

**STOP**  
**WHAT**  
**YOU'RE**  
**DOING**  
**AND**  
**READ**  
**TO YOUR**  
**DAUGHTER**



**Stop What You're  
Doing and Read... To  
Your Daughter**

# **I Capture the Castle**

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## About the Book

Cassandra Mortmain lives with her bohemian and impoverished family in a crumbling castle in the middle of nowhere. Her journal records her life with her beautiful, bored sister, Rose, her fadingly glamorous stepmother, Topaz, her little brother Thomas and her eccentric novelist father who suffers from a financially crippling writer's block. However, all their lives are turned upside down when the American heirs to the castle arrive and Cassandra finds herself falling in love for the first time.

## About the Author

Born in 1896, Dodie Smith grew up in Manchester. She trained at RADA and began her playwriting career in 1931 with *Autumn Crocus*; *Dear Octopus* in 1938 was her abiding success. In 1939 she went to the USA with her manager, Alec Beesley, whom she married that year. There she wrote for Hollywood, made a close friend of Christopher Isherwood and acquired the first of her beloved Dalmatian dogs. *I Capture the Castle* was published in 1949, selling over a million copies. The Beesleys returned to the UK in 1954 and in 1956 *The Hundred and One Dalmatians* was published. Dodie Smith died in November 1990. Valerie Grove, who introduces this novel, has written her biography, *Dear Dodie*, championed by Fiona MacCarthy in the *Observer* as 'a merry book ... with a faultless sense of period ... making a persuasive case for a long neglected talent'.

ALSO BY DODIE SMITH

*The Town in Bloom*

*It Ends With Revelations*

*A Tale of Two Families*

*The Girl in the Candle-lit Bath*

Children's Novels

*The Hundred and One Dalmatians*

*The Starlight Barking*

*The Midnight Kittens*

Autobiography

*Look Back With Love*

*Look Back With Mixed Feelings*

*Look Back With Astonishment*

*Look Back With Gratitude*



DODIE SMITH

# I Capture the Castle

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY  
Valerie Grove

VINTAGE BOOKS  
London

## INTRODUCTION

Cassandra Mortmain, as one critic said, is a young girl 'poised between childhood and adultery'. Dodie Smith wrote herself into the character of Cassandra. She vividly recalled what it felt like to be seventeen and pouring her heart into a diary – though she was fifty-two by the time she published *I Capture the Castle*.

It was her first novel, written in a fever of nostalgia for England. In 1945 Dodie was living in California. She and her pacifist husband Alec and their Dalmatian, Pongo (and their Rolls-Royce) had left their idyllic cottage at Finchingfield in Essex just before the outbreak of war. It was the pinnacle of her fame as a playwright, when *Dear Octopus*, the most enduring of her six successful 1930s plays, was still being performed to packed houses in the West End. Her name was in lights, and she never imagined that she was going into fourteen years of exile. In America, she made a handsome living from Hollywood, but she found California a 'meaningless' place, and felt screenwriting to be a prostitution of her skills. Only one new play, *Lovers and Friends*, made it to Broadway in 1942. She lived in a perpetual state of wretched regret about having left London, where she longed to be, her ear pressed to the wireless reports, avid for letters from friends with their accounts of air raids, furious at having denied herself the 'good copy' that Britain at war might have supplied her for her plays, if only she had stayed.

So she sat down at the desk facing the window in Anatole Litvak's splendid house at Malibu, with a magnificent view over the Pacific Ocean and the wide blue

sky, and began to write *I Capture the Castle*. It was the only one of her novels (she was later to write five more, as well as the children's book *The Hundred and One Dalmatians*) which was written with real inspiration, and packed with convincing characters, which have kept it in print and close to readers' hearts for more than five decades.

The origins of the story lay in the glimpse Dodie had had, one evening in 1934, of a mediaeval moated castle at Wingfield in Suffolk. She loved Suffolk villages; their thatched cottages and ruined manor houses. She began to conjure up a family living in penury in the dilapidated castle: a once-successful writer named Mortmain, now afflicted with writer's block; his second wife, Topaz, a former artist's model; and his two daughters, the beautiful Rose, aged twenty-one, and the sparky Cassandra, aged seventeen, who yearn for romantic attachments but fret at never meeting any marriageable men, 'even hideous, poverty-stricken ones'.

