

PROLOGUE

As a vicar of many years standing, I sometimes despair of the human race. Not always, but there are times when I wonder just why we do to ourselves the things that we do. As a species, we seem to enjoy inflicting pain and suffering on others. Not always. Not always. I tried to remind myself that it had been a bad week, one of those in any clergyman's life when he begins to wonder if he shouldn't take up something less stressful. There had been several incidents which I would rather have forgotten, or better still, rather not have had to deal with. Violence, attempted suicide, drunkenness, petty theft, vandalism in the church porch which would now have to be repainted, to mention only some of the events of the week. Occasionally, though hardly often enough, I come across the other side of human nature, that side which is much more common than many would have us believe, but which is very definitely a human characteristic, as much so as the darker side of us. So it was on one mid spring day, just at that time when everything is making an effort to come alive again after the rigours of winter. Well, almost everything. One of the main events of this particular day seemed to suggest quite the opposite.

It was a funeral, not my favourite work by any means. Somehow, it felt as though it should be raining, a common feeling at almost any ceremony of a similar type, but it wasn't. Instead, the sun shone bright in a cloudless sky, bringing warmth to a land starved of it during the recent winter months. Crocuses were already fading, their place being taken by daffodils. A soft, balmy breeze stirred their yellow trumpets, and moved the glossy green leaves already thrusting forth from tree branches as though impatient to be seen.

The party of mourners by the graveside moved to one side, tactfully allowing a woman, no longer so young, but not yet of full middle age to say her last goodbyes. She was formally, yet lightly dressed, as befitted the weather. Her face was pale, with dry cheeks now, for she had shed all the tears she would ever need for one she had loved so well. Again and ever again, her hand went unselfconsciously to a simple necklace she wore, fingers caressing the pendant at the end of its chain.

Watchers might have seen her lips moving. Careful listeners might have heard the words she half whispered, but a strong sense of decency denied any obtrusion into what had to be a very private moment. At length, she made her way to a cedar wood bench with a small brass plaque on its back, one of several donated over the years, and sank down on it, staring out at perhaps nothing, or perhaps something which only she could see.

I watched her for a while, then moved closer. In my experience, people need a little privacy at such times as these, but also need to know that someone is near. Being on their own for too long is not a good thing.

‘May I sit down?’ I said.

Her head moved slightly up and down. Taking the movement as a sign of assent, I sat down beside her.

‘Are you all right?’ I asked. It was a trite statement, but one has to say something, and that fits as well as anything. It is contact, or an effort to gain contact at any rate.

She shook her head. ‘No. I don’t think I’ll ever be quite all right again. On the other hand, I expect I shall learn to live with it.’

‘We all do,’ I said. ‘Eventually. Sometimes, it needs a little help. If there is anything I can do...’ I left the statement hanging in the air. It is possible to suggest, but I never like to make people think they are being pressured.

‘I think not.’

‘The church is always open, if you prefer quiet contemplation. And my door is always open too if you ever need anyone to talk to.’

She gave a weak smile. ‘Thank you vicar. It’s a nice gesture, but I’m a Catholic, you see. Only a nominal one, but Catholic anyway, more by birth than by conviction. I inherited it from my mother. It never meant very much to me. I was never even confirmed, and I never go to mass, haven’t done for many years. I suppose I shall roast for it, but I don’t care.’

‘We all serve the same God,’ I said. ‘The offer still stands.’ Catholic or anything else makes no difference to me. I see the person rather than their beliefs.

‘Thank you,’ she said again.

‘Your husband wasn’t a Catholic?’ It sounded like a question, but wasn’t. I knew the man slightly. Many people did.

‘Would it have mattered if he had been?’ she asked.

‘Not in the slightest. As I said, we all serve the same God.’

‘I’m not very sure what he was. He went to a Church of England School, that I do know, and must have been raised as Church of England if anything at all. I don’t think it mattered to him which church he was in. We were married in a Lutheran church. It was as good as any.’

‘It seems to mean something to you, when you brought him here’, I said. I knew they were not regular members of my congregation, a fact which didn’t have the slightest importance, but the Catholic connection had me puzzled. It wasn’t exactly usual.

‘It was what he wanted himself. He had a high regard for you personally. He thought you were an understanding man.’

‘That’s good to hear,’ I said. ‘I do my best.’

‘Yes, I know. He asked me to see to it, especially when he knew he didn’t have much longer.’

‘So he was a believer then?’

She gave a weak smile. ‘Oh no, vicar, not a believer, not in the sense you mean. There were a good many things he didn’t believe in, like blue skies, rain, sunshine. He saw them, accepted them as facts, that’s all, just as he accepted the existence of God, as a fact. Belief doesn’t enter into it.’

