O. DOUGLAS

PRIORSFORD

O. Douglas

Priorsford

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CHAPTER I

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'*There's comfort for the comfortless*
And honey for the bee,
And there's nane for me but you, my love,
And there's nane for you but me.'

Witch Wood.

It was high summer in the Cotswold country, and the old house of Mintern Abbas dozed in the peace of the August afternoon.

At its back, beyond the home-woods, was a remote land of sheep-walks and forgotten hamlets; at its feet the young Thames, in lazy reaches, wound through water-meadows. The house itself was of Cotswold stone, grey and bleak in rain, but in summer honey-coloured as if it had absorbed the sun. It was as much a part of the landscape as a boulder on the hill-side. Built in many periods and many styles, it had been so subtly blended by time that it seemed a perfect thing, without beginning, as long descended as the downs that sheltered it.

The heat which had laid a spell on the place had evidently no effect on a group of children camped on a corner of the lawn sloping to the river. Two boys tumbled about with a cocker-spaniel puppy, while a fat little girl was absorbed in threading berries. On a wooden seat in the shade of the copper-beech their nurse sat sewing--a large woman with a broad comely face. Presently she spoke, and her voice sounded oddly in that English pleasaunce.

'Mind, Peter, that wee dog'll bite ye. Dinna torment the puir thing.'

Peter lay on his back holding the puppy suspended in the air.

'He can't hurt, Ninny: his teeth are too young; besides, the Black Douglas likes being tormented.'

'I doot it,' said Ninny dryly. 'Hoo wud *you* like if a muckle giant held you in the air like that?'

Peter twisted round to see his nurse's face as he said in an interested voice:

'Am I like a giant to Black Douglas? Ho, ho! Here comes Giant Cormoran. Fee-fo-fum, I smell the blood of a--black puppy with floppy ears.'

Peter stopped with a gasp, for the small Quentin had suddenly thrown himself on his brother's prostrate form, and for a few minutes there was an inextricable tangle of boys and puppy, the Black Douglas at last emerging triumphantly on top.

Suddenly Alison, the girl, who had shown no slightest interest in the mêlée, left her berry-threading and started to run up the lawn. In a second Peter was after her, and, as he was seven and slim and Alison was five and solid, he was soon well ahead of her.

'It's Mummy,' Quentin remarked, but did nothing about the matter, being well content to remain with Ninny, who was his providence.

'Ay, it's yer mother,' she said, watching the scene with kindly eyes. 'Peter micht hae let Alison beat him, but he maun aye be first, that laddie.'

The girl whom the children ran to meet seemed absurdly young to be their mother, a wood-elf of a creature, rather small and brown, very light and graceful. Her eyes were like moss-agates at the bottom of a burn, and there were yellow lights in her brown curls. She had hardly changed at all since that day, more than nine years ago, when, as Jean Jardine, she had married Lord Bidborough, and she stood now, her hands raised to shade her eyes, smiling at the

light-foot lad running so easily, and the fat little girl so earnest in her endeavour.

Peter flung himself at his mother's feet, laughing, while she held out her arms to her moist, crimson-faced little daughter who panted: 'Oh, Mummy, it was me saw you first.'

'But I *reached* you first,' said Peter.

'And so you should,' his mother told him; 'you're two years older and your legs are two years longer. Alison should always have a good start--that would make it fair.'

'All right,' Peter agreed. 'Come on, Alison, and I'll race you back.'

'It's much too hot for racing,' Lady Bidborough said, mopping her daughter's forehead.

Alison held up her face like a sunflower to the sun, saying gratefully, 'I do like your hankeys, Mummy. They smell like the leaves in the greenhouse that you pinch.'

'We're having tea in the Crow-Wood,' Peter announced. 'It was my turn to choose and I chose that because it's a place the Black Douglas can enjoy himself. Yesterday Alison chose the Dutch garden, and he sat on all the best flowers, and Mr. Webb was mad.'

'And he's eaten the claws off the tiger,' Alison said, making round eyes.

'The tiger?'

'She means the leopard, Mummy,' Peter explained. 'You know, in Daddy's own room--the one he shot in India or somewhere. They made him sick.'

His mother laughed. 'Puppies are like that: they want to taste everything,' and added: 'Here he comes,' as a black object was seen walloping towards them. 'Poor little fellow, he's all ears and flat feet.'

'He's *beautiful*,' Peter said, rushing to embrace his new possession, while Lady Bidborough, with Alison holding her hand, walked down the sloping lawn to where her youngest offspring played beside his nurse.

'And what's my baby thinking of things,' she said, sitting down with him on her knee.

'Mummy,' said Quentin, with a welcoming grin, but in a minute he had slid from her lap and made off after Peter and the puppy.

His mother looked after him rather wistfully.

'Ninny, he's quite a boy. I've no baby, now.'

'Weel,' said Ninny, with great good sense, looking critically at her seam as she spoke, 'ye surely wadna want him to bide a bairn. He's a steerin' callant, an' as gleg as a hawk; naething passes him. Speerity too, stands up to Peter. See that noo?'

Lady Bidborough laughed and sighed almost in one breath.

'It's quite true, Ninny. Of course it's mere silliness to regret the nursery days, but it's such a happy time and it's over so soon--How long have you been with us, Ninny? Seven years, isn't it?'

