



VINTAGE

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# THE RICH HOUSE

STELLA GIBBONS

VINTAGE CLASSICS

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## About the Book

Set on the eve of World War II in a resort on the east coast of England, *The Rich House* follows the love affairs of six young people and their intertwined adorations. Encircling their lives is Archibald Early, a once-famous actor, his housekeeper and his grandson Ted. These three tip the balance, and relationships shift, but even war cannot halt the passions of the young.

## About the Author

Stella Gibbons was born in London in 1902. She went to the North London Collegiate School and studied journalism at University College, London. She then spent ten years working for various newspapers, including the *Evening Standard*. Stella Gibbons is the author of twenty-five novels, three volumes of short stories and four volumes of poetry. Her first publication was a book of poems, *The Mountain Beast* (1930), and her first novel *Cold Comfort Farm* (1932) won the Femina Vie Heureuse Prize in 1933. Amongst her works are *Christmas at Cold Comfort Farm* (1940), *Westwood* (1946), *Conference at Cold Comfort Farm* (1959) and *Starlight* (1967). She was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in 1950. In 1933 she married the actor and singer Allan Webb. They had one daughter. Stella Gibbons died in 1989.

ALSO BY STELLA GIBBONS

*Cold Comfort Farm*

*Bassett*

*Enbury Heath*

*Nightingale Wood*

*My American*

*Christmas at Cold Comfort Farm*

*Ticky*

*The Bachelor*

*Westwood*

*The Matchmaker*

*Conference at Cold Comfort Farm*

*Here Be Dragons*

*White Sand and Grey Sand*

*The Charmers*

*Starlight*

To Gerald Trice Martin

STELLA GIBBONS

# The Rich House

VINTAGE BOOKS  
London



. . . . Everyday life—the practical life of each individual, with its home questions of health and sickness, of toil and rest, with its intellectual aspirations and tastes for science, poetry, music, what not, with its passions, loves and friendships—ran its regular course, without troubling itself to any serious extent about an alliance or breach with Napoleon. ...

LEO TOLSTOY: *War and Peace*.

## CHAPTER I

MRS. PASK WAS AN elderly widow living in the town of Seagate, where the meekness and simplicity of her nature caused her to be somewhat despised by her acquaintances.

One cold winter night she was standing at her drawing-room window. The curtains had been drawn by the parlourmaid two hours ago, and she felt a little guilty as she gently pulled one of them back to look into the street. But she did so enjoy looking out of the window! and especially on a cold winter night when there was not the smallest chance of her going out. Her favourite view in all Seagate was the Hotel Bristol seen against the Pier head and the Sunken Gardens, for she had watched them all being built, in the course of the years that she had lived in "Avonlea"; and she thought that they never looked prettier and more mysterious than on a winter night when the red light of the Northstone Lighthouse was flashing over the black sea—flash—then a pause, and suddenly the ruby spark growing in the darkness and again—flash.

This evening a piercing wind swept along the clean empty streets; the pavements and the lights in the shop windows and the black sky itself looked as if they had all been polished by the cold. The noise of the sea was loud. Mrs. Pask, bending her head a little forward to listen, almost thought that she could hear it through the glass of the drawing-room window. She could see nothing beyond the lights on the promenade except a darkness. That was the sea. The waves would be dashing forward into the light of the promenade lamps and bursting on the shore, spreading foam along the cold sands that had been smooth and untrodden (except for Those Beach Dogs) since the tide went out that morning. The rowing boats would be drawn up high for safety on the stone slope leading down from the pier.

Mrs. Pask sighed. A wild night by the sea had always excited her, ever since her girlhood in this very town fifty years ago. But nowadays she was Not Very Strong, and if she had said that she wanted to walk along the sands beside the dashing sea at night, everybody in "Avonlea" would have shrieked. Never mind, I can look out of the window until Jean comes in, she thought, smoothing down her dress, which had come from the Model Matron's Department at Boston and Lincoln's in Knightsbridge.

The drawing-room was in darkness except for the firelight. The little French clock on the mantelpiece ticked quickly, and everything was pleasant and peaceful. Mrs. Pask was enjoying herself: she turned to the window again.

Her house was on the Quiet Side of the High Street, but she had a good view of Cousin's the fishmonger's just opposite, and also of Just's Library.