‘That’s a most unusual interpretation,’ I said. ‘I have heard something similar, but not couched in quite those terms.’

‘It wasn’t all acceptance of facts with him,’ said the widow. She rubbed her arms gently with her hands. ‘There was belief, strong belief. There were many things he believed in, things such as truth, honesty, fairness, cooperation, if that’s not a dirty word, and justice to mention only a few. Man made things, you see, things which can be unmade much more easily than they were created. He thought he had to believe in them, and work at the ideas too, otherwise they would go away and be lost, and the world would be all the poorer for it. He thought everybody should work at them, though he wasn’t naive enough to believe that everybody would. He was a realist in that way.’

‘He sounds to have been a more unusual man than I had realised,’ I said.

‘He was. I don’t think you’ll find many like him. We had longer together than I had any right to expect, much longer, but I never found anyone else quite the same either.’

She looked around her, apparently taking in the scenery, although it was not certain just what it was she saw.

‘How long were you married for?’ I asked, prompting what I thought was a need to talk.

‘Over twenty years. A long time. Yet not long enough. Never long enough with a man like that. I suppose that’s true for any happy marriage.’

‘He was... That is, there was a fair age difference between you,’ I said diffidently. That much was true, I knew, and had heard certain comments about it from members of my parish, people who should have known better, people who received a swift reminder about Christian charity. I regret I’m a bit sharp in the tongue when it comes to that sort of thing. No, that’s not in the slightest bit true. I don’t regret it at all. Certain things cannot be accepted.

She gave another smile, one a good bit stronger this time. 'You mean he was a lot older than me. Yes he was. Forty years, and that's rounding it off by a fair margin. It didn't seem so great, except towards the end when he grew weaker and less capable. Even then, he gave me the strength to continue. Of course, I always knew it would come. I always knew I would survive him. We never had any doubt about that. He was fit and healthy all the time we were together, but age tells, doesn't it? Twelve months ago he had a fall and broke his leg. Even that didn't seem to bother him too much, but he never really got over it and it slowed him down considerably. It was only natural ageing, that's all.'

She turned to me and looked me straight in the eyes. 'You know, he gave me all the stability I ever needed, even when I was caring for him over the past year. I didn't have a very easy childhood, you see. Oh, I'm not saying it was anything so very bad, some people have it much worse, but it was unsettled. Perhaps you know the sort of thing. Family fights, broken marriages which is pretty terrible in a Catholic family, even nowadays. My husband gave me all the love and compassion, all the help and care I think any child, anyone, is entitled to and which I had been missing in my life up to the time we met. In the end, he gave me everything.'

'It bothers you after all this time?' I asked. 'Your childhood, I mean?'

She sighed, gazing around with internally focussed eyes. 'Silly, isn't it? It shouldn't. I've had more happy years in my life than unhappy ones. Just the same, yes, it still bothers. It always did. I suppose our earliest memories are the ones that go deepest and have the most effect. That's what my husband always said, and he was in a position to know. He didn't have much of a childhood himself. Truth to tell, he had no childhood at all.' She smiled wanly. 'God made two of us, you see. No, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that. God isn't responsible for the actions of people. There is a choice. There is always a choice.'

She turned to me and studied me with clear eyes, studying my face as though searching for something.

'You know, I do believe I would like to talk to you after all. Of course, I told my husband everything, but that's not quite the same thing. There's a natural end to my life as it was right now, and I've lost my closest confidant. I'm not sure if it was all a dream, after all, and that I'm not going to wake up and find that what I think I remember never really happened. I'd rather like to tell it all again, get it sorted out in my mind, convince myself that I'm not dreaming.'

'I think you need to talk to somebody,' I said. Women often do, in my experience. It's the strong, silent men who try to pretend that they don't, and crack as often as not.

‘I do. I’ll talk to you, if you don’t mind listening,’ she said. ‘My husband trusted you, and that’s good enough for me.’

‘Then that’s good enough for me, as well,’ I said. ‘Besides, that’s what I’m here for. It’s not all Sunday services and one day a week of work. Would you like to come to the vicarage, or should I come to your own house? It may be more comfortable there in your own surroundings.’

She shook her head. ‘No. I mean, no thank you. It’s a lovely day, vicar. Well, lovely otherwise. Nice weather is what I mean. If you can spare the time, I’m ready to talk now. I’m not sure I could do it later.’

‘Of course. I understand.’

‘Where should I start?’ she mused. ‘It all began a very long time ago, just before my husband was born. But there, you see, there are two threads in the story. Perhaps I should start with the one most familiar to me. Of that, I can be reasonably sure of the facts. The other is partly supposition, but almost certainly true. We checked as much as we could over the years, and filled in the gaps with what seemed to be reasonable assumptions.’

