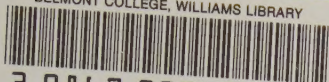


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THE  
WHISTLING  
BOY





Ruth M. Arthur

# THE WHISTLING BOY

*drawings by Margery Gill*

ATHENEUM 1970 NEW YORK



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Library of Congress catalog card number 69-13531

Published simultaneously in Canada by

McClelland & Stewart, Ltd.

Manufactured in the United States of America by

Halliday Lithograph Corporation,

West Hanover, Massachusetts

Designed by Judith Lerner

First Printing January 1969

Second Printing August 1970

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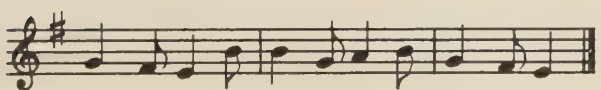
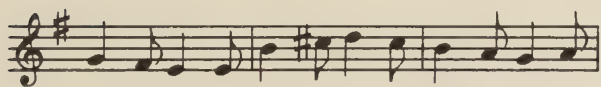
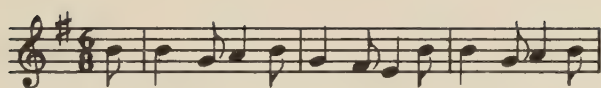
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FOR MARGERY GILL

*with love and appreciation*







# Before

## chapter 1

IF LOIS HAD NEVER BECOME INVOLVED WITH US, I believe I would have liked her very much indeed from the beginning. She was certainly attractive, she was also good-humored, intelligent and kind, but she had stepped into shoes too recently vacated and this made an impossible situation.

The boys had taken her to their hearts at once, uncritically and thankful for her care, which only made my enmity for her more apparent.

The strange thing was how suddenly my feelings for her crystalized, and what had been only a resistance to her charm in an instant became hate. Perhaps it was simply that I became aware of her in a new way and was forced to look closely at my feelings for her.

It happened on the day of our school concert, six weeks after Lois' marriage.

I had smiled across the hall at my father from my place in the choir, and a new girl sitting beside me had noticed

and whispered, "You look just like him," then continued, "and the pretty girl beside him, is she your sister?"

Unexpected rage took me by the throat and viciously I hissed back at her, "No—she's my stepmother."

It was at this moment that I realized I hated Lois, *hated* her! I bore her a terrible resentment for taking my mother's place, for even *sounding* like her, for taking the three of us under her wing, and because my father loved her.

It was just a year after my mother died, suddenly and shockingly, of a heart attack. We had all been in it together, my father, the boys and I, and we had clung together for comfort and support, bolstering one another up. We had all loved her dearly, but none of us had realized how much we relied on her as the stable core of our lives till she was gone.

Of course having Janet helped, she had been our 'daily' since the twins were born, and I don't know what we'd have done without her concern and her good cooking, those first bitter months.

Then suddenly Lois appeared. Father started bringing her home from the hospital where she worked as a physio-therapist. I think she had given him some treatment for a strained wrist at one time. We children liked her and welcomed her as an outsider, an onlooker, gay and casual and uninvolved with us—but suddenly our father fell in love with her and married her.

I had never even suspected that there was romance in the air, father was quite old, forty-six, and Lois in her middle twenties, in fact only nine years older than I am. He told us, of course, when they got engaged and ex-



plained most carefully that although no one could *ever* take Mother's place, Lois would do her best to fill part of the gap. Even after they were married and she came to live with us I did not at once quite take in just what had happened, and it was not till the fateful day of the concert that the penny dropped at last and the full realization came to me of the enormous change in our lives Lois had made—a change I did not want. I was the eldest, the responsible one, and I felt ousted. The four of us since Mother's death had had a closeness that was very comforting, my father and brothers had come to depend on me as the woman of the house and I enjoyed this position enormously. I could see my father, whom I really did not know very well, coming to depend on me more and more, our relationship blossoming as he realized what a reliable person I really was—then suddenly it was all over. Lois, not I, had taken my mother's place in the family.

The concert wavered on that day until I thought it would never end. My solo sounded reasonable and I sang lustily as usual with the rest of the choir, but whereas normally I throw myself with enthusiasm into the music, this time I sang automatically from habit, my heart was not in it. At last it was all over and I could get away—get away to think. I had to accustom myself to this new realization about Lois before I could go home.

I hurried into my coat, pulled on my beret and was about to slip out when one of the three girls I usually walked home with called out, "Hang on, Kirsty, wait for us!"

"Sorry," I answered, "I've got to rush," and I fled outside.

I ran across the playground and went out by the back gate, deliberately avoiding the crowds of parents and friends who were streaming out from the front of the school.

I cut down the lane and turned in the opposite direction from my home, making for the gasworks and the poorer part of town. I took the road that led to the next village and I walked along it for miles before I turned back. It was dark by the time I reached our town again, yet my mind was still in a turmoil. How was I to live with Lois? Somehow I had to pull myself together and calm down before I went home. Perhaps a cup of coffee would help. I felt in my pocket and found two sixpences. It was Saturday and most of the dirty little shops were still half full of customers. I found a café slightly less scruffy than its neighbors and went inside. It was half-full and the atmosphere was thick with smoke and a horrid undefinable smell. But I did not like to turn round and go out again so I walked towards the self-service counter and asked for a cup of coffee. I was looking for an empty table when a voice hailed me. "Hey, Christina! Come and sit here." It was Dinah Purdy, the new girl in our form who had asked me about Lois.

I walked toward her table and sat down, there was nothing else I could do.

Dinah was wearing a bright red pullover and tight yellow slacks; her hair was all fuzzed, and her face was badly made up—she looked *awful*.

"You've not been home yet?" she remarked, noticing my school clothes.

I shook my head. "I needed some fresh air," I replied. "I went for a walk."





Dinah nodded and looked over my shoulder toward the door, she was evidently waiting for someone. I could not help noticing how nervous she was, and when she offered me a cigarette, which I refused, and lighted one herself, I saw that her nails were bitten revoltingly.

"I'll have to go in a minute," I said swallowing the nasty coffee in my cup. "I haven't finished my homework yet. Have you?"

Dinah shook her head and looked me full in the face. She said defiantly, "I have to get my homework done late at night. I have a job, you see."

I was astounded.

"A *job*?" I asked. "D'you mean you go to work after school?"

"Yes, I work in a café from 5:30 till 9:30 every day and later on Saturdays—I'm on my way there now," she added. "At least, not in these clothes of course." Then as if she knew what delicacy prevented me from asking her, she said quietly, "There's only Mum and me and we need the money."

"Your mother doesn't have a job?" I asked.

She shook her head and a defensive expression came over her face as she said, "No, not regularly, she's not—very strong."

She lowered her eyes and drew steadily on her cigarette, and I was able to take a closer look at her. My self-complacency had suffered a severe shock, it was as if the earth had opened under my feet revealing a chasm into which anyone might slip. I sensed tragedy and I was filled with a fearful pity for the girl before me, and a new respect.

“Good for you,” I said. “I don’t know how you manage it! Of course you’re much brainier than I am for a start, but it must be terribly hard on you.” Dinah looked up and smiled at me, a smile of rare sweetness that transformed the bitterness of her face, like sunshine on a wintry day.

“Thanks, Christina,” she said. “You’re the only human being I’ve met so far in our class.”

I felt small and mean and utterly inadequate but while I was still fumbling for words Dinah’s eyes turned to the door again and the look of nervous strain came back to her face.

“You’re expecting a friend, I must go!” I exclaimed, getting up.

“He’s late and I’ve got to go myself in a minute,” she explained. “It’s my boyfriend—well, not really—he’s just someone I know.”

“Oh, I see,” I said. “Well, thanks for asking me to join you. See you on Monday.”

“See you on Monday,” Dinah repeated. “Enjoy the weekend with your pretty stepmother.” The way she said it was taunting, and I had a feeling she was being slightly malicious. Perhaps she envied me Lois.

I stepped out into the wind and headed for home. I really did not like Dinah much but I could not help admiring her. I found her interesting, unusual and intriguing enough to have distracted me from my own troubles.

## chapter 2

THE FAMILY HAD STARTED SUPPER when I got in and were seated round the table in the big cosy kitchen, my father, the twins Marcus and Gregory—Gory—and Lois. They all looked very compact and comfortable without me.

"Whatever happened to you? We couldn't find you. Where have you been?" asked my father.

"I needed some fresh air after that stuffy concert," I said. The boys looked up at me and grinned sympathetically, and Lois rose from the end of the table.

"I've kept your supper hot in the oven," she said. "I'll get it for you."

"Don't bother. I'll get it myself," I said brusquely. I noticed my father glance sharply at me, but he did not speak. I knew I was behaving badly as I swept into the back kitchen to wash my hands.

When I returned with my supper, I felt a little contrite and tried to make amends.

"I'm sorry I'm late," I said to Lois. "Thank you for



keeping this hot for me. It smells good. I'm jolly hungry."

"It's all right, Kirsty," she said in a placatory tone, and she and my father exchanged a long loving look. I ground my teeth and started to eat. I felt explosive.

"We enjoyed the concert," said Lois conversationally. "I thought your solo went very well, Kirsty. You have a lovely voice."

"Thank you," I mumbled, feeling oddly embarrassed. My father grunted. "Can't say I like this modern stuff," he said. "Give me the old classics. Your top notes were a bit wobbly, weren't they?"

"Oh Gerry! You're too critical—she sang beautifully," Lois broke in.

I smiled wryly at my father. I knew very well it was his way never to praise except for perfection, but the fact that he had mentioned my solo at all meant that he was pleased with it and I glowed inwardly. Lois's easy praise was nothing to me, she was not on our familiar wave length at all and I found this comforting.

"We should have gone after all, Gory," my brother Marcus drawled, "just to hear the old girl croaking, you know."

I aimed a banana at his nose.

"Just for that *you* can help me wash up," I cried. "We'll do it. Lois, you go and sit down."

I had recovered from my ill temper and was in an expansive mood, which lasted all through the game of scrabble that followed.

But when the boys got up and said goodnight and sloped off to their room intent on some private interest, my resentment against Lois returned. I would like to

have stayed up a bit longer and watched the program on T.V. that had just started, but I noticed Lois reach for my father's hand and he moved closer to her on the couch.

"Tired, darling?" he asked.

At once I felt unwanted, shut out, furiously jealous, and it was all Lois' fault. She had achieved what I had never been able to, a closeness to my father that I felt should have been *my* right, and I hated her for it.

"Come on, Kirsty, there's plenty of room," she invited, making a place for me beside her, but I felt vicious.

"No thanks," I snapped, "it's boring stuff anyway."

I saw the hurt on Lois' face and I was glad. I saw my father turn his head sharply towards me and take his pipe out of his mouth to rebuke me, but I did not give him time. I fled from the room, banging the door loudly behind me.

As soon as I reached my bedroom my anger collapsed and I just felt thoroughly miserable and lonely and dejected. I would have liked a sympathetic shoulder to cry on, but I had to be content with my eiderdown. I felt ashamed of myself, I knew I was being utterly unreasonable, but I also knew I would certainly not try to make things any easier for Lois!

Next day was Sunday and a walk on the downs had been suggested for the whole family. It was a glorious morning, sharp and crisp with the sun quite warm for so early in the year—just the sort of day I loved to stride over the short turf, but I decided to be contrary.

"I think I'll go to church," I said in a superior tone when our leisurely breakfast was at last finished.

My father looked up from his Sunday paper with a comical look of blank astonishment on his face. He had never known me to go to church voluntarily, although I had accompanied my mother sometimes when she specially asked me to.

"Why this sudden devotion?" he asked. "Or have you some ulterior motive? Not that I don't approve, I hope it will do you some good."

He returned to his paper and I was furious, now I would *have* to go and I had only meant to demonstrate my independence, and to make them persuade me to come with them on the downs.

I stormed upstairs and began to try out my hair in different fantastic styles, but I didn't quite dare to go to church with any of them, so in the end I wore it well brushed with a green Alice band, tidy if not original. Organ music always makes me feel good, and our organist plays well, so it was not long before my mood was soothed into one of serenity. The service went on smoothly while I thought my own thoughts.

It was not until I was on my way out of church that I noticed a kneeling figure at the far end of a back pew—it was Dinah. What on earth was she doing in our church, at the opposite end of town from her home? She did not see me, she was entirely concentrated, unaware of her surroundings. There was a look of utter despair on her face and I saw she had been crying.

I hesitated for a moment when I reached the end of her pew, wondering whether I should speak to her, but she remained oblivious of my presence, so I walked on—after all it was none of my business.

But I could not forget her, the look of hopelessness on her face haunted me for the rest of the day. I felt I should have made some gesture of friendliness toward her, she was in such obvious trouble.

Lois was in the kitchen when I got back. Janet was still with us on weekdays—for Lois had kept on at her job—but she did not come on Sundays.

“Just a second while I change out of my decent clothes,” I said, “then I’ll be down to help you.”

Lois smiled and nodded, but she did not speak. I was glad for one of the things that made me feel hostile toward her was the extraordinary fact that her voice was so like my mother’s. I simply could not take it.

I was back in the kitchen in a few minutes more suitably dressed in jeans.

“Shall I make the gravy?” I asked, “or set the table?”

“Oh, set the table will you? The meat is not quite done. We’ll have a glass of sherry and then come back to do the gravy, shall we?” said Lois.

I went off to set the table smiling inwardly. So they’d been discussing me while I’d been out had they, planning how to tackle me? And they’d decided to treat me in a more grown-up way, hence the drink, instead of always classing me with the boys who were after all four years younger. Well perhaps things would be better now. At least I had made them realize that I was one to be reckoned with. This gave me considerable satisfaction.

“Gerry! Gerry darling! We’re coming for a drink in a few minutes. Are you there?”

Lois’ voice pierced my content, warping my feelings into a rage. Why did she have to sound so like my mother

whom she had never even met? Why did she have to remind me of *her* every time she spoke? I knew Lois couldn't help it, but it hurt me bitterly.

"O.K." I heard him answer before I covered my ears with both hands in an attempt to shut out Lois' voice.

I set the table at lightning speed, and because I knew I was behaving unreasonably I ran up to my room and brought down my precious arrangement of dried grasses and early forsythia and set it in the middle of the table.

"Oh, lovely!" cried Lois admiringly as she came in from the back kitchen. "I envy you your talent with flowers, Kirsty, you're marvelous."

She took hold of my arm. "Come along," she said, "let's get that drink."

I responded to her flattery, although I despised myself for doing so, her appreciation warmed me, and mollified, I went with her gaily.

My father looked up as we entered the room and smiled, obviously pleased at seeing us so companionable.

I must say I tried hard for the rest of the day to appreciate Lois, to ignore the things about her that annoyed me, to stifle my resentment of her, but I knew quite well that my mood of toleration would not last. In the evening I had a frightful row with my brother Gory. I vented my spite on him, I tore him with malice and Marcus of course supported his twin, so we were all involved.

Luckily we were alone in the house and at least I had the grace to apologize before Father and Lois returned.

"Are you ill or something?" asked Gory, puzzled and hurt. "You never used to be like this. What's wrong?"

I felt tempted to tell him the truth but I knew he could not understand my feelings; he was too young; the boys were all for Lois, after all she was very competent in caring for them; in any case I felt too much ashamed of myself to confess. I went to bed feeling guilty and isolated and more miserable than ever.



## chapter 3

NEXT DAY AT SCHOOL, Dinah came up to greet me as soon as I arrived. She was not over-effusive or anything, but she was quite evidently glad to see me and I was pleased. I did not mention having seen her in church or at the café, I thought it might embarrass us both, and whatever it was that had upset her she seemed more than cheerful enough for a Monday morning. I felt inclined to take her under my wing a bit, and this made it awkward with the other three in my group. Dinah soon showed herself to be aggressive and rather—well—objectionable when they were there, and although I realized it was defensive because she felt shy of them, the others did not understand and were determined to dislike her. They were all three snobs anyway. So I had to steer a course between Dinah and the others, to try to stick to the old loyalty while a new one built up, and it was not easy.

I usually managed to get home early on Fridays. The

last period was Latin, which I had dropped, so I was able to slip away and get started on my weekend prep. at home. The boys and Lois on the other hand were usually late on Fridays and Janet stayed on to cook supper, so it gave me a wonderful chance to have a gossip with her in the kitchen over a cup of tea and two or three very thick slices of bread and jam.

"Ja-net," I shouted as soon as I got in the next Friday, hurling my heavy satchel of books into a corner and casting off my coat and school beret as I hurried to the kitchen.

"Come along in, tea's ready!" called Janet and I subsided into a chair at the table and pulled the cat onto my knee.

Janet's big scrawny figure appeared round the door from the back kitchen and she strode in carrying the teapot. She sat down beside me and began to pour out.

"Well," she said, "what's going on, my woman?"

I turned my head to study her familiar face, a strong face, lined and determined, grim except when she smiled. Her hair was scraped back into a bun, and she wore an old-fashioned white apron with a bib, over her blouse and skirt.

"Oh Janet," I cried with a sudden rush of love, "I'm so *glad* you're here."

She laid her hand on mine for a moment and her face softened.

"There now, drink your tea," she said, "and tell me what's up, what's wrong?"

I had known Janet Woodman most of my life, she had worked for us since before the twins were born. She was

a Norfolk woman and had been a widow for many years. Her two sons were grown-up, one in the Navy, the other in the Air Force. Janet lived on her own although she usually had a couple of young lodgers in her house. She could have got a hundred better paid jobs, and I was terrified that when my father married Lois, she would leave us. But she had a tremendous loyalty and devotion to our family, and I think she must have guessed how much I depended on her. Anyway she had stayed.

I cut myself a hunk of bread and spread it, trying to find a way of expressing what I felt about Lois. The trouble was I was ashamed of having such feelings, I felt guilty and unreasonable and I did not know how to make Janet understand.

She waited for a moment or two and when I was still silent she said quietly, "It's Mrs. Lois, isn't it? You can't accept the fact that she's your father's wife and your step-mother, maybe you think she's too young? And you're jealous of her too."

"It's not only that," I replied slowly, "it's—well, Lois is taking Mother's place and I can't bear it! I hate her for it. She even *sounds* like Mother."

"You're missing your mother badly still," said Janet in a comforting voice, "and that's natural, but you must be fair to Mrs. Lois. She's doing her best for you all and it's not easy for her. Maybe if you could think of her more as an older sister than a stepmother you'd be less critical."

"I don't know," I answered, "I'll try. I know I'm being horrible and unfair but I can't help it—I *hate* her."

Janet shook her head doubtfully and poured me out another cup of tea. "Well, I don't know," she said.

"You've got your loyalties confused. Give her time and don't expect too much of her."

"Even Janet's on her side, as well as Father and the boys," I said to myself. "They've all forgotten Mother, all except me, but I won't forget her, *ever*."

"I'll have to get on with my homework," I muttered aloud. "There's piles of it as usual, but call me before you go."

"Stay and do it here, I won't talk to you," said Janet. "It's warmer than your room, and the boys won't be in for another hour."

So I stayed in the cosy kitchen while Janet went on with preparing the supper, and I felt comforted and less alone.

By the time the boys clattered in I had quite a lot of work done, and I cut them some bread and jam and exchanged a few cracks with them, then I picked up my books to go up to my room.

"Good night, Janet," I called. But she followed me out to the bottom of the stairs and put an arm round my shoulders.

"Don't fret too much, lovey, it will all come right in time, you'll see. We'll work it out somehow." There was a world of comfort in that word "We."

I flung my arms round her and gave her a good hug before I ran upstairs to get ready for supper. She was gone when I came down again so I set the table. By the time my father and Lois came in everything was ready and I was waiting, full of good resolutions. But they did not last, though I really did try. Once supper was finished and I had helped to wash up I escaped thankfully to my

room on the pretext of having homework to do. I had had as much of Lois as I could stand without erupting violently. My father showed his love for her too openly, and made me feel lost and alone.

I sat with my books spread out before me, but my attention was not on them. I was thinking desperately, trying to find a solution to my problem. How could I go on living in the same house with Lois? How could I make my life tolerable? I felt that my antagonism to her was becoming obsessive, perhaps dangerous, but what on earth could I do about it? I wished I had the courage and self-confidence to talk to my father or Lois herself, but I dared not lose such esteem as they had for me, and I felt too much ashamed of my unreasonable hatred to do anything but hide it. How could my father, caring as he did about Lois, feel anything but outrage at my attitude—no, I could not talk to him. The boys were too young to understand, and in any case they had always been wrapped up in one another as twins often are. There was no one but Janet, and she was not really involved except for her fondness for me. I felt horribly alone.

If only I need not live home, if only I need not come into such close contact with Lois every single day, if only I were not being constantly reminded by her presence of my mother's absence! If only——.

I knew that my father could not afford to send me to boarding school, though this might have been a solution. Perhaps I could leave school and get a job away from home? But I knew my father would never allow me to do this. I had to pass the necessary exams if I wanted to have any sort of career. Maybe I could at least get a holiday

job without anyone except Janet knowing my real reason for wanting one. Thinking of jobs reminded me of Dinah—she might be able to suggest something, after all she had a job herself. Even from what she had told me I knew that *her* life could not be easy, and I knew there was a lot more she had not told me. Dinah seemed more mature than my other friends at school, as if she had acquired a certain wisdom and common sense just because life was difficult for her. Maybe I could talk to Dinah, perhaps she would understand.

Meantime, till I had decided what to do I must put on as good a face as I could, I must bottle up my real feelings for Lois and try not to show them. At the very least I must be polite to her, and somehow I must contrive to see as little of her as possible.

There was only one month of the term left before the Easter holidays, and this would give me time to find a holiday job, or maybe I could go and stay with my grandmother.

However, I need not have worried so much for a few days later at suppertime, my father settled my problem for the holidays.

“Lois and I had no honeymoon, so we thought of going abroad for three weeks just after Easter. Janet can come and sleep in and keep things going here, if you all want to be at home, or Grandmother would have you for part of the time I’m sure. What about it?”

The twins exchanged looks with me across the table, Grandmother, our father’s mother, was not the Gran we loved most—but the other one was dead now.

I spoke up for the three of us.



"We'd rather stay here," I said. "*Of course* you must go. We'll be all right with Janet, won't we, boys?"

"Of course," they agreed quickly. "We'll have a super time."

"But what will you all do?" Lois asked rather anxiously.

"Well they've got their bicycles and their school friends, and the boys have various projects in connection with school clubs—they'll be all right darling, you needn't worry," said my father. "After all it isn't as if any of them were at boarding school and only home for the holidays. We endure one another's company all the year round! There will be some extra pocket money," he added.

"Kirsty, will you really be all right?" Lois asked me.

