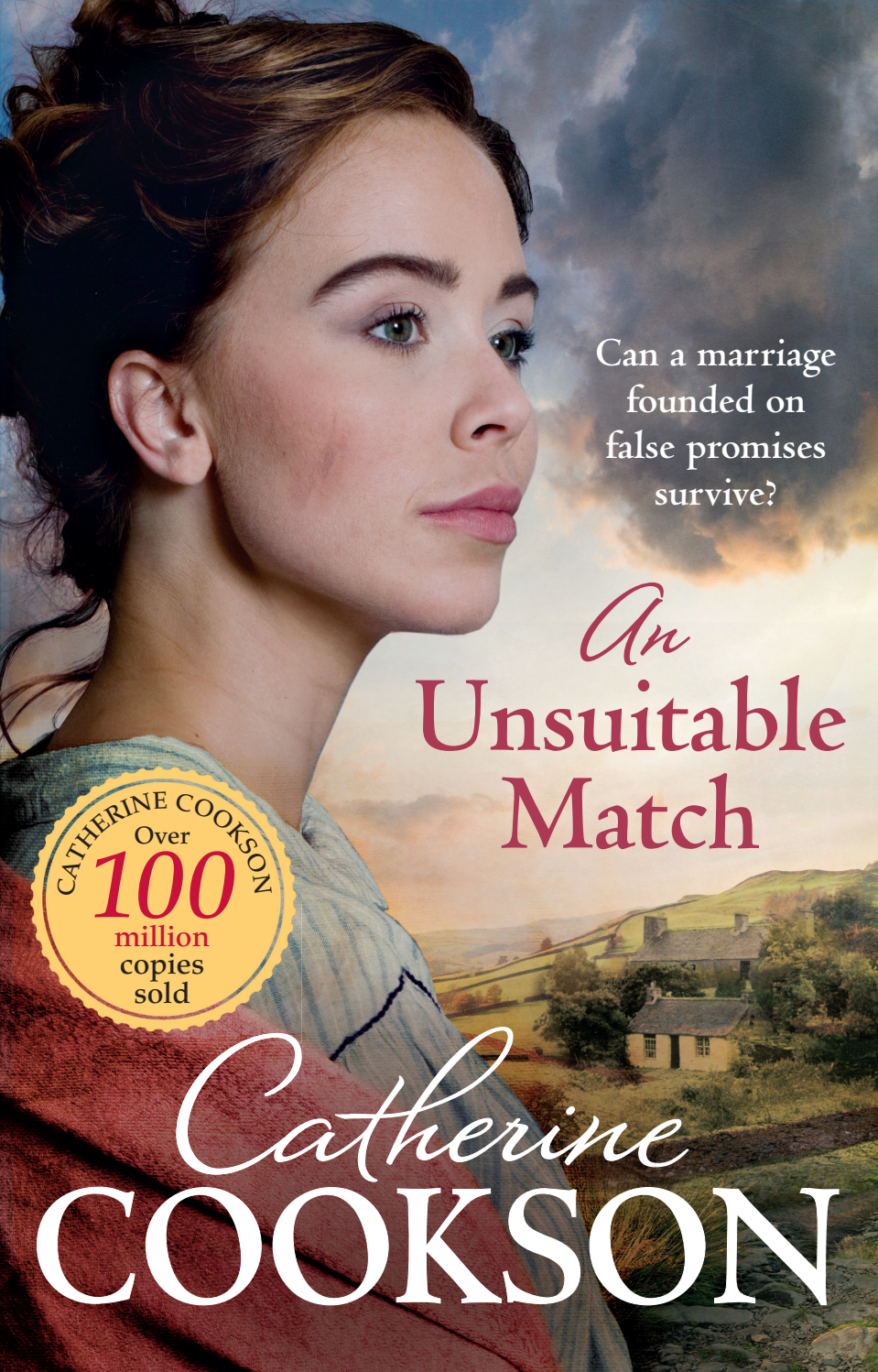
Can a marriage founded on false promises survive?
An Unsuitable Match
CATHERINE COOKSON
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Dame Catherine Cookson was born in 1906. She was the daughter of a poverty-stricken woman, Kate, whom she believed to be her older sister, and was raised in Tyne Dock by her grandmother and stepgrandfather.

From an early age Catherine was determined to become a writer. She wrote her first short story when she was eleven, sending it off to the *South Shields Gazette*.

She left school at thirteen and worked in domestic service and in a workhouse before moving to Hastings. Here she bought herself a house, taking in lodgers to supplement her income. At thirty-four she married Tom Cookson, a local grammar-school master.

During the next few years Catherine suffered several miscarriages and fell into a depression. She returned to writing to recover and joined the local writers' group for encouragement. Her first book, *Kate Hannigan* (1950), was partly autobiographical.

Although she was originally acclaimed as a regional writer, Catherine's readership soon began to spread around the world and her many bestselling novels were to establish her as one of Britain's most popular novelists.

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For many years Catherine and Tom lived near Newcastle-upon-Tyne. Catherine died shortly before her ninety-second birthday in June 1998 having completed 104 works, nine of which were published posthumously.

By the time of her death Catherine Cookson had received an OBE, the Freedom of the Borough of South Tyneside, an honorary degree from the University of Newcastle and the Royal Society of Literature's award for Best Regional Novel of the Year.

The Variety Club of Great Britain had named her Writer of the Year, she had been voted Personality of The North-East, appointed an Honorary Fellow of St Hilda's College, Oxford and created a Dame of the British Empire.

Catherine's novels have today been translated into more than twenty languages and more than 100 million copies of her books have been sold. Twenty-one of her novels have been televised starring such famous names as Sean Bean, Catherine Zeta Jones and Jane Horrocks.