CHAPTER 1

It wasn’t that she was a difficult child, but... there just has to be a but. There very often is. She wasn’t exactly easy, either. Her parents were, perhaps, the real problem, if problem there was. They were fairly conventional types themselves, holding conventional attitudes, reacting to any given circumstance with predictable behaviour. In the days when the Empire was still strong, when nice girls didn’t, before women’s lib was anything more than the germ of an idea, the Fosters were pillars of their local society, having no ideas of their own, and no attitudes beyond the, well, conventional. There simply is no other word that describes so well and so accurately.

Catriona, then, had been a disappointment. Not for anything she had done. Certainly not for anything she had not done. It was more for what she was. A girl. Not only a girl, but the elder child, as the boy, John, had come later. John. The son. The much wanted heir to the family fortunes. On his arrival, Catriona had taken second place, and had been brought up to consider that such was perfectly normal, and perfectly desirable.

It was only later that she began to realise, at first dimly then with growing awareness, that she may have been cheated. With good intentions, of course, always

with good intentions, but cheated just the same. Not that the matter worried her greatly. On the death of his father, John became manager, and shortly afterwards, sole owner of the family business. Catriona wasn't certain just what it was she wanted to do, but certainly it didn't include serving behind a counter, smiling at strangers and rubbing the hands together in a way which she always felt looked a bit smarmy. She always felt it was a bit off putting to customers. Certainly it always put her off.

Not that she was forgotten totally. Girl she might have been, but she was loved as much as the boy. Well, almost as much. On the death of her parents, she was left a few thousand pounds which went quite a long way at the time. And in addition - 'There's always a job in the High Street shop for you,' offered her brother.

'Thanks, John, but I think not. The business is yours. You've made it what it is. I'd just be another shop assistant. I think I can do something a bit better than that.'

Poor John. Brought up with old fashioned attitudes, he never saw the need to modernise, preferring to believe that personal service was sufficient. It wasn't. Oh, lip service was given to the idea, but in the end, it was self service that won the day. He retired twenty years too early, having lost the race between bankruptcy and death, bewildered at the failure of the business, incapable of understanding just why it had failed. Catriona helped out financially for a while from her own dwindling resources until those too ran dangerously low. Long before this state of affairs, however, Catriona did a short course in a college of further education as a comptometer operator, and even found work as such. The job lasted less than a year before she and her skills became redundant as a result of a booming computer industry in which the latest technology was permanently out of date by the time it reached the consumer. Directed to a shorthand and typewriting course, she found that nobody wanted her new skills either. In desperation, she took a couple of GCE 'O' level courses, but dropped out before the examinations as it became clear that she would never pass, let alone gain any respectable grade. The experiences embittered her and turned her sour.

She did as many women had done before her and sought refuge in marriage. But not just any marriage. It had to be something special, she decided. Not special in the romantic, moon, June, spoon way. Love? Well, yes, if it came along, but it had to be love with a practical aspect. Take Harry, for instance. Anybody, please take him. He's a bit of a nuisance, she thought to herself in her private and darker moments, knowing she was being unfair to him. He was all right in an every day sort of way, a bit quieter than she would have preferred, but always there at any rate. He was someone to fall back on when anything more interesting failed to turn up. She knew he would marry her if she agreed. She knew because he had asked, one day in a not

very romantic way, after one of their dancing sessions, while walking her home. Caught by surprise, still hot and tired from the evening's exercise, she had been foolish enough to say yes, but immediately regretting it, had asked him to keep it secret for a while. Wait, she had said, until we can afford to get married.

She sighed with a pensive sound. She was, when all was said and done, rather fond of Harry, and he seemed to be very fond of her in his quiet, unassuming way. In fact, it wasn't stretching the truth to say that he loved her. She thought that she probably loved him too, but nothing more than probably. Harry's trouble was that he was too quiet, too unassuming, too ready to let people walk over him. That his employer took him for granted was well known. That his friends, such as they were, hardly noticed his presence until someone was needed to do a piece of tedious work, was equally well known. Except to Harry, who seemed not to notice when he was being taken advantage of.

Catriona, of course, never took advantage of him. Or at least, she thought uncomfortably, hardly ever. Sometimes, she had cancelled a date with him in order to go out with somebody else with a bit more life in them. She understood why, of course. Being brought up in an orphanage, or whatever the modern term for the place was, meant that he never learned to express his emotions as freely as most. Not only that, it was in his character to be led. Or so she thought.