"Perfectly all right," I assured her but I avoided look-



ing at her. Here was the solution to my problem of the Easter holidays, I would be free of Lois for three blissful weeks. At the same time I was jealous. I resented her going away with my father. I wished he were taking me.

"As a matter of fact," I added, "I had thought of finding a part-time holiday job, but perhaps I'd better not. Janet will need some help with spring cleaning and I'll have to do a certain amount of school work."

"A job? You?" hooted the boys and went off into cackles of laughter.

"Yes," I said with as much dignity as I could muster, "what's so funny about that?"

Inwardly I vowed to dazzle them by finding a good job for the summer holidays and bringing home wads of money—I'd show them!

"Then that's settled," said my father. "And thank heaven for Janet."

I sighed with relief and silently echoed his words.

## chapter 4

SOMETIMES DINAH AND I WALKED part of the way home from school together, then she went off in one direction and I in the other since we lived at opposite ends of the town.

A tentative friendship had sprung up between us and was developing slowly. On my part it sprang from curiosity and a certain respect; I had never met anyone quite like Dinah before and she intrigued me. In fact I had never had a really close friend and I was a little scared of becoming too involved with anyone outside the family. But I enjoyed Dinah's company, I found her interesting and since Lois' arrival I had begun to realize how badly I needed a friend of my own age. We had been thrown together, in a way, by the animosity of the three girls who used to be my school friends and who disliked Dinah.

Although Dinah asked me plenty of questions about my home, my father, my brothers, and about Lois, she was wary of my questioning her and I thought her un-

usually secretive.

One day when we were walking home together after school she suddenly said in a burst of impetuosity, "Can't we do something together on Saturday—a walk perhaps—or have you already got something on?"

"No, I've got nothing fixed," I replied, "let's walk on the downs, and come home to tea with me afterwards."

She appeared delighted. "Oh Kirsty! I'd love to—d'you really mean it?"

"Of course I do," I said. "Let's hope it's a decent day." Already I was half regretting my invitation and wondering what the family would make of her. "But what about your job?" I asked. "You told me you work on Saturdays."

"I do, but not till the evening. I can easily get back in time," she said. "I'll have to run now, I'm late, but I'll look forward to Saturday—thank you!"

When the day came, Dinah turned up quite soon after lunch. The twins had gone to play football and my father and Lois were out, so I was alone in the house. I was quite glad, really, for I saw that Dinah was nervous.

I took her into the kitchen and told her to sit down while I made a cup of coffee.

She took a packet of cigarettes out of her pocket and offered me one.

"No thanks," I said, "I don't smoke."

"Oh come on, try one," she urged, but I shook my head.

"I hate the smell of smoke clinging to me," I said, "my hair, my clothes, my skin—it's messy, I think."

I wished that Dinah felt the same and I wondered

what her mother thought about it. I knew how much mine would have disliked it.

Dinah lit her cigarette and sighed as she said, "You're lucky. I wish I had never started."

"Doesn't your mother mind?" I asked. "Or perhaps she doesn't know."

Dinah gave me a peculiar look as she answered, "Oh yes she knows, and I've no idea whether she minds or not."

"How *is* your mother?" I asked with conventional politeness, not because I really wanted to know.

Dinah shot me a look full of suspicion.

"She's all right," she said abruptly.

"I only asked because I thought you said in that café that she wasn't strong," I said soothingly.

"She's all right," Dinah repeated emphatically, and I felt that she was warning me to inquire no further.

"Let's go out," I cried, suddenly longing for the fresh winds on the downs.

It was a typical March day of stinging showers interspersed with intervals of bright sunshine, and a high exhilarating wind chased the clouds across patches of blue sky.

We trudged along amicably, gossiping about school, discussing hair styles, clothes, films, books. We found a clump of early primroses on a sheltered bank and then raced up a path between rows of straight fir trees that marched like soldiers up the hill.

The boys were not back when we got in, but my father and Lois had arrived just ahead of us.

I introduced Dinah to them, then we disappeared into

the kitchen to make some toast for tea. I was wondering whether to take our tea up to my room when the twins appeared, dishevelled and ravenous. That settled it, we all had tea in the kitchen. Dinah seemed to blossom in the banter that went on in our usual family way, and it struck me then that she might be lonely at home. Her admiration for Lois was obvious and as we washed up together she said in a burst of confidence, "She's marvelous! You don't *know* how lucky you are to have someone like Lois to live with!"

I was quite taken aback, Dinah was not given to such enthusiasm. I found it astounding that she, who still had her own mother, should envy me Lois. I realized then that there was no use confiding my difficulties to Dinah; she would be no help at all, her sympathies would certainly not be with me.

When I saw her at school again on Monday morning her gentler mood of Saturday was gone, the face she presented to the world was the familiar one, defiant and aggressive. But I now knew her well enough to realize that this was a cover-up, a protective mask, though what her trouble was I could only guess. I supposed that it was because her father had left them, and they were hard up, and she felt scorned and looked down upon by some of the better-off girls at school. Anyway although there were things about Dinah I did not like, although her background was different from mine and most of the others in my class, I seemed to have drifted into a friendship with her and willy-nilly I had become her champion.

I admired her qualities, her steadfastness and loyalty, her sudden flashes of tart humor, her entire lack of self-



pity. But most of all I liked her because she needed *me*, she roused my protective feeling, she was not so self-reliant as she pretended to be. I had been able to see behind her mask, and however touchy and aloof and difficult her behavior might be I understood that it came from a deep-rooted unhappiness. I guessed that this had partly to do with her mother. Beyond this I rather welcomed my friendship with her because she had never known my mother nor how things had been at home when she was alive. It was somehow a relief to be friends with someone who was so unfamiliar with my earlier life.

Dinah came home with me once more before the Easter holidays began, this time for a whole day, and we all packed into the car, the whole family, and went down to the sea.

She was a different person from her school self—relaxed, cheerful, almost gay—I had never felt fonder of her. The twins liked her a lot I could see, and I determined then to invite her often to the house during the holidays. Lois seemed oblivious of Dinah's admiration but she was nice to her; my father lumped her into his "one of Kirsty's friends" category.

So far Dinah had not suggested that I go home with her or meet her mother. I hoped that soon she would ask me but I knew I must not hurry her, nor try to penetrate her secrecy. I had to be content to wait.

These last weeks of the term I had managed to keep out of Lois' way as much as possible, so we had rubbed along together reasonably well. I reckoned I had hidden quite effectively my real feelings for her, although I had caught Janet looking at me in a worried way once or

twice. The prospect of three weeks without Lois enabled me to act out the part I had set myself, but it was an enormous relief when, the day after the holidays began, we helped to load up the car, pack Lois and my father into it and wave them off down the drive. At the last minute Lois put a hand on my arm and although I felt myself stiffen I managed not to shake it off. "You're sure you'll be all right, Kirsty?" she asked. Her face was young and somehow vulnerable. I felt a softening toward her.

The blood drummed up into my ears and I felt torn with an unrecognizable emotion. "Of course," I answered in a carefully controlled voice, "and I hope you'll have a wonderful holiday!" Then I rushed round to where my father sat at the driving wheel and threw my arms round his neck in a violent hug. "Come back safely," I murmured. He was surprised and a little embarrassed at my unusual effusiveness but for once he responded, kissed my cheek warmly and whispered, "Goodbye, Kirsty dear. Be good."

The first two weeks flew past, we were a familiar cheerful group, the boys, Janet and I. I was happier than I'd been since Father married again. I enjoyed a wonderful feeling of belonging, of being needed and loved.

We were out a lot on our bicycles or tramping over the downs—Janet came with us some days, and sometimes Dinah although she seemed very busy, doing extra time at her job, and looking after her mother who was "not so well again" she said.

"Is there nothing *I* can do to help," I asked her. "Shopping for example, or some of the cleaning—washing even?"

She refused my offers bluntly, wrapping herself in secrecy, repulsing me. She had a bitter pride I could not understand.

"I can manage," she said shortly, then added, "but it's nice of you to offer, Kirsty. Thank you."

It was an unusually gracious utterance for her, so I did not feel offended at her refusal of my help.

We had postcards of France and Italy from my father and Lois, but they did no more than ruffle the surface of my peace. It seemed that so long as I could not see Lois or hear her—particularly hear her—she lost her power to disturb me.

But during the third week I began to get wound up again, to dread Lois' return. The threatening cloud of anxiety that I had succeeded in banishing for a time, began to loom again and I could not escape it. Even the twins were different as they began to retreat once more into their own private world, leaving me outside, and alone again.

Janet must have noticed the change in us but she never said a word.

At last the day of return arrived. All our welcoming preparations were made, and we waited ready.

"Perhaps it'll be all right," I tried to cheer myself up. "Perhaps I've got used to her really, and when she comes back again I won't resent her so much," but I knew I was kidding myself.

They were both looking marvelous, bronzed and happy, Lois especially. I had forgotten how very attractive she was, and my father looked so *young*!

Janet had made one of her delicious pies. She would

not stay, so it was left to me to lift it out of the oven and onto the table. The stage was set for a family Occasion. A bottle of wine brought home from France was uncorked and presents for each of us were produced. Mine was a lovely headscarf of Italian silk in several shades of pink, it was really beautiful and I was delighted with it.

“We thought it was just right for your coloring the moment we saw it in Rome, didn’t we, Gerry?” cried Lois as I tried it on.

With a sickening lurch my hopes began to tumble, a screw of misery began to twist in me, and the old antagonism to rise again. Nothing had changed, I had *not* got used to Lois, it was *not* going to be all right. My feelings for her were exactly the same as they had been. I was the odd one out, my father had Lois, the twins had each other, and I—had no one.

## chapter 5

OUR HOUSE WAS EDWARDIAN, built at the end of the last century. It was three floors high, spacious, airy and rather old-fashioned. Below it were the cellars, dark, cobwebby, with barred windows, an area of awesome creepiness beloved of the boys and me. One part of the cellars was surrounded with shelves and was used as an extra larder. Here were stored jars of bottled fruit, and Father's treasured homemade wines which occasionally blew up. The other part, and much the larger, was entered by a hole in a wall, and was in pitchy darkness. It rambled on under the entire structure of the house. Here in our mother's day when the boys and I were younger we had consorted for secret meetings, torchlit, in spine-chilling excitement and delight. Here we kept a box of stale biscuits, some candle ends, a piece of thick rope, a heavy stick and a bottle of ginger pop. It was our secret place, horrible but infinitely fascinating, inhabited by an occasional scratching or rustle—we suspected rats.

A decrepit wooden ladder-like stair led from the cellars up into the kitchen passage. It was badly in need of repair, but since the place was now so seldom used, no one had bothered.

On the last Saturday of the holidays I was helping Lois to get lunch ready. The boys and Father were working in the garden and Janet had gone home.

"We haven't got a pudding," said Lois. "What would you like, Kirsty?"

I thought of something easy. "Tinned peaches?" I suggested.

Lois looked along the shelf. "No peaches, only pears," she said.

"Marcus doesn't like them," I pointed out.

"Well—I know," cried Lois. "We've got some cream, what about gooseberry fool? There are a few bottles left in the cellar I think. Would you like that? Could you fetch one, Kirsty?"

Gooseberry fool! We'd always had it on Mother's birthday, it was her favorite pudding. Why did Lois have to hit on that? Misery welled up in me as Lois' voice babbled on and I turned away. I opened the door at the top of the cellar stairs, switched on the light and went down, but the sound of Lois' voice followed me. "Bring the biggest jar you can find," she called.

I was about halfway down the stair when suddenly, with a sickening crack, the bottom part gave way and I crashed onto the stone floor below.

I landed on my bottom with a fearful thud that jarred my whole body. For a few seconds I sat there stunned, winded, unable to move, and feeling terribly sick.

Lois appeared white-faced at the top of the ladder.



"I'm all right," I moaned. "I think I'll be able to get up in a minute."

She disappeared and in a few moments returned with my father.

He jumped down beside me in an instant, his arms went round me, and Lois followed, a glass in her hand. I took a sip, which steadied me, and then slowly, carefully with Father's support I stood up. Gingerly I tried out my legs, bent my spine, lifted my arms, turned my head about—I was all right.

They both looked enormously relieved. "I should have noticed that the stair was rotten," said my father. "I'll get a new one made straightaway. Thank heavens you're not



badly hurt—it might have been much worse.” With the help of the ladder from the garden I got up out of the cellar and Lois took me up to my room and made me lie down.

I felt shaken and confused and my head ached horribly as I shut my eyes. I had had a bad fright and I longed for my mother.

“You’ll feel better presently, just lie still until the doctor comes,” whispered a quiet voice. I felt confused, dazed, I knew it was Lois speaking, but I kept my eyes tight shut and pretended it was my mother.

I must have fallen asleep, for when our doctor arrived I woke feeling much better, apart from a headache. He was an old friend and as he examined me he joked and teased me until I laughed and relaxed.

He said I was fine but told me to stay in bed for the rest of the day.

“You’re lucky,” he said. “You might have damaged yourself quite badly.” Then turning to Lois he asked her to let him know if I was not fully recovered by morning.

Lois was very kind and for the rest of the day she was constantly in and out of my room bringing me trays, books to read, her radio, even a vase of fresh flowers from the garden. But the harder she tried to please me, the more I resented and hated her, and the more I wanted my mother. It was mean and horrible of me and grossly unfair to Lois and every minute I felt more miserable and guilty. My father had gone out with the boys after the doctor’s visit and Lois had stayed in with me but I could not even thank her. How she must have longed to box my ears!

After tea I made an excuse to get rid of her by saying

that I thought I'd go to sleep for a while, so she drew the curtains and left me deeply ashamed of myself.

Next morning I woke feeling perfectly all right, my headache gone, only a slight aching in my limbs remained, as if I had played a violent game or cycled too far.

I got up and ran a hot bath, no one else was awake. I lay relaxed and soothed in the water for a long time, luxuriating in the warmth.

My father was waiting in my room when I came out of the bathroom.

"Well, dear, how are you, no ill effects?" he asked.

"None," I replied, "I'm perfectly all right."

"Good, I'm very thankful. Lois is still asleep. I'm going down to get breakfast," he said. "Would you like yours in bed too?"

"Oh no thank you," I said laughing. I knew what *ages* it would take him to get it. "I'll have breakfast with you, and I'll see to Lois', too," I offered, not because I felt cosy toward Lois, but because I knew it would please my father, and it was wonderful to have him to myself for once.

I made the coffee, warmed the rolls, and boiled the eggs, and I set a tray attractively for Lois—my father took it up to her.

We had a long companionable breakfast together before the boys put in their appearance. I felt cherished and closer to my father then than I had since he married Lois, and this made me very happy.

Janet did not come on Sundays so as usual I washed up the breakfast dishes. I also prepared the vegetables for lunch and put the roast into the oven. This kept me oc-

cupied for some time, and then since I was feeling so well-disposed toward everyone I determined to make the gooseberry fool that had caused all the drama the previous day, to demonstrate to myself at least that I was being fair to Lois.

When I told my father, he absolutely forbade me to go down to the cellar till the stair was mended.

"Tell me what you need and I'll get it myself," he offered.

He went down the top part of the stairs, which he had propped up, very cautiously while I watched from the top, and he jumped down the few remaining feet, returning in a moment with a big jar of bottled gooseberries. I tipped them into a pan, thickened them slightly with cornflour and brought it all to the boil, stirring all the time to avoid lumping. I added some sugar and when they had cooled a little, I poured it into the blender and turned on the current. I had to wait till the mixture was quite cold before I added the whipped cream, so I put the bowl in the fridge and went into the garden to find some sprigs of mint for mint sauce to eat with our lamb.

It was while I was crouched over the mint bed that I heard the voice calling to me.

"What a heavenly morning, Kirsty! Are you all right? None the worse of your fall?"

That voice, was I never to escape from it?

I had a moment of anguish, of desperate longing for my mother, then I looked up. Lois was walking slowly toward me, cutting flowers from the border as she came—Lois who spoke like my mother, Lois who had stepped into my mother's place but could not fill it.

My desolation turned to anger, and hatred boiled up in

me frightening me by its violence. I strove to calm myself, to control my jumble of emotions. "It's not her fault," I muttered aloud, "you must be fair to her." But that was part of my trouble, I could not be fair to Lois, I could not be reasonable about her. All my battles with myself ended in the same way, I was left with a sickening feeling of guilt and a deep sense of shame. Suddenly without warning a drumming came into my ears so that I could not hear; I felt confused and dizzy, my limbs began to tremble and the world started to spin round me. I thought I was going to faint.

I pressed my hands hard on the ground where I knelt, to steady myself, and bent my head low over the mint bed. After a few seconds the strange sensations passed and I began to feel better.

Lois must have thought I had not heard her for she called again, repeating what she had said.

With great effort I answered.

"Yes, thank you, I'm fine—just getting some mint for the sauce."

I struggled to my feet and managed to get back to the kitchen round the end of the house so that I did not have to pass Lois.

I left the mint on the table and hid in the broom closet where I sat hunched on the floor till I stopped shaking and felt more normal. I must have looked all right by lunchtime for no one made any remarks.

The incident had scared me. It was a nasty turn and I was never ill, but I explained it away as a hangover after my fall, so I didn't say anything about it to anyone. I hate making a fuss.

## chapter 6

THE SUMMER TERM BEGAN UNEVENTFULLY, and I settled down to a steady slog until my exams in July. It was important I should pass well for then I could decide whether I wanted to go on and try to get to a university or content myself with something less ambitious. Looming exams seemed to weld the class into a more solid group, and old quarrels and coolnesses were forgotten for the time being. I found myself reinstalled in the good graces of my three former school friends and even Dinah was halfheartedly accepted by them. She had become rather more aloof recently and enclosed in some sort of bitterness. Her manner to me was so offhand, at times so repelling, that I felt like avoiding her. But I had a nagging feeling of responsibility toward her, and I sensed that her unapproachability sprang from a deep, a terrible unhappiness and I wanted to help. Still she kept me outside, she told me nothing, she could not let me help.

“How is your boyfriend?” I asked once. “The one you



were waiting for that day we met in the café?"

"I don't see him any more," said Dinah shortly.

"Oh, I'm sorry," I said. "I thought you needed a friend and ——"

"I don't need anyone," Dinah retorted. "I mind my own business."

"Oh—well, I was only trying to help," I apologized swiftly.

"Oh, Kirsty,—” her face softened and I knew she was appealing for forgiveness and could not ask it because of her pride. I smiled back reassuringly.

"Actually," she went on slowly, "I never liked him very much, but he understood, he knew about trouble."

"Then why did you break with him?" I asked.

"I got scared," she said. "You see—he was on drugs."

"*Dinah*," I gasped. "You don't mean you—"

She nodded.

"Oh yes, pot, marijuana, I've been smoking it for months."

I was horrified! My thoughts went back to that sordid fusty café and the peculiar smell I had noticed, so that's what it was—marijuana. I shuddered.

"But *why* Dinah?" I asked. "Why did you ever start?"

"It helped me to forget," she said simply. "And then when he wanted me to try stronger stuff, cocaine and opium, I got really scared and dropped the lot. He was only trying to help, you know."

"But what drives you to such lengths? What do you have to forget?" I asked shocked.

"I have—troubles," she said shortly and changed the subject.

That night I lay in bed thinking over what Dinah had told me and wondering what dreadful skeleton she hid in her cupboard at home. What was this trouble she kept hinting at but would not tell me? I felt really concerned about her, and sympathetic in a way I could not possibly have been before my mother died. Since then I too had had my troubles, as poignant to me as Dinah's were to her, though hers were caused by her circumstances, by something outside herself, I was sure, whereas the fact that I could not accept Lois was entirely my own fault.

"I think I've got to get into Dinah's home and try to see for myself what's bothering her, if she can't tell me," I said to myself. "Then she'll at least be able to talk to me and this might help to ease her."

I seized my chance a few days later. Engrossed in conversation I had accompanied Dinah practically to her home—I knew her street but not her number.

"Won't you ask me in?" I said.

Dinah stiffened and looked at me warily.

"You can trust me," I pleaded.

"All right," she said, "but not today. Come home with me tomorrow."

Next day Dinah seemed all suppressed excitement as we walked to her home together after school, nervous but pleased, and I began to wonder if she had ever brought a friend home with her before.

"Here we are, mum," she called as she threw the door open and drew me inside the house. There was no answering call, and I saw a shadow darken Dinah's face, a look of apprehension, of anxiety.

"Hang up your blazer, Kirsty," she said, indicating a

peg in the tiny hall, "and come in here."

She opened the door of a sitting room and I followed her. It was a small dingy room, unlovely and uncared for, smelling of stale tobacco, but the table was attractively set for tea, with pretty china and a tempting homemade cake. Then I saw her—slumped in a chair by the window, her head lolling, snoring noisily, a flabby-looking woman fast asleep—Dinah's mother.

Dinah's face froze and I heard the despair in her voice as she whispered, "Oh—*mum!*"

"She's not well, is she?" I ventured softly. "Don't let's disturb her."

Dinah gave me a glance of piercing scorn but before she could say anything her mother stirred and woke. The puffy face was turned toward us and she tried to struggle to her feet, half rose then tottered and collapsed back into the chair again.

Dinah went quickly to her side.

"It's all right, mum," she said, "you go back to sleep again. We'll take our tea out into the kitchen." There was a tenderness in her voice I had never heard before—and *still* I had not understood.

Then as Mrs. Purdy spoke in a thick slurred voice, pronouncing her words with slow care, a strong smell of gin or something hit me. Then I knew—she was drunk!

I turned away from Dinah to hide the searing pity I felt for her. Automatically I began to collect the plates and put them on the tray.

But Dinah did not spare me.

"This is Kirsty, mum," she said, "my school friend. I told you I was bringing her home to tea."

"Good afternoon, M—Mrs. Purdy," I stammered.

But her head was lolling again, the snoring resumed.

Without a word Dinah picked up the tea tray and marched off to the kitchen. I brought the cake and followed her, closing the door softly behind me.

"Well," said Dinah defiantly, "Now you can see for yourself. She's drunk—my mother."

"Oh Dinah!" I cried, searching for words that would not offend her but would show my sympathy, "I don't know what to say, except that I admire you and the way you cope more than I can tell you."

"Don't say anything," said Dinah. "I can't talk about her, but it's a relief that you know."

"I feel completely inadequate," I said. "I wish I could help you. Surely there is something I can do."

"Yes," said Dinah in a matter-of-fact voice, "you can put the kettle on!"

The tension snapped and we were able to relax into nervous giggles even in the face of tragedy.

I decided not to stay long, since Dinah did not mention her mother again, and she obviously did not wish to talk about her just then.

When we had washed up the tea things and I was about to leave I wanted to reassure her, to confirm that her secret was safe with me.

"Thank you for having me, Dinah," I said. "I'm sorry about what happened—don't forget that I'd like to help. You can trust me."

