Katie Flynn

The Top Ten
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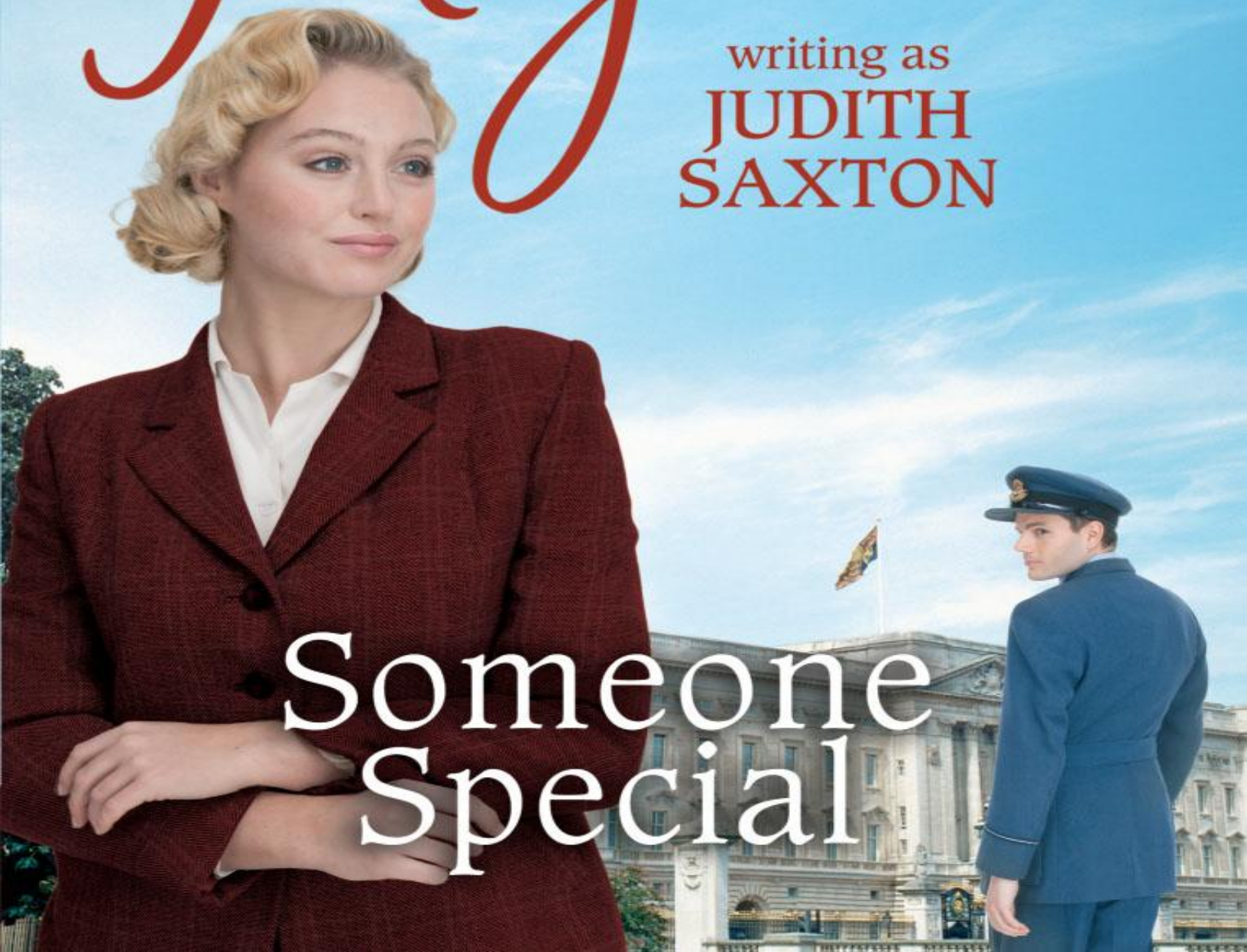
writing as
JUDITH
SAXTON



Someone Special

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About the Book

On 21st April 1926, three baby girls are born. In North Wales, Hester Coburn, a farm labourer's wife, gives birth to Nell, whilst in Norwich, in an exclusive nursing home, Anna is born to rich and pampered Constance Radwell. And in London, Elizabeth, Duchess of York, has her first child, Princess Elizabeth Alexandra Mary.

The future looks straightforward for all three girls, yet before Nell is eight, she and Hester are forced to leave home, finding work with a travelling fair. Anna's happy security is threatened by her father's infidelities and her mother's jealousy, and the Princess's life is irrevocably altered by her uncle's abdication.

Set in the hills of Wales and the rolling Norfolk countryside, the story follows Nell and Anna through their wartime adolescence into young womanhood as they struggle to overcome their problems, whilst watching 'their' Princess move towards her great destiny. Only when they finally meet to the two girls understand that each of them is 'someone special'.