Catriona sighed again, bending from the waist to inspect her face in the mirror, then smoothing down her skirt, conscious of the fact that she looked as good underneath as she did on top. Why she bothered to dress well she didn't know. A matter of feminine pride, she supposed, since Harry never passed comment on how she looked at all. Certainly he appreciated neatness and tidiness, as his own appearance testified, but all her own efforts passed apparently unnoticed. She often wondered if she shouldn't cut her losses and give him up. Simon would take her on, she knew. Simon would marry her like a shot. So would one or two others with a little bit of encouragement. She was quite a catch, she knew, her parents being amongst the wealthier inhabitants of the town. She had no false illusions about that. The trouble was, she wasn't quite certain that she wanted to marry just to be a bed companion for someone. There had to be more to marriage than that. Love? Passion? Well, why not? Money and status wouldn't go amiss, either. On three of the four counts at least, Harry failed to meet the standards she had set. The doorbell rang. The door opened and closed. There was a murmur of voices, than silence again. Catriona went downstairs.

'Hello Harry. Dead on time as usual.' He stood on his own in the passage. Whoever had let him in hadn't thought to take him into the living room where it was more comfortable. Typical. As typical as Harry's being on time. Precise, that was

Harry. He never did anything out of the ordinary. He was so predictable, so ordinary, so boring. If she ever married him, this is what life would be like.

'Where to tonight, Harry?' asked Catriona.

'Well, where would you like to go?' he countered.

That was typical too. Not that he was incapable of making decisions, but preferred to leave such onerous tasks to others whenever possible. Well, at least, he never complained about her choices of activity. Not that she minded taking the lead, but there were some things a man should do for himself.

'It's a nice evening, Harry. How about a walk? I've been locked up in the office all day, and a bit of exercise wouldn't come amiss.'

'All right. I don't mind. I've been indoors myself.'

By unspoken but common consent, they wended their way out of town and along a lane that led round the back of the town, a favourite walk and resting place of many a young couple. Tonight, they had the countryside to themselves.

'I did hear,' said Catriona, 'that the quarry is going to be filled in. It's just about worked out. How about going up there and taking a last look before it disappears?'

'All right,' said Harry. 'I don't mind.'

He helped her across the stile like a gentleman, looking the other way when the breeze blew her skirts high. As a punishment, Catriona released his hand while walking across the field, not relenting until reaching the lip of the quarry itself. This time it was Harry who released hands. Catriona looked back in surprise.

'It's a lovely view from here, Harry. Well, a rather ugly view really, considering it's just an old gravel pit with some big machinery in it, but impressive anyway. Just look at the depth of it.'

'Er, no thanks,' came the reply. 'I'd rather not go too near the edge.'

She looked a question at him.

'I'm not very good with heights,' he explained. 'I can see quite well from here, though.'

Catriona sighed for the third time, and not, she considered, for the last time tonight either.

'Be careful, Catriona.'

She grimaced. Be careful, she thought. Good old stick in the mud Harry. She felt suddenly irritated.

'What's up? Afraid we might fall? If we go crashing down, people might think we've committed suicide. A lover's pact, you know. Where's your spirit of adventure, Harry?'

He smiled weakly, but said nothing. Oh well, what more did she expect? He'd never make anything of his life. Reluctantly, she came back from the edge.

'It's a beautiful sunset, Harry. Let's sit down here for a bit.'

He took his coat off and spread it for her to sit on. She accepted the offer gracefully, patting the ground beside her in a gesture of forgiveness as a signal for him to sit alongside, then smoothing out the coat in order to make it more comfortable. He was really rather sweet and very considerate in little ways like that, she thought. Something shiny caught her attention.

'What's that, I wonder,' she said, reaching out in the short grass. 'Why, it's an old coin on a chain. I wonder where that came from.'

Harry went tense. 'Let me see. Yes, that's mine. It must have fallen out of my pocket when I took my coat off. Give me it back, please.'

'Well, let me take a look at it first. It's a tiny one. What is it?'

'It's just an old sixpence, that's all.'

'Yes, I can see that, but what is it? A lucky charm or something. No, I know, it's a present from a girl friend. You've been playing me false, Harry, haven't you?'

'No, it's nothing of the sort,' said Harry, sounding slightly frantic. 'Please, Catriona. You've seen it. Let me have it.'

'Not until you tell me more about it. You're hiding something, Harry. No you don't.'

As Harry made a grab for it, Catriona closed her hand around the coin, and stood up, holding it high in the air and out of reach.

'It's mine now,' she said. 'You can have it only if you tell me all about it. It's a mystery, and I love mysteries. Come on, start talking.'

'Catriona.' Harry shifted from one foot on to the other. 'There is no story. No mystery. It's just a coin, that's all. Stop fooling about and return it. It's not yours.'