'Ay. I cam' when Peter was a month old. Me that kent naething about bairns, takin' charge o' the heir! I dinna ken hoo I daured!' Ninny laid down her work and looked at her mistress. 'Were ye no feared, Mem? . . . Of course your ain nurse stayed on till I kinna got into the way o' things--I was terrible handless at the stert.'

'Oh, no, Ninny, you weren't. The moment you took Peter into your arms you were just right--as I knew you would be when I saw you at Laverlaw and stole you from Mrs. Elliot.'

'Eh ay.' Ninny nodded reminiscently. 'I hed been there as laundry-maid for twae years when you cam' doon to the laundry ae day wi' Mistress Elliot. Ye crackit to me, I mind; askit aboot this an' that--sic a lassie ye lookit! I couldna believe it when they tell't me that ye were Lady Bidborough. . . . Then, a while after, the mistress sent for me to her ain room. I couldna think what she wantit wi' me; I thocht mebbe I was to get ma notice. An then she tell't me that her sister-in-law, Lady Bidborough, had got a little son, an' she

wantit me to gang awa' to England an' be his nurse. Me! I near drappit on the floor, I got sic a fricht.'

'No wonder!' Lady Bidborough shook her head at her own temerity. 'It was rather calm when you come to think of it, to demand a valued laundress from one's sister-in-law, and expect her to leave all her friends, and the place where she had been brought up, and come away to England to take unfamiliar and very responsible work! But, you see, Ninny, my need was great. All the nurses I interviewed were so highly-trained, so certain that they knew everything there was to know about bringing up a baby, so condescending to me, I knew exactly what sort of nursery they would make, and it wasn't the kind I wanted. I had so often thought of you as I had seen you that day at Laverlaw, in your spotless print, ironing the clean clothes, your face so kind and contented, speaking such soft, beautiful Tweedside Scots, and I just longed to have you here to look after my baby. So I wrote to my sister-in-law and asked her to sound you and see if by any chance you would consider it, but Mrs. Elliot thought it better to wait until Peter had arrived, and then she asked you plump and plain. And you took your courage in both hands and came--and you've been everything I dreamed of and more. From the first you made the nursery the happiest, serenest place: I always felt welcome, never an intruder: you've given the children quiet nerves and good health, and you've been the greatest comfort always.'

'Weel--' Ninny seemed rather at a loss. She took up her work, smoothing it out as she said: 'I'm sure I'm gled ye're pleased. . . . Of course I ken fine I've nae manners. I ca' ye "Mem," for I canna get roond "your ladyship," an' I speak terrible broad. . . .'

'But that's one reason why I wanted you--that the children might be familiar with the Scots tongue.'

Ninny shook her head. 'They're terrible English, puir lambs. Ye see, there's his lordship, an' you, an' Elsie in the nursery, an' a' the servants inside an' oot, a' speakin'

English, but I dae ma best, an' they ken what a' the auld words mean. Peter aye asks aboot it if he hears me use a new word: he's a great yin to speir----'

She was interrupted by a shriek from Quentin and sprang forward to receive and comfort her youngest nursling:

'Was Peter bad to ye, ma bonnie lamb? Wait an' I'll sort him.'

Peter strolled up unabashed. 'He was pulling the puppy's ears, so I pulled his hair to see how he liked it. He's not hurt, Ninny; he's only shouting for fun.'

Alison, who had begun again to thread berries, now looked up, saying: 'Mummy, come to tea with us in the Crow-Wood. You haven't been to tea with us for *weeks*.'

'Darling, both Daddy and I had tea with you on Sunday.'

'Well, but you hurried, and went away to give all the visitors tea in the drawing-room.'

'Why do visitors come to stay?' Peter asked. 'It isn't as if they were poor and needed food, like the poor tramps. Why don't we ask tramps to stay?' He did not wait for an answer but went and stood on his head for a minute. When he came back he had got on to a different train of thought. 'Where's Daddy?' he asked. 'I had my ride with Jim this morning.'

'Daddy went to London yesterday to see poor Uncle Tim, who is so ill.'

'Is he ill *still*?' Alison asked; 'and I put him in my prayers three nights.'

Alison's prayers were a great feature of the nursery life at Mintern Abbas. She insisted on saying them aloud and liked an audience. Every night she mentioned by name all her special friends; she also prayed for anyone who was ill, but was apt to become exasperated if an immediate cure was not the result.

'Why does Uncle Tim want Daddy if he's ill?' Peter wanted to know.

'Wouldn't you want Daddy if you were ill?' his mother asked.

'Oh, yes, but Daddy's my relation. He's not Uncle Tim's relation. Uncle Tim's not our real uncle, not like Uncle Jock, or Uncle Davy, or Mhor.'

'*Isn't* he?' said Alison.

'No.' Peter had been going into the subject of relationship with Ninny. 'To be a real uncle he'd need to be a brother of Mummy or Daddy, and Daddy hasn't any brother and only Aunt Pamela for a sister.'