Of the Mortmains and Godsend Castle Dodie wrote, 'I knew that family; I lived in that castle.' It was a place where the past is 'like a presence, a caress in the air'. She lyrically describes 'the pool of light in the courtyard, the golden windows, the strange long-ago look that one sees in old paintings'. Cassandra's diary starts in a sixpenny notebook with the words 'I write this sitting in the kitchen sink', which became one of the most memorable opening lines in twentieth-century fiction.

The two girls and their schoolboy brother Thomas are growing impatient with their difficult, eccentric father, whose royalties have dwindled to nothing since the *succès d'estime* he had with an experimental novel called *Jacob Wrestling*, published just before Joyce's *Ulysses*. After a period in prison (following an odd altercation with a neighbour) he has become aloof, secretive, sarcastic, and shutters himself in the castle gatehouse.

Cassandra believes the iron has entered his soul. Her stepmother Topaz is a fey, almost ethereal presence, prone to waft about communing with nature in a shroudlike nightgown, or in the rain, naked under her mac.

Like the Fossil sisters in Noel Streatfeild's *Ballet Shoes*, they eke out every penny of expenditure and there is much making do and mending, and leaning on the kindness of others. The only income in the family comes from their lodger Stephen, a handsome young hired hand who dotes on Cassandra. She describes him as 'fair and noble-looking, but his expression is just a fraction daft'. All their fine furniture has gradually been sold, replaced with minimum requirements bought in junk shops: 'all we really have enough of is floor'. They have so few towels that 'on washday we have to shake ourselves'. Lighting is by candle (Dodie's favourite form of lighting throughout her life, even in her bathroom). Rose, 'a pinkish person' who 'looks particularly fetching by firelight' says she would marry the devil himself if he had money. When she declares that she will go on the streets if necessary, Cassandra retorts that she cannot go on the streets in the depths of Suffolk.

Their prospects and spirits rise dramatically with the arrival of two prosperous half-American brothers, Neil and Simon Cotton, and their American mother, landlords of the Godsend Castle estate and heirs of Scoatney Hall, the nearby manor house where the aroma is of flowers and beeswax. The girls' response, after the fashion of *Pride and Prejudice*, is predictably romantic: Rose is instantly determined to marry the elder brother, Simon, despite his unprepossessing beard.

But there is nothing predictable about the course of events, nor about the characterful and amusing personality of Cassandra, through whose eyes we see everything. As the vicar perceptively says of her, she is 'Jane Eyre with a touch of Becky Sharp. A thoroughly dangerous girl.' She may be fanciful, whimsical and even precious at times (with

her rituals of gathering wild flowers and dancing round a fire on Midsummer Eve) and while she is possessed of a guileless charm – on first tasting champagne she decides it is ‘rather like ginger ale without the ginger’ – she is also full of sturdy good sense: ‘O joyous night! It is my bathnight. I shall go down and be kind to everyone. Noble deeds and hot baths are the best cure for depression’, ‘I am feeling absurdly happy at the moment. Maybe it is because I have fulfilled my creative urge; or maybe it is the thought of eggs for tea.’ She views Rose’s predatory behaviour towards the men with a younger sister’s disapproval: ‘There were moments when my deep and loving pity for her merged into a deep desire to kick her fairly hard.’

Rose’s engagement to Simon duly changes everything. Even Stephen the handsome farmhand is taken up by a Cotton relative who determines to make him into a film star. Cassandra’s sixpenny notebook is replaced by a two-guinea book, bound in blue and gold leather, a gift with a fountain pen from Simon (‘But I seemed to get on better with a stump of pencil’) and when Rose goes to London to buy her £1000 trousseau, Cassandra is left to speculate that the fulfilment of one’s hopes might bring not bliss but ‘no kind of feeling’. ‘I wonder if there isn’t a catch about having plenty of money. Does it eventually take the pleasure out of things?... It does seem to me that the climate of richness must always be a little dulling to the senses.’ It certainly threatens to divide the sisters, as Cassandra is moved to turn on Rose’s cynical scheming with unaccustomed spite: ‘Oh go and sit in your bathroom and count your peach-coloured towels.’