'Oh you are the limit, Harry,' said Catriona, suddenly losing interest. 'You're no fun at all. You can't take a joke. Here, keep your silly sixpence. I'm going home. You know where to find me if you want me.'

With that, she threw the coin at him. He reached out his hand, but failed to catch the spinning disc, which disappeared over the edge of the quarry. They could hear it tinkling as it hit something on the way down, then there was silence. Harry turned a stricken face to the girl.

'Where did it go? Where did it go?' he asked, rushing to the fence, vaulting it and peering over into the depths below. Small stones and tufts of grass crumbled under his feet, slipping and sliding down in a none too miniature avalanche as he scrabbled for a firm purchase.

'Harry!' screamed Catriona in sudden fear. 'Harry, you'll fall. The edge is giving way. Come back to this side of the fence.'

He took no notice, searching desperately this way and that.

'Harry. I can see it. It's on the crane. Come back here and I'll show you.'

He turned, almost agonisingly and joined her in safety.

'Where is it?' he asked.

'There, just where I'm pointing. On the crane, along the horizontal bit, about half way along.'

Sure enough, a sparkle of brightness could be clearly distinguished against a background of rust and dirt. The jib of the crane was high, and tucked in close to the side of the quarry nearest to them. The coin could be seen, its chain wrapped round a protruding screw head, only some fifteen feet or so away, but with a head swirling drop between it and the watchers.

'I'm sorry, Harry. I didn't mean to do that.' She drew in her breath. 'It's a good job it's not valuable. I'll give you another one.'

'It is valuable,' said Harry, with a curiously tight tone of voice. 'To me. And I don't want another, I want that one.'

'Well, you can't get it, can you? I mean, an olympic athlete might manage to jump across from here, but how he would get back again I can't imagine. It's lost, Harry. Accept it. I said I'm sorry. What more can I do?'

'You can watch while I get it back if you like. Or you can go home, as you said. It doesn't really matter. But I am going to get it back.'

Without a further word, Harry made his determined way along the fence to the steep path that led to the floor of the quarry. Catriona stood where she was and observed his progress, unsure of what he intended, feeling slighted at the brusque way he had spoken to her. That wasn't like him at all. It showed a side of him she had never suspected, and wasn't at all sure she liked, though if she was to be honest, something she had no intention of being, she felt that she may just have deserved it on this occasion. Harry reached the foot of the crane. Already he seemed pygmy size. Catriona looked in horror as he began to climb slowly and painfully up the vertical ladder fixed to the outside of the tower, step after step, resting at frequent intervals. After what seemed like a lifetime, he reached the top, and holding on wherever possible with both hands, he shuffled sideways along the jib, ducking underneath the cross girders as he came to them. He came to an unsteady halt, the jib rocking considerably from side to side in the strong wind that blew at that height, scores of feet above the ground, yet only a few paces away from Catriona's ashen face. He stooped with difficulty and reached forward with his right hand.

'Have you got it?' she asked with trembling voice.

'Yes.' The reply was short and strained. He looked down and closed his eyes, swaying with dizziness, then started the long journey back to the ground, a journey that took considerably longer than going up. Once he slipped, not far from the top,

and her hands went over her mouth as he hung by his hands, scrabbling furiously for a foothold. Catriona was waiting for him as he came along the path again. Her face was scarlet now, flushed with righteous anger, mixed with a release of the stark fear she had felt on his behalf.

'Are you satisfied now?' she scolded. 'What do you think you are? A circus acrobat? Why on earth did you do such a stupid thing? You might have killed yourself. How would I have explained that to anyone? Of all the pointless, idiotic, stupid things to do. And what for? An old coin of no value at all. Were you trying to impress me or something, because if so, it didn't work.'

She went on at great length for several minutes, hardly stopping for breath as she expelled her fright. Slowly she ran down and stopped, looking at Harry uncomprehendingly. Strangely, he made no effort to defend himself, but simply stood in front of her, silent and expressionless, shirt sleeve torn and smeared with black grease. His shoulders were drooped and his head hung slightly low. The coin dangled on its chain which he had placed around his neck as he returned to ground level. The metal glinted in the late evening sun. For a long time he stood like that, then opened his mouth and spoke quietly.

'I wanted my sixpence back. I've got it. Yes, I'm satisfied.'

Catriona spoke harshly. 'I'm going home, Harry. I can't take any more. Don't bother to come with me. I don't think I want to see you again. You frighten me.'