"Yes, I know I can trust you," she replied. "I'd never have brought you home with me if I hadn't known that. But—well, you're so terribly *innocent*, Kirsty! Never mind.

Now I've got to get on with my homework before I go to my job."

I walked home in a daze, wrung with pity for Dinah. It was a terrible load for a girl of her age to carry, no wonder she seemed hard and bitter and secretive. And there did not appear to be any older person to help her, any relation to share the responsibility with her to whom she could turn for support and comfort. I wondered where her father was, and whether it was because of him that Mrs. Purdy had given up and sunk to her present pitiable state. I knew that Dinah needed help badly, but apparently I was not the one to give it. What did she mean by calling me terribly innocent? I had never felt so inadequate and inexperienced in my life. I wished I could have talked to someone about her problem, my father or Janet perhaps, but I did not feel free to do so since Dinah had sworn me to silence.

I was entirely concentrating on Dinah as I reached home and went in by the front door, forgetting not to slam it behind me.

"Is that you, Kirsty? How did your tea party go?"

The voice took me by surprise. I stopped dead and my heart beat in my throat. For an unwary moment I had thought—. But it was Lois of course! My body stiffened with antagonism and I wanted to run and hide.

For a moment I struggled for composure, then I went to find her.

She was sitting on the couch in the drawing room, a cup of tea in her hand. She looked up and smiled as I put my head round the door.

"It was all right," I said in answer to her question, "but

Dinah's mother . . . wasn't well, so I came home early."

"I've just got in," said Lois. "Get another cup from Janet and come and sit here beside me—or is it too late?"

Her friendliness made me feel terribly ashamed of my dislike of her, and a blush of guilt crept over my face. Suddenly the room began to swim round me, my eyes and ears went queer, I broke out in a cold sweat and began to shake all over.

I clutched the door handle to steady myself. "I'm awfully sorry," I said withdrawing my head, "but I've got such masses of homework, I'll have to get on with it."

I fled and dragged myself upstairs to collapse onto my bed, hoping that Lois had not noticed anything. I pulled my eiderdown over me, shut my eyes, and tried to stop trembling. After a little I felt better, the dizziness passed, I grew warm again, and the panic was over.

What on earth was wrong with me? What caused those queer turns? This was the second time it had happened and for no apparent reason. The first one might have been accounted for by my fall in the cellar, but not this second one. I had been feeling perfectly well till it happened, and I felt perfectly well again now.

I was worried, even a little frightened. Perhaps I should tell Janet about it. But Janet had gone home and by the next morning I was quite all right and there did not seem any point in making a fuss.



## chapter 7

AFTER MY DISCOVERY ABOUT MRS. PURDY I found I could not get close to Dinah again. She kept me at arm's length and withdrew behind a formidable shield of pride. Every time I tried to talk to her she brushed away my sympathy and refused to say anything. I saw that she couldn't help it, so at last I gave up trying, but it made things uneasy between us.

I was having my own problems. The peculiar turns, which to myself I called my panics, were happening more frequently and were lasting for longer so I was afraid that soon somebody would notice them before I could get away by myself. They had only happened at home so far, and always seemed to be connected with Lois, usually when I was hating her most, and often when her voice had taken me by surprise. She seemed to be making a great effort to make friends with me, and her very niceness made me even more ashamed of my feelings for her. I knew I was being horribly unfair and mean to her but I

honestly could not help it however hard I tried. The most I could hope for was to hide my dislike from her and from everyone else; I could not bear the idea of anyone knowing what a despicable person I had become. So I struggled to keep a pleasant manner with her, but I avoided contact with her as much as I could. Until I could stop hating and resenting her I knew that no real communication between us was possible.

As my exams drew nearer I needed no excuse for spending a great deal of time in my own room. I had a vast amount of work to get through.

Everyone in our class began to feel scratchy and easily upset. We were all very tired and thoroughly sick of the mounting tension and the nervous urgings and apprehensions of our well-meaning teachers.

It was a great relief when at last the first day of the exams arrived, and by the time the week was over I felt I had not done too badly.

On the last day our form mistress, brave woman, invited us all to supper in her house to celebrate, and I arrived home to change and dress up a little, in a reckless frame of mind.

I would have liked a tremendous welcome with all the flags out and the band playing and to have been made much of by someone who understood—my mother in fact. But only Janet was in, and she was certainly not given to extravagances, although she did her best for me.

“Well, my woman,” she greeted me, in her Norfolk form of endearment, “it’s all over is it? Come along and have a cup of tea.”

When the boys got in we had a bit of a rough and

tumble, which did me good, but I knew they were itching to be off to the swimming pool, and in any case I had to wash and dry my hair before I went out.

"Informal," Miss Levens had said, but I knew she wouldn't expect jeans, so I got out my newest summer frock, rather a pretty blue linen one; I wore my newly washed hair loose, and a pair of white sandals without stockings.

I left by the door into the garden, where I knew I'd find my father and Lois having a sherry on the terrace.

My father lifted his glass to me, "Here's luck for your results," he said.

"To you, Kirsty," said Lois. "Have a good time. You look charming."

I was pleased and flattered. "Thank you both," I said, blew them a kiss and was off.

The party was rather stilted, everyone on her best behavior, so that the ice was not properly broken until right at the end. Suddenly Miss Levens began to tell us a ghost story, and we found she had a talent none of us had suspected. We hung on her words, chilled to the spine, avid for more. Even Dinah, who had turned up after a great deal of persuasion on my part, seemed absorbed into the eerie half-world of the supernatural.

We left in a group and strolled together through the warm summer evening for a short way till we had to split up to go home in different directions.

I was in a mellow mood when I got in, my fermentings overlaid for the time being, and although I did not feel tired, it was quite late so I slipped off to bed at once.

I was awakened in the night by a crashing storm,

heavy rain pattered in at my open window. Thunder boomed and exploded overhead and lightning flickered. It was very hot and stuffy and coming so close on top of Miss Levens' hair-raising stories I could have sworn I smelt sulphur. I sprang out of bed, shut my window and hurried along to the boys' room.

They were sitting hunched up on the end of Gory's bed, tousle-headed, sleepy-faced, trying not to look scared at the fearful bangs.

I crouched down beside them, and we sat huddled together for support. My father dashed in to see if we were all right, and we waved him away back to Lois. It was a terrific storm, the worst I've ever seen, but for the three of us there was a feeling of togetherness that I found enormously comforting.

"D'you remember the time the Wrensons' chimney got struck?" said Gory. A shiver of recaptured thrill ran through all of us and we snuggled closer together.

"And the day when the elm tree in the park was split and Mother——" Marcus's voice faltered and stopped.

*Mother.* The word hung in the air between the three of us, we so seldom spoke of her, we did not dare to.

Each of us knew the others were remembering her with love, with longing, but none of us spoke a word.

At last Gory muttered, breaking the long silence, "Lois is all right, you know," and Marcus loyally echoed, "Yes, we think she's O.K., Kirsty."

They meant it for my reassurance but it drove a wedge between us, shattering my illusion of solidarity. They were for Lois, and I was not.

The storm had passed and there was a great stillness,



broken only by the heavy plops of rain dripping from the roof gutters onto the water that had collected below the window ledge.

"I'm terribly hungry," I announced. "I'm going down to get something to eat before I go back to sleep."

"It's three o'clock," Gory remarked with awe, "I've never been awake so early before. I'm hungry too. Come on, Marcus."

We tiptoed down the stairs—it was almost daylight—and crept into the kitchen.

I got the cornflakes packet out of the cupboard and gave us each a good bowlful. There was just enough milk left for each of us to have a little and a spot to spare for Cat who was wide awake of course and watching us with skeptical green eyes.

As we munched in companionable silence, I studied my twin brothers, so much alike but so different in temperament: Gory the leader, the man of action, the explorer, the experimenter, bold, determined and methodical; Marcus the dreamer, the artist, the idealist, a sensitive creature, imaginative and exceedingly vulnerable.

I was devoted to Gory, I admired his staunchness, a rock-like quality, and his utter devotion to his more delicately balanced twin. Gory let his actions speak for him, he could not say the endearing things that Marcus did, but I think he felt them just the same.

But Marcus—ah, Marcus was my special one. His other-worldliness, his vulnerability, roused my maternal instincts to a passion of protective love, which might have overwhelmed him if there had been no Gory. I knew, of course, and had accepted long ago, that with



Marcus I would always take second place, Gory came first.

The birds had begun to sing in the early dawn as we crept upstairs and back to bed.

## chapter 8

WE ALL SLEPT LATE the morning after the storm; luckily it was a Saturday.

I had a queer feeling of tautness, as if I had been over-stretched and could not relax again. It was partly because of tiredness, of excitement after the happenings of the night, and my bottled-up tension from exams.

Everything went all right till just before our midday meal, which Janet stayed to get on Saturdays. Then I suddenly remembered something I had wanted from the town, and realizing that the shops closed before lunch on Saturdays, I hopped onto my bicycle and sped away.

On my return journey I had a puncture and was forced to push my bicycle home, so that by the time I got back it was long past lunchtime. Janet had gone, leaving everything neat and the pots and pans washed. When I opened the door into the kitchen, the family was still sitting round the table drinking coffee. Animated conversation was going on above the blaring radio and no

one noticed me. I stood there waiting, it seemed, for ages, a spectator, an interloper. Then Lois turned and saw me. "Oh Kirsty!" she cried. "Where have you been?"

Immediately the easy atmosphere changed. Gory leapt to turn off the radio, everyone stopped talking and an uncomfortable restraint made itself felt.

I felt embarrassed and acutely unhappy, I was the unwanted one, the one who did not fit in, the lone one.

I started to explain my lateness and to apologize as I crossed to the side table to get my lunch—there was precious little of anything left, and it was all stone cold. They had all forgotten me, every one of them, even Marcus! It was the last straw.

"How awful of us, Kirsty. We got talking and somehow we forgot all about you——" Lois' voice trailed off and a babble of apologies broke out from the others. My ears buzzed and my knees began to shake heralding the well-known symptoms of one of my panics.

"It doesn't matter," I cried hurriedly, hating them all. "I can't eat anything, I'm not a bit hungry!" and I turned and fled upstairs, rushed into my room, banged the door and locked it behind me.

Shaking and dizzy I threw myself down on my bed and burst into tears.

I must have fallen asleep, because it was teatime when I woke up feeling better.

I got up and washed my face, what should I do now? The house was perfectly quiet as I unlocked my door and stood listening, everyone must be out, probably asleep in the garden; it was terribly hot.

"I've got to talk to someone," I muttered. "I can't go

on like this much longer. I've got to get away from home, away from Lois or I shall go crazy." Who could I talk to, that was the trouble! Not to my father, he would never understand, he was much too involved with Lois. Who then? There was nobody else but Janet—Janet, of course, she would help me.

I tiptoed down the stairs, pausing every few steps to listen, but there was not a sound.

I slipped out of the side door, which was hidden from the back garden, and streaked across the front grass and out of the gate.

Once out of sight of the house I slowed my pace. It was too hot to run.

Janet's cottage stood on the edge of the country only a short distance from my home and in a few minutes I was hammering on her open door.

She came in through the cottage from her garden and looked surprised when she saw me.

"Why Kirsty, what's wrong?" she cried. "Come in, come in!"

"There's nothing wrong with anyone except me," I said, "but I've got to talk to you, Janet. I *must* talk to you *now*."

Janet must have detected a hysterical note in my voice for she put her hands on both my shoulders, steadying me.

"Now calm down," she said. "Go and sit on the bench in the shade. I'll bring you out a glass of my lemon drink in one minute—off you go!"

She spoke to me as she had when I was a child and gratefully I obeyed her.

I strolled across the grass and sat down under the apple trees, and in a moment she followed me and handed me a cold glass.

I knew her lemon drink well, it was delicious.

"Mm, lovely, it's just what I needed," I said.

Janet settled herself into her old basket chair, smoothed down her faded cotton dress and picked up her piece of mending.

"Well now," she said encouragingly, "what is it?"

I got up from the bench and knelt down beside her, my hand on her knee.

"Janet—can I trust you not to tell?" I pleaded.

"You know you can," she replied seriously.

So I settled myself full length on my stomach on the grass and I told her everything.

She said nothing when I had finished, but she had put down her sewing and was regarding me thoughtfully over her spectacles, her face grave.

"You ought to tell your father," she said at last. "These panics, as you call them, might be serious, you ought to see a doctor."

"But surely you understand, I *can't* tell my father!" I cried. "Lois would have to know it all. I've told you it would widen the gap between us so much that I'd never be able to cross it, *never!* No, I must get away from home and stay away for the whole summer and then see what happens. If the panics go on or get worse, I promise you I'll see a doctor. But I've got to get away, and I've got to get a job, and I need your help to do it, Janet."

Janet took up her sewing again and began to work in deep concentration while I waited for her to speak.



After a few minutes of silence she suddenly looked up.

"Here's an idea," she said, "how would you like to go fruit picking, as a job I mean?"

"It's out-of-door work and I'd like that," I answered, "but where?"

"In Norfolk, near where I used to live," said Janet. "There's lots of fruit grown there, mostly currants by August but maybe the last of the raspberries too. You could stay with Suza, my sister. She married Gideon Dillon a local farmer and she knows all the fruitgrowers. She could get you a job with one of them, they're always screaming for pickers."



"Oh Janet, you're a marvel!" I cried jumping up to hug her. "It's a wonderful idea! Will you write to Suza and ask her?"

"You must talk to your father first," said Janet. "Tell him you want to earn some money this summer—and it's good pay if you work hard—tell him you need a taste of independence. I'm sure he'll let you go. You'll like Suza and her husband and most of the people of Seltingham. There haven't been many changes since I grew up there."

I stayed and talked with Janet for a couple of hours, and by the time I left her I felt relieved and soothed and resolved to carry out the plan we had made.

"Better wait a day or two before you ask your father's permission," Janet cautioned me. "Maybe I'll get a chance of dropping a hint to Mrs. Lois."

At suppertime nothing was said about my earlier outbreak and everyone was so amiable that I felt ashamed of my behavior and did my best to make amends by being extra helpful.

Janet was as good as her word, for when later in the week I broached the subject of a holiday job to my father, there was no fuss; he readily agreed and I knew that Janet must have paved the way for me.

A letter was written to Suza and her reply came promptly. I could live on her farm and work as a fruit picker for one of her neighbors. I would pay for my board and lodging out of what I earned.

"We'll enjoy having someone young about us again," wrote Suza. "We've missed the grandchildren since they went home to America."

So it was all settled, and I was glad there were only two

weeks of the term left, they could not pass quickly enough for me, I was longing to be off.

Two or three times during that period I had one of my panics, each one lasting a little longer, each one worse than the last. I felt very worried and frightened, but I knew I had only to wait a little longer until I got away, and then I hoped they'd stop.

I had been taken up with my own worries to such an extent that I had seen very little of Dinah outside school. She had become more aloof than ever and almost seemed to be avoiding any intimacy with me. Suddenly, watching her in class one day I became conscience-stricken and ashamed of my self-absorption, she looked so terribly thin and wretched.

I waited for her that afternoon outside the school gate so that she could not slip past me, and I greeted her in the casual way she liked. We bantered with one another as we strolled along and then I said, "By the way, what are you doing in the summer holidays? I've got a job!"

Her manner became more interested then.

"Good for you," she said, "what is it?"

"Fruit picking in Norfolk," I announced, "for two months."

Dinah drew in her breath sharply, and she could not altogether keep the dismay out of her voice. "A job away from home, for the whole summer!" she exclaimed. "Oh *Kirsty!*"

She said it in such a deflated way that I knew suddenly she must have been counting on having me around to do things with her during the holidays, though no one could have guessed it from her behavior toward me—how un-

predictable she was!

On a sudden impulse I said, "Why don't you come with me? I'm sure that Janet's sister would put us both up, and you could get a job at the same fruit farm as me!"

The words were out before I had time to think or change my mind and I waited anxiously to hear what Dinah would say—I did not really want her with me.

Dinah looked at me for a moment with a softer expression than she usually wore. "I wish I could," she said simply, "but of course I can't possibly, there's Mum."

"Couldn't you leave her with someone?" I asked. "I mean a relation or a friend?"

Dinah shook her head. "There's no one," she said. "I told you."

"Oh surely there must be someone to help you," I insisted impatiently. "Can't your doctor do something? Aren't there places—I mean cures for people?"

But I had said the wrong thing and offended her wretched pride again.

"Mind your own blasted business," she flared. "You don't know anything about it!"

"All right, if that's how you feel I don't care," I snapped. "And it's your own fault that you can't get anyone to help you."

I stamped off in a rage, hurt and angry, and tried to put her out of my mind.

But later I felt ashamed of losing my temper and wished my retorts unsaid. I had a miserable sense of having failed her and the hopelessness of her face haunted me all day.

I got my holidays before the boys, and Janet had promised to see me off.

On the morning of my departure my cases were packed and I was all ready to leave after breakfast when the others had gone.

The boys went first, Gory gruff with the embarrassment of saying goodbye, sloped out of the room in his undemonstrative way without touching me. But Marcus put a loving hand on my shoulder and kissed my cheek. "Have a super time," he said, "and bring back bags of money!"

My heart turned over with love for him.

My father, Lois and I sat finishing our coffee after the boys had gone. I suppose I was concentrating on Marcus to the exclusion of everything else for although I heard Lois say something it did not penetrate my consciousness. I did not realize she had spoken to me until my father suddenly threw down his paper and smashed his fist on the table.

"Can't you even manage to give a civil answer when Lois speaks to you?" he shouted furiously.

There was an appalling silence. Lois blushed scarlet and I felt shattered and humiliated as I opened my mouth to apologize and no words came. My life seemed to be ebbing out of me.

Suddenly Janet was there, solid as a rock behind my chair, her hands pressed protectively on my shoulders.

"Can't you see the child is not herself, sir?" she said sternly. "She's worn out, exhausted, over-strained—and that clock is slow," she added.

My father and Lois shot to their feet, mumbled hur-

ried goodbyes and were into the car and away before I had time to recover.

“Thank you, Janet,” I said. “Thank you very much for saving me.”

“Better get your coat on, lovey,” she said gently, “the taxi will be here for us any minute now.”

She crossed the room to the door then she turned and gave me a long shrewd look.

“I’d never have thought to say this, but I’ll be *glad* to see you go,” she said sadly, “you’re right to break away now no matter what happens afterwards—it’s time you were out of this house.”

As the taxi taking us to the station turned out of the garden gate I took a last look at my home and for a moment I wondered if I’d ever come back? What would be the use? No one there really cared about me, no one needed me enough, and unless one is needed by somebody one might as well be dead!

But once I was into the train and speeding away eastwards I began to cheer up a bit and to congratulate myself on my escape. At least I had made my break away from home, now it remained to be seen what would happen to me afterwards.





# Afterwards

## chapter 9

I HAD NEVER BEEN IN NORFOLK BEFORE, and when I arrived the sky was overcast and sunless.

Suza was waiting for me on the platform. I recognized her at once, she was very like Janet but smaller and plumper and softer.

She took both my hands in hers when she came forward to greet me.

“So you’re Kirsty!” she exclaimed. “I’ve heard so much about you and your brothers from Janet that I feel I know you quite well. Come along now, give me one of your cases.”

She led the way outside to where a Land Rover was parked. We put my cases into the back, which was already nearly full with Suza’s shopping, and climbed in. “Are you comfortable?” she asked as we bounced out of the station yard. “We’ve nine miles to go to our village.”

We wound our way through narrow streets, some of them cobbled, and soon we were out of the town, going

through a flat countryside under a vast expanse of gray skies. Here and there we passed through a village huddled round its gaunt stone church, whose sentinel tower kept watch over the land. Every now and then Suza pointed out a windmill or a prosperous-looking farm belonging to friends of hers, its flint house surrounded by fields of rich crops ready to harvest.

It was very different country from my Sussex home, more grim, forbidding, and for the first time I felt an alien, a stranger. Suza wanted news of her sister and for the last few miles Janet was a useful topic of conversation.

"Here is our village, this is Seltingham we're coming to," said Suza at last. "I want to stop at the grocer's for a minute." She drove along main street and pulled up outside "E. Bunting. Family Grocer."

"I shan't be more than a few seconds," she said and disappeared into the shop.

I sat in the Land Rover waiting and idly watched the passers-by: an old man shuffling along with his dog; two little girls pushing a doll's pram across the road; some women gossiping outside the butcher's shop.

Suddenly my interest quickened as a boy came out of the butcher's carrying a parcel. He was about my own age, perhaps a little older. He seemed absorbed in his own thoughts and his head was bent as he walked toward me. He was whistling to himself, a haunting little tune in a minor key. He was almost level with me before he suddenly looked up and saw me.

He stared at me for a moment, then gave me a tentative half-smile, and flushed darkly. I smiled back of

course, but he quickly strode past me, mounted his bicycle and rode off without glancing back.

"He looks interesting. I wonder who he is?" I said to myself.

He was out of sight before Suza returned with her packages so I could not ask her. But I kept remembering his face; it was very appealing and I felt I wanted to comfort him—he wore a slightly bruised look.

We drove on along the village street; beyond the houses the road ran straight across the marshes, which stretched to the barrier of the dunes at the edge of the sea.

Ahead of us I could see a big old farmhouse built of flint, hiding behind a high wall to match. The house had its back to the sea and the wall protected it on three sides.

"Is that your home?" I asked as we approached it.

"Yes, that's Old Manor Farm," said Suza proudly. "It may look a bit grim outside, but *inside* it's warm and comfortable."

As we turned off the road and drove through a gate in the wall I was able to see the house better. It certainly presented a stern face with its small windows and thin little chimneys. I felt intimidated by its solid austerity.

But Suza had pulled up in the cobbled yard at the further side of the lawn from the house and hooted the horn loudly.

Immediately two beautiful collies came tearing round the corner of the house followed by a short heavy man.

"Down Rupert! Down Ruskin! Here's Gideon, my husband, this is Kirsty," she shouted, then murmured in

an aside to me, "He's a bit deaf." Gideon had a shaggy look caused by his very bushy eyebrows, his face was furrowed, its skin tanned like old leather. His blue eyes twinkled merrily as he came forward with outstretched hand.

"You're welcome, Miss," he said with old-fashioned courtesy. "Is this your first visit to Norfolk?"

"My very first," I said loudly, "I belong to Sussex. It's very different there, but we've both got the sea."

He laughed pleasantly and took my cases out of the car where Suza was struggling with her piles of shopping.

"Give me some to carry," I begged her and she handed me out a couple of baskets and emerged herself with several carrier bags.



"Gideon, will you bring the rest when you put the car away, lovey?" she said.

She took me into the big stone-floored kitchen, its table and its ancient beams bleached to the same honeytone. "Leave the baskets on the table," she said. "I'll see to them later when we've had a cup of tea."