The fish had been shoved away into the mighty refrigerator that was never cleaned at the back of the shop. The two fish boys, the hideous one who sang in the choir at St. Anne's and the very-good-looking one who was mad on football, were rinsing down the marble slabs. Reenie Voles, the cashier, was fumbling for change for a late customer and looking annoyed at being detained; she had her things on, and was all ready to go home.

It's a shame, thought Mrs. Pask, watching interestedly. She'll never get her shopping done. She's a good girl, though she is so fat and plain, poor thing. Not many girls would do all the shopping for their mother like that after a hard day's work. And *why* don't they wash those fish-scales off that little box she sits in? I do think Mr. Cousins might. I'm always meaning to speak to him. After all, I have dealt there for forty years. ... Perhaps Reenie doesn't mind them. But I should. I should always be picking them off.

Suddenly there was a faint slam! and Mrs. Pask started. It was the distant sound of the front door closing. She just had time to see Pauline Williams, Mrs. Williams's eldest

girl, going into Just's Library with that dog of theirs, before she glided rapidly away from the window and fell into, rather than sat down in, an arm-chair. At the same time she slowly reached out her hand for the *Radio Times*, looking with a smile towards the door.

It opened, and in came her companion, Jean Gaye.

"There you are, dear," said Mrs. Pask. "What a wild night! Is there a moon?"

"Yes, quite a gale getting up and bitterly cold. That means dead sparrows on the lawn to-morrow morning, I suppose. No, there's no moon. You would have seen it from the window just now if there had been. What a big fire! This new lot of coal burns very fiercely. Rather dangerous, I should think, and so uneconomical. But that's to Their advantage, of course."

Most people have a They. Some people, when they say They mean the Germans; others mean their relations or burglars or Communists. Miss Gaye meant the tradespeople.

"Come and get warm, dear, won't you? You must be frozen."

"No, thank you. I don't want to start my chilblains; they're late this year so I expect they'll be worse when they do come. Well, I saw Selby's and They'll call for the blankets on Monday."

"Not before then?"

"They can't. One of Their boys has run off, so They're short-handed."

"And it takes quite ten days to clean them!"

"A fortnight, They seemed to think. If I were you I should allow three weeks to be on the safe side."

"It's really very tiresome, the cold spell is going to last, it said on the wireless."

"You ought to have had them done before. It's leaving it very late, to send them in December."

"Yes."

“Yes. Well, I’ll go and take my things off.”

Miss Gaye then went upstairs to remove a miserable little hat of a suggestive shape, one of a family of such hats all in shades of beige that lived a dim communal existence in the drawer of her wardrobe. Some of them, as if maddened by the monotony of their days, had burst out into a nasty little coloured feather or a small hard loop of felt, but somehow these adornments made no difference to their general suggestiveness and misery. It was really a wonder, in this age of silly but pretty hats, where Miss Gaye had managed to acquire such depressives.

Mrs. Pask, left alone, stared into the fire and felt dashed. It was no use. Jean knew that she had been looking out of the window again. Now, if Mrs. Pask caught a cold, Jean would say as she always did on such an occasion: “It must have been that very cold night when you were looking out of the window.”

Miss Gaye, who was Mrs. Pask’s cousin, did not like Mrs. Pask to look out of the window. Miss Gaye liked scarcely anything except anticipating minor disasters and sombrely pointing them out when they arrived to those who had been trying to circumvent or ignore them. She also liked to pick holes; and she particularly disliked Mrs. Pask to indulge in pastimes which she called weird. “Do you *like* walking in the snow? How weird.” Miss Gaye would observe to some young enthusiast. “I’m afraid I’m very conventional in my tastes. I enjoy a brisk walk in the winter as much as anyone, if there’s no wind or frost, and it isn’t muddy or that stuffy oppressive heat, but I can’t say I like the idea of walking in the *snow*.”

It says much for the better qualities in human nature that Miss Gaye had reached the age of forty-nine without anyone trying to kill her.

I wish Jean didn’t mind me looking out of the window, thought Mrs. Pask, gazing into the fire. I’m nearly seventy and I haven’t many friends left now. I pay a good salary to

Jean and she has a comfortable home here, I'm sure. It doesn't *hurt* anyone when I look out of the window. I like to look at the people and see what everybody's doing, Reenie and Mr. Cousins and those two fish boys and Pauline Williams. It's something to do, when you can't go out at night or much in the day either because you're Not Very Strong.