She turned and walked rapidly along the footpath leading away from the quarry. On reaching the stile she looked back. Harry was still at the other end of the field, not having moved, staring at her lifelessly. In anger, she fluffed her skirts well up above her knees as she climbed over the fence. Let him look the other way if he wants to, she thought savagely. I don't care. He's the one that's missing out, not me. I should put them up above the waist, then he'd have something to gape at. As if he would. As if he cared. He wouldn't know what to do with a girl if she offered herself free.

A solitary figure slowly came out of his trance like state and equally slowly walked back home to clean up and ponder on what had transpired that evening. He picked up the telephone on the following evening and rang a well practised number, putting down the receiver before the dialling tone had sounded three times. The day after, his figure could have been seen by anyone who cared to look, standing outside Catriona's house, finger poised over the bell. He left without pressing it. Twice he started writing, then tore up the offending page without finishing.

Two weeks passed. Fourteen dismal days. Three hundred and thirty six hours, or twenty thousand one hundred and sixty miserable minutes, give or take a quarter of an hour or so. For the third time, Harry took out a fresh sheet of writing paper,

staring at it as though the words he wished to express would miraculously write themselves.

At the other end of the town, quite fifteen minutes drive away if not getting stopped too often by traffic lights, Catriona left the house with a young man who resembled Harry in the sense that they both had the conventional number of limbs, but who otherwise had very little in common. Some hours later, she returned home and put her key in the lock, turning to wave briefly at her escort sitting in the car. She stood on the front step for a long moment, pondering on the events of the evening, remembering with mixed feelings how she had been kissed and how a hand had smoothed itself over certain parts of her body which were not normally available for caresses. It felt good to be wanted, but she couldn't help wishing that the hand had belonged to someone else. It was with a sense of unease that she realised she wasn't sure just who that someone else might be.

The front door opened and closed. A peek at the clock. Five past eleven. Catriona entered the living room, draped her coat over the sofa and sank into an armchair facing her mother. For a while there was silence apart from the hissing of the gas fire. Her daughter, thought Mrs. Foster, looks a little flushed. She has something to tell me.

'Have a nice evening, love?'

'Yes thanks, mum. Er... Simon proposed to me tonight.'

'Congratulations.' Mrs. Foster put her sewing down and glanced at Catriona sharply. 'Or is it too early for that?'

'Probably not. I told him I'd think about it.'

'Aren't you sure?'

'I don't know. Yes. Yes, I'm sure.'

'I see,' said the older woman placidly. 'Want a cup of tea?'

'No thanks, mum. I'll just go to bed. I'm rather tired.'

'Oh, I almost forgot. There's a letter for you. Over there, on the table. It came some time during the evening, though I'm sure I don't know exactly when.'

Wondering, Catriona picked up the envelope. There was no stamp, so it had obviously been delivered personally. Naturally, since there was no postal delivery in the evening. She recognised the writing. It was from Harry. Not being well paid, he didn't have a car, so he must have walked with it. Even if he took a bus to the town centre, it didn't save much in distance. A good three hour walk as a round trip. With a pang of guilt, she realised that he had often made the same walk in order to take her out, something she had all too frequently taken for granted, instead of picking him up in her own car, which she could easily have done. Oh well, it was too late now.

She fingered the envelope as she went upstairs, but didn't open it. It remained on her bedside table all night, accusingly. She woke up in low spirits, picked up the envelope again and began to tear the seal, desisting as soon as she had started. It was no good. She wasn't going to marry Harry. After the way he had treated her, she found it hard to forgive him. Excitement in life was all very well, but being terrified like that! No thank you. She wasn't certain that she was going to marry Simon, either, even though she had accepted both proposals. At least, she thought she had accepted Simon's. Oh Lord, what a mess. Help me to get out of it, please, she prayed.

Well, a start could be made, she thought with determination. She picked up Harry's letter and carried it downstairs, placing it on the living room fire, watching as it shrivelled and blackened to a fine ash. With frustration in her heart, she dressed swiftly and came back downstairs to search the newspapers. Her fingers flickered rapidly through the pages until she found what she wanted. Situations vacant. Shop assistant. Not on your life, she murmured to herself. I could have that without effort right here in the family business. Well, John's business, really. Another shop assistant. Still no good. Secretary. Not bad, but needs typing and shorthand. What's this? Train as a comptometer operator. Join the booming computer industry. Learn new skills which are in high demand. Help given in finding suitable, well paid jobs at the end of your course. Hm, sounds interesting, or would be if I knew what a comptometer was, she thought. Not that it matters. The course is in another town, well away from here. Scissors. Snip, snip. A glance at the clock. After nine. Telephone. Short conversation. Satisfaction. If nothing else, it would help to keep her out of the way of too many entanglements, entanglements she couldn't cope with. Better to make a fresh start.