'But, Peter,' Jean said, 'it's just because Daddy has no brother of his own that Uncle Tim means so much to him. They've been friends all their lives. They played together, worked together, travelled together, and fought together. Out in France, in the great fighting, when Daddy was lying with his leg broken, Uncle Tim, though he was badly wounded himself, managed to drag him into safety. So you see, none of us can ever do enough for Uncle Tim--.' She turned to Ninny--'I think it's the effects of that old wound that trouble him now. He seemed to get over the pneumonia all right, then there came one relapse after another, and now his nerves seem to have gone all to pieces, and that's the worst of all.'

Ninny looked serious. ''Deed it is,' she said. 'Bad eneuch for a woman but a heap waur for a man. I wadna thocht Major Talbot wud hae gone like that, he was aye so blythe and cheery-like.'

'Uncle Tim's my godfather,' Peter reminded the company. 'He sends me a present every birthday--a good one.'

'And you don't even say him in your prayers,' his sister reproached him.

'Oh,' said Peter lightly, 'I might put him next to Mummy and Daddy before I come to--Quentin, let *go* the puppy's tail.'

Lady Bidborough rose to go, amid protests, Alison remarking bitterly, 'Mummy *never* stays long enough.'

'I'm so sorry, darling, but Daddy may be back any minute now and I want to be on the doorstep to welcome him. . . .

Enjoy your picnic, and perhaps I'll bring Daddy out to the Crow-Wood after tea. Don't overfeed the puppy; it's mistaken kindness. Good-bye, my ducks.'

Jean walked quickly until she reached the rose-garden. From there she could see the bend of the drive and the approach of the car.

As she stood, in the warm delicious afternoon, among the roses, listening to the contented hum of the bees, knowing that every minute was bringing her beloved nearer, she sighed with sheer happiness.

From one rose-laden tree to another she went, bending over the blossoms, blush pink, pale yellow, glowing crimson, revelling in their sweetness, and humming to herself words that had run in her head all day:

'*There's comfort for the comfortless*
And honey for the bee. . . .'

Comfortless! She smiled as she thought of her brimming cup, then sobered, remembering those whose cups were empty of aught but bitterness. How strangely, almost waywardly things were portioned out in this world. Certainly it was not always the most deserving to whom the good things came. Perhaps--but this was not the moment to puzzle over the decrees of fate: the car was coming up the beech avenue.

She was at the door as it drew up, and in a second Lord Bidborough was up the steps.

'Jean, my blessed girl, what a refreshing sight you are! Yes, I am a bit hot and dusty. I'll change, if you don't mind, before tea. I shan't be many minutes.'

Lord Bidborough was forty-two, ten years older than his wife, but as he was neither fat nor bald, he still had the appearance of youth, and certainly he had the spirit.

'Well, this is good,' he said a little later, as they sat together in Jean's own room. She had appropriated it the

day she had come as a bride to Mintern Abbas, saying that it reminded her of the living-room at The Rigs. It was a small room, panelled, looking out over lawn and river and away across woods and meadows to the hills, and Jean had given it the touch she was able to give to any room she occupied.

Looking round it, her husband gave a satisfied sigh, saying:

'This room is so like you, Jean. I'd know it for yours anywhere. It's always meticulously neat--like yourself: a trifle austere perhaps.' He nodded towards a bureau on which stood the miniature of an old lady, with white hair and a mouth that folded sternly. 'Great-Aunt Alison dominates it, doesn't she?'

Jean looked at the miniature and smiled.

'Poor Great-Aunt Alison! I don't think she'd think the room very tidy; too many flowers; but I can't resist them against the old oak. . . . Am I very old-maidishly tidy, Biddy?'

'It's part of you: it goes with all the rest. You wouldn't be yourself if you allowed yourself to lounge, or if you smoked, or were loose in speech or manners. I like the hint of austerity.' He leant forward, smiling. '. . . I wonder if you remember a talk we had the day we were married, when you told me you thought it would be *stawsome* (you translated it as "rather sickening") if we had nothing to do but *love* all the time.'

Jean blushed and shook her head. 'Did I say that? Surely not.'

'Oh, yes. You said it. I was amused at the time, thinking it rather an unusual remark for a bride to make, but I've often thought of it since, when I saw couples, who began with raptures, shipwreck, or descend to a dreary jog-trot, having obviously lost all interest in each other. I realise the wisdom of having reserves. . . . Well, what have you all been about since I left you?'

'Tim is worse,' thought Jean to herself: 'Biddy dreads beginning to tell me about him. We'll talk about other things

till he's rested,' and she began an account of how she had spent the hours while he was away.

'I lunched yesterday with the Maynards: a large *hot* luncheon. After it the ominous words: "*Now* you must see the garden." It's dreadful of me, but I am so sick of garden, and oh, I know, it's like saying I'm sick of Spring or the Bible, but I can't help it. This summer has been so hot, and people's gardens are so large, and so similar. You wouldn't think you could get tired of herbaceous borders, but you can. And so many of them are making rock-gardens, and you're expected to poise on boulders and be intelligent. . . . The Maynards spare one nothing. We trailed, quite a party of us, along hot ashy paths, while Mrs. Maynard pointed out how large this blossom was, and what a wonderful colour the other. . . . I managed to ooze away before we reached the vegetables, and rushed home hoping to have tea with the children, but some people arrived--Americans--Doria Manson brought them. They asked to see over the house, and were nice, and interested, but it took so long that I only saw the babes at bed-time. . . . After dinner I sat here and wrote letters--worked off quite a heap--and thought of you in airless, August London.'