And besides, why shouldn't I?

Pauline Williams pulled off her pixie-hood just before she passed the Hotel Bristol, and at once her brown curls blew out in the wind and the whole of her head felt cold. She endured it for a few minutes; then her ears began to ache, so she put the hood on again. She got neuralgia nowadays if she walked in a cold wind. It was annoying; when she was fifteen she used to walk for miles in a roaring gale along the shore and never get so much as a twinge. But now she was nearly twenty-two, and getting older made a difference, of course.

She had forced herself to walk past the Hotel Bristol.

When her mother had said at half-past five: "Pauli, change my book for me, will you? You might take Jumps, he'd like another run, wouldn't you, old man? And be as quick as you can, the Jamesons'll be here at seven," her heart had started to beat unpleasantly hard. For the quickest way to the library was past the Hotel Bristol, and for months, ever since the summer, she had been going the long way round in order to avoid passing the place.

But I can't go on like this for ever, she had thought, while she was tying the brown knitted hood in front of her mirror and putting on her new tweed coat (it was cold enough to-night to wear it, and besides it would cheer her up). I've got to go past the beastly place *some* time, and it's better to get it over by myself, at night, than when I'm with Mother or Marjie.

So she walked quickly past the long, cream-coloured, three-storied Victorian building with the fig-vine climbing along that veranda facing the sea.

On summer afternoons the large shadows of the leaves lay across the little tables, and it was so peaceful. Between the green tracery of the leaves the faraway sea showed faintly blue. The old waiter who did the teas on the veranda lounged against one of the iron columns supporting the vine, and read his *Daily Mirror*; and in the quiet it had seemed as if the music from the distant bandstand was made by some romantic gipsy orchestra and as if, in all the world, there were only two people.

But to-night, as Pauline glanced casually up at the hotel, she saw that the leaves were withered and the little iron tables were stacked at one end of the veranda. The blinds were not yet drawn over the lounge windows and she could see the two pictures, "Feeding the Swans" and "Two Strings to Her Bow" on the dark red walls and knew that on the other side were "Little Lady Bountiful" and "When Did You Last See Your Father?" There was the broad old table, with *The Field* and *The Lady* and the *North Essex Advertiser* spread on it. Two old ladies were sitting by the fire, with their knitting and one old gentleman. He looks fed up, thought Pauline, and I don't blame him. That lounge is frightfully old-fashioned; they ought to modernize it.

She walked quickly on.

Jumper rushed to the door of the library and turned on the very threshold to give her one of his dramatic looks. "Are we going in here? Am I right? Speak!"

"Go on, you flab," said Pauline, holding open the door for him, and he dashed into the shop.

"Good evening, Miss Williams," said Mavis Jevons, sitting at the library desk.

"Good evening," answered Pauline, to whom Mavis was only That Rather Pretty Fair Girl at Just's. "Isn't it cold!"

"Ever so cold. Still, it's seasonable, isn't it."

"Oh yes. I rather like it, really."

*(You have to walk straight into the wind and face it, thought Pauline. You can't moon about like you can in the summer. Cold weather certainly helps.)*

"I've brought this back for my mother," she went on.

"Oh yes, thank you. I'll just enter it. I've got her list." Mavis bent over the file. "Do you know what she particularly wants? I suppose she wouldn't like *I Was Hitler's Prisoner*? That's very good, they say."

"I'm quite sure she wouldn't, thanks. Have you read it?"

"Well, no, I can't say I have. The fact is, I like something—well, a bit more refined, really. And I like something to take you out of yourself, too. You want to forget what's in the papers when you open a book, don't you."

Mavis's voice was soft and shy and her small questions did not seem to require an answer.

"You do indeed, Well, don't bother, I'll just look round and find something."

Mavis returned to her work and Pauline went over to the fiction shelf, while Jumper lay down with his nose on his paws near the electric fire and watched her. The wind violently shook the door, making the gay clean jackets on the new novels, the bright lights, the tidy counters with red fountain-pens and Christmas cards and packets of blue or cream stationery, seem cosy.