Dodie finished drafting her novel shortly after the war ended, but even the longed-for peace did not rescue her from the anguish she suffered over the book; she was so anxious that her first novel should be a success after the long years of frustration and failure with plays. The revisions went on for two years, and tormented her. She

rewrote every line, under Alec's critical supervision, rehearsing every line of dialogue and unable to stop thinking about it, even in bed, waking each morning with a visceral dread, her mind throbbing with nerves and nagged by doubts. She felt she was disintegrating mentally and physically. But her industry was unflagging. She drew little sketches of the girls' bedroom in the tower (inspired by Margot Asquith's account of her girlhood with her sister Laura Tennant at Glen, their baronial, turreted ancestral home). Alec sharpened her pencils, made a model of the castle, questioned every detail of topography, and re-read the text dozens of times. Dodie's 100,000 word notebook on the progress of the novel records how each character developed, and how even the minor characters, down to the Mortmains' dog and cat, were kept in play. The ending remained uncertain. Dodie herself felt that it ended in a totally different way from what she had expected.

The painstaking labour paid off. Her novel was effortless to read, and an instant critical and popular success. Her Boston publisher sold it to the Literary Guild book club which subscribed half a million copies; the London publication in 1949 took it straight to the top of the bestseller lists. Two responses to her novel were particularly pleasing to Dodie. One was that of Christopher Isherwood, one of the friends she had made during her years in America, who had come to depend on her critical advice about his own novels. She had warned Christopher, with a studied insouciance, that it was 'just a little piece for Peg's Paper - written with a care that would not have disgraced Flaubert.' He responded with a treasured letter: 'To say "I couldn't put it down" is hardly original, but true... Your tremendous strength is detail. It is like a really good carving: the more you look at it, the more you see... I think it is a book that will be very much lived in by many people; because you can live in it, like Dickens.' He was charmed and moved by the episode in which Cassandra locks her

father in the tower to get him to unblock his talent and write. He felt that at times he had only just escaped being locked up by Dodie himself.

And at the end of 1949 the Malibu postman arrived on his motor scooter delivering the London *Sunday Times* which then, as now, ran a 'Christmas Books of the Year' feature in which celebrities named their favourite reading. There was Ralph Vaughan Williams's nomination: *I Capture the Castle*. To Dodie there could have been no greater honour, as she told him; she considered him the greatest living composer, and had been listening to his Mass in G Minor only the night before. His music personified England for her, and all that she was exiled from and nostalgic for.

However many times she told people in letters that her novel was mere Peg's Paper stuff she did care desperately about its reception. And she lived to know how long its appeal lingered. Although the play she wrote based on the novel (with Virginia McKenna exquisite as Cassandra, and Roger Moore, Bill Travers and Richard Greene as the three young men) lasted only four weeks at the Aldwych in 1954, the year she returned home, the book itself stayed in print, gathering new readers, often passed on by mothers and grandmothers recommending it to daughters and granddaughters.

By the time Dodie died in 1990, aged ninety-four, she was probably more popularly known for *The Hundred and One Dalmatians*, thanks to Disney's cartoon film. But when embarking on Dodie's biography in the mid-1990s, I kept being told by people that *I Capture the Castle* had been a seminal book in their lives. Antonia Fraser told me that the scene in which Rose is heard singing in her hotel room is one of the most erotic ever written; Armistead Maupin, whose English grandmother had given him the book when he was a boy in the American Deep South, paid homage to it by organising his 1993 novel *Maybe the Moon* along Cassandra's 'shilling notebook' lines. It was a favourite

book of Joanna Trollope and her daughters; and when J.K. Rowling erupted onto the literary scene with Harry Potter, she too named *I Capture the Castle* as the influential book of her youth. But its charm defies classification into reader age-groups; I read it aloud to my daughters before their teens, but also gave copies to several men of sixty or more, who were astonished to find themselves beguiled by the sharp wit and perception of Cassandra. I have never met a reader who wanted the story to end.