About the Author

Judith Saxton has lived for many years in the north-west. A compulsive writer, she started with short stories and articles and many of her early stories were broadcast on Radio Merseyside. She decided to write her Liverpool series after hearing the reminiscences of family members about life in the city in the early years of the twentieth century. For many years she has had to cope with ME but has continued to write. She also writes as Katie Flynn.

Also by Katie Flynn

A Liverpool Lass
The Girl from Penny Lane
Liverpool Taffy
The Mersey Girls
Strawberry Fields
Rainbow's End
Rose of Tralee
No Silver Spoon
Polly's Angel
The Girl from Seaforth Sands
The Liverpool Rose
Poor Little Rich Girl
The Bad Penny
Down Daisy Street
A Kiss and a Promise
Two Penn'orth of Sky
A Long and Lonely Road
The Cuckoo Child
Darkest Before Dawn
Orphans of the Storm
Little Girl Lost
Beyond the Blue Hills
Forgotten Dreams
Sunshine and Shadows
Such Sweet Sorrow
A Mother's Hope
In Time for Christmas
Heading Home
A Mistletoe Kiss
The Lost Days of Summer
Christmas Wishes
The Runaway

A Sixpenny Christmas
The Forget-Me-Not-Summer

Katie Flynn writing as Judith Saxton
First Love, Last Love
You Are my Sunshine
We'll Meet Again
The Pride
The Glory
The Splendour
Full Circle
Sophie
Jenny Alone
Chasing Rainbows
Family Feeling
All My Fortunes
A Family Affair
Nobody's Children
This Royal Breed
The Blue and Distant Hills

Katie Flynn

writing as
JUDITH SAXTON

Someone Special

arrow books

Dear Reader,

As with all my books, something I have seen or heard has triggered a desire to put it into a story and *Someone Special* is no exception.

It came about after we'd sold our house in Rhyl, but hadn't entered the children in a new school, since we were not sure where we would end up living. In the interim we borrowed a holiday cottage outside Abergele, so every day I drove along the coast road from Abergele to Rhyl, dropped the children at school and returned to the cottage. With each journey I became more familiar with the scenery along the route, which included the magical Gwrych Castle, just outside Abergele. It was a magnificent, crumbling pile, set against a backdrop of tree-covered mountains, and the road passed close by one of the lodges, which was a small, stone built building, green streaked and neglected, set amidst tall trees.

Every day there was a row of sad looking washing, mostly nappies, dripping on the line. It rained a lot and because of the trees, I wondered how the occupant of the lodge ever managed to get anything dry. I only saw her twice; a thin, bedraggled young creature, despondently reaching up to the line, whilst at her feet a decrepit old basket held yet more uninspiring laundry. On the second occasion she was running down the road with a baby in her arms, splashing from puddle to puddle, chasing a local bus, whilst some way behind her, a heavily built man pursued.

In my imagination, that girl became Hester Coburn, mother of Nell, one of the three girls who were born on the 26th April, 1926, the day that the Duchess of York gave birth to Princess Elizabeth Alexandra Mary. The third girl was Constance, mother of Anna, whose beautiful home was on the edge of the Norfolk Broads.

So that was how my story started, with a scrawny young girl hanging out washing beneath dripping trees on a wet and deserted road, with Gwrych castle in the background. And the man became Matthew …

Now read on!

All Best Wishes,
Katie Flynn

For Tony Turner, my Australian offspring, who is someone special himself.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Firstly, I should like to thank Marjorie Howe of Rhyl for telling me about Rhyl in the twenties and thirties and for her excellent books on local history, all of which I perused closely to get 'Pengarth' the way I wanted it to be. And thanks, too, go to Bert Mather, for telling me about Aden during the war – and about the monkeys! Then, as I pursued my characters across country the staff of the King's Lynn Folk Museum found me information about their town in the years before and during the second world war. Cassie Turner remembered the small village fairs which toured Norfolk after the first world war, and Dorothy Saxton recalled with great vividness the impact made by the abdication on a whole generation.

Research is like a detective story, however, and librarians are the Hercule Poirot of my research, particularly John Thomas of the Wrexham Branch library, who, upon hearing the word 'Fairs' uttered in despairing accents, promptly remembered a small article in a copy of a wonderful little publication – *The Fairground Mercury* – which had been lodged in the reference library by a Mr A. Plinston. I read Mr Plinston's article, then got in touch with Mr Graham Downie, the editor of the *Fairground Mercury*, who put me in touch with Chris Gibson, whose marvellous article about life on the gaff had already been of immense help. Chris sent me more copies of the magazine and Frances Brown's fascinating book, *Fairfield Folk* – many thanks to all these people, without whose unstinting and generous help I would never have managed to find out about the rich, tough life of the fairgrounds of Britain.

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May 1926

IT WAS RAINING cats and dogs and blowing a gale by the time Hester got out of the hospital, although it had been brilliantly sunny when she left home earlier that morning. She was later than she had expected to be, too, so she just tucked the baby inside her coat and scuttled. She made it to the bus station in time to join the other wet people shuffling aboard the green omnibus, most of them laden with shopping, for people mainly came into Rhyl from the outlying villages to stock up their food supplies at the larger shops.