Pauline's mother always said that she liked a nice story with plenty of descriptions and nothing disgusting and a happy ending only not too ridiculous; nevertheless, Pauline had almost insensibly observed that her mother seemed to read a good many books that were described by the *North Essex Advertiser* (if it ever got around to reviewing them) as Outspoken. This evening there did not seem to be many books about of the kind that Mrs. Williams officially desired, so her daughter chose one with an Outspoken bit on every other page and took it over to the desk.



*"Afternote to Experience,"* said Mavis. "Oh yes, thank you. That's very good, they say."

"Have you read it?" asked Pauline, standing by the desk and smiling down at her without much interest or feeling in the smile. Suddenly she felt desolate, though she knew at the same time that she was better dressed and better looking and healthier than That Rather Pretty Fair Girl.

"No, I'm afraid I haven't. I don't get much time, really. I'm not always on the desk, you see, I'm just doing it this evening because Miss Gordon is away ill."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

"It's only a cold."

"Well ..." said Pauline, and at the note in her voice Jumper quickly stood up, "I must get along. I expect this will do. I shan't read it myself, I don't get much time either. I'm crazy about Maurice Walsh's books but I haven't read any of his for ages. Come on, Jumps. Good-night."

"Good-night, Miss Williams." Mavis glanced at the clock while she was speaking and suddenly turned pink and bent over her work once more. Pauline turned up the collar of her coat and went out.

This time she did not go past the Hotel Bristol but went through the High Street (there was that fat cashier from Cousin's stepping through a little door in the shutters of Glory and Partners, the big grocers, with a basket crammed with parcels and tins, while one of the counter boys with a furious face dragged down the little door behind her). Pauline went down one of the quiet roads on either side of the High Street that ended on the sea front. Here there were the two kinds of hedge that are found in seaside towns; the kind with thick glossy leaves against which the wind pushes, and the kind with thin wispy shoots through which it hisses. When Pauline and her sister Marjorie were little girls they used to call the second kind "witches' hair."

Pauline held the book under one arm and put her hands in her pockets. The wind was so cold that she could not get

her breath properly. The roads were deserted, except for one or two cars parked outside houses with a red or yellow glow in the windows, and through the black yet transparent air, rushing to land on the wind, came the loud noise of the invisible sea.

Well, I've been past the place, she thought, running a little way to please Jumper. Now I've done it once I can do it again. And to-morrow I'll buy that hat at Noreen's. I *will not* let this business get me down.

The road curved as it came near several fields not yet built on, which seemed like the sudden end of the town and the beginning of the country. Just before she came to the darkness that lay over them, there was a long row of iron railings through which bushes and branches had thrust themselves and beyond this could be seen some tall gates of wrought iron. On the opposite side of the road was a row of double-fronted houses that presented a cosy and prosperous face to the night and contrasted with the darkness of the grounds opposite, which were resounding with the melancholy and beautiful sighing of massive trees.

As Jumper rushed past the gates he suddenly stopped and began to bark furiously, staring in through the delicate bars of twisted iron.

"Shut up, you idiot! It's only a cat," and Pauline hurried up to the gates to see what was exciting him.

She could make out nothing but the wide path beyond the bushes, grey in the dimness, but suddenly she saw something moving towards her and the next instant a young man—a boy—was standing with his hands on the iron bars, laughing at the dog, which he teased with one foot stuck between them.

"Hullo!" he said, lifting his head to look at her. His hair was so long that it blew about in the wind.

"Oh, hullo Ted! (shut up, will you, Jumps!) I haven't seen you for ages."

"It's Pauli, isn't it? It's so dark I can't see your face, but I know your voice," and he laughed; a laugh that was plainly a habit and not because he was amused. He always had laughed for no reason, and cried too, and both displays of emotion used to annoy Pauline, sensible little girl that she was, when he and Marjorie and she had played together on the beach when they were children.

"Yes, it's me. How are you, Ted? We thought you must have gone to college or got a job in London or something."

"I only left school last week so I haven't had much time to look for one, have I?" and he laughed again.

"What are you going to do now you've left school?"

"Well, Grandfather wants me to go on the stage——"

He suddenly stiffened his body, and held out both hands to the dark rustling trees while he chanted dramatically:

*"Once more unto the breach, dear friends——"*

"You know, that sort of thing," he ended, looking sideways at her and laughing.

"That sort of thing's a bit out of date nowadays, isn't it?" she said spitefully.