Catherine Cookson was the most borrowed author in UK public libraries for twenty years – a sure testament to the ongoing popularity of her stirring, timeless novels.

An Unsuitable Match

Catherine
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The good die first,
And they whose hearts are dry as summer dust
Burn to the socket.

Wordsworth

PART ONE

1

Daniel stared up at his father and wondered why a man so old could still retain boyish habits, for his father wasn't sitting behind but on the edge of his study desk and was swinging one leg the while he talked to Pattie. When he had anything of importance to say he always talked to Pattie, never to him, perhaps because she was four years older, being thirteen now. Yet at the same time he knew his father very often got angry with Pattie, and he was showing signs of it now because his leg was swinging more quickly than usual. She had just said to him, 'Mother has only been dead for two years, and the house goes on the same way, so why . . .?'

'I know your mother's been dead only two years, but two years is a decent enough time to wait until one marries again. As for the house,

it isn't run as it was before: Rosie is a lazy bitch; the meals get worse.'

Daniel now turned his gaze on his sister, awaiting her reply, and she said, 'It's a big house. She has to clean the place, besides cooking now. And there were two other maids when Mother was alive.'

Daniel noticed his father's leg had become still; then he slid off the end of the desk, stood straight for a moment, before bending towards his daughter and saying, 'There were lots of things different when your mother was alive; for instance, you were spoilt. If you are finding the house dirty then you should bestir yourself and get a duster in your hand, if not a pail and mop, Miss Stewart.'

The plain fair-haired girl did not flinch from her father's stern gaze as she retaliated, saying, 'You sent me to school, the village one, but you could send Daniel, here, to a boarding school. Why?'

'Why, miss? Because he's a boy and needs special education, whereas you, all you've got to do is to prepare yourself for marriage.'

'I may not want to get married, Father. Not everybody gets married.'

'Those with sense do, child, so that they are enabled to run their own household. But if

you've decided already that you're not going to be married then you will have to make yourself useful in my household. Now, have you anything more to say, daughter?'

The boy watched them staring at each other; then his sister said boldly, 'Yes, Father. Why are you marrying Moira Conelly? She's a relation, isn't she? Moreover, she's Irish.'

Hector Stewart drew in a long breath; then turning sharply to his son, he said, 'You have a sister, boy, who's going to find life very hard, for already she is proving to be a finnicky, pestering female. But I shall answer her questions and enlighten you too. I am going to marry Moira Conelly because I happen to like her. As for being related to her, her father was my father's half-cousin. Now when you're doing your mathematics, work that out. As for her nationality, you both know' – he now jerked his head towards his daughter – 'that she is Irish, for she has spent two holidays here, hasn't she? That was when your mother was alive.'

Daniel spoke for the first time: a slight smile on his face now, he said, 'She lives in a castle, doesn't she, Father?'

Once more Hector Stewart drew in a long breath before returning his son's smile and

saying, 'Yes, Daniel, in a way she lives in a castle, but it isn't as we think of a castle. Nevertheless it's called a castle.'

'She is old.'

Hector's head jerked back towards his daughter as he demanded, 'What do you mean, old?'

'She must be twenty-five.'

'Yes. Yes, she is all of twenty-five years. And you consider that old?'

Pattie did not seem to be able to find an answer to this, and her father, his expression softening now and his voice too, said, 'Wait till she comes: you will grow to love her; you won't be able to help yourself for she's such a happy soul. She will lighten this house.'

When again Pattie seemed unable to find anything to say, or perhaps she had considered it expedient to keep her opinion to herself, her father said, 'Well now, time's getting on. This young gentleman is for the road to his school tomorrow. Go and help him pack.'

'I've already packed, Father,' Daniel said.

'Oh, you have, have you? Ah well.' He straightened his shoulders, buttoned the middle button of his collarless jacket, then looking from one to the other, his manner a little awkward now, he said, 'I have work to do.

I'm away to the farm. And you, Pattie, I would suggest you go to the kitchen to see what mess Rosie has concocted to present us with at supper time. As for you, boy: as it is your last night at home for a while I'll leave you to your own devices.' And on this he unbuttoned the middle button of his coat again before marching out of the room.

Daniel turned to his sister. Her usually pale face was flushed, indicating she was in a temper, and his voice had a soothing note as he said, 'I remember her, Pattie. She was jolly, and she made me laugh. You might get to like her. And Father said she's bringing her maid with her, and she is a working maid, so you may not have to do any work at all.' He put out his hand and took hold of hers, and now her voice came strange, almost a whimper, as she said, 'You won't be here, Dan. You don't know what it's been like since Mother died. He never bothers with me, and there's nobody to talk to, that's why –' she now paused and, lowering her head, shook it before going on, 'when I do get the chance I keep asking him questions, just to make him talk to me.'

'I shall write to you from school.' Daniel's tone was tender.

She looked at him, her eyelids now blinking

rapidly. 'It isn't the same,' she said.

'Haven't you made friends at school yet?'

'Oh, that crowd. Betty McIntosh, Theresa Holmes, they're stupid, dull, and the boys are like clodhoppers. As for Miss Brooker, she doesn't know how to teach. I could teach *her*. Mother taught me my tables when I was four. As for being able to tell the time and count up to a hundred, and reading, I can't even remember learning those things. Mother was so advanced in her knowledge. But that school! Huh!'

She now threw off his hand as if getting rid of the whole school and its occupants. And when she turned away he had the urge to pull her back and put his arms about her and hold her close, to comfort her and at the same time be comforted himself.

He now followed her out of the room, down a passage and into a stone-flagged hall from which the shallow oak stairs rose. And he watched her hesitate at the foot of the stairs, then shrug her body about and make for the kitchen door at the far end of the hall.