Hester, with the baby asleep and well out of sight, climbed on to the bus, shoulder to shoulder with a fat woman in black who smelled of fish, and a pert-faced girl whose lip-salve had been applied so generously and with such nonchalance that it even covered her large front teeth. Hester had thought, seeing the crowd ahead of her, that she would never get a window-seat, but she climbed the stairs to the top deck and at the last moment a man, settled against the pane, spotted a friend and stumbled to his feet, moving up a couple of seats. Hester hurriedly slid into the place he had vacated, turned to the window and rubbed herself a viewing port in the steam. Lovely; now she would really be able to enjoy the bus ride, especially if baby Helen continued to sleep.

Someone came and sat beside her; a sideways glance confirmed that it was a middle-aged woman in black, a cloche hat pulled well down over greying hair, cracked black leather shoes on her feet. Bunions, Hester diagnosed, seeing just where the shoes bulged. There had been a

teacher at her school in Liverpool, Miss Appleyard, who had bunions and several of the nuns at the orphanage had suffered from them, too; Miss Appleyard's shoes had been cracked in just that fashion. The omnibus must be filling up fast, Hester concluded, since older people preferred not to have to climb the stairs, particularly if they suffered from bunions.

Rather pleased with her role as detective, Hester looked down the street towards the distant line of sea and the prom. The bus was due to depart at eleven and her glance took in the clock tower at the end of High Street and confirmed that it still lacked five minutes to the hour. She had caught this bus often enough to know that sometimes the driver started early, more often late, but this morning he was going to be on time; he sat in his seat, revving the engine impatiently now and then but remaining stationary while would-be passengers hurried across the pavement and climbed aboard.

Presently, the conductor came down the bus collecting fares and clipping tickets. Hester, being on her way home, handed over her ticket to be clipped, then shoved it back inside her coat pocket. The woman next to her paid her tuppence; she had probably come into town with someone but didn't want to wait for a ride home, Hester decided, her lively imagination endowing the woman with a rich friend who had a motor car but no patience with slow and enjoyable shopping. Just as she was about to turn cautiously in her seat to see what purchases her neighbour had made the bus jolted into motion and her attention returned to the view outside.

At first, there was little to see apart from shops and raised umbrellas, but presently they began to jog along the residential roads and Hester's attention, which had strayed back to her neighbour's shopping, returned to her peephole.

It was the beginning of May but it had been a long, cold spring and the weather was still typically April. Not so much as a leaf showed on the trees whose branches tossed wildly as the omnibus surged past them. In the gardens daffodils were finished, wallflowers were in rich, tawny flower and clumps of sweet-scented narcissus, white petalled, orange-eyed, gave their perfume to the wind. Hester, who loved flowers, noticed the pink of flowering currants, the strident yellow of forsythia, and told herself that the worst of the winter was over, that soon summer, with its milder climate, longer days, would arrive. Then what flowerings there would be, what burstings of buds and ripenings of fruit, even in Hester's small, damp garden plot.

To own a garden, however poor, was wonderful to Hester. Children reared in orphanages, even such excellent ones as the Sister Servina, did not own gardens. Now her fingers itched to plant and prune, seed and sow. If she was successful … but she would be; she would grow rare and beautiful flowers and people would come from miles around to admire them. Perhaps one day she would own a glasshouse – she had seen such things – and would grow peaches, apricots, grapes until she was the envy of all her neighbours.

As the omnibus roared along the country roads, Hester concentrated on her peephole. She had been catching the bus into Rhyl on and off for several months, ever since she had married Matthew, but she never tired of the view. It was such a glorious change after fifteen years of Liverpool city streets, especially now that spring was so well advanced. She admired green upland meadows and stands of thin trees growing on the mountainside, clinging perilously to the almost sheer rocks. She saw a small stone cottage crouching against the side of the mountain, a stream tumbling down in a flurry of white falls, slowing when it reached the mountain's foot. Presently, as the

omnibus came out into a valley, the stream ceased to hurry and began to meander around the rocks as though it had all the time in the world to reach its destination. They passed a farm, if you could call such a tiny place a farm, with scrawny hens scratching in the yard and geese paddling in the mud beside the pond. Hester saw a man carting muck, a sack around his shoulders and his cap well down over his brow, and wondered about his life; did he live in the farmhouse with a comfortable wife or was she a nag, a nuisance to him? Other people's lives were so mysterious, so fascinating, particularly to someone who had lived, at best, a sheltered life.

Soon the bus left the valley and reached another stage of its journey. To Hester's right was the plain leading down to the distant gun-metal grey of the sea, to her left the mountains, hump-shouldered beneath the lowering, rain-filled clouds. She could see Pengarth Castle from a good distance away, looking so much a part of the mountain that you could have imagined it just a series of extraordinary rock formations. It was huge, too, spreading right out along the side of the cliff, in places actually built into the rock. It was grand; Hester wondered idly about the owner. He was lucky of course, because it was such a romantic building, and he must be rich, because who could afford to inhabit such a gracious ancestral home without a great deal of money? But she knew nothing else about him, because Matthew, who worked at the castle, was a man of few words.