She was a little embarrassed by him, as usual; he said and did the craziest things that weren't even funny, and his looks and manners were so different from the kind she most admired in a young man that the contrast made her feel miserable, and she shivered suddenly as she stood there in the cold wind. Yet she was sorry too, for Ted Early, who had always been so clumsy and queer looking, with such an odd habit of laughing out loud as he walked along the street that he was called "that barmy Early kid" by half Seagate.

"Do you want to?" she asked, more kindly. She knew that people of her age, and younger, often hated the careers described by their elders as "*Such* a wonderful chance for Rosemary!" Besides, it was impossible to imagine that

great thump on the stage! Marjorie would shout at the very idea.

"Do I want to what? "He suddenly leant languishingly on the gate, gazing at her with his head on one side and an adoring expression.

"Go on the stage, of course." Pauline laughed for the first time that day. "You are an ass, Ted!" she added almost affectionately, for she remembered that even if he was always laughing himself he could make other people laugh, too.

"I shan't tell you," he answered after a pause. "It's a secret."

"All right. Be a mystery man if you want to. *Jumps! Will* you shut up! What on earth's the matter?"

The dog was staring at something in Ted's hand and whining with excitement.

"What's that you've got there, a torch?" she said, peering. He silently held it up; it was a cricket ball, but it glowed strangely. Jumper leapt at him, barking.

"Is that what you were doing just now, playing catch all by yourself? You'll get pneumonia." She bent to put on the dog's lead, looking up at the boy who was just visible in the darkness. One pale hand held the weirdly glowing ball, which cast a faint light upon his face, and the other clasped the slender bar of the gate, which was wreathed with iron leaves and grapes.

"I say, you do look extraordinary, like a prisoner in a film or something," she added. "Aren't you frozen without an overcoat?"

"I was bowling," he answered.

"Practising, do you mean?" Pauline was immediately interested. She delighted in games, at which she excelled.

"Yes." He held up the ball, gleaming with soft light. "Phosphorus. So I shan't lose it."

"What an absolutely brilliant idea!" she exclaimed, really impressed. "I say, do let me look."

He handed the ball over and watched while she curiously turned it about in her small sturdy hands.

"But why on earth do you practise at night?" she asked, giving it back to him. "I never heard of anything so weird."

"Grandfather," he said shortly in his other voice, the one he used when boys cheeked him in the streets or girls teased him.

"Oh Ted, don't be crazy! He lets you do just what you like, or he used to, anyway."

"Well, I don't want him to see me bowling, anyway."

"I think you're nuts."

"Thanks. I've got to go in now. Good-night."

"Good-night. I'm glad to have seen you again. Listen, do come over to tea one day soon, won't you? Mother and Marjorie'll be awfully pleased; we haven't seen you for such ages. Saturday about four is our best day. I'm at home that afternoon, of course, and Marjorie'll be in between the shows."

"Thanks awfully, Pauli, I'd like to. I'll come in the New Year. Well, good-night, lady fair!" and he made her a sweeping and awkward bow.

"Good-night. Come on, Jumps."

Ted walked off into the darkness, tossing the gleaming ball in the air, and she crossed her road to her home, which was opposite his.

When Pauline and Marjorie were little girls of six and seven, old Mr. Early, who used to be a famous actor years and years ago, had come to live at the big house opposite the Williams's home, with his little grandson and a dark thin woman named Louise Caller (who was supposed to be American or Spanish or something) to keep house for them. The two little girls had taken a half-fearful interest in the bony little grandson because he sometimes had screaming fits at night. They used to stand at their bedroom window with their arms round one another, shivering and staring

into the darkness and listening to the screams coming across the garden from the big house opposite.

But though the screams were frightening, there was no sinister mystery about their cause. Old Mr. Early neither thrashed his grandson nor stuck needles under his fingernails; he merely let him sit up as late as he pleased, eat salmon mayonnaise or veal and ham pie with coffee for his supper, and then march round the room to music from the gramophone until he fell exhausted on the carpet. When he did go to bed he not unnaturally suffered from night terrors. Louise was ready to explain this to anyone who chose to enquire. She would stand at the gate of the big house, with her dark hand clasping the hand of little Ted, and drawl away in her sweet voice with her eyes fixed anywhere but upon the shocked and eager eyes of her questioner. "His grandfather loves him too much, that's all," she would always conclude.