She put the kettle on one of the hot plates of the big stove, and taking me by the arm she led me upstairs.

I noticed there was a lot of wood, panelling and floors, and everywhere it gleamed with centuries of care and shone like silk.

There were great massed bowls and jugs of country flowers adding color and beauty to the solidity of the house. A wood fire crackled in the sitting room—the parlor, Suza called it—which we passed on our way through the hall to the stairs.

At the top of the first flight of stairs Suza got her breath, then we went up the second narrower flight to the top of the house.

The door of a large attic room stood open facing us.

"Here you are, my woman," said Suza. "I thought you'd like to have this floor to yourself. Gideon and I sleep in the room below you, and you'll have to come down to the bathroom."

The familiar "my woman" warmed me to her and made me think of Janet as I stepped inside the room.

The wide floor boards were of the same satiny smooth wood as the ground floor; there was a homemade rug beside the massive bed, a large wardrobe and a chest of drawers to match, and a big jug of roses stood on the dressing table. The window was small and looked out

onto the garden in the front of the house. I could see by the window alcove the great thickness of the walls.

"Will you be all right alone up here?" Suza asked.

"Oh yes, thank you," I cried, "it's a lovely room, and I like being high up."

Heavy steps were coming up the uncarpeted stairs, and in a minute Gideon appeared with my suitcases, which he dumped on the floor.

"Kettle's boiling, missus," he said, "and we'd best shut that window, there's a tempest brewing." Suza noticed my look of alarm for she hastened to reassure me.

"Nothing to worry about," she said, "only a bit of wind and rain. It'll be over by tomorrow."

We had tea in the big warm kitchen, and then I went up to my room to unpack my things. By the time I was finished and was beginning to feel really at home, the rain, driven by a high wind, was drenching down.

When I went downstairs again to help Suza get supper ready, the farming seemed to be over for the day. Everywhere was quiet and Gideon was sitting in the kitchen near the stove with his boots off, smoking his pipe. The dogs had tucked themselves away at one end of the stove, out of Suza's way, to dry their wet coats, I supposed. They rose at my entrance and walked round me, sniffing curiously, then apparently satisfied that I was harmless they wagged their tails in approval and went back to their warm spot.

"What other animals have you?" I asked. "Any cows? I suppose milking is over?"

"No cows, missie," said Gideon, "bullocks, but we're mainly crops with a few hens and ducks thrown in."



“And what about Mrs. Muscova? Have you forgotten her?” Suza broke in. “Look, Kirsty, there she is, my beauty.” She pointed to the inner back door, which had glass pannels.

Outside the bottom one stood a huge black and white duck, a handsome foreign bird of a kind I remembered having seen on the pond in the park at home. She was standing outside in the rain, tapping on the panel with her beak, which she opened and shut repeatedly as if she were talking.

“She’s asking for her tea, bless her,” said Suza, and she cut a piece of cake and threw it out of the window.

Immediately the duck wagged the back half of her body, it was more than tail, and waddled sedately across the grass to the cake.

“What kind of duck is she?” I asked. “She’s quite a character, isn’t she?”

“She’s a Muscovy,” said Suza, “the last of a brood we once had.”

She turned again to her cooking pots and I offered to set the table for her. It was a vast table of scrubbed wood and I thought of Gideon sitting at one end of it, Suza at the other and me in the middle between them, we’d need a telephone almost to communicate.

“Good girl,” said Suza, “set us all together at the stove end; supper will soon be ready, then Gideon can get to his T.V. There’s a Boxing program.”

Suza was as good a cook as Janet, and I was extremely hungry. By the time we’d eaten I felt comfortable and easy with them. They seemed such an uncomplicated pair and the plain old house was a perfect setting for them.

Afterwards we all went into the parlor and Gideon put some wood on the fire. It was a chilly evening even if it was July. We settled down to watch the television, but I soon found it difficult to keep awake.

Suddenly the telephone rang and Suza got up to answer it. "It's your father, Kirsty," she called and I jumped up and ran into the hall.

"We just wanted to know that you'd arrived safely," he said when I put the receiver to my ear. "How is it? All right?"

"Very much all right," I replied. "Everything, except that it's pouring with rain!"

"Never mind," said my father, "there's a heat wave coming the forecasters say. Oh—er Kirsty—I'm sorry about this morning. I was a bit annoyed, but I shouldn't have jumped on you so hard. Would you like to speak to Lois?"

"No, not now, just give her my—greetings," I said rather awkwardly and then we hung up. I hoped they would not call me any more, I wanted to be on my own for a bit, to disassociate myself from all of them, even Marcus.

It was not late but I was finding it impossible to stifle my yawns so Suza suggested that I must be tired after my journey and might like to go to bed.

She came up the creaking stairs with me and saw me into my room.

"Gideon and I don't sit up late," she said. "We'll be going to bed in a short time too. Now don't forget our room is right underneath you if you want us."

I undressed quickly and went down to have my bath

before they came up.

When I climbed the narrow stairs again to my floor, I stood for a moment on the shadowy landing listening to the old house breathing, to the tick of the hall clock, to the cracking of the timbers, to the faint rustle and whisper that made me feel the house was alive.

Facing me at the top of the stairs was the door of my bedroom, wide open, but beyond it to the left of the stairs, there was another door.

Cautiously I approached it. I'd like to know what shared the top floor with me, a cupboard? Another room? Carefully I turned the handle and pushed against the solid wood—it did not budge, the door was locked.

I nipped inside my room and shut the door as I heard Suza and Gideon coming up to bed. I opened my window and although the wind had subsided, heavy rain still dripped outside. I climbed into bed and turned off the lamp.

From the room below me the gentle murmur of Suza's and Gideon's voices rose, reassuring, comforting—then all was still.

I woke suddenly in the darkness. With a thudding heart I lay listening, holding my breath—thin reedy notes, a sad little tune trembled on the air. The sounds came from the room next to mine, the room with the locked door. The tune was vaguely familiar, surely I'd heard it somewhere before?

There was silence for a moment, then the tune was repeated, thin, high, eerie, unearthly.

A little shiver slid icily up my spine. Suza had said I was all alone on the top floor.

## chapter 10

WHEN I WOKE AGAIN it was morning, the rain was over, and the sun shone from a blue sky. I found my pillow doubled around my head and pulled halfway down the bed under the covers—then I remembered the music I had heard during the night. I must have been trying to shut out the sound. Could it have been a dream? No, I was certain I had really heard it, a definite tune. I tried to remember how it went but it eluded me; there was so much else to think about I soon forgot it.

Suza poured me a cup of coffee from the big pot as soon as I arrived in the kitchen.

“Gideon’s had his breakfast and gone out an hour ago,” she said cheerfully. “D’you like two eggs with your bacon?”

“Oh yes, please,” I replied, finding I was extremely hungry.

“I hope you slept well?” Suza asked me. “You’re looking fine and rested this morning I must say.”

I thought at once of the sounds that had wakened me in the night. "Who sleeps in the room next to mine?" I asked.

Suza looked surprised. "Why, nobody, the room's hardly ever used. I told you, you are alone up there. Did you think you heard someone?"

I shook my head, deciding not to tell her.

"I just wondered," I said.

Suza laughed and put down a sizzling plate in front of me. "Eat your breakfast," she said, "then I thought we'd go round to the Jarvis farm and see about you starting work on the fruit tomorrow, if that's what you'd like?"

"Jarvis? That's a name I haven't come across before," I said. "Dillon is another. I suppose they are Norfolk families."

"Dillon is one of the old French names," Suza explained. "There's lots of them round these parts—Piggott, Dudney, Meryon, Dillon—there must have been a settlement of Frenchmen here at one time. Dr. Meryon's the one who knows history, he can tell you about all that." She broke off, her attention attracted to Mrs. Muscova, the big duck, tapping for her breakfast.

"Drat the creature," said Suza fondly. "She's as human as a housewife!"

I gobbled up my breakfast thinking over what Suza had said about the French names. My interest had been roused and I determined to find out more about them from Dr. Meryon, whoever he was.

The Jarvis farm was two or three miles inland. Suza drove the Land Rover toward the village, then turned off along a narrow side road, and we rounded a corner.

"We have a bicycle you can borrow for getting to work," she said, "that's the house now. 'Morning, Mrs. Jarvis," she called to a woman who was coming down the drive, and she stopped the car. "I've brought Kirsty over to see you," she said. "She'll be ready to start work tomorrow. Is it all right if we look around?"

"Of course," said Mrs. Jarvis. "I'm sorry I can't take you myself but I've got a hair appointment. You know your way round, Mrs. Dillon. See you tomorrow, Kirsty."

She hurried off toward the village and Suza drove on up the drive and parked the car in front of the house.

I was surprised to find it was a beautiful house of red brick, like a small Elizabethan manor house, quite different from Suza's home. It had a charming grace and elegance, which made it seem less well-suited to the wild east coast weather—but of course it was situated a little way inland and protected by trees.

"Is this really a fruit farm?" I asked, surprise in my voice.

"Certainly," said Suza. "Oh, you mean the house? The Jarvises have not been very long in it, but they've worked hard and they're doing well. The fields are round at the back of the house." I followed her through the orchard, and behind the house we came to outbuildings, the old stables and lofts, and behind them, stretching for miles, lay the fruit fields. Some pickers were busy among the raspberry canes, but most of them were picking black currants.

The ones nearest us were a cheerful group of mixed ages and I scanned their faces eagerly hoping to see the boy I had seen in the village the previous day, but he

was not among them. Suza was looking for one of the local pickers to introduce me to, someone who would show me the ropes next day when I was feeling strange, but most of those in sight were strangers. We waited around for a few minutes but Mr. Jarvis did not appear. "He can't be far away," said Suza, "but we won't wait any longer now, you know where to come."

We had reached the Land Rover and Suza was just going to start the engine when a shout made us both turn around. A man was coming after us waving and calling out, "I was across the field when I saw yew—thought yew'd be off before I reached yew," he panted.

"It's Mr. Jarvis," said Suza to me, then in a louder tone, "I'm sorry if we've brought you from work, Mr. Jarvis. I've just been showing Kirsty here where to come tomorrow morning. She wants to pick for you, d'you remember I asked you about her? Kirsty, this is Mr. Jarvis, Kirsty Newton."

"Good day to yew," said Mr. Jarvis shaking me by the hand. "Comin' to pick for us are yew? Better be ready to start soon after eight, then. Yew'll find me in the shed by the old stables. I'll start yew off. Yew comin' with her, Mrs. Dillon?" he asked.

Suza looked at me inquiringly and I shook my head. "I know where to come, I'll be all right," I said.

"O' course yew will," said Mr. Jarvis in a friendly way. "Well, I'd better be getting back to work. So long, Mrs. Dillon. So long, Miss. See yew tomorrow."

He disappeared round the side of the house and Suza drove out onto the road and back the way we'd come.

I spent the rest of the morning exploring around the

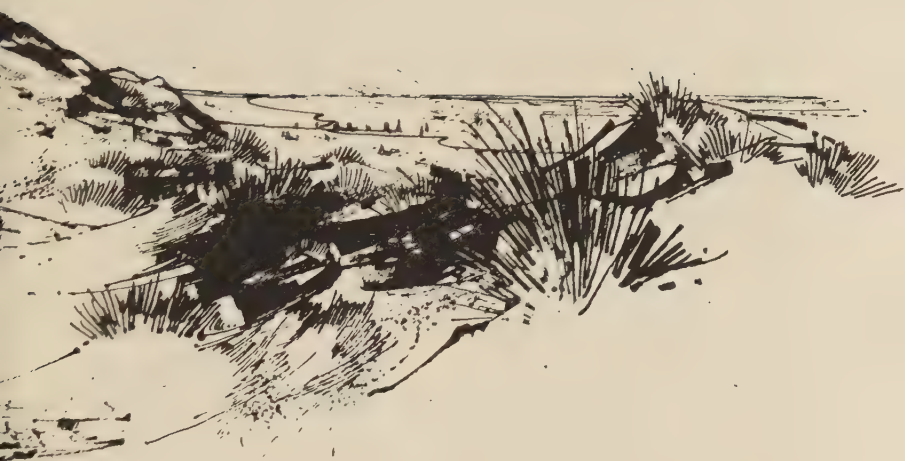




Dillon farm. I went up on the dunes behind the house where the road came to an end and over them onto the beach.

There was a huge expanse of sand, for the tide was out, and although it was the summer holiday season the beach was in no way crowded. Busy family groups of children dug and molded the sand into castles, forts, volcanoes, villages, while their parents sunbathed alongside.

I climbed to the highest point of the dunes and stood looking down on the beach. The dunes were strongly reinforced at the base with a concrete wall to prevent encroachment by the sea. On the other side, inland, stretched the salt marshes, low flat land, and I could well imagine in a winter storm or an extra high tide, how the sea might break over the dunes and pour across the land,



flooding it for miles. From my viewpoint I could see the road leading to the village and a causeway built from the village across the salt marsh to the beach. I saw the little road running inland to the fruit farm, the road I must take next morning when I went to work. And below me, hunched behind the flint wall, firm on its ancient base stood the stalwart house, Old Manor Farm. It had an indomitable look, uncrushed by the ravages of the centuries, unbeaten by the savage winds and the greedy sea. Outside the wall on the land side behind the house stood the tall tower of a church I had not noticed earlier, and a few derelict cottages. It almost looked as though a village had once been there, of which only the old manor house remained.

I wandered back by way of the church behind the

house. Its door creaked on its hinges when I peeped inside as if it were seldom used, and it smelled musty. I stopped to look at a crumbling fresco on one of the walls and to read the Commemoration tablets to men drowned at sea. It must have become a fishermen's church. I peered at the early tomb of the medieval lord of the manor and his lady that still gave the neglected building a certain distinction. Now it seemed unused and forgotten, except perhaps for a service two or three times a year, but the fabric remained intact and the solid tower with its bell still weathered the storms.

Over our lunch of salad and homemade brawn and cheese, I tried to find out from Suza and Gideon something about the surroundings and history of Old Manor Farm. I had been right in guessing that once the house had been part of a village that the sea had swallowed up, the encroaching sand now covered it and only the church and the house remained, and one or two ruined cottages.

"At one time this house was six miles from the sea," said Gideon. "Now it's just a matter of time until it's gone too."

"It'll see us out," said Suza comfortably, "but it's true what Gideon says, the sea is encroaching on the land all along this coast. There are several drowned villages, one of them just beyond the end of our old causeway here, where it reaches the sea. You must meet Dr. Meryon, he's the one to tell you all the old stories, if you're interested."

"I am, very interested," I said. "I had no idea that Norfolk was so exciting, all those French names, and

old houses; the medieval tombs and the greedy sea snatching at them all. I'd like to learn a lot more from someone who knows."

"So you shall," Suza promised, "we'll fix it."

"How long have there been Dillons at Old Manor Farm?" I asked.

"My father bought this house," Gideon answered. "The Meryons owned the house before us, before my father's day, that was."

The afternoon was sunny and warm and after I had helped Suza in the kitchen I took a book out into the garden and stretched out on a rug. It was wonderful to feel so lazy and so relaxed, and I fell asleep till teatime.

When Suza realized that she had forgotten to get the fish for supper, I offered to cycle to the village for her, partly because I wanted to try out the bicycle before I went to work on it next day.

After I had picked up the fish from the fishmongers—there was hardly a soul in the shops—instead of going straight back to Old Manor Farm by the road across the marshes, I turned off along a lane and made an exploratory detour that brought me before long to the Jarvis fruit farm. I rode past it and soon I saw ahead of me the line of dunes across the marsh, and to my right the tall church tower beyond the Dillons' farm.

At the corner of the lane just before I joined the marsh road again, I noticed a dilapidated cottage, more like a pigsty than a dwelling, standing in an overgrown bit of garden, half buried in a tangle of bushes.

The dirty windows leered at me, and a plume of smoke rose from its chimney, showing that it was occu-

pied. I averted my eyes and held my breath as I accelerated past it, for it seemed to me a horrible spot, evil smelling, and sinister. I did not care to linger near it.

## chapter 11

I WAS UP BEFORE SEVEN next morning, the sun was shining and it was a lovely day. Suza offered to come with me as far as the Jarvis farm, but I felt I could manage quite well on my own, so she contented herself with giving me a lunch packet big enough to feed four.

I mounted my bicycle and rode off jubilantly, well before eight.

I went to the shed at the back of the house where I had been told to go.

Mr. Jarvis was there and several other pickers. I was given a chip—a light basket—and shown which row to start on. “Bring your chip here to be weighed when it’s full,” said Mr. Jarvis, “it holds 12 pounds of fruit. Yew get 3 shilling and sixpence each chip.”

I walked to the end of the row I had been given and began to pick the big juicy black currants.

The people picking on each side of me were friendly and we chatted as we worked.

I was slow at first and had to stop frequently for a rest. It was a cheerful busy scene, noisy with the children belonging to some of the pickers, who ran about chasing one another and playing.

By twelve o'clock I had picked two chips of fruit and earned seven shillings, not bad for a start. Several of us took our lunch packets into the orchard at the end of the garden where there was a water tap. We took an hour off to rest and eat our lunch before we started work again.

It was nearly six when I knocked off work, and I was aching all over with the constant stooping and bending. Several of us who had been working together trooped to the shed for our last chip to be weighed, and parted at the farm gate, everyone was going in the opposite direction from me.

I cycled slowly along the rough country lane, feeling rather pleased with myself; I had done a pretty good day's work for a start, and I had enjoyed it too. I was so busy thinking of the others who had worked beside me that I did not notice the derelict cottage till I had almost reached it. I was shocked to find that it was even worse than I remembered it.

I slowed down to get a better look at it, when to my horror I saw crouched on the step outside the gate, an enormous rat. I like most animals, but I *do* have a loathing for rats and this one was huge. He regarded me curiously and seemed entirely unafraid. For a moment I felt paralyzed, then I slid off my bicycle, picked up a stone and hurled it at him. I did not hit him but he vanished.



Immediately, as if summoned by a familiar spirit, a dreadful old man hopped out of the door.

He had a long nose; whiskers and broken teeth—he looked like a rat himself. He was spluttering with rage as he shook his fist at me and shouted, “Be off, yew varmint, yew! Let *be* my creatures!” A stream of curses followed me as I jumped onto my bicycle and pedaled off like mad out of the lane and onto the marsh road.

I was so shaken and frightened that I was not looking where I was going and wobbled round the corner on the wrong side of the road.

“Hey! Steady there!” a voice shouted, and I just managed to avoid colliding with a bicycle coming in the opposite direction. It was the boy who had passed me in the village the day I arrived while I waited in the Land Rover outside the grocer’s shop, the boy I had been hoping to meet ever since.

I jammed on my brakes sharply, almost shot over the handlebars, lost my balance, and fell off onto the grass.

I felt like a terrible fool as he threw down his bicycle and bathing things and rushed to help me up.

“Good heavens! You’re not hurt are you?” he asked.

“No, no, not a bit. I’m terribly sorry for nearly riding into you,” I gasped as he pulled me up, and then I just could not help it, I began to giggle.

He looked rather stiff and put out for a moment, and then he joined in and the ice was broken between us.

When at last my giggles were over and I was able to speak, I began to explain to him what had happened and what a fright I had had.

“Oh, that’s Old Corpusty,” said the boy. “He’s as mad

as a hatter, and a pretty sordid type. No one pays any attention to him, but it's as well to keep out of his path. He can turn nasty."

"Thanks," I said, "I know."

"By the way," he continued, suddenly becoming shy, "my name is Jake Meryon, I live on the other side of Seltingham from here."

"I'm Kirsty Newton," I said, "and I'm staying at the Dillons' farm."

To my surprise a change came over his face, it took on a wary look and his glance slid away from mine.

"I saw you in the village yesterday," he said. "Are you a relative of the Dillons? Are you here on holiday?"

I explained how I came to be staying with Suza, and that I had just finished my first day at work. I rattled my earnings proudly in my pocket—seventeen and sixpence, not bad! Then it was my turn to ask questions.

"Jake Meryon?" I said. "Are you related to the Dr. Meryon Suza keeps talking about?"

"I'm his son," Jake answered. "If you happen to get ill or anything while you're here, he'll look after you."

"Thanks," I said laughing, "but I don't intend to get ill. Perhaps I'd better be going now or Suza will think I'm lost."

"I expect I'll see you again, in the village perhaps?" said Jake. "Don't knock me over next time, will you?"

He sprang onto his bicycle and rode off whistling, and I made my way back to the Old Manor Farm.

"Well!" cried Suza who was looking out for me, "How did you get on? No doubt you're tired out not being used to it. Come on into the kitchen yard where it's cool and

I'll get you a glass of my orange squash. I expect you're longing for a bath."

I went into the yard on the cool side of the house outside the kitchen window and sat down gratefully to sip Suza's orange squash. Suza came and sat beside me to shell the peas for supper.

I told her the various happenings of the day and that I'd met Jake Meryon, but for some reason, of my encounter with Old Corpusty and the rat I did not tell her.

"Jake's a nice friend for you," Suza remarked approvingly, "clever too, like his father. I told you about the doctor didn't I? No doubt you'll be invited to the house now you've met Jake."

The rest of the evening passed quietly, and I had a delicious sense of well-being, of ease and contentment.

By half past nine I was so sleepy with the day's outdoor work that I felt compelled to go to bed.

I was almost asleep on my feet before I climbed into bed, and the next thing I knew Suza was knocking for me to get up next morning.

The first week slipped past and I became so much part of my surroundings that I felt as if much of my life had been spent at Old Manor Farm.

I was enjoying my work too, I had made friends with a girl and her cousin and we usually worked together.

Several times during the week, Jake and I met in the village on our bicycles, and each time we lingered together a little longer, and each time I liked him better. It was all very light-hearted, we laughed together whenever we met. Each seemed to touch off a spark of laughter in the other. I found myself thinking about him a

good deal. I had never had a boyfriend, in fact my brothers were the only boys I knew at all well, and although I had heard some of the girls at school boasting about their boyfriends, I had paid very little attention, boys had not interested me much. But now with Jake it was different. I felt as if I stood on the threshold of a great new adventure.

At the end of the week when I added my earnings together, I felt like a millionaire. I could not persuade Suza to take more than 30 shillings for my board and lodging for the week. It was ridiculous but she was quite firm and said they loved having me with them and no more arguments. So I gave her a good hug, and Gideon too.

"I thought I could never be happy again," I said to them, "but I *am*, I simply love it here! You are both so good to me."

Saturday morning there was a letter from my father giving me all the news from home. I had scarcely given the family a thought since the first night when he had telephoned. I had been entirely absorbed in my new surroundings and interests and friends. Even Lois, the disturbing element in my home life had been forgotten—and now that I came to think of it, I had not had a single sign of one of my panics!