The road wound and twisted so the castle got nearer slowly, each turn of the road revealing a little more of its face, like a shy but beautiful woman emerging from behind her veil. But they did get closer, and presently Hester could see the lodge, a bird's eye view as yet. She was trying to see whether Matthew had taken her washing in when she realised the omnibus had passed the stop she normally used. Still, the walk was probably of about equal length

whether you were walking forward to the lodge or back to it.

Leaning back in her seat, resigned to the walk, Hester tried to look at her home as a stranger might; from a distance the lodge looked, if not as romantic as the castle, at least interesting. But like most things, closer scrutiny was disappointing; it was a real let-down when you saw it, as she saw it now, against the faded splendour of the distant castle. Once it might have been rather nice, built as it was of silver-grey stone and roofed with gleaming slates, but the perpetual Welsh rain had caused lichen to grow on the tiles and streaked the stone walls with green and brown so that now it was a uniform sludge colour, crouching behind the high wall with the left-hand gate partly obscuring the small bit which could be seen from the road. To Hester's critical eye it looked like a dirty-faced child squinting sourly through prison bars. A sly child, she thought, who probably picked its nose when it thought itself unobserved and wiped its harvest on someone else's furniture.

It really is an ugly house, Hester decided, turning slightly to indicate to her fellow-passenger, with a smile and a clearing of the throat, that she wished to leave her seat. Hovering there while the old woman gathered her wits, Hester acknowledged that the lodge had a thousand drawbacks – it was cold, damp, and the proximity of the front windows to the ill-kept drive meant that the panes were perpetually dirt-splattered – but it was a home, as much her own as any home could be. Though she thought wistfully that it would be fun to live in the castle, to pretend all day about Princesses and magic and giants and dragons, to have big log fires in the great hall and to order your dinner from the kitchen, something different every night. Why, if she lived there, she would never have to peel a potato, hang washing on a line or catch a bus, servants

would do all the menial work, leaving the mistress to sit before a roaring fire and sew a fine seam.

As Hester half stood up, the woman sitting beside her hauled herself reluctantly to her feet. Hester slid past her, giving due thought to the bunions. The conductor, standing at the foot of the stairs, must have seen the movement in the mirror for she heard the bell tinkle commandingly and the green omnibus, which had been charging along in a cloud of spray in the very centre of the road, swerved to the left as the driver began to apply the brakes. Hester, clutching the still slumbering baby to her chest, steadying herself against a seat, saw the outposts of a tiny hamlet begin to appear outside the windows. Half-a-dozen grey cottages, slate-roofed, crouched on either side of the road, their gardens hidden by drystone walls, their inhabitants keeping indoors on such a wet and miserable day.

The omnibus stopped. Hester walked up the aisle between the two rows of seats, steadying herself with one hand. She descended the stairs, then said ‘Thank you’, politely to the conductor, who nodded as she got carefully down off the step. No one else was getting off. The vehicle, which had scarcely stopped at all, it seemed to Hester, roared off again, plumes of water spraying on either side of it as it went, and Hester walked a little way after it. She wanted to have a look at the hamlet – you could scarcely call it a village – where the staff from the castle must live, those who did not live in, of course.

Hester wondered what it would be like to live here, in a small community, cheek by jowl with neighbours who must know one another intimately. For the first fifteen years of her life Hester had known nobody much apart from the staff and children of the Sister Servina Orphanage and the girls at the Convent School in Liverpool. She thought it might be rather fun but, fun or not, the cottages were not her destination so having taken a good look at them and

the smithy, the solitary shop in someone's front room, she began to walk slowly back the way she had come.

The rain had been intermittent throughout the journey but now, as though it had waited for her to get off the bus, it came down hard and viciously, the drops so large that they created small explosions on the wet tarmac and bounced off Hester's unprotected head with considerable force. She tried to draw her head into her shoulders like a tortoise and gave up her leisurely gait in favour of a brisk, splashy trot. She had been walking along more or less in the middle of the right-hand carriageway, but now she dived for the shelter of the great stone wall with its jagged, raw-rock top. It gave a little shelter, though you had to offset that against the occasional shower of drops when you went under the branches of one of the trees which leaned over the wall at intervals.

It was a good walk. It must be a mile, Hester thought dolefully, as her hair began to slick to her head and raindrops sluiced down her face. She should have brought an umbrella, but it had been fine when she started out, and she could not have managed an umbrella as well as the burden beneath her coat. She sighed and tried to walk even faster; if she didn't get out of the rain soon she'd probably catch her death. For ten minutes the picture of herself on her death-bed – very pale, dignified and noble, with people coming from miles around to see the bride who had died so young – kept her occupied, but then the sheer discomfort of the heavy rain began to tell and not even the most vivid imaginings could keep her feet warm and dry or her hands from turning white and purple with the cold. Crossly she slogged along, head bent, saturated shoes sloshing indifferently in and out of the great, rain-dimpled puddles. No point in walking an additional yard or two round a puddle when you were as wet as she; might as well wade right through the middle.