Her husband lit a cigarette and remarked: 'It's a very good imitation of the Sahara.'

'And poor Tim lying in that grim Home!' Jean went on. 'I do think if he would only make the effort and come here it would do him good. He could come in an ambulance with his own nurse, and he'd have perfect quiet. This house is so big the noise of the children would never reach him. And at least he would smell roses instead of disinfectants. Don't you think you could persuade him, Biddy?'

Lord Bidborough smoked for a minute in silence.

'No,' he said at last, 'he won't come here. I did suggest it, but I don't think he even listened. He was too full of his own plan. Yes. Something--nobody seems to know what--has roused him from the state of apathy he's been lying in all

these weeks. He's taken the most tremendous desire to be on a ship. He would be well, he thinks, if he could wake up and hear the water swishing past. And of course the doctors are only too glad to encourage him in his idea.'

Jean lifted a delighted face to her husband.

'Why, Biddy, that's *splendid* news! It means that now he will recover, for the sun and the sea will do wonders for him. Of course he'll take a nurse with him, and a doctor too, if he's wise. Oh, Biddy, how glad you must be! And I was thinking from something in your voice that he must be worse.'

Lord Bidborough carefully placed the end of his cigarette in an ashtray as he said: 'You haven't heard it all. Tim's idea is not only to get away from London--you can't wonder he loathes the place--but to get away also from doctors and nurses and everything that would remind him of his illness.'

'But he can't go *alone*,' Jean said, her hands clenching in her lap.

'No,' said her husband, 'he can't go alone; he wants me to go with him.' He got up and looked out of the window, and came back and sat down beside Jean.

'. . . You know how desperately unselfish Tim always was, never thought half enough about himself, but now it didn't seem to occur to him that I'd even hesitate. As a matter of fact I believe he's forgotten the years between, forgotten your existence and the children's; to him there's only the two of us again--and he needs me.'

Jean leant forward and straightened a rose in a bowl on the gate-table. Presently she said:

'Tim is quite right to forget everything but that, Biddy: I'd hate that he should remember me as an obstacle and a hindrance. Of course you must go with him. Will it--will it be for long?'

'All winter, I'm afraid. The doctors are keen on a long voyage, and he mustn't be back in England until spring. His own idea is to go to Canada, then on to New Zealand. . . . Of

course if he improved rapidly I might be able to leave him, but----'

There was silence in the room. Lord Bidborough smoked by the open window, staring at a scene he did not see, while Jean gradually realised what this would mean. She grudged even a day away from Biddy, and this would mean a whole winter out of their lives. A winter. Summer was delicious, but it was a restless time: they were much away, and when at home streams of people came and went. Winter was their own. How she loved the falling of the leaves, the first frosty mornings, the chilly grey-blue mists at twilight, the whistling wind! Mintern Abbas was such a perfect place in winter, she thought, so cunningly lighted; warm, with central heating for comfort and huge log fires for show; smelling deliciously of apples and chrysanthemums and burning wood.

The burden of a great house lay but lightly on Jean's shoulders. True, Miss Hart, the housekeeper, kept her place less because of her efficiency than because her mistress's heart was tender. She sat in her room and wrestled with accounts, but the house was really run by Mrs. Watts, the cook. Not only did Mrs. Watts keep everything going smoothly indoors, her beneficent influence extended to the village, where she was everyone's friend and comfort. Very large, very placid, nothing upset her, nothing was a trouble. She spoke little but listened with intelligence. With two such women as Mrs. Watts and Ninny, Jean always felt that she was armed against all slings and arrows of domestic misfortune. They had made such plans for the winter, she and Ninny and Mrs. Watts, plans to give every one a good time. . . . Already Jean was looking forward to the Christmas Tree and storing away gifts for it. . . . And the gully below the lily-pond that she and Biddy had meant to work at in the autumn and transform. And the--Oh, but there were a hundred things that would not be worth doing if Biddy were away. . . .

And as Jean realised all it meant she drooped so pathetically that her husband cried:

'Don't look like that, Jean, girl. After all, it mayn't be for long. I *may* be home for Christmas.'

Jean sat up straight, and, though her face looked pinched, she smiled bravely.

'Of course you may,' she said. 'Why, this is only August. When d'you sail?'

'Oh, there's nothing fixed. I had to see you first, of course. Probably September. I suppose I ought to be jolly glad to get the chance to do something for Tim, and I am glad, but----'

'There are no buts, Biddy. I'm glad, too. It was just when I remembered all we'd planned for next winter. . . . But we'll do them yet--if we're spared. (Great-Aunt Alison always made us add that. Why, I don't know, because if we weren't spared no one would expect us to do anything!) Anyway, nothing would have been much fun with Tim lying lonely and ill. That he should get strong again is what matters most. And now, let's go to the Crow-Wood where the babes are picnicking, and let's try to forget that there are such things as partings in the world.'

She took his hand and they went out together.

CHAPTER II

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'*Women never have half an hour that they can call their own.*'

Florence Nightingale.

'Biddy,' Jean said to her husband as they sat at breakfast next morning, 'Biddy, let's get all the plans for your going away made at once, and then we can banish the thought of it, so that the time we have together won't be spoiled.'