And when, after thirty-five years on the stocks of the Disney organisation (Walt himself had bought the film rights in 1963, after the success of *The Hundred and One Dalmatians*) *I Capture the Castle* was eventually made into a film released in 2003, the producers discovered in Romola Garai a young actress of eighteen who would play Cassandra to perfection. Romola had been given the novel by an aunt when in her early teens. Dodie would have loved to know that the novel, her finest legacy, had been passed down the generations in this way into the twenty-first century. She had, after all, entitled her own seventeen-year-old diary 'An Eye on Posterity'.

Valerie Grove, London 2003



# I

## The Sixpenny Book



*March*

# I

I WRITE THIS sitting in the kitchen sink. That is, my feet are in it; the rest of me is on the draining-board, which I have padded with our dog's blanket and the tea-cosy. I can't say that I am really comfortable, and there is a depressing smell of carbolic soap, but this is the only part of the kitchen where there is any daylight left. And I have found that sitting in a place where you have never sat before can be inspiring – I wrote my very best poem while sitting on the hen-house. Though even that isn't a very good poem. I have decided my poetry is so bad that I mustn't write any more of it.

Drips from the roof are plopping into the water-butt by the back door. The view through the windows above the sink is excessively drear. Beyond the dank garden in the courtyard are the ruined walls on the edge of the moat. Beyond the moat, the boggy ploughed fields stretch to the leaden sky. I tell myself that all the rain we have had lately is good for nature, and that at any moment spring will surge on us. I try to see leaves on the trees and the courtyard filled with sunlight. Unfortunately, the more my mind's eye sees green and gold, the more drained of all colour does the twilight seem.

It is comforting to look away from the windows and towards the kitchen fire, near which my sister Rose is ironing – though she obviously can't see properly, and it will be a pity if she scorches her only nightgown. (I have two, but one is minus its behind.) Rose looks particularly fetching by firelight because she is a pinkish gold, very light and feathery. Although I am rather used to her I know

she is a beauty. She is nearly twenty-one and very bitter with life. I am seventeen, look younger, feel older. I am no beauty but have a neatish face.

I have just remarked to Rose that our situation is really rather romantic – two girls in this strange and lonely house. She replied that she saw nothing romantic about being shut up in a crumbling ruin surrounded by a sea of mud. I must admit that our home is an unreasonable place to live in. Yet I love it. The house itself was built in the time of Charles II, but it was damaged by Cromwell. The whole of our east wall was part of the castle; there are two round towers in it. The gatehouse is intact and a stretch of the old walls at their full height joins it to the house. And Belmotte Tower, all that remains of an even older castle, still stands on its mound close by. But I won't attempt to describe our peculiar home fully until I can see more time ahead of me than I do now.

I am writing this journal partly to practise my newly acquired speed-writing and partly to teach myself how to write a novel – I intend to capture all our characters and put in conversations. It ought to be good for my style to dash along without much thought, as up to now my stories have been very stiff and self-conscious. The only time Father obliged me by reading one of them, he said I combined stateliness with a desperate effort to be funny. He told me to relax and let the words flow out of me.

I wish I knew of a way to make words flow out of Father. Years and years ago, he wrote a very unusual book called *Jacob Wrestling*, a mixture of fiction, philosophy and poetry. It had a great success, particularly in America, where he made a lot of money by lecturing on it, and he seemed likely to become a very important writer indeed. But he stopped writing. Mother believed this was due to something that happened when I was about five.

We were living in a small house by the sea at the time. Father had just joined us after his second American lecture

tour. One afternoon when we were having tea in the garden, he had the misfortune to lose his temper with Mother very noisily just as he was about to cut a piece of cake. He brandished the cake-knife at her so menacingly that an officious neighbour jumped the garden fence to intervene and got himself knocked down. Father explained in court that killing a woman with our silver cake-knife would be a long weary business entailing sawing her to death; and he was completely exonerated of any intention of slaying Mother. The whole case seems to have been quite ludicrous, with everyone but the neighbour being very funny. But Father made the mistake of being funnier than the judge and, as there was no doubt whatever that he had seriously damaged the neighbour, he was sent to prison for three months.