So intent was she on walking as fast as possible that she did not hear the pony and cart until it drew to a halt beside her.

‘Hester! You’re soaked, girl! What are you doin’ here? Didn’t you ask the bus conductor to stop at the lodge? They will, if you asks.’

Hester looked up at the man driving the cart and gave him a grateful smile. A chance to get out of the wet a bit quicker! She put a hand on the side of the cart.

‘Oh Matthew, am I glad to see you! The omnibus was past the lodge before I knew it. I’m ever so wet.’

Matthew laughed with more than a trace of indulgence. He was a dark-haired, good-looking man in his thirties, wearing a sack over his head and shoulders to keep off the rain. A skinny black-and-white border collie sat beside him in the cart, pressing close to his stained corduroy trousers, eyeing Hester doubtfully.

‘You’re half drowned, be the looks of it. Come on, give me your hand, I’ll heave you aboard.’

He held out a square, capable hand but Hester shook her head. ‘Can’t take your hand, Helen’s under my coat. But I can hop up.’

She hopped up unaided and sat on the wet wooden seat beside the dog. Behind them were sacks of what looked like chicken meal or fertiliser, she could not tell which; Matthew had chucked another sack or two over them to keep the worst of the rain off. As Hester settled herself the collie shifted further along, giving her an almost human look of dislike, then heaved a deep sigh. Hester patted the dog’s wet head with a wet hand but received not a flicker of response. Fanny, she knew, was a one-man dog; Matthew was the only person who mattered in her life, and she rarely even acknowledged Hester’s existence.

Matthew waited until she was settled, then lifted the reins and clicked his tongue. The bay mare flicked an ear back and broke into trot.

‘Baby all right? You all right, too? What did they say at the ’ospital clinic?’

For the first time since she had boarded the bus, Hester turned back the edge of her coat. Slumbering in the rough sling which Matthew had fashioned for her the baby lay, tiny fists balled, mouth a crinkled rosebud, small body cuddled against Hester’s ribs beneath the curve of her breast. At the sight of her child a tide of gentle love washed over Hester, bringing an involuntary smile to her lips, a tenderness to her eyes.

‘She’s fine; the nurse and the doctor were pleased with me and said Helen was doing just as she ought at a couple of weeks. We don’t have to go back again, next time we can see the village doctor.’

Matthew nodded. ‘Good. Less trouble. Cover her up again, m’dear, us don’t want her taking cold.’

Hester pulled the edge of her coat across, but not before a raindrop had hit the baby full on the face, causing a pair of large blue eyes to open for a moment, squint confusedly, and then slowly close. Hester laughed and held the child even closer.

‘She nearly woke up then. I was glad she slept in the bus so I could keep her tucked away from harm, under my coat. I do hate people staring and hanging over her.’

‘Why? Folk think she’s a pretty thing, and aren’t they just right?’

‘Yes, she’s very pretty, but I’m afraid they might give her coughs and colds and things. I’d rather they kept their distance. She’s so little, a cold or a cough might make her dreadfully ill.’

‘Aye, I never thought o’ that.’ Matthew slowed the cart as they drew alongside the lodge. ‘Wait on, I’ll tie Frisk to the gatepost and get the door open for you.’

‘I’m all right, I can manage,’ Hester said briskly. ‘Thanks for the lift, Matthew. Are you coming in for your lunch?’

‘Dinner, d’you mean?’

‘Sorry, yes. Dinner. Are you coming back or did you make yourself sandwiches?’

‘You didn’t ’ave time, I daresay, what wi’ gettin’ the bus?’

‘Sorry, I forgot. Why didn’t you remind me?’

He smiled kindly at her. Hester, climbing down from the cart, reflected guiltily that Matthew was always kind.

‘It don’t matter. I’ll come in for dinner if it’s no trouble.’

‘Of course it’s no trouble, silly! I’ll have to feed Helen when she wakes, but I’m sure I can find something nice so you can have a hot meal. When’ll you be in?’

She was standing at the lodge door, looking back at him, a hand on the latch. He glanced ahead, towards where the castle bulked pale against its dark cliff.

‘Say an hour? Will that suit?’

‘Of course it will, Matthew! See you in an hour, then.’