My father's letter however tugged at my heartstrings for it contained a surprising piece of news—Marcus and Gory were to be parted for the first time in their lives. Gory had been invited to go off on his godfather's boat on a trip to the Mediterranean for six weeks. Since he was keen on sailing this seemed a splendid chance for him. Marcus was no sailor and seemed quite happy to

stay behind at home. Caley, a cousin of his own age, was coming on a visit to keep him company.

*"Lois has had to take a few days off work,"* wrote my father, *"she has not been feeling too well."*

A faint stirring of sympathy moved in me, a slight feeling of responsibility and concern. So Lois was not infallible after all! Perhaps I ought to offer to go home and help to look after her? But I shrugged the feeling off, they had shown they didn't need me and if after all they *did* they could jolly well ask me!

I went straight to the village and wrote postcards to the boys, to my father, to Janet, to Dinah, and to Lois, and felt my conscience soothed!

Then I walked into Jake just outside the Post Office and we arranged to go to the beach for the afternoon.

"Come back to tea with me afterwards," I suggested, "I'm sure Suza would be delighted." He hesitated for a moment, looked a little embarrassed and his glance slid away sideways again.

"I hoped you'd come home to tea with us. I'd like you to meet my father and mother," he said.

"Oh, all right, thank you very much," I agreed. "You can come to the farm some other time."

"I'll call for you about two," said Jake. "See you." He shot off leaving me feeling slightly puzzled.

It was a glorious afternoon and I felt I had earned my day off. I had worked jolly hard all week.

"Jake and I are going bathing and he's asked me back to tea, to meet his father and mother," I told Suza as we washed up the lunch things.

"Oh you'll like them, they're nice people," said Suza,

"and Jake is a charming boy. They've had their worries with him, but he seems all right again now. I'm always so sorry it happened when he was here with us."

"What happened?" I asked. "When was he here with you?"

But Suza must have been thinking aloud, for she started at my question and a shut look came over her face.

"Here's Jake now," she said waving through the window, "off you go, and be happy together, lovey."

I looked toward the gate where Jake stood waiting in the sunshine beside his bicycle. Why on earth didn't he come in?

I picked up my bathing things, called a goodbye to Suza, and hurried toward him.

He stood very still, his gaze fixed on the house and he did not greet me. There was a strange look on his face, a dreamy shadowed look as if he had strayed for a moment into a different world from me, a world I could not enter. "Jake!" I called softly and then more loudly, "Jake!"

He started and his expression changed to one of pure pleasure, and as he smiled at me the strain went out of his face.

"Hello!" he said. "Are you ready? Then let's go!"

I seized him by the hand and we ran off together toward the dunes.

## chapter 12

IT WAS ON THAT AFTERNOON our *real* friendship began, something deeper and more important than the light-hearted camaraderie we had enjoyed up till then.

We threw ourselves into the water, icy and bracing as only the sea on the east coast can be. We swam through the waves, somersaulting and playing together like a pair of dolphins, and when we were exhausted we climbed up to the dunes and lay baking in the sun, prone on our stomachs.

We did not talk much at first, but I was conscious of a strong current of feeling between us, a kind of understanding that seemed to have been called into being by that moment at the gate.

"Why did you come to work here?" Jake asked lazily after a bit.

I explained to him about Janet and Suza and how it had all been arranged for me.

"Why did you come, *really*?" he asked again when I'd



finished speaking.

"To escape from Lois, my stepmother," I replied. Then to my surprise I found myself telling him the whole story, about losing my mother, about Lois, and the awful feeling I had against her, and about my frightening panics that had finally forced me to break away from home.

Jake's face was turned toward me attentively and he remarked quietly at the end of my tale, "So you have your difficulties too, yet you seem so gay, Kirsty."

"I'm gay here because I'm happy," I said. "I love the Dillons and I enjoy being with you, Jake. We seem to find the same things funny. Now it's your turn to tell me about yourself."

He lifted his head and looked sharply at me, suddenly embarrassed and a little resentful as if I had tried to open a shutter to let in the light too suddenly and too soon for comfort. I was reminded somehow of Dinah.

Then he laid his head down on his arms, but he turned his face from me.

"There's nothing much to tell," he said. "I was ill for a while and now I'm better. . . ."

"What was wrong with you?" I asked. "You seem to be quite well again now."

He turned his face toward me, "Loss of memory," he said briefly. Then abruptly changing the subject, "Have you had enough sun?" he asked. "Shall we go now?"

I was rather hurt that he did not confide in me, but I understood his reluctance to talk about his illness, so although I was bursting with curiosity and interest I decided it was wiser not to press him.

"Yes, I'm ready to go if you are," I said. "I'll have to tidy myself a bit before I go to tea with your parents."

We picked up our bathing things and strolled over the top of the dunes toward the farm. "What's that line slanting across the marsh from the farm to the sea?" I asked. "I hadn't noticed it before, it's half buried in the marsh. Why would anyone want to go to the beach that way? It's quicker to come as we did right over the dunes."

"It's the old causeway," said Jake, and I thought he shivered. "Once it was the nearest way from the farm to the sea, and to the village, the old village that's now under the sea. The farm, which was the manor house and its outbuildings and church, used to be much further inland, you know. The sea must have been quite a distance away then, but it's swallowed up the land and goes on encroaching on it all the time along this coast. The village went long ago, Old Manor Farm will be the next to go."

"Go? How do you mean?" I asked. "Are you telling me that the sea could pour over the top of the dunes and cover the farm? I don't believe it!"

"Over the dunes or through the gap at the end of them," said Jake. "You've never seen the sea when there's an extra high tide and a northwesterly gale blowing. The sea floods over the land then however much we try to keep it out. It happens all along this coast, over and over again. Whole villages disappear overnight—you ask my father if you don't believe me."

I looked back at the crest of the dunes behind the farm, and I thought of the sunlit friendly sea on the other side. It seemed impossible that it could ever over-

top the dunes and surge across the land.

When we reached the end of the old causeway beside the farm I stopped for a moment to look along it. It was narrow and ran straight across the salt marsh to the sea. On either side of it lay thick mud oozing brackish water, I could imagine how easily on a dark night or in mist one might slip off the path and sink into the bog—it would be only a few minutes before one was swallowed up.

I took Jake's hand and pulled him round the high wall to the gate of the farm.

He stopped beside his bicycle just inside the gateway. "I'll wait here for you," he said.

"Oh, Jake, don't be so silly! Of course you must come and wait inside. Whatever will Suza think of you?" I cried.

He looked uncomfortable and flushed darkly. A sudden thought struck me. "Don't you like the Dillons?" I asked puzzled.

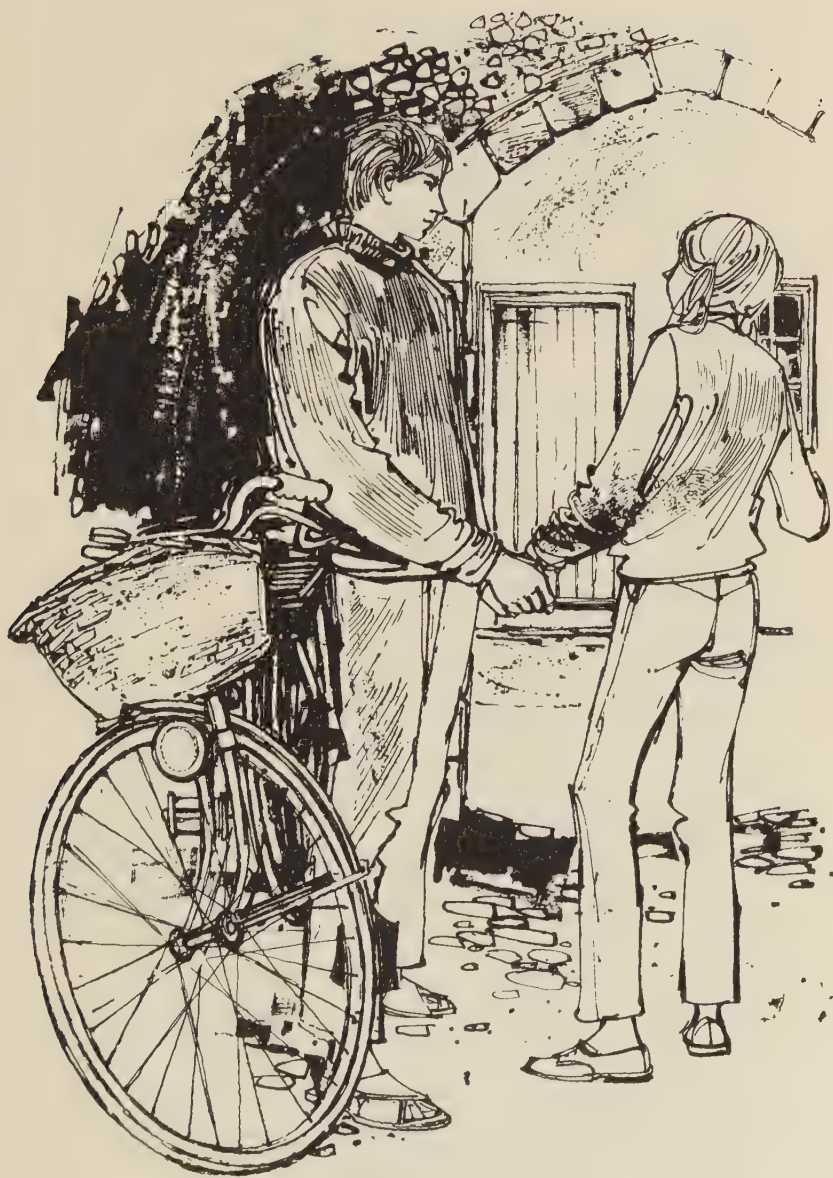
"I'd have thought you'd want to see them even for politeness sake. After all you must know them quite well, you stayed with them once, didn't you? Weren't they good to you?"

"Of course they were," said Jake quickly.

"Then why won't you come in?" I persisted.

"I just—can't," he said with difficulty. "Something happened while I was in that house—something I can't remember. I told you I was ill, that I lost my memory." He jerked the words out as if he hated to say them.

"Oh," I breathed. "I see. It was while you were here staying with the Dillons that you—got ill. But I still



don't understand," I persisted. "You can't hold it against Suza and Gideon that you got ill in their house? It wasn't their fault?"

He shook his head emphatically, "Oh no," he said, "it had nothing to do with the Dillons, they're dears."

"Come on, then," I pleaded. "Come in and see them. What are you afraid of? Not of Suza and Gideon surely?"

"No, not of them," he said shortly.

"You mean you're scared of the *house*," I asked curiously.

He looked away from me then and I thought he felt ashamed of what he had told me. But I remembered that eerie music in the darkness of the night, and I wondered.

"Never mind," I said. "At least you can sit on the step. Come along," and I took his hand.

He was still reluctant, but he allowed me to lead him to the front step outside the house. Suza met us at the door. "Hello, Jakey," she said. "Come round to the kitchen yard, it's cooler than here, and I've got my chair out there." She spoke in a perfectly natural voice and she did not ask him to come through the house, she was evidently familiar with Jake's queerness and had accepted it without resentment. Jake walked round the house, not through it, to the shady yard outside the kitchen window.

"I shan't be a minute," I called as I raced upstairs.

It didn't take me long to change into a cotton frock and brush my hair, which I tied up with a piece of ribbon, then rushed down to Jake again. I hadn't had time while I changed to think about Jake's queer mood, but I tucked it away in my mind to think over later.

I found Jake and Suza chatting happily together without any sign of embarrassment, and I felt reassured to know that Suza was quite used to his ways.

"Sit down for a minute, lovey," she said, "here's a fruit drink before you go off. It's a mile or two to Jake's home you know. She looks nice, don't she Jakey?"

I sat down quickly on the step beside Jake and laughed off Suza's remark so that Jake didn't have to answer her. But he looked me up and down with approval. "She do," he said smiling.

"Be off the two of you," cried Suza when we'd drained our glasses. I kissed her soft cheek and so did Jake.

"Give Gideon my love," he said.

We pushed our bicycles out onto the road and made off along it toward the village.

"My turn to be moody now," I said lightly. "Don't let's go past Corpusty's cottage."

"There you are," teased Jake, "you're just as queer as I am you see! It's longer to go through the village, but I'll humor you."

"Thanks," I retorted. "At least my queerness has sense. I hate rats!"

"You're lucky," said Jake quietly. "You know what you're afraid of."

I glanced quickly at him. "Don't you?" I asked.

But he ignored my question and pedaled on a little ahead of me, while I followed mystified. What had he to be afraid of at the Dillons' farm?

"Wait for me!" I yelled. "I don't want to collapse like a melted jelly on your mother's doorstep!"

He slowed down for me to catch up with him, and the



face he turned toward me was full of laughter. As we rode along slowly together Jake began to whistle. I recognized the tune as the one he had whistled the first time I saw him, but surely I had heard—Suddenly something clicked in my mind and my heart began to thud with excitement. There was somewhere else I had heard it! It was the tune that came from the empty room next to mine, the tune I had heard in the night.

For a moment, staggered at the astonishing coincidence, I could not speak, then remembering how sensitive Jake was about the farm, I decided not to tell him anything. I made myself say calmly to him, "I like that tune. What is it?"

"A French love song of the 15th century," he answered. "It's haunting. I can't get it out of my head."

"Where did you learn it?" I asked. "In France, I suppose."

He shook his head.

"I've no idea where I got it from. I've never been to France."

"Then how do you know so much about it?" I asked.

"It's a traditional song. My father came across it quite by chance a few weeks ago when he was hunting through a collection of French songs," said Jake, "but I've known it for ages. I don't know why I like it so much, it has a kind of magic for me."

He began to whistle it again, clearly, sweetly, like a bird, while I listened in silence, puzzled and uneasy and very much out of my depth.

Soon we were through the village and out on the other side. After a short time we turned off along a lane and



came to a house in a pretty garden—Hollies End was on the gate.

“Here we are,” said Jake, “and there’s mother in the garden.”

She was lying in a garden chair with her feet up, and when Jake introduced me to her she held out a languid hand and waved vaguely to a chair on the other side of the table before she went on with her tea.

“Pour out for your friend and yourself, darling,” she said to Jake, but there was no warmth in her voice. It was rather an arid tea party, for although Jake and I chattered and joked his mother took little part in it, and I found her aloof formality very off-putting. I had been looking forward particularly to meeting Jake’s father and it was just too bad that he had been called out and was not expected back before dark. I could see that Jake was disappointed too, he had wanted to show off his father to me. He tried quite hard to thaw his mother, but she did not respond; I thought she was unloving to him. It hurt me to see Jake rebuffed and I wanted to make up to him for her coldness. I had never had a very clear picture of Mrs. Meryon in my mind, it was usually of his father that Jake spoke, but I must say it was a big disappointment to find her so distant and negative.

I did not stay very long after tea, I was definitely on my best behavior,—and Mrs. Meryon did not encourage me to linger. Since the Dillons were taking me out to supper with friends I had a good excuse to leave.

Mrs. Meryon shook hands with me formally. “Perhaps Jake will bring you again when my husband is at home,” she said vaguely, and I felt myself dismissed.

"I'll come a bit of the way back with you," said Jake.

We parted in the village, and he promised that I should meet his father soon.

"You're sure to like *him*," he said proudly, and I felt rebuked for not taking to his mother.

I was late going to bed that night, it was after midnight when I finally tucked down. It had been a very cheerful evening, with several girls and boys, some of my own age and some younger, and we had had a huge supper and then played hide and seek and other wild children's games while the older people chatted and gossiped—"had a mardle" as they say in Norfolk.

I did not fall asleep at once. Perhaps I was over-excited; I did not feel in the least tired and I lay thinking about Suza's friends, the people who had had us to supper. Suddenly, icily on the summer air I heard the notes of Jake's little French tune, nostalgic, enchanting, ethereally sweet. It came from the room next to mine, the room that was empty.

## chapter 13

NEXT MORNING I DETERMINED TO ASK SUZA to tell me what she could about Jake, and try to clear up the mystery. So after breakfast, when Gideon had taken the dogs out on his Sunday round of the farm, I seized my chance.

"Suza," I began tentatively, "please will you explain what happened to Jake while he was staying here? He doesn't like talking about it, and it would be easier if I knew."

"There's not much to tell," said Suza. "He started sleepwalking while he was staying here with us when his parents were abroad on holiday. One night he gave us a terrible fright, he went out along the old causeway and nearly got drowned."

"Does Jake know about this?" I asked. "He says he lost his memory while he was staying here."

"Oh he knows," Suza replied. "It's true he doesn't remember, but his father thought it best to tell him."

"But couldn't you have stopped him somehow from

going out in his sleep?" I asked. "Didn't you lock the front door or barricade him in?"

"Oh yes, of course we did," cried Suza. "We locked all the doors and hid the keys, but he got out of the parlor window. We were afraid after that to lock him into his bedroom in case he tried to get out of his window and fell."

"Where was he sleeping?" I asked.

"In the little room next to yours. We were having the ceiling repainted in your room—not the beams of course—so we put Jakey in the little room—that is until we discovered he was sleepwalking. After that we tried to get him to come and sleep in our daughter's room, next to ours, but he wouldn't do it, said he *had* to sleep in that little room at the top."

"But surely you must have heard him getting up?" I asked.

"No, never. I sleep heavily and Gideon's deaf, and he made no noise. Gideon had a sick bullock he was worried about and he got up one morning before it was light to have a look at it. He saw Jakey walking across the front grass toward the door. He got a bit of a shock when he spoke to him and the boy didn't answer. Straight through the door he went and upstairs back to bed without waking—Gideon followed him, and then he woke me."

"So you don't really know how long he had been sleepwalking before that night he was nearly drowned?"

Suza shook her head. "We thought he'd been in the garden and we didn't worry too much. We never dreamed he'd go along the causeway or anywhere dangerous."

Suza passed her hand across her forehead as if she'd like to blot the memory out of her mind forever.

"Tell me," I said softly, "what happened?"

"We'd all had a busy day harvesting and we'd gone early to bed. I expect Gideon and I slept soundly for we heard nothing. Very early in the morning I woke suddenly, it was barely light, but I felt uneasy, worried-like. I got up and went upstairs to Jakey's room to see if he was all right. His bed was empty.

"I woke Gideon, and he pulled on his trousers and went out to look for him. He searched the garden and the out-houses round the old church and the ruined cottages, and then he went out onto the road. He saw Jakey almost at once, far out along the old causeway in the mist. The tide was coming in, a high tide, and Jakey was walking steadily on toward the gap in the dunes and the sea beyond. Gideon said his heart came up into his mouth and he wondered if he could reach the boy in time to stop him. He fairly ran along that old causeway as if a demon were chasing him, and he caught up with Jakey just as he stepped into the waves. Gideon knew it's dangerous to waken a sleepwalker, so he took Jakey gently by the arm and tried to turn him back. The boy's eyes were wide open but glazed-like, as if he walked in another world from ours. He shook off Gideon's hand and went on walking straight into the sea as if he were on a well-known path. Then Gideon grabbed him by both arms, but Jakey still resisted and fought back, pulling away from Gideon as if he were under some tremendous compulsion to go on into the sea.

"Gideon did the only thing he could, he picked the boy

up in his arms—he's very strong you know—and carried him kicking and struggling violently, back to the farm. Jakey was awake when they got back but it took him a little time to realize it was Gideon. Then he stopped fighting and went quite limp in Gideon's arms as if he had lost consciousness. We put him to bed and sent a telegram to his father. We sent for the nearest doctor of course, but there was little he could do till Jakey woke up. "He's very deeply asleep and you mustn't waken him," he told me.

"His father and mother got back that night and took Jakey home. He didn't waken till twenty-four hours later, and when he did he seemed quite himself except that he couldn't remember anything that had happened that night; there was a complete gap in his memory, as if his mind had been wiped clean like a slate. Two days later there was a flood, a surge as we call it, and the sea broke through the gap in the dunes and covered the land right up to the road. If Jakey and Gideon had been out on the causeway *that* night, they'd both have been drowned."

I took a deep breath when Suza finished.

"It's the most extraordinary story," I said. "Has no one been able to find any explanation? What made Jake behave like that?"

"No one has found any reason for it," said Suza. "Dr. Meryon came and slept in that room but there was nothing to account for Jakey's state."

"But there must have been something that frightened him," I said. "Something that terrified him so much he dared not come inside the house again. He can't remember anything himself, only that he's scared to death of *some-*

*thing*. The house isn't haunted, is it Suza?" I asked, just to see how much she knew.

"Bless you, no," cried Suza, "not in our time anyway. But this was Meryon land before Gideon's father bought it, and old Corpusty has some legend about a Whistling Boy—though no one pays any attention to him; he's lost his wits."

"Whistling Boy?" I repeated thoughtfully, "I wonder—But what has Old Corpusty to do with this farm?"

"He used to work here; he was the village rat-catcher," said Suza.

I shivered with disgust and loathing as I remembered the horrible old man and his tame rat. "I detest rats," I cried.

"They're a curse to the farmer, that's certain," said Suza, "but nowadays they're easier to keep down, with all the chemicals that are used. Every now and then of course, after a mild winter, we'll get a plague of them and have to send for the Pest Control Officer as they call him now." She laughed and I joined in.

"Rather different from Old Corpusty," I said. "I saw him at his cottage door the other day and Jake warned me to keep clear of him."

"Well, he's not a pleasant character, and he has his likes and dislikes. People in the village used to say he had the evil eye, but I think he's just a bit crazy," said Suza. "Jakey, now, is the nicest boy, but I think he'll never be quite happy until this business is cleared up. He's got a queer faraway look at times that I don't like."

"I know," I said. "I've seen it."

Suza turned toward me and her face was serious as she



said, "Now Kirsty, my woman, I want you to promise you'll not repeat what I've told you; even Janet doesn't know, nor anyone in the village. I've only told you because you're a sensible girl and I know you're fond of Jake and maybe you can help him."

"I mean to have a jolly good try," I said. "I'll speak of it to no one till I can tell you the whole of the story."

I went off then to wash my hair and dry it in the sun.

All kinds of possibilities were churning in my mind and I felt excited. I had an idea that I might have to get Old Corpusty to talk, that he might be able to shed some light on the mystery. I must find out about this Whistling Boy. Was it his music I had heard in the night? And what had he to do with Jake? I shrank at the thought of going anywhere near Old Corpusty; my flesh crawled when I remembered his beastly rat, and he might have others like it—but I knew that I would be prepared to brave anything or anyone for Jake's sake.

I had never felt so strongly about anyone—not even Marcus—as I did about Jake, and I had come to depend on him too. I wanted very much to help him if I could.