When he came out he was as nice a man as ever – nicer, because his temper was so much better. Apart from that, he didn't seem to me to be changed at all. But Rose remembers that he had already begun to get unsociable – it was then that he took a forty years' lease of the castle, which is an admirable place to be unsociable in. Once we were settled here he was supposed to begin a new book. But time went on without anything happening and at last we realized that he had given up even trying to write – for years now, he has refused to discuss the possibility. Most of his life is spent in the gatehouse room, which is icy cold in winter as there is no fireplace; he just huddles over an oil-stove. As far as we know, he does nothing but read detective novels from the village library. Miss Marcy, the librarian and schoolmistress, brings them to him. She admires him greatly and says 'the iron has entered into his soul'.

Personally, I can't see how the iron could get very far into a man's soul during only three months in jail – anyway, not if the man had as much vitality as Father had; and he seemed to have plenty of it left when they let him out. But

it has gone now; and his unsociability has grown almost into a disease – I often think he would prefer not even to meet his own household. All his natural gaiety has vanished. At times he puts on a false cheerfulness that embarrasses me, but usually he is either morose or irritable – I think I should prefer it if he lost his temper as he used to. Oh, poor Father, he really is very pathetic. But he might at least do a little work in the garden. I am aware that this isn't a fair portrait of him. I must capture him later.

Mother died eight years ago, from perfectly natural causes. I think she must have been a shadowy person, because I have only the vaguest memory of her and I have an excellent memory for most things. (I can remember the cake-knife incident perfectly – I hit the fallen neighbour with my little wooden spade. Father always said this got him an extra month.)

Three years ago (or is it four? I know Father's one spasm of sociability was in 1931) a stepmother was presented to us. We *were* surprised. She is a famous artists' model who claims to have been christened Topaz – even if this is true there is no law to make a woman stick to a name like that. She is very beautiful, with masses of hair so fair that it is almost white, and quite extraordinary pallor. She uses no make-up, not even powder. There are two paintings of her in the Tate Gallery: one by Macmorris, called 'Topaz in Jade', in which she wears a magnificent jade necklace; and one by H. J. Allardy which shows her nude on an old horsehair-covered sofa that she says was very prickly. This is called 'Composition'; but as Allardy has painted her even paler than she is, 'Decomposition' would suit it better.

Actually, there is nothing unhealthy about Topaz's pallor; it simply makes her look as if she belonged to some new race. She has a very deep voice – that is, she puts one on; it is part of an arty pose, which includes painting and lute-playing. But her kindness is perfectly genuine and so is her cooking. I am very, very fond of her – it is nice to have

written that just as she appears on the kitchen stairs. She is wearing her ancient orange tea-gown. Her pale, straight hair is flowing down her back to her waist. She paused on the top step and said: 'Ah, girls ...' with three velvety inflections on each word.

Now she is sitting on the steel trivet, raking the fire. The pink light makes her look more ordinary, but very pretty. She is twenty-nine and had two husbands before Father (she will never tell us very much about them), but she still looks extraordinarily young. Perhaps that is because her expression is so blank.

The kitchen looks very beautiful now. The firelight glows steadily through the bars and through the round hole in the top of the range where the lid has been left off. It turns the whitewashed walls rosy; even the dark beams in the roof are a dusky gold. The highest beam is over thirty feet from the ground. Rose and Topaz are two tiny figures in a great glowing cave.

Now Rose is sitting on the fender, waiting for her iron to heat. She is staring at Topaz with a discontented expression. I can often tell what Rose is thinking and I would take a bet that she is envying the orange tea-gown and hating her own skimpy old blouse and skirt. Poor Rose hates most things she has and envies most things she hasn't. I really am just as discontented, but I don't seem to notice it so much. I feel quite unreasonably happy this minute, watching them both; knowing I can go and join them in the warmth, yet staying here in the cold.