Hester hurried into the lodge and shut the door as Matthew drove off down the long muddy track towards the castle. The front door opened straight into the parlour, a room filled with heavy Victorian furniture bought by Matthew’s mother and grandmother and lovingly cared for, judging by the gleam on the walnut-wood piano, with its candle sconces and shallow, yellowing keys. There were a great many knick-knacks in the parlour: artificial flowers under glass, a case of stuffed birds and quantities of cheap but pretty china from various seaside resorts, and everything was clean and gleaming. It was dim in the parlour even on a sunny day, but with the rain pouring down from a dark sky very little light filtered through the musty Nottingham lace and looped sateen curtains which half obscured the small diamond-paned window. Nevertheless it was a room to be proud of, if you could forget that it was all old Mrs Coburn’s stuff and if you liked old-fashioned things, for there was almost nothing modern in the room. Even the leaded windows had intrigued her at first, with their

wobbly, green-tinted glass distorting the view outside, but they were undoubtedly very old.

I still like these windows, Hester thought, they're like a gingerbread house would have, only I hate cleaning them; it takes so long. And we could do with fewer *things* around too, because they take ages to dust. One day, when I know Matthew a bit better, I may suggest we put some of the stuff away and give ourselves some space; but not yet, it's too soon to change things.

Having taken off her coat, Hester settled the still-sleeping child in the old-fashioned moses basket which stood on its stand beside the settee, and looked guiltily at the wet footprints marking old Mrs Coburn's rug. In the bedroom a great many old pictures and photographs lined the walls, so Hester knew Mrs Coburn's stern, unsmiling face very well. The older woman's ghost was often present in the parlour, looking sadly and accusingly at the daughter-in-law she had never met, suggesting that Hester could try a little harder, get up a little earlier … Hester seldom entered the lodge by the front door in deference to Mrs Coburn's cherished front room. But today, because of the rain …

Still. Matthew wouldn't mind, even if the marks hadn't dried out by the time he came in for his meal, and the Coburn ghosts were present only in Hester's imagination. After his mother's death Matthew had lived here alone until their marriage – ten years of cooking his own meals, cleaning for himself, sorting out his finances and his marketing. I think I'd go mad if I were alone here for ten days, let alone ten years, Hester thought, padding barefoot into the kitchen, her muddy shoes in one hand. It's such a dark house, so chilly and unwelcoming. Matthew probably won't mind if I change things, and I will one day, because he does want me to be happy. And because he rescued me when I needed someone, I want him to be happy too, so I won't make many changes.

The kitchen wasn't a bad room, though. The fire had been lit in the range – poor Matthew, Hester thought, conscience- stricken, to have to tackle that on top of so much else – and the kettle, though it wasn't over the heat, purred gently on the hob. She padded across the quarry tiles, slung her coat on one of the ladder-backed kitchen chairs and began to wind down the drying rack. It was old and creaky, but an absolute blessing. Each rainy morning Hester did her washing, hung it over the rack, then hauled it up to the ceiling where the clothes dried in the uprush of warm air from the range, out of sight and mind, until she brought it down the next day.

Until baby Helen had been born Hester had washed only on a Monday, but she and Matthew couldn't afford piles of towelling and muslin napkins, a dozen of each had to suffice, which meant washing every day whether she liked it or not. So now the drying rack had come into its own, and Hester now appreciated this relic of Mrs Coburn, if no other. Fortunately I quite like washing, Hester reminded herself, draping her coat across the rack, then feeling the top of her grey jumper and the white blouse beneath it. They were both pretty wet, the rain had channelled down her neck and soaked most of her upper clothing; glancing down, she saw her navy skirt was also soaked for six inches around the hem and muddy from the dirt of the road.

Muttering crossly, Hester stripped off jumper, blouse and skirt, hung them over the rack and hauled it back to the ceiling, then glanced down at herself. Her breasts, engorged by the milk, looked huge, out of proportion on her thin body. They were far too big for the little bust-bodice she had previously worn and she had told the doctor bluntly that they could not afford a nursing bodice which she would have no further use for once Helen was weaned. As she moved, her big, rather painful breasts moved too, but more slowly, as though parodying her. They reminded her of the cows she saw swaying into the milking shed in

the early mornings, their udders veined and bulging with milk. Her breasts were veined too, she could see pale blue lines on them, and her nipples had darkened and spread … she hated her new body, hated it.

But one consequence of her new body was baby Helen, so she must not grumble. Not even when she looked down at her flaccid belly, empty now of the child but not yet shrunk into decency. The nurse at the clinic had repeated yet again that in a couple of months, if she did the exercises the doctor had recommended, she would get her slim figure back, but at times she doubted even the nurse. Flesh wasn't elastic, how could it simply shrink back to its youthful tightness? But Sister said because she was so young that was just what would happen, and Sister had been wonderful. When Helen had been born and Hester had been in such pain and so afraid, Sister had been a tower of strength. She had been right when she had said the pain would soon be over and that she, Hester, would forget it when she held her child in her arms, so she probably knew about saggy stomachs, too.