'All right, darling. There'll be the deuce of a lot to arrange. . . . Sausage? Bacon? Mushroom omelette? Cold ham?'

'Sausage, please. Yes, a tiny bit of bacon. One thing I know, you won't taste anything so good as sausages made by Mrs. Watts till you get home again.'

Lord Bidborough came back from the sideboard and sat down to enjoy his breakfast, remarking as he unfolded his napkin, 'That's a true word. But to me everything at Mintern Abbas is perfect, so whatever the wide world has to offer me will be second best.'

'Very nicely said, but it's the wrong spirit to go travelling in. Besides, you know you love wandering. Confess that the very idea of taking a steamer ticket thrills you! It always amazes me that you're content to be a stay-at-home. Have I tethered you, Biddy? I haven't meant to. When we were married I made all sorts of vows to myself about being unselfish and letting you go off on expeditions with Tim. It would ill become me to make a fuss and play the martyr now, when I've had nine undisturbed years of you.'

'You're not playing the martyr, blessed child. It's I who feel a martyr. I want to be tethered, as you call it. Taking it all round I suppose I've had about as varied a life as any man could have, but I can say with perfect truth those nine years have been worth all that went before--By Jove, these sausages are good! I must have another.'

'Sausages and sentiment!' Jean mocked. '. . . I've just realised that there'll be no stalking for you this year, poor lad. The children, too, will miss their time in Ross-shire. Pamela is so good to them and they adore the moors and burns at Kinbervie. Biddy, d'you think I should take the children to the seaside after you sail? It would be a melancholy kind of holiday, but it would brace them up after the hot summer.'

Biddy carried his plate to the sideboard, and when he was seated again he very deliberately buttered a bit of toast before he said:

'Jean, I've been thinking, wouldn't it be a good plan for you and the children to spend next winter at Priorsford?'

'At Priorsford?' Jean laid down her cup. 'But--but what about Mintern Abbas? Who would look after everything, the house and the gardens and--Oh, and the Institute, and the District Nurse, and the----'

'I know: that's just my point. They've got far too much into the habit of leaving things to you. It's high time somebody else took a hand. I know quite well if I leave you here all the people round will bully you into doing things--meaning to be kind, I admit. And this place would be a burden to you. I can see you creeping about at night after Simson has retired majestically to rest, trying the fastenings, and looking under sofas for possible burglars. You're scared at night, though you're too proud to admit it, and I'd hate to think of you alone in this big place, listening to the owls hooting. I confess I'd go away much happier if I knew that you and the children were comfortably settled in some place near Priorsford, with Pamela and Lewis within

call if anything happened to worry you, and people round that you've known since childhood. There's sure to be some place to let. I'll write to Pamela. Wouldn't you like the children to have a winter in Priorsford? Think of Ninny's delight!'

'Ye--es,' Jean said, 'it would be lovely in many ways--if I didn't feel a shirker.'

Her husband laughed. 'O Great-Aunt Alison! That conscience of yours!'

'If we went to Priorsford,' Jean continued, 'why shouldn't we go to The Rigs? You know we got electric light put in, and it's in perfect order. It would hold the children and myself and Ninny. Of course there would be the boys in the holidays, and----'

'And Miss Barton and her typewriter.'

'Yes. But we might get a furnished house quite near The Rigs and take a couple of maids and Elsie. I don't know . . . but it might be managed.'

'I'd like to think of you in The Rigs; and Mrs. McCosh is a tower of strength.'

Jean nodded. 'I'd like it to be The Rigs myself. It was nice of you, Biddy, to think of such a plan--but don't let's talk about it any more just now. We'll enjoy this summer day as if no black cloud were coming over our particular bit of sky. Are you fairly free? Could we do something with the children? . . . Here's a letter from Pamela. Isn't it odd that, when we are parched for want of rain, they are drowned out? She says they might just as well be in Lincolnshire for all they see of the hills! Mist to the doorstep. It is bad luck. And they've got such a large party, rather heavy in hand, I gather. Pamela says--where is it? Oh, yes. "*At present there is nothing to report but rain; it's like living in the middle of a wet sponge; everything squashy and dripping. Even the most ardent sportsmen are daunted, and show a tendency to sit about in the house. . . . The women aren't so bad. The wise ones stay in their rooms till luncheon, but the girls*

have a nasty trick of coming down to breakfast and hanging on my hands most of the day. In despair I suggested theatricals, a performance for the Nursing Association, and they have embarked on 'Quality Street,' chosen because there are several female parts--the female being always more ready for impersonation and acting than the male--(which sounds like a sentence from an eighteenth century novel)--and because Daphne Morris has played 'Phoebe' before. Fortunately I came across trunks of old dresses in the attics, and they are happily rummaging among them. Would it were September and you dear people here! I wouldn't care then whether it rained or snowed or blew--!" Pamela will be disappointed, Biddy.'

'Yes, and I'm sorry to miss Kinbervie, but, after all, that's a small part of the missing.'

Jean turned to her letters. 'I see they've sent the plans for the addition to the Cottage Hospital. They could be getting on with the work, couldn't they, even if----What is it, Simson?'

'Mrs. and Miss Marston in the library, your ladyship. They will not detain you more than a few minutes.'

Simson removed his portly presence, walking delicately as one long accustomed to slippery oak floors.