Pauline and Marjorie used to peer through the railings on their way home from school on summer afternoons, trying to catch a glimpse of the yellow brocade curtains at the long dark windows, or the cream and pink and purple flowers pressing against the glass of the conservatory. In those days the house, which was made of that dark brick which preserves its appearance of good repair longer than other materials, looked luxurious and the well-kept lawns and large flowering bushes were beautiful. Sometimes if Pauline and Marjorie were lucky they would see the-poor-little-boy-who-screamed bouncing his ball on the lawn, while Louise sat near him in a garden chair, sewing something white and fine.

The little girls used to talk over all these wonders (that looked so different from the things they had at home) when they were in bed at night, and their name for the mansion was The Rich House.

Poor old Rich House, it doesn't look very rich nowadays, thought Pauline as she crossed the road. The windows get

worse and worse (what *does* Louise hang up those bits of dyed rag for? They'd be much better with no curtains at all) and they never use the front door, and the dining-room must be fearfully draughty with all those broken panes in the conservatory. Whatever can it be like in the rooms they don't use? It simply *smells*; it's awful. Mr. Early ought to move into one of those new flats in Strathcona road; they'd be quite big enough for three. And fancy poor old Ted on the stage! I'm sure he simply loathes the idea.

She was just opening the gate of "Dorna" when she heard a car coming down the road. It was a noisy sports engine, the only one of its kind in Seagate, and she knew it well. She let the gate swing back and quickly stepped into the shadow of the hedge.

The car stopped outside "Dorna." A door opened, and a slim and lovely leg came out, followed by another, and then came a fur coat, and at last a fair head. Two voices, a man's, and a girl's that was soprano and emphatic, laughed together and exchanged "good-nights." Then the car drove away, and Pauline came out of the shadows and opened the gate.

"Good god, Jumps, you nearly killed me—get away, you nasty old man!" cried Marjorie, coming up to the gate with her handbag, her hat, an attaché case, and a part which she was studying in a crumpled brown paper cover, and fending off the dog with her foot. "Hullo Pauli—my dear! *who* do you think that was? The Son of Frankenstein!"

"Good heavens!" said Pauline rather loudly, as they went up the path together. "Do tell me, I can't wait to hear."

"Well, I was charging out of the stage door and someone said 'Would you like a lift?' and I said 'What do you think?' so he brought me home. Lots of back-chat, we had. I'm not sure if he knew who I was."

"Don't be crazy, of course he knew!" Pauline was opening the front door. "You danced together most of the

evening that time we went to the Bristol two years ago, anyway."

"Ah, but I've lost pounds since then. I say; he has got what it takes, hasn't he?"

"Definitely. Here's a postcard for you." She picked it up from the brass tray on the medieval chest and gave it to her sister, who read it.

The hall of "Dorna" did not smell. The little bits of sole, the skinny chickens, and unpretentious apple tarts that were cooked in the kitchen were not large enough to make smells. If they did make a faint one, it died in the kitchen in the company of Connie Letter, Mrs. Williams's maid, who had been taught to keep the door shut while she was cooking. In the summer, when the three ladies and the maid lived on modest salads and cut ham and dainty jellies in individual glasses, she was allowed to keep the door open. Mr. Williams had been dead for nearly four years.

"It's from that old so-and-so Cissie Curtis," said Marjorie. "Will I call on her to-morrow at eleven. No, I will not. Second leads twice nightly at Castleford for two-ten a week. I shall stay here, where at least I'm comfortable, until the New Year." She tore up the postcard and put the pieces in her pocket. "I should say Brian was definitely rather a swine though, wouldn't you?"

"Oh, definitely."

Jumper pattered along the passage and disappeared through a half-open door into the kitchen, where a female form was moving about preparing a meal. She said something to him; he responded eagerly, and then she shut the door.

"Pauli, is that you? What did you get me?" called a voice from the drawing-room.

"An outspoken one," called Pauline, beginning to go upstairs. "*Afternote to Experience.*"

"Pardon me?" said Marjorie, looking at herself in the triangular mirror over the medieval chest and shaking her



head over the untidiness of her hair-do (she tried never to frown, because frowns make wrinkles). "Mother, who *do* you think brought me home?"

"Who, dear? (Pauli, you know I can't bear that sort of book.) Do tell me, Marjorie!"