Daniel walked to the front door and so out on to the flagged terrace that bordered the front of the house. He walked to one of the two small stone pillars that headed the six steps which led

down to the gravel drive and, laying his forearms on the flat top, he gazed away over the expanse of his father's farmland.

The house was situated on a rise and this gave a view of the patchwork of fields straight ahead and also of those stretching away to the right. To the left there was a cluster of buildings obscuring the view, behind which he knew there to be the five cottages. But away beyond the cottages the hills rose, as they did for some way behind the house, thus giving some protection against rain, sleet and the north-east winds.

Daniel did not know why, loving this house and its surrounding land as he did, that it should make him feel lonely. He had been thinking of late that if, like his sister, he had a probing mind, he would have already been given the answer. All he could tell himself was that he needed something, but he would never allow himself to go as far as to think that what he needed was to hold and be held.

He recalled the day they had buried his mother and the strange thought that had come into his head as he stood by her grave, for it was true she had never hugged him. His mother hadn't believed in hugging, and she had stopped Rosie from hugging him. His mother

hadn't even believed in holding his hand.

He straightened up and sighed. He'd be glad to get back to school tomorrow. He liked Crawley House. The food wasn't very good but that didn't matter; Matron was very nice. He was very fond of her. In the spring, when he'd had a cough, she had given him linctus, and she had kept him in bed for a day and had stroked his hair. She was the first one he could remember ever stroking his hair. Rosie used to ruffle it. His father had, now and again, ruffled it, too, but no-one had ever stroked it until Matron did.

In the far distance over the gardens he could see Barney Dunlop, Rosie's husband, ploughing the barley field. It had been a good harvest but the ploughing pointed out that they would soon be in autumn. He thought he would go and say goodbye to Barney. He liked Barney.

He went down the steps, turned left and walked to the end of the house and round the corner to where it opened out into the yard. There was no-one in the yard. The four horse boxes were empty, the tack room door was closed, as were the outhouse doors; but when he approached the open barn two dogs which had been lying on the straw got up lazily and

sauntered towards him. They gave him no barked greeting but, one at each side, they walked just a step behind him; and he turned and looked from one to the other, saying, 'Good boy, Laddie,' then, 'Your ear better, Flo?' And for answer both dogs wagged their tails.

A doorway at the far end of the yard led into a walled vegetable garden. It was a large area of land, and prominent were rows of late beans and peas.

Keeping to a pathway that skirted one wall, he went through an archway and into a field that had at one time been a lawn. Walking through the long grass he was reminded of his surprise when he had returned from school last summer and realised how quickly grass grew when it was not kept cut, and also how quickly weeds spread among the flowers and obliterated them. This had been brought about, he knew, by his father's dismissal of Peter Kent and Will Brown. Peter had seen to the vegetables and the garden, and Will had helped him now and again when he wasn't attending the horses. But now the two hunters and the two carriage horses were kept down on the farm. This had all happened since his mother died.

Why? This was the question he had put to Pattie when he had first seen the long grass on the lawn, and her answer had been, 'Mother's money went with her.'

At the time he had thought that very odd and he had had a mental picture of the money being spread round her as she lay in her coffin on the billiard table, which had been draped in black.

Would things return to what they were before, after his father married Moira Conelly, the Irish woman? Perhaps she had money.

Everything seemed to depend on money. His father had to pay money to keep him at this school, and he had pointed out to him that he was lucky. He supposed he was.

This thought set him running and the dogs bounded away from his side and chased each other in the long grass.

The field ended where a stretch of woodland began, and he ran zig-zagging through this, the dogs at his heels now barking with excitement. Once through the wood they were into ploughed land and skirting the neat furrows. In the distance he could see Barney Dunlop unharnessing the horses from the plough. When he reached them, the old man turned and spoke as if he hadn't been made aware of

his approach by the barking dogs, saying, 'Why, there you are, Master Daniel. Where've you sprung from?'

'Granny Smith's Well.'

The old man and the boy now smiled knowingly at each other; for a long time this had been their usual greeting and answer. It was the answer Barney's wife always gave him when he asked her where she had been: 'Down Granny Smith's Well,' she would say.

Granny Smith's Well was the deepest in the district and it was known never to have run dry, even in the season when no rain had fallen for weeks.

'All ready for the morrow mornin', eh?'

'Yes, all ready, Barney.'

'Want to lead Princess? although she needs no leading, stone blind she could be an' still find her way. But Daisy, her daughter here' – he thumped the other horse on the rump now – 'daft as a brush, she is, skittish she is, would be off to the market in Fellburn, she would, if I wasn't keepin' an eye on her.'

As Daniel walked by the head of the big shire horse and listened to the old man chattering away he experienced a feeling of contentment. He wasn't sure why he felt this way, but at this end of the estate life seemed to go on in a

different pattern from the other end.

The farmyard was filled with noise and movement. Arthur Beaney was driving in the cows from the pasture; Alex Towney was carrying fodder for the horses, and at the far end of the long earth yard his father was talking to Bob Shearman, the shepherd, his hand waving as if he were angry.

He had reached the stable door and let go of Princess's halter and was turning to ask Barney if he could help him water the horses, when he saw that he too was looking to where the shepherd was now coming across the yard towards them. As he passed to go into the stable Bob Shearman hissed, 'You know what now, Barney? he's bloody well telling me I've got to take Falcon into the market the morrow. I asked him why not one of the carriage horses. He told me to bloody-well mind me own business. But I told him I was a horse man afore he put me on shepherding and that Falcon isn't past it; he's still got a lot of jump in him yet and would burst a blood vessel to please him. But no, it's him that'll have to go; he must keep the carriage horses for his fancy piece that's comin'. I tell you, Barney, this place is goin' to hell quickly.'