## chapter 14

ANOTHER WEEK PASSED and Jake and I saw each other every day. Sometimes he met me after I had finished work and rode as far as the farm with me, sometimes we went for a swim together or walked along the beach in the evening. All the time I felt I was growing closer to him and learning to understand him better. He was often moody, and remembering his difficulties I tried to be patient and not to force his confidences, but I found it hard to do this when I was simply longing to get him to face up to his fears and get the better of them.

At the end of the week I was invited to Hollies End for supper and there at last met Dr. Meryon. He was all I had hoped he would be, and I think he liked me too. It was easy to see why Jake was so proud of his father; he was a very attractive and interesting man, and it was obvious that he loved Jake. At supper that evening I saw Mrs. Meryon in a new light. I had thought her a selfish woman, spoiled and lacking in warmth. Now she was a

different person, animated, amusing, and charmingly gay, but it was all for her husband. She adored him. All her love was concentrated on him. I never knew how much of this Dr. Meryon realized, but I thought he tried to make it up to Jake. I could imagine how, when the three of them were alone together, Jake would be the odd man out, the uninvited. I could not bear to think of him feeling shut out.

"Kirsty is interested in local history," Jake told his father. "D'you think you could lend her one of your books?"

"Of course, come along to my study and we'll find one," Dr. Meryon invited me.

We had finished supper and Jake said he'd clear the dishes away while his mother went to make coffee.

I followed Dr. Meryon along the passage to a room at the far end.

"Jake says you are collecting information about your family," I ventured. "How are you getting on?"

"Fairly well. I don't have a great deal of spare time, but it's surprising how many odd little pieces of history crop up and fit in, like a jigsaw puzzle. It's fascinating," said Dr. Meryon. "And then I have some old family papers I'm gradually working my way through. Not much in them, but once in a while I find a useful bit of information."

"It must be fun," I replied. "I've never heard your name, Meryon, before. Suza says it's French, like Dillon."

"Oh yes, she's perfectly right. Seltingham was a French settlement once," said Dr. Meryon, "and Delean, Drouet and Merineau are still family names here in Norfolk.

They're changed now to the more English forms—Dillon, Drewitt and Meryon—and of course there are plenty of others."

"When did the Meryons come to England?" I asked.

"About 1685 according to the history books," said Dr. Meryon. "Many settlers came earlier than that, about 1568. They were mostly silk weavers who established their trade in Norwich. They were followed about a hundred years later by a second wave of fugitives also fleeing from religious persecution in France."

"Yes, I know, Suza told me," I said. "I'd love to hear more when you have time."

I had to leave quite soon as it was beginning to get dark and Suza would worry if I was late.

When I said goodbye to him, Dr. Meryon invited me to dinner the following week.

"I'll pick you up about 6.30 and take you back afterwards," he promised, "so Suza won't have any reason to worry about you."

As usual, Jake rode part of the way back with me and left me within sight of the Dillons' farm.

It was not yet quite dark although after lighting-up time and I had my bicycle lights on. It was very still apart from the distant wash of the sea, and the sky was still banded with gold.

I dismounted near the gate of the farm and stood for a moment gazing at the shadowed ridge of the dunes, at the black gap in them where lay the sea, beyond the end of the old causeway.

The sheer beauty of it all made me catch my breath.

It was then I saw him, a slim boyish figure about half-



way along the old causeway, sauntering toward the sea.

I was flabbergasted. "How on earth could Jake have got out there?" I gasped. Common sense came to my rescue—he couldn't, of course, he would have had to pass me. It couldn't be Jake.

I drew a breath of relief, but I was curious, so I threw down my bicycle and began to walk along the old causeway, following the boy ahead of me.

He was about Jake's height and build and looked roughly about the same age. As I drew closer to him I was able to see that his clothing was ragged and rather old-fashioned, and he wore a strange hat.

And then I saw him take something from his pocket, some kind of whistle, and he began to play—it was Jake's tune, the music I had heard in the night!

I called out to him then, hoping he would look round and I would see his face and perhaps recognize him. But he never stopped nor turned, he just walked steadily on until he reached the gap at the end of the causeway.

Beyond him I could see the waves tumbling up the beach with the incoming tide.

I began to run after him and a kind of terror seized me. "Stop! Stop!" I shouted. "Hi! Stop!"

He paid not the slightest attention to me, he just walked on into the waves. His form seemed to dissolve—one moment he was there, the next he was gone, vanished.

I halted, rubbing my eyes, unable to believe what I knew I had seen. I stood still for a moment trying to collect my scattered wits. I felt shaken and tremendously excited. "He's not real!" I exclaimed aloud. "He can't be. He's a ghost, a phantom." Then with a sudden flash of insight I gasped out, "He—must be—the Whistling Boy!"

The tide was coming in fast as I stood at the edge of the beach, and the light had faded from the sky. Darkness fell suddenly and a chill little wind sprang up among the dunes.

"I'd better get back quickly before it gets too dark to see," I told myself.

My heart beat fast as I turned back along the narrow causeway. One false step, one slip and I might fall into the treacherous salt marsh on either side of me and sink



deep into it without a sign.

By the time I reached the farm gate and picked up my bicycle I was exhausted and my knees were shaking.

But the house looked so solid, so reassuring that I was able to pull myself together and calm down before I met Suza.

She was sitting in the parlor in the lamplight, her head bent over her sewing, and Gideon was snoozing in his chair beside her.

Anything more comfortable and down-to-earth than these two I could not imagine. If the house was haunted it had nothing whatever to do with them. So since I did not want to alarm them, I said nothing about my adventure. I did not feel myself in any way threatened, nor to my surprise, was I really at all frightened of my first ghost. Instead I felt I had several loose ends of a fascinating story, and somehow I must tie them up together. I promised myself a long think when I got into bed.

But Suza had a surprise for me.

"Janet rang up. She wants you to ring her back," she said.

"Janet?" I cried. "I wonder what she wants? There's nothing wrong at home, is there?—Marcus?"

"No, everything's all right with your family," Suza assured me, "but she wants to speak to you. Better call her now. It's not too late and you'll be off to work early in the morning."

I was puzzled, I could not think why Janet should want me to call her back unless something important had happened at home. My father had had a telephone put into her house after the twins were born, but Janet hated the



thing and never used it if she could help it.

Suddenly I felt contrite about her. I should have written more than a postcard to tell her how I was getting on and how grateful I was to her for sending me to Suza and Gideon. I had become so much absorbed into my new life, and so concerned with Jake, that Janet and everyone at home had rather faded into the background. Well—I had better call her at once and find out what she wanted.

Her voice came strangely over the line, reticent, stern, “Mrs. Woodman speaking. Who is there?”

“Janet!” I cried, “it’s Kirsty. I’m sorry I was out when you rang. What did you want to tell me? Is everyone all right at home? Marcus?”

“Yes, yes, everything’s fine, lovey, and how are you?”

We chatted for a minute then she told me.

“Your friend Dinah is in trouble with the police—shoplifting. I thought you’d want to know.”

I was horrified. It was absolutely unthinkable! I knew that Dinah was utterly honest.

“Dinah shoplifting?” I cried. “She couldn’t! She’s not like that. There’s been some ghastly mistake. Oh poor Dinah. How terrible for her.”

While I had been enjoying life in Norfolk, happy for the first time since my mother died, Dinah had been in trouble and I had never given her a thought. That’s the kind of friend I was.

I felt ashamed and terribly shocked and worried.

Janet’s quiet voice went on explaining what had happened. Apparently Dinah had been caught with jewelry and clothing she had pinched from our biggest local store. She had confessed at once that she had stolen the things

and had appeared quite blatant and defiant about it, not at all ashamed.

"But none of it fits!" I cried. "Dinah's not like that. She would never do such a thing. I just cannot understand it. How do you *know* anyway?"

"From the wife of the policeman who was called in, she's a friend of mine; they live quite close to me and she heard Dinah went to your school."

"Is Dinah in prison?" I asked as the seriousness of the charge against her penetrated my mind.

"She's in a Children's Home until her case comes up in the Juvenile Court," said Janet, "and the Welfare Officer is looking after her mother—d'you know about her, lovey?"

"Yes, yes, I do," I answered impatiently, "but what will happen to Dinah? Will she be sent to prison? Will it all be in the papers? Oh, it's *awful*. It's a nightmare. I wish I could do something," I cried.

"They won't send her to prison and her name won't be in the papers," said Janet. "She's under sixteen, but she'll certainly have to come to Court. I'll try to find out more about it from my friend and I'll write to you. Now don't fret too much, Kirsty. I'm very sorry this has happened but knowing the girl was a friend of yours, I had to tell you."

"Yes, yes, thank you Janet," I said. "I'd rather you told me than anyone else. I'd better hang up now. Good-night." My voice sounded hollow as if I were speaking in some horrible nightmare, and when I had put down the receiver I stood helplessly for a moment, feeling stunned.

But Suza must have heard the distress in my voice, for she had followed me into the hall and now she patted my shoulder comfortingly.

"I'm going to make us all a mug of cocoa," she said. "There's quite a chill in the air tonight. Go into the parlor beside Gideon, my woman, and when I come you can tell us what it's all about, if you want to."

"I'd rather tell you first," I said. "I know you better."

Suza took my arm and led me into the kitchen, and I sat on the table and talked to her while she got the mugs and the cocoa tin and put the milk on the stove to heat.

"There must be some explanation," I cried. "Dinah's not the kind of person to do such a thing. I'm quite sure it's all a dreadful mistake."

"Then don't upset yourself too much till you've heard the whole story," Suza advised. "There's nothing you can do just now, but she's soon going to need a friend badly. Now come in by me and Gideon and drink your cocoa, lovey."

I felt comforted and I knew she was right, there was nothing I could do till I heard again from Janet. But my heart ached for Dinah. I reproached myself bitterly and wished I had been able to do more for her. If only I had been less involved in my own problems and had tried harder to understand hers. If I had cared more about her I might have found a way of helping her—now it was too late.

## chapter 15

I MUST HAVE SLEPT SOUNDLY once I got to sleep, for I did not wake till Suza called me in time for work. Immediately Dinah's trouble shadowed the brightness of the morning. The contrast between my happiness and her misery seemed too much to contemplate. I wished that I could see her, or at least let her know that I cared about what happened to her and that I had faith in her however bad her action appeared. I hoped that Janet would call me soon and tell me whether Dinah was allowed to get letters.

When I set off for work on my bicycle I was surprised to find Jake waiting for me in the garden.

"Hullo!" I cried. "What are you doing here?"

Jake flushed and looked a little embarrassed.

"Er—I just thought I'd ride along with you," he said. I was pleased and flattered and delighted to have his company.

My mind had been so full of Dinah that I had com-

pletely forgotten my experience on the old causeway the previous evening. Seeing Jake so unexpectedly reminded me of it. "I thought I saw you walking along the old causeway last night after you'd left me," I began. "Of course after a moment I realized it couldn't be you, by then you must have been halfway home in the opposite direction."

"Oh? What made you think it was me?" Jake asked.

"It was a boy about your age," I said, watching him closely. "He had a wooden whistle—he was playing your tune."

"It must have been someone from the village who'd heard it from me," said Jake unconcernedly. "So then what happened?"

"He walked into the sea and vanished," I said.

"Good heavens! D'you mean he was drowned?" cried Jake in alarm.

"No—I mean he wasn't real, he was a ghost. I believe he was the Whistling Boy," I said.

"Who's he?" asked Jake. "I've never heard of him."

I was watching him closely while I talked but so far he had shown little interest and no indication that my story could concern him. I hoped I might somehow have jogged his lost memory, have shocked him into remembering what had happened to him at Old Manor Farm. So far I had failed, but still I persisted.

"You know the Whistling Boy," I said. "He lives in the attic where you slept at Old Manor Farm. You whistle his tune."

Jake went very pale and a sudden look of intense grief came over his face as if he were remembering a painful

experience, then as suddenly it was blanked out and he turned on me savagely, "Shut up!" he shouted. "Just shut up and leave me alone!"

I was completely taken by surprise, his startling reaction frightened me. Before I could say anything he shot ahead of me on his bicycle and I saw that he was shaking. What had I said to upset him so? Had I somehow managed to touch off some spring of memory, aroused a long forgotten sorrow?

"Jakey, I'm terribly sorry," I cried, trying to catch up with him. "I'm only trying to help you. Please don't be angry."

But he kept on ahead of me and paid no attention and when we reached the fruit farm he rode straight past and did not even look round. I was absolutely miserable all day so that I worked doubly hard, but I could not forget the mess I had made—first with Dinah then with Jake. I had wanted to help both of them and I had failed.

By the time I knocked off work in the evening and started for home on my bicycle, I was exhausted both physically and emotionally.

What was I to do about Jake? Obviously by rushing in with shock tactics I had done more harm than good. How was I to regain his confidence and make him see that it was only because I cared so much that I had risked upsetting him? Perhaps my best plan would be to talk to his father, tell him what I had tried to do. I could ring him up and make an appointment at the surgery in the village. Jake need know nothing about it. I would tell Dr. Meryon about the Whistling Boy and perhaps we could puzzle out what part he played in Jake's story.

By this time I had almost reached Old Corpusty's cottage, and to my dismay I saw that he was leaning over his gate smoking a blackened pipe. My instinct was to ride straight past him keeping my distance, but I knew that sooner or later I had to talk to him, he held a link in the chain of clues that led to the solution of Jake's trouble, he knew something about the Whistling Boy.

So I suppressed a shudder of revulsion and as I approached him I said, "Good evening" in as cheerful a voice as I could manage.

He glared at me, his face sly, malevolent, then he took his pipe out of his mouth and without saying a word he spat on the ground as I passed.

I clenched my teeth and sped past him and round the corner onto the marsh road and a purer air.

Ahead of me stood Dillons' farm and seated on his bicycle, propped against the wall, waiting for me—was Jake.

I was so glad to see him that I pedaled like mad toward him and as he came running to meet me, I jumped off my bicycle and threw my arms round his neck. We hugged one another in an abandonment of relief and joy, shyness forgotten and our quarrel finished.

"I've had a *terrible* day!" I cried. "What with Dinah and then you."

"I spent my time waiting for you outside the Jarvises," Jake confessed, "till I lost my nerve and thought you might not want to see me again—ever. Come on, let's go on the beach and you can tell me about Dinah."

I forgot my tiredness, my misery over Dinah, my anxiety over Jake himself, and as soon as we stretched



out on our stomachs on the dunes I gave myself up to the sheer joy of being happy and with Jake again.

After a little while I began to tell him about Dinah and how badly my conscience was troubling me.

"If I'd tried harder to persuade her to come here with me, this might never have happened," I said.

"And what would have become of her mother?" asked Jake. "It seems to me that from the mother's point of view this is the best thing that could have happened. Somebody has been forced to do something about her, the Welfare Officer has taken over the responsibility of her and now she'll be sent into a home for treatment and probably cured."

"Oh Jakey," I cried gratefully, "I believe you're right. This was Dinah's desperate cry for help to force somebody to take notice. Of course she knew quite well she could have gotten help for her mother by the asking, yet she wouldn't even let me talk to my father about it. I suppose she so hated the idea of anyone knowing about her mother, even me, that she couldn't bring it out into the open directly. I think she must have come to the end of her tether and lost her head and her control, and impulsively done the first mad thing she could think of to attract notice. She's just not the sort who would steal, I mean she'd never be a real thief. Oh, poor Dinah! If only I hadn't lost my temper with her that day, I might have been able to do *something* to help!"

"I suppose every one of us has to find a way out when a problem or a situation becomes unbearable," said Jake thoughtfully. "This must have been Dinah's way of escape from her mother's illness and her own loneliness."

I rolled onto my back while I thought this over, it was true everyone had to find a way of escape from an intolerable situation, or else they had to face up to it and overcome it. Take myself. I had escaped from my home because of Lois, this happy time in Norfolk was my escape. But sooner or later I'd have to go back home again and then I'd have to face up to my problems and find a solution. And Jake, what was his trouble? Loneliness too? The closeness of his parents to each other that made him feel shut out? And what way of escape had he found? At school, or somewhere else? Had he found a way of escape so painful, so dangerous perhaps that he had to get rid of the idea, forget it? Was this what had happened to him at Old Manor Farm?

Impulsively I turned to him and flung an arm across him.

"Oh Jakey, don't ever be lonely, you've got *me* now," I said.

"I thought you were asleep, you've been very quiet," said Jake, and he lifted my hand to his lips and kissed the palm, so I knew he understood.

We strolled back to the farm together and when we got inside the gate I paused, expecting Jake to turn and leave me.

But he lingered as if undecided till I asked, "Do you want to come into the farm with me?"

"Not tonight," he said sighing, "but soon I must. I've got to try to find out what happened to me in there, I'm sick of not being able to remember. I don't mean the sleepwalking part, I mean the rest. I'm torn in two about the house." He paused, considering. "There's a kind of

magic, a spell if you like, that makes me long to be in it, to belong to it. Sometimes I feel I've left part of myself in there. But it's a dangerous magic, one that could destroy me. I'm so much attracted I can hardly resist it, I'm also scared to death. I've never dared to go inside the house again—now that you know you'll despise me. I'm afraid."

I put my hand on his arm. "I don't despise you, Jake, I admire you for tackling something that frightens you. I'll help you all I can, but I think you should talk to your father before you come inside the farm. It might be dangerous for you."

He nodded, "You're probably right about telling my father," he agreed, "but I don't know if it's dangerous now. You see, I don't feel the same as I did. I'm not so involved as I was, the house has lost some of its hold over me since—since you came. I've never been able to talk to anyone as I can talk to you, Kirsty."

He sounded surprised, as if he had just made a discovery, and he looked at me with a new awareness as if he'd never really seen me before. Then his puzzled expression changed to one of recognition and wonder.

"Kirsty—it's you I need," he said. "I've never cared about anyone before."

"I'm glad, Jakey!" I whispered, and idiotically I began to cry. He put his arms round me and kissed me as we clung together. "I'm so happy," I sobbed, "it's wonderful to be needed."

"Then stop crying," said Jake gently and he gave me his handkerchief to dry my tears.

After that we couldn't bear to leave one another, it was torture to think of being apart. But I knew that Jake was

to go out with his parents that evening so after a while I let him go.

I watched him mount his bicycle and ride away; I watched him out of sight, then I turned and walked thoughtfully into the farm.

I rang Dr. Meryon after I got in and said I wanted to see him. He told me to come to his surgery on my way home from work next day. That was all right, I would finish work a little early and Jake could meet me afterwards. The next thing to do was to try to get into the room next to mine and to have a look around it. But how was I to get hold of the key without asking Suza? I wanted to keep her out of this business, it had nothing to do with the wholesome down-to-earthness of herself and Gideon, it was something between the house and the Meryons. Where would Suza be likely to hide the key? In a drawer? Hung on the nail by the kitchen door? Or somewhere close to the room itself?

I became very excited as I thought of a possible hiding place. Suza and Gideon were safely in the parlor watching T.V. so I took my chance. I tiptoed across the hall from the telephone and ran lightly up the stairs to the top floor. There I stretched up to my full height and felt with my fingers along the dusty ledge above the door—and I found the key.

It was dark on the landing and I had to feel for the keyhole and fit the key into it; the lock turned quite easily. I opened the door a crack, only enough to get my head inside the room and have a look round.

It was about half the size of mine and it smelled fusty and airless; there was only one little window, a bed, a

chair and a high chest. The great roof beams sloped at a sharper angle than in my room, seeming to press heavily on the emptiness.

I shut the door again softly, locked it and replaced the key. I was not exactly scared of seeing the Whistling Boy, but I definitely preferred to wait for full daylight before I entered the room.

I wiped my dusty hands and went quietly downstairs to join Suza and Gideon at their T.V. program until bedtime.

I woke next morning at six, slipped out of bed and craned my neck looking over the bannisters to see if Suza and Gideon were up. Their door stood wide open, their bed stripped, so I knew they had gone downstairs. I had an hour undisturbed till Suza came to waken me, an hour to search the room next to mine.

I don't really know exactly what I hoped to find, but I had been thinking a great deal about the Whistling Boy and I felt sure that he must once have lived at Old Manor Farm, in the room next to mine. I wondered if he had known the old village, the village that now lay under the sea? I had a hope that there might be something in the room that could help me to discover his story and perhaps how Jake came into it. Maybe I was only wasting my time, but I felt it was worth a try. The music from the room, if nothing else, made me feel there must be something there—that strange, haunting tune.

I reached for the key and unlocked the door, then I stepped inside and shut the door behind me.

I stood quite still for a few minutes, my antennae out, waiting, hoping for something to happen, for some hint

of communication however slight. But there was nothing, not a rustle, not a breath, not a tremor. If this room had belonged to the Whistling Boy he was certainly not here at the moment, I had better get on with my search. First I went all over the floor for the sound of hollowness, hunting for a loose board that could be a hiding place. But I found nothing, the wide oak planks, polished to a satin sheen seemed thoroughly solid.

Next I tried the walls, thumping the thick plaster to discover any secret panel, scanning their smoothness for cracks—there were none.

Then I got up onto the chair, and I tapped along the beams, moving the chair as I reached the limit of my stretch. But I found nothing unusual or suspicious, no message tucked into the cracks, no words scribbled on the wood.





“It’s useless,” I sighed, “there’s nothing here. I might as well give up.”

I brushed a cobweb from my face and reached up to destroy the spider’s web that stretched between two beams above my head. By standing on tip-toe I could only just reach over the top of the main beam, but I got the idea of feeling along the top of the beam with my fingers as I had when I found the key on the ledge above the door.

It was very dusty up there and my fingers were soon filthy as I kept moving the chair and feeling along the length of the beam.

I had nearly reached the door when something turned under my searching fingers. I felt again with both hands, something like a pencil only bigger lay in a groove of the beam and turned at my touch. My heart thumped loudly in my ears and my throat felt dry. I had to bring my arms down to rest for a moment before I stretched up to my limit and tried again. I began to roll the thing in its groove, then I managed to get my nail under one end of it and lever it out. My knees were shaking with excitement as I lifted it down.

It was a slim wooden whistle notched for the notes, and carved into the wood were a number of rough letters—  
JACQUES MERINEAU 1686.



## chapter 16

I STOOD HOLDING MY BREATH for a moment and trembling with excitement as I stared in disbelief at the whistle in my hand. Then I climbed onto the chair again and felt once more along the groove with my fingers. There was something else in it, a piece of paper. I picked it out and took it to the window to examine it. It was rather frayed around the edges and folded lengthwise. I smoothed it out carefully and peered at the faded writing. It was so ornate, so much decorated and flourished that I found it very difficult to read, but I could see that it was a letter written in French.

It began: "*Jacques, mon bien-aimé,*  
*Je me trouve depuis ton départ, absolument*  
*désolée.*"

I could not translate the rest of it, there was not time, but it finished with the signature "Fleur."