'Institutes,' said Jean resignedly. 'When I lunched at Lovell on Tuesday we talked for two hours on the subject. Mrs. Marston must have thought of something fresh to say.'

'But why should Mrs. Marston rise betimes and disturb people's breakfasts to talk about Institutes? Don't go till you've finished.'

'Oh, I finished long ago. I was just idling. Coming?'

'Lord, no, I'm taking Peter out riding at ten. Get rid of your visitors and come and see us start.'

Mrs. Marston was a woman of fifty who would have been strikingly handsome if her head had not been a trifle too large for her body. Her daughter Sara, a perfectly nice girl, was handicapped by a bad manner. She was very good-

looking, though Lord Bidborough, who shrank from her supercilious stare, said she made him think of Buffalo Bill and the Wild West, and christened her for his own satisfaction, *Rain-in-the-face*.

Mrs. Marston gripped Jean's hand with enthusiasm, and spoke rapidly in a high clear voice.

'How are you? Forgive this shamefully early call. No. No breakfast, thank you. Sara and I are on our way to London. An absurd place to go to in this heat, but Jemmy has chosen to arrive there this afternoon, and we couldn't have him unmet after three years' absence, could we? . . . My dear, how lovely this room is. Those flowers! And such a business-like writing-table! You have one side and your husband the other? Isn't it perfect, Sara?'

Sara, after a brief greeting, had begun to march about the room, staring at water-colour drawings of the three children ranged along the ledge of a bookcase, and pulling out a book here and there. She made no response to the remark addressed to her by her mother, who continued:

'What I came to say was that after you had left the other day it occurred to me that it would be rather a scheme if our Institute joined yours for the October meeting, seeing you are having a special speaker. I know our people do love to come here, and it would be a nice beginning of the Session for them. I shall be away for October myself, so it would fit in very well. . . . And then, didn't you go in for the acting competition last year? I wonder if you would come over and give us some hints? Or let us come and see you? It would be such a help. You are all so talented at Mintern Abbas, and Chipping-on-the-Wold has a lot to learn. Now please say yes, and Sara and I'll rush off and leave you in peace. No, positively I mustn't sit down.'

'Please do,' said Jean, 'until I explain. Since I saw you on Tuesday we've got news that changes all our plans. My husband has to go abroad for the winter with an invalid friend: I may go to Scotland with the children, and I'm afraid

the Institute'll have to look after itself. Luckily, there are several members quite capable of taking charge.'

Mrs. Marston sat down suddenly. 'Oh,' she said, and again, '*Oh*.' Then, 'This *is* bad news. I wish I'd never promised to be President. I was leaning on you, my dear.--Sara, isn't it dreadful? Lady Bidborough's going to be away all next winter in Scotland!'

Sara turned her piercing gaze on Jean and said:

'Scotland in winter sounds pretty foul. But it can't be worse than Chipping-on-the-Wold. Get up, Mother.'

Her mother rose obediently. 'I'm dreadfully discouraged,' she murmured. 'Of course it isn't your fault, and sick friends are so selfish, but you shouldn't be so helpful, really you shouldn't. Yes, Sara, I'm coming--Oh, could you write me out the names of some one-act plays? Nothing about dream-pedlars or Jacobites: something really funny without being low--you know the sort of thing I mean: suitable to a village audience.'

When the door had closed behind her visitors, Jean ran out to the garden to have a minute with the children before she interviewed the housekeeper. It was not her first sight of them, for she always took the nursery on her way down to breakfast. It made, she said, a good beginning for the day, the sight of the three small figures with the morning sun on their gilt heads, supping porridge vigorously, in a nursery from which, Peter boasted, you could see the young crows in their nests when the wind was singing *Rock-a-bye baby* to them.

She was in time to see Peter start off proudly with his father, mounted on a mild pony that could not be persuaded to curvet.

'Take care, my dears,' Jean cried. '. . . You'll find me in the library, Biddy. . . . Alison, you will soon be going out with Daddy, too.'

The child shook her head. 'Ponies have such slippy backs,' she said.

As Jean turned to go into the house she was told that the rector's wife wished to see her and was waiting in the hall. She sighed when she heard it, for Mrs. Turner, with the air of desiring above everything not to be a nuisance, was apt to put off much time.

'No, thank you,' the lady said to an invitation to come to the library. 'I won't think of coming further. I know how busy you are in the morning, but there was something I thought I ought to discuss with you, something that has worried me a good deal; in fact I have lost *sleep* over it; and I said to Herbert this morning while we were at breakfast: "I'll go and consult with Lady Bidborough," and he said, "I would most certainly".'

The Turners were a childless couple with a comfortable private income, who spent their own time worrying about trifles, and Jean's heart sank when she heard that she was to be consulted, for she knew it would be a lengthy business.

'Do sit down,' she said, 'and tell me what's worrying you.'

'No,' said Mrs. Turner firmly, 'I won't sit down. If I once sat down I might be tempted to sit too long.'