'Be quiet! Be quiet!'

Bob Shearman glanced to where Barney was indicating the boy. And now he said, 'What odds? he'll learn how the land lies soon enough. And when he should come into his own there'll be nowt to come in to. You mark my words.'

Daniel did not ask Barney if he could help water the horses, but he said, 'I'll say goodbye, Barney; I've got to go now.'

'Goodbye, Master Daniel. It won't be long afore I'll be seein' you again. Christmas isn't all that far off. What's ten weeks or so?'

Without saying goodbye to Bob Shearman Daniel turned away; but as he walked through the wood he thought of the man's words, 'When he should come into his own there'll be nowt to come in to.' Was this all because his mother's money had died with her, as Pattie had said? But what about the money his father got from selling the corn and the eggs and the vegetables and the milk, and of course the pigs and the sheep. That must come to a great deal, surely. What did he do with it? He couldn't ask him, so he supposed he'd never know.

Oh, well, he was glad he was going back to

school tomorrow for there was so much to do there that you never had time to think about unpleasant things such as nothing to inherit when you grew up. He now called to the dogs and galloped with them through the wood.

2

Daniel didn't have to wait until the Christmas holidays to return home; he was granted three days' leave to attend his father's wedding. Over the past week he had become the centre of attraction in his House, after he had confided to Ray Melton, his friend, that his father was going to marry a lady from Ireland who lived in a castle and who was bringing her maid with her. Ray had, of course, passed this information on to the other boys in their dormitory, and consequently Daniel found himself bombarded with questions after lights out.

The lady would be his stepmother, wouldn't she?

Yes, she would.

Would he like that?

He didn't know yet.

Was she rich?

He wasn't sure.

Well, if she travelled with a maid she must be. You had to be really of the aristocracy to have a personal maid.

This last remark caused some controversy. Three of the boys claimed that they knew of friends of their parents who had personal maids.

This was topped by someone saying that his cousin visited a manor house in Northumberland where, with the butler and the footman, there were twelve indoor servants . . . how many did Daniel have?

Daniel was aware that were he to be truthful and say, 'One,' his prestige would sink drastically. So he did not consider that he was really lying, when counting in the farmhands and their wives, he said, 'Eight.'

There were one or two murmurs of 'Oh! Oh!' Eight seemed to be a satisfactory number on which to run a household to which an Irish lady was coming with her maid.

As Daniel settled down to sleep he told himself he must remember to explain to Ray how the eight servants were dispersed and that only one of them, Barney's wife, Rosie, worked in the house, because he had promised Ray he would invite him to tea during the coming holidays to see the farm, and, of course, the house.

It was a very interesting house, one part of it being more than two hundred years old. But in the meantime that was nothing to worry about, for Ray lived miles away in a place called Corbridge.

He could feel the change in the house before he entered the door. As he jumped down from the trap, which had brought him from the station, and made for the front door, the laughter seemed to flow out of it on a wave, and it caught him up and he rode in on it to the middle of the hall, where, stepping off the stairs, he saw his future stepmother. She wasn't as he remembered her; she looked younger and prettier and more plump. And when she leant forward and held her arms out to him, crying, 'Why! Daniel, you are grown up. Come here. Come here,' he did not rush towards her and into her arms, but approached slowly, feeling that he should be polite and say, 'How do you do?' But when her hands caught him and drew him to her breast he put his arms about her waist and looked up into her face and he laughed, and she laughed, and her laughter was almost in his ear, and it wasn't a tinkling laugh such as you would expect from a lady, but a jolly, rollicking one. And now, on loosening one arm from about

him, she stretched it out and pointed to a fat, dark-haired woman now approaching from the kitchen, and said, 'This is Maggie Ann, Daniel. And I'm warning you: beware of her, she practises magic and she casts spells.'

The big woman laughed and seemed to swim all over him as her plump hand gripped his chin and lifted his face towards hers. 'So you're Daniel, are you?' she said, 'God! but you're thin, boy. You'll never brave the lions' den, not until we get some flesh on your bones.' She smiled now, and he noticed that a number of her teeth were crooked and that her hair was very dark, as were her eyes.

When she let go of his chin she patted his cheek, saying, 'You'll do. You'll do. You'll shape up nicely. What d'you say, me dear?' She had turned to her mistress, to whom Daniel, too, turned; and she, her head on one side, surveyed him as if she had not seen him before. 'He doesn't take after his father, not in looks anyway,' she said; 'but he'll do splendidly for himself.'

'Who doesn't take after his father?'

Hector had entered the hall from a side door, and Moira, now turning a laughing face towards him, said 'Here's your son come home and never a greeting to him. Where have you been?'

Daniel watched his father come striding towards them and straight away put his arm around the waist of his future wife and hug her close, before turning to him and rumpling his hair, saying, 'Well, here you are! and I declare you've grown another inch in the last few weeks.'

'He's too thin by half.' This was Maggie Ann speaking, and when Hector made to answer, it wasn't in the free and easy tone he had just used, for his voice was cold even as he smiled at the woman and said, 'Well, you'll have to see that your culinary prowess in the kitchen outdoes Rosie's, won't you?'

But Maggie Ann's manner or tone didn't change as she addressed her new master: 'Oh, begod!' she said on a loud laugh, 'Don't expect miracles in that quarter. And look, I don't want to get up the good Rosie's back again, for it's taken me these three weeks to stroke down her ruffled feathers by each day asking her to show me the ropes, and begod! I'd like to see the ropes I couldn't untangle meself, given time of course.'