CHAPTER 2

Her mother hadn't been pleased at Catriona's idea of leaving home, and wasn't slow to let her daughter know.

'I thought you might have spent a bit more time at home, now that I'm on my own,' complained Mrs. Foster. 'I don't know why you want to go gadding about so much.'

'It's hardly gadding about,' explained Catriona, not troubling to hide her impatience. 'It's a training course, and there's a job at the end of it.'

'There's a job in one of the shops,' said Mrs. Foster. 'Talk to John. He'll give you a job, I know he will. In fact, he'd rather have you than some of the dozy school leavers he has to put up with.'

‘No doubt,’ returned Catriona. ‘That’s supposed to make me feel wanted, is it? Let me tell you, I have no intention of working in a shop. Not John’s, not anybody’s. I want something a bit better than that.’

‘I’m sure your father wouldn’t have thought so.’

‘Are you sure?’ asked Catriona. ‘The business went to John, after all. Nobody even thought about offering it to me, even though I am the older. Oh, don’t bother to explain, I know my place. I’m just the girl. I mustn’t get ideas above my station. Well those days have gone, mother, gone for good. I do have ideas of my own, and I intend to put some of them into practice.’

‘Well, can’t you be a comp whatever it is for John?’

Catriona laughed, but without any great humour. ‘Comptometer operator. No, I can’t. It’s a totally different thing altogether. It’s office work, and I I don’t mean counting up sides of bacon, packets of cornflakes and pounds of sugar. It might suit John, but it doesn’t suit me.’

‘Your father and I worked hard to give you what you have now,’ grumbled Mrs. Foster.

‘My heart bleeds,’ said Catriona. ‘The only thing is, you didn’t do it for me at all. John got the lot, didn’t he? I was never even considered.’

‘Well, you don’t seem to want it.’

‘I don’t. Certainly not as an act of charity. I can’t stand the thought. That’s why I’m leaving home and making my own way in the world. Accept it, mother. Accept it, and I’ll come back. Eventually. When I’m ready. Otherwise, I might just be tempted to stay away for good. You can’t interfere with my life. Nobody can interfere with my life. I won’t have it. If there’s any interfering to be done, I’ll do it.’

It was in high dudgeon that Catriona left home and town. Finding somewhere to live took only a little time. She recognised ruefully that in spite of her desires to lead an independent life, such desires were all the easier fulfilled because of her father’s money. He had left her a fairly sizeable amount, and there was more to come, she knew, when her mother died.

Her flat was comfortable, having a kitchen, a living room and two bedrooms. One of these was admittedly small, but would serve to accommodate anyone she wished to have stay with her. She went on a spending spree, buying furniture, kitchen equipment and a fair number of decorative items to brighten the place up and make it feel as though it was all her own. She enjoyed shopping and cooking for herself, giving not even a passing thought to those who served her in the shops she despised so much. The feeling of freedom, of independence, was too heady to warrant a moment’s consideration for others.

Her training course wasn't as interesting as she had thought it might be, but was different enough to have an appeal of its own. At the end of the course, the promised help in finding a job was fulfilled, and she found herself in full time employment with scarcely a break. The work required intense concentration, but was otherwise frankly dull, consisting in the main of tapping out long lists of numbers on a seemingly endless amount of cards. What the cards were for she had only the haziest idea, but it didn't seem to matter. She was paid every week, and as long as she made no mistakes in her work, nobody bothered her. Once, just once, she was called into the main office for an interview with the manager, an interview that had left her seething internally. It had started badly when she entered the office and sat down. The manager had simply stared at her with a look of distaste.

'You wanted to see me, Mr. Fisher,' she said eventually, when a full minute had passed without his saying a word.

'I do,' he replied. 'I don't recall asking you to sit down.'

Catriona stood up slowly, her face reddening in half suppressed anger.

'That's better. Now, perhaps you would like to explain these,' he said, pushing over a stack of punched cards.

'I'm sorry,' said Catriona, not understanding.

'And so you should be, young woman, so you should be. Our work in this office may not be the most important in the world, but it is well that we should take it seriously. The odd error is understandable, even acceptable providing it is put right, but this work, your work, is so full of errors it's hard to discover just what it is you have done correctly.'

'I beg your pardon,' said Catriona, taken aback.

'Of all the careless, slipshod and negligent work I have ever seen in my career, this surely ranks amongst the worst. If you wish to stay with this firm, you had better pay far more attention to your job than you appear to do so. You will stay behind tonight and do these lists again, this time without error. They have to be ready for use first thing in the morning.'

'What? But that will take hours.'

'Probably. You should have thought of that before allowing your mind to wander during working time.'

'But I'm going out tonight,' exclaimed Catriona.