Oh, dear, there has just been a slight scene! Rose asked Topaz to go to London and earn some money. Topaz replied that she didn't think it was worth while, because it costs so much to live there. It is true that she can never save more than will buy us a few presents – she is very generous.

'And two of the men I sit for are abroad,' she went on, 'and I don't like working for Macmorris.'

‘Why not?’ asked Rose. ‘He pays better than the others, doesn’t he?’

‘So he ought, considering how rich he is,’ said Topaz. ‘But I dislike sitting for him because he only paints my head. Your father says that the men who paint me nude paint my body and think of their job, but that Macmorris paints my head and thinks of my body. And it’s perfectly true. I’ve had more trouble with him than I should care to let your father know.’

Rose said: ‘I should have thought it was worth while to have a little trouble in order to earn some real money.’

‘Then *you* have the trouble, dear,’ said Topaz.

This must have been very annoying to Rose, considering that she never has the slightest chance of that sort of trouble. She suddenly flung back her head dramatically and said:

‘I’m perfectly willing to. It may interest you both to know that for some time now, I’ve been considering selling myself. If necessary, I shall go on the streets.’

I told her she couldn’t go on the streets in the depths of Suffolk.

‘But if Topaz will kindly lend me the fare to London and give me a few hints—’

Topaz said she had never been on the streets and rather regretted it, ‘because one must sink to the depths in order to rise to the heights’, which is the kind of Topazism it requires much affection to tolerate.

‘And anyway,’ she told Rose, ‘you’re the last girl to lead a hard-working immoral life. If you’re really taken with the idea of selling yourself, you’d better choose a wealthy man and marry him respectably.’

This idea has, of course, occurred to Rose, but she has always hoped that the man would be handsome, romantic and lovable into the bargain. I suppose it was her sheer despair of ever meeting any marriageable men at all, even hideous, poverty-stricken ones, that made her suddenly

burst into tears. As she only cries about once a year I really ought to have gone over and comforted her, but I wanted to set it all down here. I begin to see that writers are liable to become callous.

Anyway, Topaz did the comforting far better than I could have done, as I am never disposed to clasp people to my bosom. She was most maternal, letting Rose weep all over the orange velvet tea-gown, which has suffered many things in its time. Rose will be furious with herself later on, because she has an unkind tendency to despise Topaz; but for the moment they are most amicable. Rose is now putting away her ironing, gulping a little, and Topaz is laying the table for tea while outlining impracticable plans for making money – such as giving a lute concert in the village or buying a pig in instalments.

I joined in while resting my hand, but said nothing of supreme importance.

It is raining again. Stephen is coming across the courtyard. He has lived with us ever since he was a little boy – his mother used to be our maid, in the days when we could still afford one, and when she died he had nowhere to go. He grows vegetables for us and looks after the hens and does a thousand odd jobs – I can't think how we should get on without him. He is eighteen now, very fair and noble-looking but his expression is just a fraction daft. He has always been rather devoted to me; Father calls him my swain. He is rather how I imagine Silvius in *As You Like It* – but I am nothing like Phebe.

Stephen has come in now. The first thing he did was to light a candle and stick it on the window-ledge beside me, saying:

'You're spoiling your eyes, Miss Cassandra.'

Then he dropped a tightly folded bit of paper on this journal. My heart sank, because I knew it would contain a poem; I suppose he has been working on it in the barn. It is written in his careful, rather beautiful script. The heading



is, ““To Miss Cassandra” by Stephen Colly’. It is a charming poem – by Robert Herrick.

What am I to do about Stephen? Father says the desire for self-expression is pathetic, but I really think Stephen’s main desire is just to please me; he knows I set store by poetry. I ought to tell him that I know he merely copies the poems out – he has been doing it all winter, every week or so – but I can’t find the heart to hurt him. Perhaps when the spring comes I can take him for a walk and break it to him in some encouraging way. This time I have got out of saying my usual hypocritical words of praise by smiling approval at him across the kitchen. Now he is pumping water up into the cistern, looking very happy.

The well is below the kitchen floor and has been there since the earliest days of the castle; it has been supplying water for six hundred years and is said never to have run dry. Of course, there must have been many pumps. The present one arrived when the Victorian hot-water system (alleged) was put in.