Daniel watched his father stare hard at the woman before turning again to his future bride and, smiling now, say, 'I must go and change because I smell of the farmyard, and then I'll

take you for that promised jaunt around the countryside and introduce you here and there.' With that he hugged her to him once more, then made for the stairs, taking them two at a time, as would a man half his age.

As if they had forgotten Daniel, the two women, talking in quick exchange, now walked to the door that opened into a corridor and what had once been the servant's quarters. At the end of it a sharp turning led to the back entrance to the kitchen. It was as Daniel entered the corridor to follow the women that he heard their voices coming from this passage. His future stepmother was saying in a tone that held no laughter, 'Now I warned you, Maggie Ann, what it would be like . . . Do you want to go home?'

The answer came: 'Not without you. D'*you* want to go home?'

'Don't be silly, woman.'

'He's looking down his nose at me.'

'Well, to him you're a servant. I've explained it all to you.'

'Begod! I was a servant across the water and neither himself nor your ma ever tripped over themselves to tell me of me position. We worked together, we talked together, we ate together, the only thing we didn't do was sleep

together, except for you, for you slept with me for years. So how d'you expect me to take this new situation, I ask you?'

'Maggie Ann. You've either got to take it or you go back across the water. Now I'm only repeating what I said to you before we came.'

'Aye, I know. But then, I hadn't had a taste of what it was goin' to be like. Even that Rosie, the ploughman's wife, looks at me as if I am the slush running out of the cow byre. And I have to lower meself and make believe I'm a numskull of the first water and know nothing about a kitchen or a kale pot.'

'I also told you, Maggie Ann, that they don't eat as we did, neither in food, nor ways.'

'Aw, you've made that evident enough an' all. It's in the kitchen I've got to sit. Look, Miss Moira, himself, your own father, was from one of the best families that ever trod Irish soil and if he could sit down with me and me like and eat his food, then who the hell in England should think themselves any better!'

There was a long pause and Daniel was making for the hall again when he heard Moira, as he was thinking of her now, say, 'It's not going to work, is it, Maggie Ann?'

This statement was followed by another silence before Maggie Ann, speaking quietly

now, said, 'You know damn fine I won't leave you. You've been me life from when you were born. So there's nothing for me but to stick it and make it work. I can tell you one thing, though, Miss Moira, you'll have to make it work an' all, because that young madam looks upon you almost in the same way as her father does on me.'

'That isn't news to me, Maggie Ann – I'm well aware of that – and so it will be up to me to make her change her attitude. By tomorrow I shall be her stepmother and mistress of this house. Thanks be to God. Yes, mistress of a house. And I say again, Maggie Ann, thanks be to God. Now together we could make it work, but only if you watch your tongue and fall in with the new ways and remember that the English gentry are a different breed altogether from our lot.'

'Ah!' Maggie Ann's voice came high now. 'What you talking about, Miss Moira, with one mouldy servant in the house – gentry? Huh! Even himself managed four, and he without a penny to his name. By the way, I'll ask you, do they know that?'

Moira's voice was low as she replied, 'They know only what I choose to tell them, and that there's money coming, which is true enough.'

'Yes; God speed the dead.'

'Go on with you, Maggie Ann. I don't wish anybody dead. But come on, give me a smile, give me a laugh. It's pulled us through so far. As Mama used to say, keep your pecker up.'

'Aye, and himself used to finish, "When the other hens are pinching your corn."'

Keep your pecker up while the other hens are pinching your corn. What a funny saying. But then they talked funny all the time.

When Daniel heard the rustle of their skirts he quickly went back into the hall and made for the main entrance to the kitchen.

Rosie Dunlop turned from the table where she was thumping a large mound of dough with her fist and said, 'Oh, hello there, Master Daniel. So you've got back.'

'Yes, Rosie. You baking?'

'Bakin'? I've never stopped for the last four days. A quiet weddin', your father said, and we're having breakfast at the hotel in Fellburn, he said, only to add, there'll be a few friends dropping in for the evening: you can knock something up for that, can't you? And I've been knockin' something up, as I said, for the last four days now: he wanted hare pie, brawn, spare ribs, a leg of pork, and that was just for starters. Just push it on the table, he said, where

they can help themselves. Have you met them?'

Daniel paused a moment before saying, 'Yes. Yes, Rosie, I've met them. I've been talking to them in the hall.'

'Well, what d'you think?'

He knew he would have to be what was called diplomatic and so he said, 'I don't know, Rosie, I've only just met them.'

'Well, she's been here afore. Did you like her then?'

'Yes, she appeared all right.'

'But what about the other one?'

He smiled as he said, 'She's very large.'

'Aye, and in the head an' all, I should say, for it appears full of water, like her body. And there's a squad of them due shortly.'

She now came towards him, and in a voice just above a whisper, said, 'Has she money? I mean, Miss Conelly; is she bringing money in?'

'Money?' he repeated, recalling the conversation he had just overheard; 'I don't know, Rosie; but I suppose she has money; perhaps when her people die.'

'Live horse an' you'll get grass . . . that! That's what that means.' Rosie flounced back to the table, and after pounding the dough for a few

seconds she stopped and, motioning her head towards the bench in the corner of the long kitchen, she said, 'I've made some sly cakes, a couple will never be missed. Take one to Miss Pattie.'

'Pattie's in?'

'Oh, aye, she's in. Like you, she's off school for three days. Why, I don't know.'

He picked up the two pieces of pastry filled with currants, saying, 'Thank you, Rosie,' and putting them on a plate, he added, 'Where is she . . . Rosie?'

'Well, where she always is these days, up in her room or in the nursery.'

'Yes, yes.' He nodded at her before running out and across the hall and up the stairs.

On the landing he paused, undecided whether to make for Pattie's room at the far end or take the stairs that led to the nursery and schoolroom floor, and above them the attics. He decided on the latter and, without ceremony, burst into the old schoolroom to be greeted by Pattie saying, 'Why didn't you call?'