Her large earnest eyes were fixed on Jean's face as she said: 'I always think it is a crime to waste people's time, for I know how *precious* the hours are to me. Herbert said only yesterday that he did not know how I got through so much, but I told him it was simply because I map out every hour and never waste a minute. Yes. Breakfast at 8.30, then prayers: see cook: correspondence: flowers: visiting, and so on. Then when evening comes I can fold my hands--don't you think there is something very sweet and pathetic in the expression to *fold* one's hands?--and feel that rest is sweet at close of day to workers. . . . Herbert has just gone off on his bicycle to Woodford to see dear old Amelia. You know she was cook with us for long, and so interested in everything--the dear dogs and the church services. I could even leave her to do the flowers. But she began to get a

little *peevish*, poor dear: old servants are so apt to develop tempers, I can't think why, for housework is so soothing. At times she was quite rude to me. Yes, everything I said seemed to irritate her; wasn't it sad? I would have borne with her, but Herbert said "No." It was demoralising, he said, for Amelia herself, and bad for my nerves.' Mrs. Turner smiled wistfully. 'I used to get so upset when I received a snappish answer to a kind question, and she was just eligible for an old-age pension, so we got her a dear little cottage at Woodford which happened to fall vacant--so providential. . . .'

She stopped.

'Yes,' Jean prompted. 'You wanted to discuss something. . . .'

Mrs. Turner glanced round the hall and, lowering her voice, said, 'It's Mrs. Hastings.'

'Mrs. Hastings,' Jean reflected. 'Isn't that the nice woman who has come to the cottage by the ferry? I think she'll be a great help to the Mothers' Union.'

'But can we allow her to help, dear Lady Bidborough? She is not a widow as we supposed: I've found to my great regret that she is *living apart from her husband*. Of course, I have mentioned it to no one but Herbert: you know what *he* feels about the sanctity of marriage?'

Jean felt that at least she could guess, and a spasm of inward laughter seized her as she thought of that gentleman's decent, cod-like countenance.

It was with great difficulty that she persuaded the rector's wife that it was the kindest as well as the wisest thing to say nothing.

'You see,' she said, 'we don't know the circumstances nor what the poor woman has had to bear.'

'But is it *right* to pass it over? Is it not our *duty* to make it known?'

'I don't know,' said Jean, 'but it doesn't seem to me that it's ever anyone's duty to make things harder for another. I

think if you were specially kind to Mrs. Hastings----'

Mrs. Turner brightened: she liked to be kind.

'Yes,' she said, 'and Herbert might make a special point of preaching on the sanctity of the home, and the duty a wife owes to her husband. She might, who knows, see things in a better light. . . . I am so glad I came to you, Lady Bidborough. Now I must fly back to my neglected household.'

Jean walked with her visitor to the door, thinking what a decent soul she was after all, and regretting that she had so often found her tiresome and her Herbert dull.

'I wonder,' she said, 'if Mr. Turner likes grouse. He does? Then I'll send down a brace. They came from Scotland yesterday, the first of the season. . . . There's a chance that we won't be at Mintern Abbas this winter. . . . I think you've met our great friend Major Talbot? Yes. He has been very ill for months, and the doctors think that the only chance for him is a long voyage and a winter in sunshine. There is no one to go with him except my husband. . . . I may take the children to my old house in Scotland. It *is* a turn-up, isn't it?'

The rector's wife was aghast. 'What dreadful news! What shall we *do*? Mintern Abbas means so much to us all.'

'You will manage beautifully,' Jean assured her. 'I'll try not to put more on you than I can help. We'll arrange for speakers for the Mothers' Union and the Institute before I go, and make plans for the Christmas festivities. . . . I want you to be my almoner.'

Mrs. Turner's troubled face lightened a little.

'Of course,' she said, 'I'll do my best, but how we shall miss you and the children and all the cheerful bustle of this house! It keeps us all interested and alive. I don't really see how I can face having no one to come to for advice.'

Jean, looking about sixteen in a white frock belted with green, laughed aloud: 'You make me feel so old,' she protested. 'When I go back to Priorsford no one will think of

asking me for advice: they'll give it me--and I'll feel young again!'

'It's quite true, dear Lady Bidborough, quite true. You are really only a girl and we all lean on you. I was saying so to Herbert only the other night. . . . What Herbert will think of this news I simply *don't* know. I'm afraid it will quite spoil his lunch,' and shaking her head, Mrs. Turner departed.

That morning, one thing after another cropped up demanding attention, and it was nearly luncheon-time before Jean was free.

'Anyway,' she thought, 'I'll have Biddy to myself for lunch,' and, remembering that she had said she would do the flowers herself, she seized a basket and scissors and ran out to gather them. But about a quarter past one Simson came stepping delicately among the roses to announce that Her Grace the Duchess of Malchester and Lady Agnes Chatham were in the drawing-room. 'In the *drawing-room*, m'lady,' said Simson impressively. He only put the fine flower of the county into that sacred apartment: the library or the boudoir were good enough for ordinary callers.

Jean handed Simson the roses she had cut and went off to wash her hands, feeling rather out of patience with the world at large.

The Duchess of Malchester was a round, little woman with a soft voice and a merry laugh. She was consistently pleasant to every one, but as her circle was enormous and she had no memory for faces, she seldom knew to whom she was talking.