Interruptions keep occurring. Topaz had just filled the kettle, splashing my legs, and my brother Thomas has returned from school in our nearest town, King’s Crypt. He is a cumbersome lad of fifteen with hair that grows in tufts, so that parting it is difficult. It is the same mousy colour as mine; but mine is meek.

When Thomas came in, I suddenly remembered myself coming back from school, day after day, up to a few months ago. In one flash I re-lived the ten-mile crawl in the jerky little train and then the five miles on a bicycle from Scoatney station – how I used to hate that in the winter! Yet in some ways I should like to be back at school; for one thing, the daughter of the manager at the cinema went there, and she got me into the pictures free now and then. I miss that greatly. And I rather miss school itself – it was a surprisingly good one for such a quiet little country town. I

had a scholarship, just as Thomas has at his school; we are tolerably bright.

The rain is driving hard against the window now. My candle makes it seem quite dark outside. And the far side of the kitchen is dimmer now that the kettle is on the round hole in the top of the range. The girls are sitting on the floor making toast through the bars. There is a bright edge to each head, where the firelight shines through their hair.

Stephen has finished pumping and is stoking the copper – it is a great, old-fashioned brick one which helps to keep the kitchen warm and gives us extra hot water. With the copper lit as well as the range, the kitchen is much the warmest place in the house; that is why we sit in it so much. But even in summer we have our meals here, because the dining-room furniture was sold over a year ago.

Goodness, Topaz is actually putting on eggs to boil! No one told me the hens had yielded to prayer. Oh, excellent hens! I was only expecting bread and margarine for tea, and I don't get as used to margarine as I could wish. I thank heaven there is no cheaper form of bread than bread.

How odd it is to remember that 'tea' once meant afternoon tea to us – little cakes and thin bread-and-butter in the drawing-room. Now it is as solid a meal as we can scrape together, as it has to last us until breakfast. We have it after Thomas gets back from school.

Stephen is lighting the lamp. In a second now, the rosy glow will have gone from the kitchen. But lamplight is beautiful, too.

The lamp is lit. And as Stephen carried it to the table, my father came out on the staircase. His old plaid travelling-rug was wrapped round his shoulder – he had come from the gatehouse along the top of the castle walls. He murmured, 'Tea, tea – has Miss Marcy come with the library books yet?' (She hasn't.) Then he said his hands were quite numb; not complainingly, more in a tone of faint

surprise – though I find it hard to believe that anyone living at the castle in winter can be surprised at any part of themselves being numb. And as he came downstairs shaking the rain off his hair, I suddenly felt so fond of him. I fear I don't feel that very often.

He is still a splendid-looking man, though his fine features are getting a bit lost in fat and his colouring is fading. It used to be as bright as Rose's.

Now he is chatting to Topaz. I regret to note that he is in his falsely cheerful mood – though I think poor Topaz is grateful for even false cheerfulness from him these days. She adores him, and he seems to take so little interest in her.

I shall have to get off the draining-board – Topaz wants the tea-cosy and our dog, Heloïse, has come in and discovered I have borrowed her blanket. She is a bull-terrier, snowy white except where her fondant-pink skin shows through her short hair. All right, Heloïse darling, you shall have your blanket. She gazes at me with love, reproach, confidence and humour – how can she express so much just with two rather small slanting eyes?

I finish this entry sitting on the stairs. I think it worthy of note that I never felt happier in my life – despite sorrow for Father, pity for Rose, embarrassment about Stephen's poetry and no justification for hope as regards our family's general outlook. Perhaps it is because I have satisfied my creative urge; or it may be due to the thought of eggs for tea.

## II

LATER. WRITTEN IN bed.

I am reasonably comfortable as I am wearing my school coat and have a hot brick for my feet, but I wish it wasn't my week for the little iron bedstead - Rose and I take it in turns to sleep in the four-poster. She is sitting up in it reading a library book. When Miss Marcy brought it she said it was 'a pretty story'. Rose says it is awful, but she would rather read it than think about herself. Poor Rose! She is wearing her old blue flannel dressing-gown with the skirt part doubled up round her waist for warmth. She has had that dressing-gown so long that I don't think she sees it any more; if she were to put it away for a month and then look at it, she would get a shock. But who am I to talk - who have not had a dressing-gown at all for two years? The remains of my last one are wrapped round my hot brick.