'Were you?' asked Mr. Fisher. 'As you please, of course. Will you call in for your cards, or shall I have them sent on?'

Catriona's face went red with anger, and her voice sharpened. 'Are you sacking me?'

Mr. Fisher smiled thinly. 'Let us rather call it constructive dismissal. It's entirely up to you. You have wasted the firm's time when you should have been working. I am simply giving you an opportunity to put things right in your own time. If, of course, you would prefer to seek employment elsewhere, I will do nothing to prevent you. If, on the other hand, you wish to stay here, then you know what to do. I am not an unkind man, Miss Foster, but I do insist on a fair day's work for your pay. You may go.'

Catriona returned to her desk, fuming and trembling with self righteous anger. She sat there for some time before looking almost unwillingly at the clock. Ten minutes before her official day ended. With a sigh of impatience, she pulled the long, long lists of numbers towards her, flexed her fingers and began work again. An hour passed. A door behind her opened, then closed once more. The sound of footsteps came to her ears, then a slight cough as she finished one sheet, turned it over and took another.

'The door is on the latch, Miss Foster,' said a well known voice behind her. 'Would you be good enough to see that it is properly locked when you leave?'

She simply nodded, not trusting herself to speak. Tomorrow, she vowed, tomorrow I'll start looking for another job.

What time she actually finished work for the day she never knew, but it was after eleven before she got back to her flat, tired and hungry, but oddly satisfied. If Mr High and Mighty Fisher found a single mistake in the work she had done that night, she promised to hand in her notice with immediate effect, even though she knew that her decision that she should look for another position was an empty one. There were fewer jobs advertised now than when she started. Another wouldn't be so easy to find.

Wearily, she bent down and picked up the post from the mat. A circular and two letters. The circular she threw away unlooked at. The letters were different. One was from Simon, the other from Harry. He must have been to see her mother, or perhaps John, to get her new address. She opened Harry's letter first, even before removing her coat. Taking out the several sheets of paper that were inside the envelope, she stood for a long moment, considering. With a series of swift, almost savage movements, she tore the unread letter into shreds and stuffed the pieces into the waste paper basket, the one with the bright yellow daisy handpainted on the side.

'No, Harry,' she murmured. 'I haven't forgiven you yet. I probably never will. Nobody treats me the way you did. Nobody. I looked for a bit more action from you, a bit more excitement, but I didn't want to be frightened half to death.'

She sat down and slit the envelope that Simon had sent. This one she read. It didn't take long, as he wrote more briefly than Harry's missives.

Dear C,

Thanks for your last letter. You seem to like your job, and being away from home, but I'm missing you. I'm coming over for the weekend by car. My cousin lives nearby, so he will put me up for a couple of nights. Let's go out on the town, and you can show me around. We have a lot to talk about. Looking forward to it. I'll arrive on Friday night, probably quite late, so I won't see you then, but I'll call for you early Saturday, say about ten in the morning. Perhaps we could see a film, if there's anything decent on.

Love, S.

Catriona lifted her eyes in despair to the ceiling. 'My name is Catriona, not C. I won't be an abbreviation for anyone,' she muttered to the uncaring walls. 'As for calling for me at ten o'clock, he's taking a lot for granted. I may not be in at that time. I just might have other arrangements. Not that I have any, but that can be changed quite easily.'

She went to bed, tired and dispirited, sleeping badly because of her still glowing anger at her employer, her irritation at being taken for granted by Simon, or S, as he seemed to prefer to be known, and Harry, who didn't seem to realise that it was over. Or, to be more accurate, Harry, who didn't seem to realise that it was never on in the first place.

Saturday arrived. During the week, Catriona had been extra careful with her work, and no further complaints came her way. She had scanned the situations vacant columns in the newspapers, but to no avail. There was nothing, simply nothing that she could envisage taking up. She was not going to be a shop assistant, on that point she was determined. There were very few office jobs available, and of those, a knowledge of skills she didn't possess seemed to be necessary.

Saturday. Something to look forward to at last. She arose early, breakfasted and tidied her flat with a little more care than usual. Choosing just the right clothes took a little time, but at last she was ready. She looked at the clock. It was a few minutes before ten. Simon would be arriving soon. While waiting, she investigated her feelings and found it hard to envisage a lifetime with Simon. He was all right in his own way, fun to be with, if lacking somewhat in consideration. He held down a decent job in a bank, and had ambitions of a minor managership before long, so financially he was sound. Of course, money wasn't everything, but you couldn't do much without it, she mused. It does have a certain importance. Any man she married would have to understand that, and understand the necessity of spending some of it on his wife. A lot of it, in fact. She smiled as she thought of what this weekend was

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