Pauline laughed; she was nearly at the top of the stairs, walking slowly, as if even she, twenty-two years old and accomplished at games, were tired.

"The Son of Frankenstein!" said Marjorie gaily, going into the drawing-room.

"That very good-looking boy whose father keeps the Hotel Bristol? Come and tell me all about it!"

Mrs. Williams was sitting over a rather resigned little fire. Marjorie put her possessions carefully down on a chair (she never threw her handbag or gloves about, no matter how casually she might seem to be treating them) and crouched over it and warmed her hands as she began to tell. Pauline heard the story beginning again as she shut her bedroom door.

## CHAPTER II

THE SHOPS IN the back streets of a town sit up later than those in the prosperous ones. When Reenie Voles turned aside into Lavender Road there were still several shops open down its length, and she was able to dart into a little ham-and-beef one and get the pickled walnuts after all! While she was in there she saw Mavis Jevons walk quickly past, with her nose in the air, as usual. (In fact, Mavis usually looked at the ground while she hurried along, but when Reenie said that she had her nose in the air she meant that she, Mavis, did not see her, Reenie.) Mavis lived in Mrs. Voles's house, and Mrs. Voles and Reenie disapproved of Mavis because she was proud and a hypocrite and no better than anyone else. Only people who were hypocrites and wanted to suck up to the Vicar went to church; real Christians stayed at home. Thus argued Mrs. Voles and Reenie, whose choice it was to stay at home.

Mavis was hurrying. A wide road called Church Avenue led into Lavender Road and at one end of it was St. Anne's, her church. This evening, of course, she had not been able to go to Evensong because of Miss Gordon at the library being away ill; she had had to do part of Miss Gordon's work; but she knew exactly where she would meet someone else who had been. He always took a short cut through Lavender Road on the way to his home in Station Road on the other side of the town.

She could see the church and a little group of people just coming out, while Mr. Pent, the verger, was shutting up for the night. The figure in the black robe slowly drew the doors to; and suddenly the beam of light from the open doors had gone, and the church, dark against the dark sky, stood with its steeple among the stars. The wind rushed down the street and the group of people came with it,

talking as they came. They were walking smartly and Mavis walked faster as she saw them.

It was all quite natural, really; she was on her way home from work and he was coming out of church, and after all, they did sing in the choir together. It wasn't as if they were strangers.

And now she was actually passing the little group of people. He was talking ever so interestedly with Mr. Reeves, but he noticed her and turned quickly, with a smile, and raised his hat:

"Good evening, Miss Jevons."

"Good evening, Mr. Somers." Her voice was a murmur carried away by the wind, but she smiled eagerly.

When she got to the gate of Mrs. Voles's house she lingered for a moment, watching him out of sight.

*Pretty smile that girl has.* The thought went through the head of young Mr. Somers (full, as usual, of Bach's music and Handel's music and Palestrina's music) as if it were itself a tune.

"Come in, if you're coming," said Reenie, not ill-naturedly, pushing open the gate while Mavis was still standing and gazing up the street. And she accidentally shoved her shopping basket past Mavis and out fell a tin of salmon. At the same instant Mrs. Voles, who had been hovering between the kitchen and the workroom in front of the house as she did every evening to see if her daughter were coming, charged slowly yet irresistibly out into the hall and flung open the front door.

"Come on, Reen, the chips'll be ruined!" exclaimed Mrs. Voles in a deep voice. "And we're nearly out of tea. Evening, Mavis. Did you get the salmon and the walnuts, Reen? Come on in, both of you, for goodness' sake, you're freezing me with that door open." As the two young women crowded into the narrow hall Mrs. Voles slammed the door, thereby securing victory for the smell of frying that had been wrestling with the fresh smell of the winter air.

"Oh Mum! Now I'll have to go out again!" said Reenie. "Isn't there enough tea for supper?"

"Oh, I daresay we can manage. Don't go out again now, it's perishing; you can pop round in the morning."

"O.K. I will. They open at eight."

Mrs. Voles and Reenie had good cause to know that they opened at eight, for there was seldom a morning that Reenie did not pop round to the shops for something, she and her mother having eaten—not more than they meant to, for they always ate as much as they humanly could—but all the food there was in the house.