What poignant love story had I stumbled on? Who was Fleur and why was she desolate? I longed to sit down

there and then to make a translation but warning sounds of Suza moving about reminded me that I must hurry if I was not to be caught. I put the chair back into its corner and tiptoed out of the room, locking the door behind me and replacing the key on its ledge.

I slipped into my own room and glanced at my watch—it was almost seven o'clock—I would have my bath before Suza came up to waken me. I went down to the bathroom and locked the door while I ran the water. The letter must wait, but I had a good look at the whistle. It was about ten inches long, a bit clumsy and homemade looking, and nearly three hundred years old.

"Jacques Merineau," I whispered aloud, "the Whistling Boy—my Jake's ancestor—I wonder—."

I was glad I was going to see Dr. Meryon that evening, I could not have waited any longer to show him my discoveries. There might be some mention of Jacques in the family records that he said he had been collecting.

When I went off to work I took the whistle and the letter with me at the bottom of the satchel in which I carried my lunch.

The morning dragged along and the others who worked beside me must have thought me very preoccupied for I scarcely noticed their jokes and pleasantries. At lunch time I was able to shake them off and go away to eat my sandwiches by myself so that I could read Fleur's letter properly.

I found a hidden place in the garden, sat down, and got out my food package. Then I spread the letter out in front of me and read it aloud with great difficulty and very slowly in French:

*"Jacques mon bien-aimé,*

*Je me trouve, depuis ton départ absolument désolée. C'était vraiment affreux de te dire adieu. Je t'aime de tout mon coeur jusqu'à l'éternité. J'ai peur que nous ne nous revoyons jamais, mais jamais. Moi, je suis Catholique: toi, Protestant. Quelle situation impossible! Mais ne m'oublie jamais je t'en prie.*

*Je serai obligée, peut-être de me marier avec Monsieur Tranchot—voilà ce que désire mon père. Mais c'est toi et toi seul qui tiendra pour toujours mon coeur entre tes mains.*

*Fleur."*

Now I tried to translate it into English, slowly and painstakingly.

*"My beloved Jacques,*

*I find myself since your departure absolutely desolate. It was truly frightful to say goodbye to you. I love you with all my heart forever. I am afraid that we will never see one another again, never. I am a Catholic, you a Protestant. What an impossible situation! But do not ever forget me I beg you. I may be obliged, perhaps, to marry Mr. Tranchot—that is what my father wishes. But it is you and you alone who will always hold my heart in your hands.*

*Fleur."*

It was the saddest letter I had ever read, so despairing, so resigned; there was nothing they could do about it, so

goodbye forever. When I really thought about it, her total acceptance of the situation made me cross with her. My sympathy was mainly for Jacques who dared not return to France since he belonged to a Protestant family. But how he must have missed his home, his friends, the French way of life. Above all to have left behind the girl he loved must have broken his heart. How intolerably sad and lonely he must have felt. Now I could understand why the tune he played on his whistle was such a sad one, it was a lament. I hummed it over to myself.

It was a very hot afternoon and I made this my excuse for stopping work early. My heart was thumping with excitement as I hurried along to the surgery in the village. When I rang the bell Dr. Meryon himself opened the door and let me in.

"Well it's quite obvious it's not your health you want to see me about," he said with a twinkle in his eye. He made me sit down, then he asked me in a more serious tone, "Now, what's the trouble?"

I began to tell him about the Whistling Boy, and although at first he only seemed amused, as my story unfolded he became really interested.

"He was a real person, his name was Jacques Merineau and I think he *lived* in Old Manor Farm in 1686. Look, I can prove it." I handed him over the wooden whistle and Fleur's letter, and told him where I had found them.

Dr. Meryon became quite excited. "What an extraordinary find!" he cried. "This Jacques Merineau must appear in our family records. There's a whole chest full of family papers that my grandfather left to me—my father was never interested—I mentioned them the other day,

you remember. I've started to sort them out, working back from my grandfather's day, but I haven't much time and I haven't gotten very far back yet. I'll have to see if I can find anything written around 1686. Of course it's common knowledge that the Meryon family came originally from France about 1685."

"I wonder what happened to Jacques Merineau and why he still haunts the house?" I said.

"I didn't know there was supposed to be a ghost," said Dr. Meryon, smiling slightly, "but then I've never lived in the house. My grandfather sold it to Gideon Dillon's father while I was growing up in London. I never knew my grandfather—he quarreled with my father, and it was not till after his death that I qualified and came to live in Seltingham. I don't really know much about the house."

"Well, old Corpusty knows something," I said, "about the Whistling Boy."

"Old *Corpusty*?" cried Dr. Meryon astonished. "What on earth has he got to do with it?"

"You could ask him," I ventured. This seemed to me a wonderful way of getting round speaking to the horrible old man myself.

"Well, I could try," said Dr. Meryon. "He's a queer, cantankerous old chap, but I saved his leg for him once so maybe he'll talk to me."

"There's something else," I said tentatively, "it's about Jake. I know about his illness, his loss of memory, he told me, and about his sleepwalking and the strange effect the house has had on him. I think there's a connection between Jacques, the Whistling Boy, and Jake, and I mean

to try to find out what it is. I think the ghost of Jacques Merineau has some hold over Jake, some fascination for him. I think Jake is almost beginning to remember what happened to scare him so much in Old Manor Farm, and he *wants* to remember. He'll have to go into the house again; d'you think it may be dangerous for him?"

"You mean you're afraid Jake will start sleepwalking again? I rather doubt it, but it looks as if at last he is ready to co-operate, to try to find out himself what happened and clear the whole business up. He's always been very secretive about it and too scared to try, until now. His change of attitude is largely because of you I think, Kirsty. His mother and I are very grateful to you. We feel he has met reality at last."

I did not quite understand what he meant, but I was pleased.

There was an interruption while Dr. Meryon answered the 'phone and absent-mindedly I began to hum the little French song. Dr. Meryon finished his conversation and rang off.

"That's Jake's tune," he remarked. "I found it in a book of French songs. It's 15th century. Isn't it charming?"

"I think Jake learned it from the Whistling Boy, from Jacques Merineau. It's the tune he plays on his whistle. I've heard him, I told you."

Dr. Meryon began to look amused. "Well, well," he said. "You are full of surprises, young woman. I thought you had too much common sense to believe in ghosts."

I was annoyed with him for being so skeptical and for making me feel foolish. How could he be sure anyway?

"I'd better go," I said. "Suza will be wondering what's happened to me. You'll tell me what you can find out about Jacques, won't you?" I asked. "And show Jake the whistle and the letter."

"Of course, and I'll keep you fully informed," said Dr. Meryon teasingly as he opened the door and escorted me to my bicycle, "and thank you for coming."

I rode slowly back to the farm. I had a great deal to think about.

When I reached it I found Suza preparing supper, hulling a great bowl of raspberries. Gideon was reading his paper in the cool courtyard outside the back door and Mrs. Muscova, the fat duck, was squatting companionably beside him, her bright eyes watching the kitchen door for the scraps she knew Suza would throw to her. Both the dogs rose lazily to their feet and walked round me wagging their tails and making me welcome.

A letter addressed to me was propped up on the kitchen table.

"It's from Janet," I cried, "it'll be about Dinah. May I read it here, now?"

"Of course," said Suza. "Sit down, lovey." She pulled out a chair for me and then went on with the raspberries.

Janet's letter was quite short, there was nothing much to add to what she had already told me about Dinah. Only that her case had come up before a Juvenile Court and Dinah had been put on probation for two years, under the care of a Children's Officer. Her mother was being taken care of in a hospital, and Dinah was to stay in the Children's Home in the meantime.

I handed Suza the letter to read.



“Well, there’s nothing you can do yet,” she said, “but you can trust Janet to keep you in touch. You see what she says about the mother being taken care of. Maybe some good will come out of it in the end, tho’ it was a bad thing for your friend to do.”

“Dinah is *not* a thief!” I cried. “I’m not sure why she did this thing, but I know she had some reason.”

“Well perhaps you’re right. Supper’s ready, so come as soon as you can. Come along, Gideon, and here’s your bite!” she called, throwing a handful of crusts out to the duck.

Jake did not come that evening and I missed him a lot. It had been a dramatic day.

Later I decided to call home. My father answered the telephone and said that Lois was out so she must be better. “We were wondering if you’d cut us out altogether,” he teased me. “Thanks for your postcards by the way.”

Everything seemed to be going well at home; they’d had a card from Gory who was having a wonderful time sailing. “How’s Marcus managing without him?” I asked.

“Surprisingly well. He seemed a bit lost at first, but he and Caley get on splendidly together, they’ve gone camping near Grandmother’s for ten days or so while this heat wave lasts. And what about you, Kirsty? How is everything?”

“Simply super!” I said. “I love being here with Suza and Gideon and there’s a doctor and his—family I like very much. Work is fun and not too hard and they’re a very decent lot who pick at my place.”

Suddenly we both dried up and could find nothing

more to say.

“Well, give my love to Lois,” I said. “I’ll call again next week,” and I hung up the receiver. I wished communication between my father and myself were easier, but apart from everything else he hated the telephone and was at his least approachable when speaking on it. I was afraid he was still hurt with me for not being nicer to Lois; he must resent my attitude to her very much, but I had honestly tried and meant to try again when I got home—but not just yet thank heavens. For a bit longer I could relax in Suza and Gideon’s home and be happy with Jake.

## chapter 17

WHEN I FINISHED WORK NEXT DAY Jake was waiting at the gate for me.

"Did your father show you the letter and the whistle I found?" I asked eagerly.

"Yes, he did. What a clever little thing you are!" he said teasing.

I felt a bit deflated, I had expected Jake to be much more interested, even excited, but it seemed he really could not care less. I tried to think up a stinging reply, but before I managed to, Jake changed the subject. He evidently did not want to talk about it.

"Come for a swim and then home to supper with us, will you? Invitation from my parents as well as me," he said. I cheered up at once and readily accepted and when we reached Old Manor Farm I ran in by the open front door, calling out to Suza. Jake made his way round the house to the open kitchen window where he stood talking to Suza while I dashed up to change.

We spent a marvelously refreshing couple of hours in and out of the water. And the glory of the summer day and the heavenly blue of sea and sky and being with Jake all went to my head a little so that I felt charged with a super-human power and most gloriously alive.

When it was time to go back again we walked hand in hand across the dunes toward the farm, and Jake began to whistle.

"Not that, not today," I cried. "It is too sad a tune for today. Whistle something gay."

He laughed and changed to a lighthearted jig.

"I've never been so happy in all my life as I am at this moment," I told myself. "Whatever happens I shall remember this always."

Jake had a mug of cider with Gideon in the cool yard outside the kitchen and petted the dogs and fed Mrs. Muscova while I put on my prettiest frock and a band of ribbon to keep my damp hair in some semblance of decency. When we had turned the corner of the road by old Corpusty's cottage, we raced on our bicycles along the straight stretch of road and were not far past the Jarvis's farm where I worked when we met an ambulance lumbering along the road toward us.

"Good heavens, somebody must have had an accident or something," I cried. "I hope it's not any of the Jarvises."

"Maybe it's old Corpusty gone round the bend at last," said Jake jokingly. "I suppose it means that Dad will be called out again whatever it is. Who would be a doctor?"

"There aren't many people living along here," I remarked, "unless for some reason it's going the long way

round to the village."

"Well, we'll know soon enough," said Jake with a sigh, "there's no other doctor except Dad in this area, unless you count the one at the American air base."

"It seems funny to think there are Americans in Norfolk!" I said. "Sort of out of place."

"There were plenty here during the war, Dad says, and lots of them still come back in the summer to visit old haunts and meet the local people who were their friends, and show their wives and families where they spent the war—those who survived."

"Of course, both Suza and Gideon's daughters married American Air Force sergeants. I'd forgotten that."

"I only know them, their daughters I mean, because they come home here every second or third year with their husbands and their children."

Dr. Meryon's car was not at the door when we reached the house, and Mrs. Meryon came out to greet us.

"Dad's at the hospital," said Mrs. Meryon, "but I hope he won't be long."

"We passed the ambulance, who's ill?" asked Jake.

"Old Corpusty," said his mother. "The baker found him in a bad way when he left bread for him this afternoon, and sent for Dad."

"Poor old Corpusty," said Jake, "how he'll hate being in hospital—they'll clean him up."

I could not repress a shudder as I thought of my encounter with the old man, and I did not envy the nurses who had to deal with him.

We were halfway through supper when Dr. Meryon came in.

"Poor old boy, he's had a heart attack. I don't think he's ever had a day's illness in his life before, apart from a broken leg, and he's thoroughly scared. He'll be all right in a day or two, but he'll have to be careful," said Dr. Meryon.

"Meantime I suppose he's giving the nurses merry hell," said Mrs. Meryon, laughing.

"Surprisingly he's not, the fight has gone out of him for the moment. He's had a bad fright." Dr. Meryon spoke with understanding and kindness and I thought once again how much I liked and admired him.

My feelings for Jake's mother had not changed as I got to know her better. I felt that no one would ever be admitted to the close inner circle of her love, no one but her husband.

Dr. Meryon was very hungry and it was not until he had finished eating that he started to talk about Jacques.

"Well now, Kirsty," he began. "I've found what we'd hoped for, a short record or memorandum written by Jacques' father, Philippe Merineau. We were fortunate to find it so quickly thanks to Jake's help. It's only a few pages among a mass of papers in my grandfather's chest, but they give quite a substantial background to your Whistling Boy. I'll show them to you presently."

I tried to control my excitement, but I could hardly bear to wait for Dr. Meryon to finish his supper. At last he had had enough and Jake and I followed him along the passage to his study.

"You can understand French? Yes, of course you can, you read Fleur's letter," he said, handing me several sheets of paper neatly tied together with silk thread.

The writing was in faint tiny copperplate and I could see that it would take me ages to make out the words, apart from translating them—mine was only school French.

“What does he say?” I asked. “This will take me a long time to read.” Dr. Meryon laughed and took the papers from my hand.

“Your Whistling Boy, Jacques Merineau, belonged to a French Protestant family who lived near Rouen. His father, Philippe Merineau, decided to escape to England because of religious persecution in France. Along with several other Protestant families mostly connected with the silk trade—merchants, weavers and so on—he left France and came to settle in Norwich around 1685. The earlier silk weavers had already established their own craft, the first in England. Jacques’ mother is not mentioned so probably she was dead. There were two older sons who chose to remain in France, only Jacques, the youngest, a boy of 17, accompanied his father to England, apparently much against his will.”

Dr. Meryon paused for a moment.

“Thanks to Kirsty who found Fleur’s letter we know why in particular he hated leaving France.”

He turned again to the papers in his hand and went on. “Jacques Merineau hated towns and he did not want to work in the silk trade, so he left Norwich and went to work on the land, at Seltingham. He and Philippe seldom met; it seems the boy quarreled with his father. During a great winter storm most of the village of Seltingham was swallowed up by the sea, but Jacques survived, since the Manor House where he lived and worked



stood well back from the beach."

"And that was Old Manor Farm," said Jake, "it's just about the only house left of the old village."

"And his room was the attic next to mine," I continued, "where I found his whistle and his letter. But what happened to him later on?"

"There is only one more short entry," said Dr. Meryon, "rather a sad one. A few weeks after the storm he was seen to walk into the sea and drown himself."

"But why?" I asked horrified. "Had life become so unbearable? Was he so lonely without Fleur that he couldn't stand it? Doesn't the record explain at all?"

"No," said Dr. Meryon. "I've looked carefully and there is nothing more about Jacques. Philippe Merineau married again, a Marie Drouet, and had three more sons."

"Poor sad boy," I murmured aloud, then to myself, "what has he to do with Jake? I wish I knew."

"Perhaps he lost all his friends again, perhaps they were drowned when the old village was submerged," said Jake in a low dreamy voice. "Perhaps he couldn't stand the loneliness."

I glanced at him anxiously, there was something odd about his voice, and his face wore a sad withdrawn look almost as if he were remembering some old forgotten grief.

Dr. Meryon had not noticed anything, his attention was on the whistle and the letter, which he was placing carefully on a shelf in a little glass-fronted wall cupboard.

"Jake," I said softly putting my hand on his shoulder and shaking him gently, "Jake, I must go now, it's getting late."

He surfaced at once from whatever depths he'd been swimming in and put his arm round me.

"Yes, Kirsty," he said smiling, "I'll come with you."

He walked along with me pushing my bicycle for me. When we reached Old Corpusty's cottage, it was in complete darkness and I gave a passing thought to the old man, and wondered, shuddering, what would become of his rats. We stopped to say goodnight at the gate of the farm where Jake usually left me, but we found it terribly hard to say goodbye. I knew that Jake had to go away next morning for a few days, a long-promised engagement, a yearly cricket match, he had to keep. This was our first parting and the thought of separation hung heavily over us. I clung to him mutely, I had no words to tell him how much he meant to me, I did not know how I could bear to be parted from him.

Suza was waiting for me outside the kitchen door, and as I came slowly through the garden, she came to meet me, followed by Mrs. Muscova.

"What's wrong?" I cried, for it was not yet dark enough to hide the expression on her face.

She put an arm round my shoulders.

"It's Marcus," she said quietly, "there's been an accident—but he's all right—your father says he had a miraculous escape. I said you'd ring them at home as soon as you got in."

For a moment I felt sick and my knees began to shake, but Suza's arm tightened round me and her reassuring voice repeated, "He's all *right*, your father would not have said so unless it was *true*."

I tried to pull myself together enough to ask, "What



happened? Is he in hospital?

Suza put her arms round me and let me cry.

"There, my woman, he's all right. He slipped on a cliff path near your grandmother's house and fell some way down before he was able to stop. He's scratched and bruised and very frightened, but nothing's broken. He might easily have been killed. He's in hospital and Lon has gone up to your grandmother's to be with him."

"If Gory's not with him I ought to go," I said. "Don't you think I should?"

"Wait till you've talked with your father, then we can decide," said Suza, and taking my arm she led me toward the house.

"You'll come and have a cup of tea with Gideon and me and then when you're calmer you can ring your father."

I knew that she was right and I was glad to do as she told me. By the time I had finished sipping my cup of tea, the solid comforting presence of Suza and Gideon had quieted and reassured me and I felt ready to ring my father and talk reasonably with him.

## chapter 18

MY FATHER WAS QUITE FIRM, there was no need for me to go to Marcus. He was still in shock but in a day or two he'd be perfectly all right again. He had had a spectacular escape from a ledge above a sheer drop to the sea. Police and firemen had rescued him, there had even been a helicopter in the offing.

"I've talked with the doctor in charge of him and he thinks there's nothing to worry about. Lois has gone up to be near him and Grandmother is on the spot, so you are not needed, Kirsty."

But I was still not convinced.

"Marcus doesn't *like* Grandmother very much," I pointed out. "Can't Gory be gotten hold of?"

"Certainly not, Marcus isn't a baby or an imbecile. You're making an absurd fuss," snapped my father. "There's no reason for us to curtail Gory's holiday, nor yours."

But he did promise to send for me if Marcus wasn't

better soon, and with this I had to be content.

In a way my father's down-to-earth attitude helped me to stop feeling hysterical, but I remembered uncomfortably that in all the crises in our lives, it was not he but our mother who really understood our needs.

I wrote to Marcus at once, a breezy, jolly letter, carefully covering up my anxiety for him and just saying at the very end, "*Make them send for me if you need me and I'll come at once.*"

I would have gone on worrying and churning all the week that followed had it not been for an extraordinary distraction that Dr. Meryon provided.

He rang me up suddenly and came straight to the point.

"I've got a job for you, young woman," he said.

"But I've already *got* one," I pointed out.

"This is something different," he said, "it's old Corpusty."

"Old Corpusty?" I repeated. "Whatever do you mean?"

"Well, he's recovering, but he'll have to be in hospital for some weeks and he's got no friends. He needs a visitor, and I wondered whether you'd go. He's in a very expansive mood, longing to talk about himself, and you might find some of it very interesting."

"Oh, you mean—but I *couldn't*. I'd be no good as a visitor—and—he hates me."

I shuddered as I remembered his curses and the looks he had given me.

"You'll find him very different from his usual crusty self. He's had a bad fright, a real scare as I told you, and

he's so thankful to be alive that it's changed his mood—for the time being anyway. I'd be very grateful if you'd go to see him, you're just what he needs, a cheerful young stranger who doesn't know too much about him."

I hesitated a bit longer, dredging up excuses and trying to overcome my antagonism to the whole idea, but in the end I gave in and agreed to go after tea the following evening, since it was Dr. Meryon who was asking me and I just could not refuse.

Jake was away at his cricket match, I felt quite lost without him, so when I got back to Old Manor Farm after work next day I was really quite glad to have something to do. Also I was intensely curious about Old Corpusty.

I put on a clean frock and Suza, when she heard where I was going, gave me some farm butter and a few little cakes to take to the old man.

As I rode past it, his house seemed to scowl at me, but there was no sign of any rats.

A pretty young nurse looking scarcely older than I, led me into a long ward and up to a bed at the far corner, and it was as well she did for I would never have recognized this transformed Old Corpusty. He was sitting up in bed, his smiling face scrubbed, almost polished, his blue eyes eager and expectant like a pleased child. I almost gasped at the change in him as the nurse introduced me and I sat down on the chair by his bed. The nurse plumped up his pillows and made a bit of a fuss over him and he responded quite delightedly. "Thank yew, Miss Nurse," he said beaming.

"Doctor said yew'd be comin' along to see me, Miss,"



he said turning to me. "Reckon Oi owes yew an apology—over them rats, yew know."

"Oh, that's all right," I said hastily. "I had no idea they were pets of yours."

"Took yew by surprise-like, well it ain't everyone wot fares to like 'em."

"I'm sorry to hear you've been ill, Mr. Corpusty," I said changing the subject. "I hope you're feeling much better now? Mrs. Dillon sent this butter and the cakes to you, and she hopes you'll soon be all right again."

"Well now, kind o' her that wor, thinkin' o' me," said old Corpusty. "Be she a friend o'yours?"

"Yes, her sister Janet is one of my best friends," I replied, "and I am staying with the Dillons at Old Manor Farm for the summer. It's a splendid old house," I said craftily, hoping to get him to talk about it.

"Aye, a powerful house," said the old man. "Once Oi lived there when Oi wor a lad. Up the top o' the house, in a' attic room Oi slept," he continued, then softly, "they wor the sweetest days o' my life." His eyes shimmered moistly, clouded with memories, and his face wore a faraway look as if he walked in some dream world of his own.

I waited patiently for a few minutes but he was lost in his dream and had forgotten me.