'Why should I? You knew it would be me.'

'How was I to know it would be you, silly? I didn't know you were back.'

'Well, you should have been downstairs, then you would have seen me. Here!' and he

smiled as he handed her the sly cake. 'Rosie sent that for you.'

She took it from him without offering any thanks and bit into it, and she'd eaten the whole square before he was half-way through his.

'You hungry?'

'Yes, I'm hungry. I didn't have any breakfast.'

'Why?'

'Why? Well, because I didn't want to sit down with my laughing jackass-cum-stepmother, nor sit in the kitchen with her great sloppy maid. And Father said I had to do one or the other, so I did neither.'

'You can't do anything about it, you know,' Daniel said quietly, and as he watched Pattie lean against the table, the while gripping its edge, there came in him again that feeling for her that saddened him, and he didn't like it, so he looked from her to the table and the scraps of paper spread out and asked her, 'What are you doing?'

She straightened up and now asked *him* a question; her voice eager, she said, 'Can you recall any of Father's friends who have the nickname of Barbie?'

He thought for a moment, then said, 'Barbie? Sounds like a girl's name. Short for something?

No: there are the Talbots, but Mrs Talbot's called Lilian, isn't she? And then there's Frances. Mrs Farringdon, she's called Tessa, and there's Janie. But why do you ask?'

'Look' – she pointed now to the table, and he leant over and looked at the pieces of torn and charred paper, and with a stabbing finger she pointed to the signature still evident on one piece, and said, 'What does that read?' And he, looking closer, said, 'Barbie. But this is a letter. And why all these bits?'

'Yes' – she was nodding at him – 'why all these bits? Why all these letters? There were a number of them. I happened to go into the study one night this week and Father was burning papers in the grate and he asked me what I wanted. I said I wanted a book. And he said, "Well, get it and go." And I went. But I waited until he came out and had gone upstairs; then I went back, and there was all this charred paper, with here and there unburnt bits.' She now stabbed her finger at the pieces of what had evidently been a letter, and went on, 'They're not all of the same letter. But look, three times there's the same name, "Barbie". There's only half the signature on that piece, it says, "Bar", but look, it's the same kind of writing as this complete one, "Barbie". And

see, on that piece of paper it says, “You can’t”. And over there – ’ she now pointed to a small piece of paper about an inch long and her fingers stabbed out the words, ‘“Years and years”. And look at this piece.’ With her other hand now she turned over a strip of charred paper that showed an uneven white line where the tops of letters had been burnt off. And she said to him, ‘What d’you make of that?’

He looked closely at the paper, and then he said, ‘Oh, I think that word is “time”, but I can’t make out the rest.’ And she said, ‘I can. That is “if”.’ And to this he nodded: ‘Oh, yes, it could be.’

‘And the next word is, “ever”.’

‘You’re just guessing,’ he said.

‘No. Look!’ and now taking a pencil, she pulled a piece of clean paper towards her and wrote ‘ever’ on it.

He nodded, saying, ‘Could be.’

‘Well,’ she said, ‘it looks as though it reads, “if ever the time came.”’

He scrutinised the charred scrap again and said, ‘Perhaps you’re right. But even so, what does it mean? What do you make of it?’

She turned and leant against the side of the table and, looking straight at him, she said, ‘Why should Father be burning those letters?

Mother's name was Janice. The one downstairs, her name is Moira. Who, I ask you, is or was Barbie?'

He smiled now, saying, 'Don't ask me, Pattie. It's you who have set a puzzle, but I can't see you working it out.'

'I . . . I will some day.'

His face straight now and his voice low, he said, 'Why are you so bitter against Father? You said before that you talked at him because you want him to take notice of you. Well, if you do, why are you bitter?'

She shook her head twice before she said, 'I suppose it's because Mother was bitter against him.'

'Mother? Bitter against Father?'

'Yes' – she was bending down to him, her face now thrust into his – 'Mother was bitter against Father. You know nothing, you're a fathead.'

'I am not a fathead, and don't call me a fathead.'

That she was surprised at his retaliation was evident, for now she almost apologised, saying to him, 'Well, you know I didn't mean "fathead" really. But, you see, Daniel, you've been away at school for more than two years now. You were just turned seven when he

packed you off, and you know nothing about what's happened in the meantime. I missed you when you went to school. Do you know that?'

When he didn't answer she said, 'You will be ten and I'll be fourteen in December, and you know what I'm going to do next year?'

'Leave school. You'll have to, won't you?'

'No, I'm not; and I won't. I'm . . . I'm going to pupil-teach, starting with the infants. Miss Brooker said I can.'

'I thought you said Miss Brooker was a thick-head; that she didn't know anything.'

'Well' – Pattie hunched her shoulders – 'she knows I know as much as her, I suppose.'

'Does Father know?'

'Not yet.'

'Do you think he'll let you?'

'He'll have to.'

'Oh, Pattie.' He smiled sadly at her. 'You know you can't make Father do anything that he doesn't want to do.'

'No, perhaps not me, but his new wife will because she won't want me under her feet all day. I'll make myself felt right from the start, so she'll be glad to get rid of me. Oh, she'll back me up; I'll see to that.'

He laughed, saying, 'You know, Pattie,

you're a terror. If you had been a man, you're the kind that would have caused riots.'

'Very likely.' She nodded at him. 'And I wish I had been a man, because then I wouldn't have to go and put linen on the four guest beds.'

'How many are coming?'

'Well, as far as I know, her mother and father, two brothers and their wives, and a great aunt.'

'Are they staying long?'

'No, thank the Lord, only tonight; then they're taking the late train to the boat after the wedding.'