She kissed Jean affectionately as she said:

'It is really too bad of us to descend upon you like this, but the fact is Agnes and I have simply run away. Yes. You see this is our month for entertaining relations, and the house is packed with them--both sides; and they're all taking the opportunity to tell us home-truths--So ungrateful, isn't it? Last night, after dinner, my sister-in-law--Jane Dudley, you know--who doesn't play bridge, made me sit

beside her while she tore poor Agnes to pieces. At breakfast this morning--my dear, they *all* come down for breakfast!--an aged aunt on my father's side criticised me severely. We didn't know who would attack us at luncheon so we made off to find refuge with you.'

'We came to you, Jean,' Lady Agnes said in her soft deep voice, 'to have our feathers smoothed down: you're better at smoothing than anyone I know--Hullo, Biddy!'

Lord Bidborough remarked, after greeting his guests, that he thought they had a houseful of visitors.

'It's because of them we're here,' the girl told him cheerfully. 'We've just been explaining to Jean that the house is full of relations who all think they've a right to be rude. We thought we might just stand them at dinner if we'd had a rest from them at luncheon, and I said: "Let's fly to Jean." You've got rid of your lot?'

Jean laughed suddenly. 'I like,' she said, 'the note of true hospitality in that remark! We *have* got rid of them: in other words, we have parted regretfully from our delightful and delighted guests.' She nodded at Lady Agnes as she added. 'They were, you know.'

'But they weren't relations,' Lady Agnes insisted.

'No, but relations don't terrify us as they do you. We can count all ours that matter on the fingers of one hand.'

Jean held out her hand and ticked each finger off. 'Pamela and Lewis, Davy, Jock, Mhor. Five.'

Lady Agnes looked across the table at her mother, crying:

'Oh, Mums, aren't they lucky? We've got aunts and grand-aunts, and uncles and grand-uncles, all full of proper family feeling, all determined to spend some time every year under the family roof-tree. They look and dress like ordinary mortals, but they might have come out of the Ark so far as their ideas go. Nothing must be changed at Malchester. Though their own houses are quite modern and comfortable they resent any change there. We had

positively to fight for electric light and central heating--hadn't we, Mums? And old great-uncle John patrols the house in a dressing-gown every night, scared to death in case we go up in flames. I got the fright of my life when I met him at midnight in the Picture Gallery: I thought it was the family ghost.'

Lord Bidborough looked across at the Duchess. 'Does this romantic miss frequent the haunted gallery at midnight?'

That comfortable lady merely shrugged her shoulders, smiling. She was enjoying her lunch and her company.

'Tell me, Jean,' she said, 'when do you go to Scotland? Is it the very beginning of September?'

Jean looked at her husband.

'Alas!' she said, 'our plans are altered. Biddy is going abroad, and I am taking the children to Scotland for the winter.'

Lady Agnes laid down her knife and fork. '*What!*' she said. 'That's my last out-post gone! Jean, are you and Biddy going to separate. . . . And I *banked* on you two.'

'Really, my dear!' her mother warned her, 'you go too far. Jean--what has happened, my dear?'

'Biddy, you tell this time,' Jean cried. 'I seem to have been recounting it all morning.'

'What a nuisance,' said the Duchess, when things had been explained. 'I quite see that you can't very well do anything else, but still. . . And I was relying on you, Jean, to take Agnes out next winter and let me be lazy at home.'

'And *I* thought you'd help with the play we're doing in October,' Lady Agnes said; 'there's a perfect part for you. Oh! and my ball in December! It's too bad, Jean.'

'I shall miss you all sadly,' Jean said.

'I wonder!' Lady Agnes munched a salted almond and studied her hostess. 'Biddy, I think you're rash to let Jean go back to Priorsford. She loves it too well. . . . And there's something so very nymph-ish about her, I'd never be

surprised to find her becoming the shade under the beech-tree or whatever it was the girl became in the story.'

'Most unlikely,' said the Duchess comfortably. 'Though I'm selfishly sorry we're to lose you for a winter, I think Jean will be greatly the better of getting away from us all for a little. I hope you will get a rest from responsibilities, my dear.'

Her daughter scoffed. 'Not she! The Priorsford people--horrible creatures I'm sure they are--will have "the face ett off her." Are you going back to The Rigs? Really, Jean? Well, I'm coming to stay with you whether you ask me or not. Yes, I'm determined to see Priorsford with my own eyes, and Mrs. McCosh, and Bella Bathgate.'

Jean nodded. 'Of course. We'd love to have you. But don't come expecting too much, and be disappointed. I'd *hate* anyone who didn't appreciate Priorsford.'

When the luncheon guests had departed others arrived for tea, and it was not till dinner was over that the husband and wife could finish their morning talk.

'Wasn't I right, Jean, not to leave you here? As Agnes puts it, elegantly, the neighbours would have "the face ett off you!" You're too popular, my girl.'

Jean was leaning back in a chair by the wide open window enjoying the evening air that came in sweet with a thousand scents.

'Not so much popular,' she said lazily, 'as soft. It's easier for me to do things than refuse, and people have found that out--I've written to Miss Janet Hutton, Biddy, to ask if there's a furnished house to let for the winter near The Rigs. I didn't want to trouble Pamela when she is away. Besides, Pamela really doesn't know much about Priorsford. She and Lewis keep themselves very much to themselves in their green glen at Laverlaw. . . . Did you ring up the steamer people?'

Lord Bidborough came over and sat on the window seat.

'They can give us the accommodation we want on a ship sailing on the 25th September--the *Duchess of Inverness* or