Our room is spacious and remarkably empty. With the exception of the four-poster, which is in very bad condition, all the good furniture has gradually been sold and replaced by minimum requirements bought in junk-shops. Thus we have a wardrobe without a door and a bamboo dressing-table which I take to be a rare piece. I keep my bedside candlestick on a battered tin trunk that cost one shilling; Rose has hers on a chest of drawers painted to imitate marble, but looking more like bacon. The enamel jug and basin on a metal tripod is my own personal property, the landlady of The Keys having given it to me after I found it doing no good in a stable. It saves congestion in the bathroom. One rather nice thing is the carved wooden window-seat - I am thankful there is no way of selling that.

It is built into the thickness of the castle wall, with a big mullioned window above it. There are windows on the garden side of the room, too; little diamond-paned ones.

One thing I have never grown out of being fascinated by is the round tower which opens into a corner. There is a circular stone staircase inside it by which you can go up to the battlemented top, or down to the drawing-room; though some of the steps have crumbled badly.

Perhaps I ought to have counted Miss Blossom as a piece of furniture. She is a dressmaker's dummy of most opulent figure with a wire skirt round her one leg. We are a bit silly about Miss Blossom – we pretend she is real. We imagine her to be a woman of the world, perhaps a barmaid in her youth. She says things like, 'Well, dearie, that's what men are like,' and 'You hold out for your marriage lines.'

The Victorian vandals who did so many unnecessary things to this house didn't have the sense to put in passages, so we are always having to go through each other's rooms. Topaz has just wandered through ours – wearing a nightgown made of plain white calico with holes for her neck and arms; she thinks modern underclothes are vulgar. She looked rather like a victim going to an Auto da Fé, but her destination was merely the bathroom.

Topaz and Father sleep in the big room that opens on to the kitchen staircase. There is a little room between them and us which we call 'Buffer State'; Topaz uses it as a studio. Thomas has the room across the landing, next to the bathroom.

I wonder if Topaz has gone to ask Father to come to bed – she is perfectly capable of stalking along the top of the castle walls in her nightgown. I hope she hasn't, because Father does so snub her when she bursts into the gatehouse. We were trained as children never to go near him unless invited and he thinks she ought to behave in the same way.

No – she didn't go. She came back a few minutes ago and showed signs of staying here, but we didn't encourage her. Now she is in bed and is playing her lute. I like the idea of a lute, but not the noise it makes; it is seldom in tune and appears to be an instrument that never gets a run at anything.

I feel rather guilty at being so unsociable to Topaz, but we did have such a sociable evening.

Round about eight o'clock, Miss Marcy came with the books. She is about forty, small and rather faded yet somehow very young. She blinks her eyes a lot and is apt to giggle and say: 'Well, reely!' She is a Londoner but has been in the village over five years now. I believe she teaches very nicely; her specialities are folk song and wild flowers and country lore. She didn't like it here when first she came (she always says she 'missed the bright lights'), but she soon made herself take an interest in country things, and now she tries to make the country people interested in them too.

As librarian, she cheats a bit to give us the newest books; she'd had a delivery today and had brought Father a detective novel that only came out the year before last – and it was by one of his favourite authors. Topaz said:

'Oh, I must take this to Mortmain at once.' She calls Father 'Mortmain' partly because she fancies our odd surname, and partly to keep up the fiction that he is still a famous writer. He came back with her to thank Miss Marcy and for once he seemed quite genuinely cheerful.

'I'll read any detective novel, good, bad or indifferent,' he told her, 'but a vintage one's among the rarest pleasures of life.'

Then he found out he was getting this one ahead of the Vicar and was so pleased that he blew Miss Marcy a kiss. She said: 'Oh, thank you, Mr Mortmain! That is, I mean – well, reely!' and blushed and blinked. Father then flung his