Hester turned from hauling the rack back into place and glanced at the window. It was difficult to see out for the steam and the rather draggly curtains but she thought she saw a movement in the yard outside. Hastily she scurried out of the kitchen, heading for her bedroom – she did not want to be caught waltzing half-naked round the kitchen by anyone, not even Matthew. Especially Matthew, she decided, trying to cover her breasts with her arms and wincing at the pain of it. She had not yet moved back into the main bedroom with her husband, she and the baby slept in the little room; she had pleaded night-feeds and exhaustion and Matthew had agreed to wait a little, so now she ran into the small room and grabbed another blouse, a thin, much-darned jumper and her green wool skirt. She was putting them on when two things occurred to her: one was that the movement outside the kitchen window would

have been the washing on the line; the other was that if she put dry clothing on before towelling her hair it wouldn't be dry clothing long.

When she had ducked under the clothes line in the back yard, she had wondered why the line was there, where it caught virtually no breeze, and not in the castle grounds. I really must rig it up somewhere else, where the washing will catch whatever sun and wind there is, she told herself, but right now I must get myself presentable again. She seized the towel which hung beside the washstand and stood before the mirror, rubbing her hair vigorously. She stared accusingly at her reflection as she did so, keeping her eyes averted from her huge, bobbing breasts. She was even paler than usual, her strong, blackish-brown hair hung in rat-tails down past her shoulders, and the thick, uncompromising black eyebrows which she always intended to pluck into fashionable arcs were drawn into a frown of disapproval. She quite liked her amber-coloured eyes framed with stubby black lashes, but they didn't seem to fit her small, triangular face with its blob of a nose. They were too big, and the expression in them wasn't sweet or meek, it was challenging, as though she were daring people to notice her plainness.

The nuns of course said plainness did not matter, especially if you were clever. They had known Hester was clever and had accordingly sent her to the paying convent school, reminding her far too often that she owed them gratitude for their generosity. She knew it, promised to do her best, make something of herself. Thank God, she thought fervently now, that she had been pupil-teaching at a school in Chester when they had realised she was pregnant and turned her out. The nuns had planned such a bright academic future for her; if they saw her now they would believe her friend Annabel had been right when she had said there was something strange about Hester.

Annabel had been a prim, conventional twelve-year-old with neatly braided blonde hair and meticulously tidy clothes, the complete opposite of brainy, impetuous Hester. But Annabel had once told her, in a moment of honesty, that Hester looked like a changeling.

'You know, the baby that appears in the cradle but never cries,' Annabel said earnestly as the two of them surveyed their images in the long mirror in the cloakroom. Annabel, conventionally pretty as well as conventionally good, smoothed her pleated tunic skirt down over her long legs in their black stockings. 'I don't suppose you cried much as a baby, Hester; you certainly never cry now. You just tighten your lips and look down and jut your chin.'

'You mean I look like an elvish brat?' Hester had said with mock indignation. 'Annabel Cranbourne, what a horrible thing to say!'

But Annabel hadn't meant to be unkind, she had just said what came into her head. And perhaps she had been right; even now, so long after Annabel's remark, Hester could see what her friend had meant. Her eyebrows tilted up at the corners and her eyes were set at a slight slant. Her chin, though small, did jut. It was a pity because she longed – what girl did not? – to be beautiful, but even prettiness had been denied her. However, pretty or not, her fate was sealed. Her lovely bright future had come to nothing because she had so wanted a bit of fun out of life, and anyway, she had Helen, didn't she? Though not yet seventeen years old, she was a married lady with a little girl of her own and it was time she started acting the part instead of driving poor Matthew into making his own lunch … dinner … and lighting his own fire.

Not that Matthew seemed to mind. He may not think I'm pretty, Hester thought, dragging her thick, wiry hair back with one hand and lassooing it into submission with a rubber band, but he must like me or he would never have agreed to marry me. Would he? No, of course he wouldn't.

She had run back to Rhyl, not searching for him, but because she dared not return to Liverpool and thought she might get work in the seaside town. She had run into Matthew on the very first day, but had said nothing about her condition; it had not been necessary.

'Hester!' he had said. 'I thought you'd gone for good! Oh, my dear.'

He had proposed marriage and she had accepted. And you're grateful to him for that, aren't you, she asked herself severely? And for Helen, of course. Darling little Helen, who would do all the things that Hester would never do now, who would be the famous actress, the prima ballerina, the first girl ever to scale the Matterhorn or swim the Channel or ride the winner of the Grand National. Hester's dreams could still come true, though in future she would dream them for Helen rather than herself.

As she dressed, she heard the muttering cry of a child waking from sleep. Hester pushed her feet into her old slippers and padded out of the bedroom into the parlour. She plucked Helen, pink-faced and blinking, from her nest in the blankets and carried her through to the kitchen. She settled herself comfortably in the ancient rocking-chair and put the baby to her breast; as the child began to suck, Hester pushed off with one foot, rocking contentedly. She let her mind wander back to her childhood, when she had hoped for such great things: she would marry a prince, live in a castle, be someone special. Was this, then, what she had been born for, was this the real purpose of Hester Jane Coburn, née Makerfield? Was her destiny not to be someone special, but to rear and cherish someone special? It seemed likely now, with the child's dark mossy head butting Hester's thin little arm, and the baby's avid mouth tugging at her nipple, that bringing Helen up would be a full-time job.