'But why are they leaving it so late when Father's being married at eleven in the morning?'

'It's cheaper travelling that way, so Rosie says.'

'How did she know that?'

'Well, don't you know that Rosie's half Irish? Her mother was Irish. Oh.' She now turned to the table again and carefully gathered the pieces of charred paper together, adding, 'They are spattered all over the country, the Irish. Miss Brooker said that, when I told her my father was marrying a lady from Ireland. What she actually said was, "More of them?

They're already spattered all over the country." Come on, help me with the sheets. But mind' – she stopped abruptly on her way to the door – 'don't tell Father anything about this,' and she pointed to the envelope containing the remains of the letters. And his tone held indignation as he answered her, 'Now why should I do that? What reason would I have?'

'Well, you never know; things slip out.'

'You won't get it out of your head that I'm a dumb-bell, will you?'

She pushed him and gave one of her rare laughs in which he now joined and they went out together.

Daniel sat on the deep window-ledge of the third window in the long dining-room and his eyes darted from one to the other of his future stepmother's family, and the only words he could call to mind with which to describe them were odd and different.

There was Moira's father. He was tallish and thin, very thin and very dark-haired and, like his daughter, he laughed a lot, and he never seemed to stop talking. His wife seemed about half his size but her figure was dumpy. She too was dark, and her face was lined. She looked

old. She smiled a lot but she didn't laugh and she spoke only now and again. Then there was a brother named Brian. He was as tall as his father and very like him, and he, too, talked a lot, but he didn't laugh, nor did he even smile. Apparently, they called his wife Mary, because he alluded to her often, saying, Mary here said so and so. And Mary, too, talked a lot. Yet the younger son – Moira said he was younger, although he looked almost like a twin to his brother – this son was called Rory, and his wife's name was Bertha, and they stood out because they rarely spoke. And then there was the great aunt. Now she was very odd and so old that he couldn't remember having seen anyone quite as old. Yet she was what you would call spritely, for he had watched her previously walking around the room fingering the pieces of silver on the sideboard and opening the drawers of the old chest at the end of the room where the best dinner service was kept, together with the trays of cutlery. And what stood out was that everybody seemed to adhere to her wishes. They plied her with the eatables from the table and, as did all the others, she ate as if she hadn't seen food for days.

His father kept putting plates in Pattie's

hands and directing her to offer their contents to the guests, but he felt he needn't have bothered because Maggie Ann, as everybody called her, was doing that all the time.

His father had seen to the drinks, too, but the company seemed to pick only two kinds, beer or whisky, and they drank a lot of each, seeming to wash the food down with it.

Although his father kept moving about the room from one guest to another, Daniel knew that he wasn't at ease.

They had been eating for more than an hour when Moira suggested they should move to the drawing-room. She did it, as he was finding out, as she seemingly did everything, on a laugh and with a funny quip; standing in the middle of the room, she called, 'Would the remnants of the Conelly family of ancient lineage follow their daughter over the battlements to rest their bones in the luxury of the drawing-room.'

At this and amid joined laughter she held out her hand to his father and he led her down the room, out into the hall and across it to the drawing-room door, where, relinquishing her hand, he pressed her forward into the room, then stood aside while Sean Conelly and his wife, with their aged aunt between them,

passed him with a smile. Then followed the dour Brian with his wife, and lastly Rory and his wife. But when Maggie Ann came up in the rear and intent on joining the family, he put out an arm to block her way and, inclining his head towards her, he said, 'Would you please see to the coffee?'

The smile slid from her face and she replied briefly, 'They don't take coffee; tea's their drink when they can't get anything else.'

He brought his jaws together for a moment before allowing himself to speak: then under his breath he said, 'All right, it will be tea. But listen one moment: you and I must have a talk, you understand?'

She stared into his face. She understood, but she made no reply. Swinging her large body about, she made for the kitchen, pushing aside Daniel and Pattie who had been making their way towards the stairs but were stopped by their father's voice saying firmly, 'Come!'

Reluctantly, it seemed, they moved towards him, and as they went to pass him he stooped and quietly but firmly he said, 'Remember your manners and who you are. We have guests in the house. You understand?'

Neither of them answered nor indicated by a nod that they understood, but they went

forward and into a buzz of laughter and chatter . . .

Daniel did not know how much later it was when the argument started, only that it was long after they had drunk tea and further glasses of whisky had been passed around. It started with the man called Brian saying, 'When you used to come across to us, Hector, you gave us the impression that you lived like landed gentry, and her there, our Moira, she did the same. Well, you've got the house all right, an' the settings for it, but where's the staff? I thought we'd be greeted to a dinner tonight and be meeting all your friends.'

'Shut your mouth! Shut your mouth, Brian. It always gapes wide after the hard stuff. You should keep off it. Aye, you should that, unless it's under your own roof.'

'Aw, Dada, you said as much yourself.'

'I said no such thing, and I warn you, behave yourself. If you soil our name with your chatter, I'll cut your throat, begod! I will. With me own hand I'll do it.'

'Huh! That'll be the day that you do anyt'ing with your own hand.'

All eyes were now turned on Brian's wife, for she too had imbibed of the hard stuff. 'And why shouldn't my Brian open his mouth and

tell them a t'ing or two over here? 'Tisn't much opportunity we get. And as you know, neither my Brian nor me was for Moira making this match, as long in the tooth as he is.'

'How dare you! Mary Conelly.' It was Moira bristling: no smile on her face now; no laughter in her voice.

However, immediately the attention of everyone in the room was caught by the old lady saying to Hector, 'Did you meet Mr Palmerston, Hector?'

'No, Aunt Mattie.' Good Lord, how old did she think he was?