The house was very small and Reenie and her mother were very large. As they went down the passage on their way to the kitchen they shut off the bright light and the cheerful red glow from the fire, and all that could be seen was their two massive forms moving along in the dim light to the sound of the chips sizzling. Neither of them took any more notice of Mavis, who went upstairs to the room which she rented from them at eight and sixpence a week.

She had chosen this room from many others five years ago, when she was looking for somewhere to live, because it had a pretty blue wallpaper and blue was her favourite colour. (Reenie had chosen it, for once overruling Mrs. Voles, who favoured a grey one with very large brown loops on it.) And from the three narrow windows that made an ungenerous little bay at one end Mavis had a glimpse, between the houses, of a dark blue line—the sea! That was enough for her; she took the room unfurnished, and moved into it, to the disgust of Mrs. Voles and Reenie, with only a divan bed and a suitcase, and here she had lived ever since.

Now it was her home, her pride, her refuge, the place where she could be peaceful and quiet.

The bed had a blue coverlet with apple blossom embroidered on it. There was a small fireside chair covered in blue, and a blue rug with roses on it; square, modern-sort-of-roses, but recognizable. The oilcloth was blue, like

the sea. There was a chest of drawers and a dressing-table on which Mavis was still paying instalments to the Cosyhome Furnishing Company, Ltd., and about which she dreamed at nights, waking up crying "I can't pay it—I can't pay it!"

It was annoying that she could not dream about what she wanted to dream about. Surely, when a person was thinking about one subject most of the day, they ought to be able to dream about it at night? But no, she dreamt about falling behind with her payments on the furniture.

On the landing there was a small zinc safe on a table, where she kept her food. There was also a gas ring. She had to fetch water from the bathroom on the next floor.

But Mavis never did much cooking. Lumps of steak, muddy potatoes, tins with jagged edges stained with tomato sauce, would have spoiled the prettiness of her room; so she lived on eggs and bread and butter and the unmessier fruits, and milk, and those emasculate little cheeses wrapped in silver paper. And she always felt sick when the smell of the Voles's cooking floated up the stairs—until she had had her supper, that is, and then the smell did not make her feel sick any more.

She got out a little folding table and a clean tablecloth and some blue and white china and pulled the curtains across the dark windows, and lit the gas stove. She arranged a lettuce, a hard-boiled egg, a banana and two of the little cheeses. Then she made some tea and toast, and took down Rupert Brooke's Poems from her shelf, and propped them against the teapot.

But before she began to read, she leant back in her chair and looked dreamily, for nearly five minutes, towards the mantelpiece.

There was only one photograph on the mantelpiece, a snapshot of the St. Anne's Choir on their annual outing last year. They were sitting in a big circle in a sunlit hayfield, laughing and holding up their teacups, with their eyes

screwed up against the strong summer light. Mavis was there, wearing the white linen suit that it had taken her nearly a year to save up for. She was laughing like everybody else, and she happened to be next to Mr. Somers—just while the photograph was being taken, of course; they had exchanged only twenty words and three smiles all that day. It was a good photo of Mr. Somers. He looked just like that when he smiled.

The photograph was unframed. The lightest head, resting upon a pillow, might damage a photograph in a frame if the photograph happened (as it usually did) to be underneath the pillow.

Mrs. Voles's kitchen was as small and hot as a stokehole, and this was not surprising because it really was a stokehole. It was here that Mrs. Voles and Reenie stoked themselves every morning and evening with unwholesome, indigestible and uneconomical food.

They ate and drank all the things the dieticians most disapprove of; golden chip potatoes, pink and silver salmon out of tins, slabs of rosy breakfast sausage, glistening black pickled walnuts, platefuls of spongy new bread, lumps of Best Fresh, blue mackerel drenched in vinegar, fat brown pickled onions, mounds of tinned beans, ropes of pork sausages bathed in tomato sauce, wedges of yellow Empire cheese, tinned loganberries swimming in coffee cream, pots and pots of tea the colour of burgundy with three pieces of sugar to every cup they drank, and bundles and bundles of spring onions.

Mrs. Voles seldom cooked a good nourishing joint or made a plain and sustaining pudding. Tins and the frying pan, like the Axis powers, ruled the kitchen. The more worthy vegetables such as carrots and spinach which are bursting with vitamins and pathetically eager to be properly cooked in order to do you good were ignored by Mrs. Voles and Reenie. "No taste to it" was the most awful verdict they could pass upon something to eat; and when