The chair creaked, the baby sucked, the fire settled in the range. Hester was almost asleep when the baby pulled

her pointed knees up hard into her small stomach, spat out the nipple and began to squall.

Wind! Hester slung the scrap of humanity across her shoulder and began rubbing and patting the small, solid back.

‘Poor baby, poor little one, then … does it hurt? Never mind, mummy will make you better.’

An enormous burp rattled from the baby, making Hester laugh. She held the child gently against her face, kissing the rose-petal cheek.

‘There, is that better? What a big burp that was, you nearly made mummy faint with fright!’

The baby, feeling Hester’s mouth against her cheek, wove her head frantically from side to side, seeking sustenance once again. Failing to find it, she began to mutter, her fists coming up to press and push at the unresponsive flesh.

‘No, sweetheart, you won’t find milk there, but if you look here …’ Hester slid the child down across her bare skin, loving every touch, and pushed her against the full breast which had been dripping in sympathy ever since the baby started to feed. With the skill born of ten days of finding the nipple, Helen homed in on it and sucked. Hester’s foot began to rock the chair again and her mind, freed from the necessity of dealing with her daughter, began to wander once more.

The nuns were always on about the evils of dreaming, but I never could see it, and now I’m proved right, because even if this is what my life is to be about, my dreams are still my own. I can be anyone, rich or poor, plain or pretty, clever or stupid. So I’ve not ruined my life, despite what the nuns may think.

But she must be practical; she began to think about Matthew’s meal, because that was her next task when the child was fed, changed and put back in her basketwork cradle. There was a bit of meat pie, and a heel of cheese …

was there still bread? If not, she really should bake, but she made awful bread. If the rain stopped and she took Helen out in her sling, she could buy a loaf in the larger village a couple of miles from the lodge. It was a good walk, but perfectly possible in an afternoon. The baker was friendly too. He spoke Welsh, of course, but he changed to English when he saw she had entered his shop. Different from the butcher, a big fat man with mean little eyes who addressed Hester in Welsh though he knew she hadn't so much as a word of the language.

I really ought to learn Welsh, Hester told herself, rocking gently, smoothing her free hand around Helen's face. But it's so hard when no one else speaks it – Matthew didn't, he'd lived in Sussex until his employer had inherited Pengarth Castle from a profligate uncle, and of course his employer, Geraint Clifton, didn't speak Welsh either, since he too had come from Sussex. Matthew had worked for the Cliftons on their dairy farm, with its neat little house and eighty well-kept acres, before Mr Geraint had inherited the vast, rambling castle in the wild hills of Wales, as well as the mountain of debt which accompanied it.

It was a pity in a way, Hester mused, that the old man, as Matthew called Mr Geraint, had taken to Pengarth Castle like a duck to water. If he'd had any sense, he would have looked at the state of it, and the size of the debts, and got back into his motor and returned to Sussex. But he had fallen in love with the castle, Matthew told her, dreaming of the day when it was mended and made good, when it was the sort of home he wanted and could be proud of. He was a worker, the old man. He'd worked with his own hands inside and out, making good wherever he could. Matthew and he had laboured side by side to make a couple of rooms habitable and he had recently sold a farm which had been more or less derelict when he arrived and had made good money out of the deal. He had parted with his Sussex home

years ago, of course, and ploughed the money into Pengarth.

Hester had never been in the castle or met her husband's employer, but Matthew had told her about them both. The old man with his passion for the place, his stubborn refusal to give up, and the great hall with the roof so riddled with holes that pigeons and jackdaws flew in and out without let or hindrance. The long gallery, empty of the family portraits which had once graced its walls – the old man had sold many of them to pay for re-roofing the kitchen – and the bedrooms in the towers, the windows broken, the floors unsafe. But it seemed to Hester a place of infinite romance and infinite possibilities. She could not blame the old man for loving it, wanting to restore it, even though a sensible, down-to-earth part of her mind knew that there was a difference between dreams and reality, knew that if the place was as bad as Matthew said, restoring it would be impossible unless you were a millionaire several times over.

What millionaire would want to live here, she thought looking discontentedly at the rain-smeared pane, hearing the wind getting up and tugging at the little house as though it wanted to raze it to the ground. There wasn't much doing, though if you had a motor – and the old man had a lovely one – you could get to Rhyl in the summer, see a bit of life. Indeed, it was because the old man had gone to meet some friends in Rhyl that she had met Matthew.

That summer! So warm, so wonderful … her first little taste of freedom. A summer job at a hotel so that she could earn some money and see a bit of life before plunging into her first real job as a pupil-teacher at the convent school in Chester.

She had so enjoyed her summer of freedom. The hotel work had been hard, but she hadn't minded because she always had mornings or evenings free. And once she got to know Matthew they spent a lot of time together one way