'A great man. A great man. If anyone could have saved Ireland, he was the one. And you didn't meet him?'

'*No.*' The word came sharp, definite.

'Oh, then you never heard him speak, which is a great pity. He was a great orator; he kept your men in London on their toes. Great many stupid men up there. And your Gladstone is a ditherer, a ditherer. You have nothing like the Land League here, have you?'

The answer to this came sharply: 'No, thank God, else they would be out to destroy us as they are destroying Ireland.'

'Destroying Ireland? Listen to him!' It was Brian shouting now. 'Just listen to him,

destroying Ireland. You can't destroy a thing twice, man. You've already killed it, or nearly. You do know, don't you, that you did away with half a million? Starved them to death. Aye, starved them to death with your bloody corn laws.'

'Nonsense! Nonsense! Even the child knows it was the potato famine.'

'Aye, but what followed the potato famine? Migration to America. And what happened when they got there? They were so depleted they died by the hundreds.'

'Look, Brian, this is not a political meeting. It is a get-together prior to a wedding. Isn't that so, dear?' Hector had turned to Moira.

For once Moira did not make a laughing reply but she said somewhat quietly, 'Yes, that was the idea, Hector, and I must apologise for my lot.'

'Begod! you'll not apologise for me, our Moira. And what's come over you, anyway? there was nobody stauncher than yourself. It was you that boycotted Jimmy Bradley first, wasn't it, following Parnell's advice to every decent Catholic.' He now turned his gaze on Hector, saying, 'The bloody landlord turned Davey Sheenan and his family out of his farm, on to the road he put them. And there was

Jimmy Bradley ready to go in. But we fixed him: the cattle got no water and he couldn't buy in the market, nor sell. He's going to emigrate now an' all, God's curse on him.'

'There was a law made, I understood, that eviction had to stop. I mean–' said Hector stiffly, only to be interrupted by the old man letting out a great, 'Huh!' of a laugh, saying, 'Ah, Hector, boy, there's one law for the English and one for the Irish, that is the Irish farmers and peasants. But there's another law for the Irish Protestants; always has been. But their time's running out: the door of Home Rule is ajar and one of these days it'll be thrust open, blown open in places, oh aye, blown open, literally I mean, if you get my meaning.'

'Dada! Dada! Be quiet. You know that's only talk. Been talk for a long time.'

'Talk, daughter? You haven't been here in this land but days, and you're telling your Dada to be quiet, and that it's only talk. And you whose belly has gone hungry like the rest of us. You live in a castle, people say. My God! I'd change it for a good cow byre any day.'

'That isn't true, Sean.'

'Perhaps not, Kathleen.' The old man's voice was soft now and he nodded at his wife, saying, 'We're all at sixes and sevens. I never wanted

to come; you know that' – he turned from her and now looked straight at Hector, who was standing stiffly before the fireplace – 'because this is a kind of wedding that's never been in our family. Not in my time or my father's or our fathers' before him, but, Protestant that you are, you're still of our line. Why wouldn't you talk to the priest?'

'Oh, we've been through all this over and over. And what difference would it make, anyway?'

'None to you, seemingly, but, to her – she knows she should be married in church.'

'Well, what was to stop her marrying me in a Protestant church? but you wouldn't have that, would you? So it's the registry office. Anyway –' Hector shook his head vigorously now and his voice was loud as he said, 'We've been through all this. When I was with you last I told you what I had decided and I left it to her. It was up to her.'

'No good'll come of it.' It was Brian's wife speaking again in her thin high voice. 'And as I said, before we put foot on that boat . . .'

Her voice was cut by the old woman now turning on her and crying, 'If you said your prayers, woman, as often as you open your mouth, you'd be flying with the archangels at this minute; but

even then your wings would be flapping faster than theirs.'

There was a titter now from both Rory and his wife. It was the first sound they had made since they had come into the room. It seemed to affect Moira and, with the exception of Brian, it was taken up by the others until the room was now filled with laughter. Even Pattie and Daniel, who were sitting on a small couch in the shadow of a French screen, turned to each other and grinned. Then Pattie, putting her mouth close to Daniel's ear said, 'I wish they were staying. There'd be some fun, wouldn't there?'

When he didn't answer she muttered under her breath, 'Well, don't you think so?'

'Father wouldn't think so; he's mad.'

After a moment she said, 'Yes. Yes, he is, isn't he? He's let himself in for something.'

Daniel lowered his head now and muttered, 'Did you know anything about this business of a priest and marrying in a Catholic church?'

'No. No. All that talk must have happened when he was over there . . . Anyway, it proves one thing.'

'What?'

'Well, she wanted to get married or get away from Ireland, one or the other.'

Still with bent head he said, 'Did the Irish people really starve to death?'

'Yes, I suppose so.' Then with an unusual flash of humour she moved her head closer to his and almost spluttered as she muttered, 'But this lot's going to see that they themselves are not going to starve to death. They've eaten enough tonight to last them for six months. They'll be like the cows, they'll chew their cud.'

'*Daniel! Pattie!*' Their father's voice was stern. 'It's very bad manners not to share a joke. What were you laughing about? Come on' – his voice was aiming to be merry now – 'we're all dying to hear.'

Daniel looked at Pattie and Pattie looked at him and for once she hadn't a ready answer, and he realised this. So he said, 'We were talking about cows, Father, re . . . regurgitating.'

'Cows regurgitating?' There was silence for a moment. Then Hector, looking around his guests and on a slight laugh, said, 'They were talking about cows chewing their cud.'

'Jesus in heaven! man, you don't need to translate the word. We might have just come over but our hair's dry. And I was at college in Dublin until I was eighteen. Regurgitating. Regurgitating.' Brian swung round in his chair now and looked towards the children, saying