taken very ill, young man, on your return from the wood the other day,' said the housekeeper.

The other day! 'How long have I been in bed?'

'Since Wednesday, and today is Friday.'

'You have had a very bad fever,' put in my aunt. 'I was convinced that we should have called the doctor in again - he first came Wednesday evening but of course you wouldn't remember - but Elizabeth persuaded me to let your illness run its course. I see now that she was right.'

Alice, the name and the memory rushed into my thoughts.

'Alice,' I almost shouted. 'What has happened to Alice?'

Aunt Madeleine and the housekeeper exchanged a look which answered me fully. I turned away from them, burying my despair in the pillow. Alice was dead.

'It was the water from the well, Jonathan,' said my aunt. 'It has been unfit to drink for some years.'

I turned to face her. Then she knew. About Alice, about the accident at the mill and how I tried to revive her.

'You must not be surprised, Jonathan. Did you not expect me to be aware of what happens at Border End? Oh yes, the old mill is part of the estate, and a valuable part it has proved to be in the past.'

My misery was complete. The memory of squeezing that moistened cloth and letting the crystal well water trickle into Alice's mouth came back to me with awful clarity.

'You must not blame yourself,' Miss Tregear said, patting my shoulder in an uncharacteristic gesture of kindness.

'No,' my aunt added. 'You were not to know.' She stood up and crossed to the window, making a chink in the curtain and looking out. 'It looks as if there may be a storm later, some black clouds are forming to the south. You will be returning home tomorrow,' she said, turning back to face me. She smiled.

Cartwright loaded my suitcases into the boot of the Bentley.

'Have you got everything?' asked Miss Tregear, fussily adjusting my tie.

'Safe journey, young man,' said Aunt Madeleine, putting her face down next to mine and waiting until I kissed her. 'I shall see you again soon.'

I climbed into the back of the car, wincing as the sun-heated leather of the seat burned the exposed skin between the bottom of my trousers and the top of my socks. Cartwright sat in the driving seat and started the engine. A moment later the Bentley eased its way down the drive, and the air filled with the shouted farewells from the house. I resisted the urge to look back until the very last minute, but then, twisting around so that I could kneel on the seat, I stared back at Border End and its occupants.

In the doorway stood Aunt Madeleine and Miss Tregear. Surrounding them were a group of children. They were no longer smiling. I sat back in my seat and closed my eyes, not opening them again until we had reached the station at Plymouth. I felt in the pocket of my jacket and found the crumpled paper bag containing the bullseyes. As the car pulled away from the kerb I unwrapped one ready for the journey home.

Such vivid recollections, they seem like only yesterday. The innocence of childhood captured for all time in the memories of two short weeks. The change in me upon my return home was as natural as could be, and neither my mother, nor Ellen commented upon it, but I was aware. Childish things were put away, and the spirit of childhood, which was all I had previously known, was gone forever, at least for me. Somewhere it existed. The carefree exuberance, the freedom from responsibility or worry that had characterised my thirteen years would never again feature as part of my life.

My own son is thirteen soon. I wait, even now, for the pink envelope to arrive. For his summons to Border End.