"My room is one of the attics," I remarked presently, "the larger of the two. There's nobody in the other room next mine, but it's very strange, sometimes in the night I hear music, a little tune played on a wooden whistle—it goes like this." I whistled Jake's tune to him and waited. "Of course there's no one there so I must have dreamed

it all," I said. Slowly astonishment spread over his face, his withdrawn look vanished and his eyes became alert again as he leaned toward me in his eagerness. "It wor no dream," he said. "It wor the Whistlin' Boy yew heard—stoon me, it wor!"

"That's what I thought," I said. "I've *seen* him too."

Old Corpusty peered at me with renewed interest, then he wriggled himself closer to me and whispered, "What did he tell yew?"

Now it was my turn to feel astonished.

"Tell me?" I repeated. "He told me nothing. He never even saw me."

"Ah—so it wor not yew he came for," murmured the old man, "must 'a bin someone though. He only comes afore a surge, when floods are out."

"You mean he comes as a warning of danger, of the sea rushing in again?" I asked.

The old man nodded. "Thass sure as my name's Joel Corpusty," he said solemnly, "there'll be great floods." He seemed to lose interest then and he lay back on his pillows as if he were tired.

"Mr. Corpusty," I said clearly, leaning towards him, "What did the Whistling Boy tell *you*?"

My question roused him again and he smiled.

"Ah," he said softly, "he told me of a lost village under the sea, a beautiful place, a won'erful place, where a man could be happy for all eternity. He asked me to go there with him, to be his friend, yew see, to follow him down through the green waves. Oi'd a gone with him too, he spoke so soft and sweet, Oi loved his gentle ways and his witching tune."



"Why didn't you go with him," I asked, "if you wanted to so much?"

"Oi followed him along the ow causeway," muttered the old man as if talking to himself, "right to the end Oi went, but Seraphy stopped me goin' on, she knowed about him 'cos Oi told her. She came lookin' for me and strayed onto the salt marsh—she wor blind yew see, so Oi had to turn back and go after her afore she sank in the mud."

"Who was Seraphy?" I asked gently.

"My sister," he said, "there wor no one to look after her except me. But she took me from the Whistlin' Boy and Oi never forgave her for it."

"And Seraphy," I asked. "What happened to her?"

"She died long ago," he said, "and left me all lone-some."

There was a world of regret and longing in his voice as he continued.

“Now it’s too late and Oi’m old and lonely, with only my rats for company. Oi’ve never had no other friend, the Whistlin’ Boy spoiled me for anyone else, there’s never been no one like him nor never will be. If there is any place called heaven, I knows where mine is.”

I was so much moved by his story that I sat silent for several minutes after he’d finished. Then I got up and took his hand in mine.

“Thank you for telling me, Mr. Corpusty,” I said, “it’s a wonderful story, thank you very much. I’ll come and see you again.”

I could see he was tired and only half understood that I was leaving him, he had slipped away again into his lost dream.

I hurried out of the hospital and mounted my bicycle, and I was so preoccupied that I set off in the wrong direction. When I noticed my mistake, I dismounted and climbed onto a field gate at the side of the road. I had to think about what old Corpusty had said. I thought I knew now what had happened to Jake in that attic room. Like old Corpusty and perhaps several other boys, he had fallen under the spell of a lonely ghost, had been bewitched into following him, down to the old drowned village under the sea.

I could not help shivering as I thought how nearly Jake had come to destruction. Old Corpusty had escaped, but was Jake safe yet? And what about the coming storm? Could there be any truth in the old man’s story that the Whistling Boy came as a warning? Should I tell someone

what Corpusty had said, or was it all nonsense? I wished I knew.

I wished too that I could keep Jake away from Old Manor Farm until the storm was over, until the Whistling Boy had gone back to the sea.

Everyone would laugh at my fears if I told them, I felt sure. If only I knew whether Jake was really in danger! I was glad that he was safe for the moment with his school friend, it gave me time to think, but he wouldn't stay away from me for longer than he had to, and what then?

I felt quite battered with anxiety as I remounted my bicycle and rode slowly home. I shrank from telling old Corpusty's story even to Dr. Meryon. I was sure he would only laugh at me, he would never take seriously what I could tell him about the Whistling Boy. I must think of a way out myself.

Next day I went to see old Corpusty again after work, and somehow he seemed less forceful, slightly more removed from everyday things, as if he were slowly fading. I was not allowed to stay for long and I was afraid my previous visit must have overtired him.

It was a beautiful evening and as I went back to Old Manor Farm for supper I wondered how much longer the heat wave could last. I also wondered what would happen once the weather broke. Could there really be a great storm and floods in the middle of the summer as old Corpusty had said? I supposed the weather on this coast was unpredictable enough for anything.

My anxieties kept churning over in my mind, Jake, Dinah, Marcus, the promised storm. I worried about

them after I got into bed that night. Marcus I knew so well I was confident I would know how to cope with him if I was needed. But Dinah? And Jake? Two people I loved and who depended on me, two people I wanted to help if only I had the wisdom and the courage.

Dinah I had failed, and she had done the only thing she could; perhaps I would get another chance with her. Jake I must not fail, never, *never!*

I repeated his name aloud in the darkness "Jake—Jake." He filled my world with a breathtaking magic. The miracle of loving one another had given me a new understanding, a new maturity. Was this what everyone felt when they fell in love, or was it special to us? Was this something that Dinah had known? And Lois? Was this what Lois felt for my father? The idea staggered me, I had never thought of Lois in this way before. It brought her close to me, down to my level from the unapproachable heights of her grown-upedness. This was a feeling we could share, and it was a revelation to me for I began to think of her with kindness.

I lay still in the darkness, listening, waiting, thinking again of Jake and of the threat to his safety—but no sound came from the room next door.

## chapter 19

NEXT DAY WHEN I FINISHED WORK I paid another visit to old Corpusty in hospital. I brought a basket of late raspberries that I picked for him.

Old Corpusty seemed brisker than the day before and "Miss Nurse" promised to give him my raspberries for his supper. But after a few minutes his attention began to wander and he seemed to withdraw from me, so I did not stay for long.

There was no one about when I got home, so I took a walk down to the beach. I noticed that the sky had a ruffled look and the sun had lost some of its heat so that I was glad to pull on a sweater.

I did not pay much attention at the time, though I was still wondering how much to tell Suza of what old Corpusty had said to me. Finally I decided to say nothing. It all sounded so wild. But later that evening, when I went upstairs to my room to fetch my book, I noticed how sullen the sky had become, the gold of the sunset



had a leaden metallic quality that I found ominous.

I was on my way downstairs, still pondering the whole matter of the storm when the telephone rang, and since I was nearest to it I picked up the receiver.

It took me a moment to recognize the voice at the other end—it was Lois. She sounded quite unlike herself, her tone was flustered, agitated and she sounded frightfully hurried.

“Kirsty? It’s Marcus. He’s not . . . so well. He’s terribly depressed and sort of dimmed. Your father doesn’t seem to understand, and Grandmother says I’m making a silly fuss about nothing. She said I wasn’t to tell you—that’s why I must hurry while she’s in the garden. Oh Kirsty, I’m dreadfully worried about him. Can you come at once, tomorrow?”

I was completely taken by surprise, that Lois was asking *me* for help was quite unbelievable. Marcus, my heart lurched when I heard the anxiety in Lois’ voice, but how could I go and leave Jake behind? He needed me too, particularly at this moment.

“I—I don’t see how I can come,” I hedged, “I’m rather tied up with someone here. Surely Marcus will be all right if you’re with him?” My words sounded hollow even to myself.

“Can’t you understand?” cried Lois in exasperation. “I don’t know what to do, how to help him—I’m *not his mother!* She’s the one he really needs, but you’re the next best thing. Kirsty, you’ve *got* to come—please—I beg you!”

Lois was usually so calm, whatever had come over her? This was a genuine cry for help and I could not refuse,

I had to go—but what about Jake?

Lois' voice came again, "Kirsty . . . you'll come won't you? Oh *please* Kirsty!"

I was torn between Jake and Marcus, I loved them both, what was I to do? Suddenly my mind was made up, I must go to Marcus, he was the younger and he was ill. I could rush up to Grandmother's for a few days and get back to Seltingham perhaps before Jake himself got home.

"All right," I agreed, "I'll come tomorrow, just for a few days. Expect me about suppertime, and tell Marcus."

Lois replaced the receiver so quickly that I knew Grandmother had returned.

I went slowly into the parlor where Gideon was dozing in his chair and Suza sat knitting and I told her what Lois had said about Marcus. "Maybe he got more of a fright than they thought," Suza suggested, "rolling down a cliff face could terrify anyone—but you're the one to help him, lovey, you know him so well you'll be able to give him just what he needs. I expect he's missing his mother."

"That's exactly what Lois said," I remarked thoughtfully. "I thought he'd be all right with her, it's not as if he was badly hurt and he's very fond of Lois."

"It's not the same thing," said Suza, "after all Lois is young and he hasn't known her very long. *You're* the one who has known him all his life, you're the one he can rely on to give him back his security, then he'll soon get well again. As he can't have his mother, he needs you."

Lois' words kept repeating themselves in my mind, "I am *not* his mother." She was not my mother either! She

was young and inexperienced, even defenseless like myself, she was of *my* generation, not my father's. Why on earth had I never understood this before?

Had I tried to make her into something she was not, had I lost the real Lois behind my obsession with her as my stepmother? It was as if her words had drawn back a curtain in my mind letting in the sunlight, and I was able to begin to see everything more clearly. I began to feel more hopeful that Lois and I might become friends.

"I'll have to go tomorrow, Suza," I said, "but I'll come back in a few days if you'll have me, as soon as ever I can."

Suza gave me a great hug, then I ran off to ring Jake at his friend's and explain why I had to go to Marcus.

"I'll only be gone a few days I hope," I said. "Why don't you stay on where you are till I get back, Jake?"

"I'll give it my serious consideration," said Jake teasing me. "I hope Marcus will get better quickly so that you needn't be away for long. I wish I could come with you, but I've got to finish the match here. Oh, Kirsty, don't stay away too long. I need you, too. Somehow I have a feeling—."

He broke off in the middle of his sentence, but he had said enough for me to fear for him again. Old Corpusty came into my mind and I said as urgently as I could, "Oh Jakey, do be careful. Do take care. And I'll be back as soon as ever I can."

I left in a bit of a rush the next morning. The weather had broken and the sky was grim with gray clouds as Gideon drove me to the station. I wondered whether I

should have told Suza what old Corpusty had said about the coming storm, given her a warning about the floods that might come. But I only half believed it myself and I did not want to alarm her on such intangible evidence—after all she knew nothing about the Whistling Boy, and she thought old Corpusty was crazy.

All the way north in the train although I kept my thriller open before me, I was not reading it. I was thinking perhaps more deeply than I'd ever thought in my life. Although I was worried about Marcus, it was not mainly of him I was thinking; once I saw him I would know how to deal with him. Jake was my chief concern, I thought of him with love and a new realization of the responsibility that comes with love. Apart from my own family I had never *really* loved anyone till I met Jake. I knew he had come to depend on me, and I wanted, more than wanted, to give him what he needed. My thoughts moved on to Dinah, strange difficult Dinah who pushed me away with one hand while she drew me toward her with the other. Although I did not find her attractive, yet somehow she had thrust her way into my affections and I felt troubled and concerned for her. And then I thought of Lois, whom I was on my way to see, Lois whom I had hated ever since she had married my father; Lois who had caused me such distress that it had disrupted my life at home; who had troubled my conscience so greatly that it had made me ill—those panic turns had disappeared as soon as I left; Lois whom I hated no longer.

It amazed me how my attitude to her was beginning to change, and apparently quite suddenly. Now I could see her in a different light, as someone more on my own

level, not as someone displacing my mother, or me, but as someone with a place of her own.

Of course I had been leading my own life away from home for more than a month, free to come and go as I pleased, independent, and this freedom must have been working a change in me. Also I must have learned even more than I realized from my close relationship with Jake, from knowing Dr. Meryon, and from Suza's and Gideon's warm friendship. Whatever had brought about the change in me I was glad, for it meant that Lois and I could be friends. I need not feel out of it or lonely at home any more.

The day passed quickly, I changed to the local train and soon I began to recognize the landmarks as we drew nearer to the village where Grandmother lived. I wondered who would meet me; there was only one train after lunch so someone would be sure to come.

Soon the train slowed down and stopped at the little halt, I got out, and Grandmother's tall figure strode along the platform toward me.

"My dear Christina," she said pecking at my cheek, "it was quite unnecessary for you to come. Lois has lost her head a little. Marcus is perfectly all right, only a little shocked."

"I'm very glad to hear it," I said, "but I wanted to see him for myself. I won't stay for more than a few days because I'm doing a job, you know."

I carried my case out to the car and got in and Grandmother drove off. I knew very well that she was annoyed and I thought it must be with Lois. Well, I wasn't afraid of her, and I wasn't going to let her bully Lois either.



As Grandmother drove along the sea road I told her about Seltingham and my job, about Norfolk and my friends there, and I told her about the Meryons.

"It's an unusual name, Meryon," she said. "I had a school friend once of that name, she came from Norwich and was of French extraction. She was a charming girl, I stayed with her once and liked her family."

"She may have belonged to the Meryon family I know," I said. "There can't be very many of them."

After that Grandmother's manner softened and by the time we reached her house she was chattering animatedly.

"How's Lois?" I asked, during a lull in the conversation.

"I thought she looked exhausted when she came back from seeing Marcus at the hospital today so I sent her to bed for a rest," said Grandmother.

I was surprised and a little worried, it was not like Lois to allow herself to be ordered around, although Grandmother can be pretty formidable when she likes.

When we reached the house and stopped at the door, I got out of the car and lifted out my case.

"You're up on the top floor, Christina," said Grandmother, "your usual room."

I carried my case up, flung it on the floor and hurried down to find Lois.

She was in the room in which I expected to find her. Sitting up in bed, her fair hair round her shoulders, she looked about sixteen. There was something vulnerable and young and defenseless about her that touched my heart, and with a sudden impulse of love I went and put my arms round her and kissed her. The painful jealousies, the bitterness, the resentments faded and at last I felt that Lois and I belonged to the same family.



## chapter 20

I WENT TO THE HOSPITAL TO SEE MARCUS as early as they would admit me next morning. I must say I was shocked at his listlessness; at first he didn't even seem particularly glad to see me. But I sat myself down beside him prepared to stay there till I got through to him. It was hard work, and for a long time my sallies brought only a dim smile to his face. But eventually I had the bit between my teeth and I tried harder. I made him tell me exactly what had happened to him. Apparently he and Caley had been coming along the cliff path high above the beach when Marcus had slipped on a loose stone, lost his balance and begun to roll down the cliff. Somehow he had managed to grab hold of a gorsebush and cling onto it. This broke his fall and saved him from the sheer drop to the beach. He lay on a small ledge below the bush, dizzy and terrified, not daring to move till his rescuers came.

"It seemed ages and ages before they came," Marcus said, "tho' Caley raced to the village for help as soon as it

happened. My head was spinning so badly, I just had to shut my eyes and wait and wait and wait. I wanted to scream, I was so afraid I'd not be able to hold on long enough and would roll over the edge."

"Thank heavens you had the sense to hang on and stay still," I remarked, "I don't believe I could have done it. I'd have been so scared I'd probably have fainted and that would have been the end of me."

Marcus opened his eyes wide and began to look more alive. "I was afraid that might happen," he whispered. "I've never been so frightened in all my life—I wouldn't tell anyone this except Gory and you, but I was—*petrified*."

"I don't wonder, it's nothing to be ashamed of, anyone would feel the same about perching at that height, but you had the presence of mind to hang on, good old limpet!"

It was an old joke between the three of us that Marcus always stuck to Gory, and I blessed the spontaneous way in which I had trotted it out unthinkingly, for it acted like a touchstone on Marcus. A deep rumble, half sob, half chuckle, forced its way out of his mouth and he began to laugh. He laughed until the tears ran down his face and I had to hold him to keep him from rolling out of bed. Presently the laughter turned to tears, great convulsive sobs shook him as if they'd tear him to pieces, and I just held him, terrified that a nurse or somebody would come in and see him and cause him humiliation. But no one came and I let him cry, it was easing him out of the gray land in which he had been lost and I felt he'd be much the better for his tears. I had found this myself

more than once.

At last he stopped, sniffed a bit and searched for a handkerchief.

"Sorry, Kirsty," he said grinning apologetically, "I don't know what came over me, but it's a great relief to have you here, you always make me laugh and it feels so good."

I could see that he was tired, exhausted with relief, so after a little mild banter in our peculiar family language, I got up to go.

"You'll be all right now, won't you?" I said. "And you can stop being so brave, it's all over now. I'll tell everyone you'll be coming out of hospital soon—Lois and Father, and Grandmother, of course. Lois has been really worried about you," I added, "it was she who sent for me."

"Lois is *all right*," said Marcus, "but I'm not quite *familiar* with her yet."

He brought out his new word with such emphasis I had to smile.

"Yes," I said seriously, "I know now that Lois is very much all right."

Marcus smiled at me, drowsily content, and I kissed him and slipped out of the room, just as Sister, who seemed to have been lying in wait, appeared round the corner.

She nodded at me and smiled approvingly, "You've done very well," she whispered as she disappeared into Marcus' room.

I turned up the hill to Grandmother's house, feeling very happy that I had been able to give Marcus the boost he needed, now I could stop worrying about *him*.

I strolled along the road, a harsh wind whipping at my

face, and by the time I reached the house heavy rain had begun to fall.

Grandmother had lit a fire in the sitting room and she and Lois were sitting by it reading the newspapers. The atmosphere was a bit tense. Grandmother wore her disapproving face and I could see that Lois was relieved when I appeared.

"How is Marcus?" she asked at once.

"I think he's a lot better," I said, "he told me exactly what happened, all that he'd been feeling, and I think it was a great relief to get it all off his chest. I think he's been trying too hard to be brave and to be on his best behavior, but with me of course it doesn't matter. He was ashamed of being so frightened, but I hope that's all over now. Let's all go and see him this afternoon."

Lois smiled at me. "Thank goodness," she said. "I'm so glad you came, Kirsty, I knew you could work the magic if anyone could."

Grandmother snorted. "I never thought there was much wrong with him," she said. "You'll never make a man out of him if you coddle him so much."

I looked at her sadly. "My father might have been a more approachable person if he had had some coddling from you, if you had ever been able to *show* him your love," I said to myself.

"The rain is on for the day, I'm afraid," said Grandmother changing the subject, "the glass has gone way down and the wind is rising. I shall settle down to letter writing. You can amuse yourself in the little study, Kirsty, there's an electric fire if you want it."

It was plain that she was dismissing me, so I rose.

“Coming to play ‘Scrabble,’ Lois?” I suggested, pulling her up from her chair. But before I left the room I crossed over to Grandmother and putting my hand on her shoulder I kissed her cheek. I knew her too well to be intimidated by her austere manner, and I was fond of her in spite of her forbiddingness. I admired her strength and her self-sufficiency, and I knew that she loved us in her own strange way.

On our way through the hall to the little study I glanced at the table where the telephone stood and saw there, propped up against the handbell Grandmother used for summoning us, a letter addressed to me. It had been sent on from home the day before, after they knew I was coming.

I picked it up and my heart began to thump loudly as I recognized the writing—it was from Dinah.

## chapter 21

"I'LL FOLLOW YOU IN A MINUTE," I said to Lois. "I have to read my letter first."

She went ahead of me into the study and I tore open the envelope.

It was headed "*Hartland House, Boldington,*" which I knew to be a village a few miles from home.

*"Dear Kirsty,*

*I don't know what you must be thinking of me"* it began.

There were two closely written pages, which I read eagerly. Jake and I had been right in our guess about why she had stolen. She had had a sudden mad impulse to do something outrageous, something that had to be noticed and investigated, and now she was paying for it. It was a frightful thing to do, but after I had gone, she had gotten more and more depressed and had finally lost her head and landed herself in trouble.

Her case had come to Court and the magistrates and

everyone had been very kind. They had believed her explanation, but she had been put on probation for two years and sent to Hartland House, a Children's Home, for the rest of the summer.

*"It's not bad here," Dinah wrote, "they're mostly younger than me, and I'm able to help with the little ones and I like that."*

She went on to say that the Welfare Officer had been very kind to her and was looking after her mother, who was having treatment in a special home.

*"Do write to me," she continued, "I wouldn't want you to come to see me here, but I'd love to hear from you. I'm terribly ashamed of what I did, and I hope you can understand how it happened and will go on being my friend."*

Her last sentence brought the tears to my eyes and made me feel how much I had failed her as a friend. If only—but what was the use of thinking back to what might have been, the important thing now was to think of the future, to try to make up to Dinah for the bad time she had had.

I wrote to her that evening, a long letter telling her about Jake and Suza and Seltingham, and Marcus and Lois. Only at the end did I touch on my personal concern for her and assure her that I understood and that it made no difference to our friendship.

*"If only I could have put myself in your place," I wrote, "I'd have realized that you had to have help and I'd have gone to my father or Lois. I think I must have grown up quite a lot while I've been away from home, at least I hope so, and I've learned to care about other peo-*



*ple. I hope I've become a more worthwhile friend."*

I closed the envelope and stamped it, then I wrote to Janet so as to catch the same post, asking her to go and see Dinah at Hartland House. I knew that Janet would be tactful and kind. Then I went to talk to Lois, to ask her if she had any suggestions about getting Dinah out of the Children's Home and into some kind of training or job till her mother was better. She promised to do what she could to help. Janet had told her about Dinah.

Lois seemed uneasy and nervous as if there was something difficult she wanted to say.

Suddenly she blurted out, half shyly, half defiantly, "I'm going to have a baby, Kirsty, in the Spring. I've been trying to tell you ever since you came, but first Marcus, and then I didn't quite have the courage."

I must say I was taken by surprise, it was not a thing I had ever really thought about, father and a young child didn't seem to go together. At one time I would have been outraged, indignant and embarrassed, now in my newfound sympathy for Lois it was of *her* I thought. She wore that new defenseless look, which made me feel protective towards her. "Oh Lois, how lovely for you," I said. "I'm delighted. Are you pleased?"

Lois laughed shyly. "Of course I'm pleased," she said, "and so is your father, but I don't know anything about babies. I've never really met a very young one!"

I couldn't help laughing, she sounded so apologetic.

"Oh you needn't worry," I comforted her, "you'll probably hardly ever see it anyway. I adore babies and Gory is an absolute wizard with them, all the little ones in the neighborhood adore him. We'll look after it for you."

"I'll certainly need lots of help," said Lois laughing. "I feel terribly ignorant and a little scared."

I found her inexperience appealing, she made me feel older than herself. We were quite used to babies, there had always been one living close enough to us for us to play with and to help bathe and dress.

"Just leave it to us," I said, "we'll look after it for you and it will be wonderful to have a baby of our own. It will make us a real family again."

I was tremendously glad to find that she was not the self-confident, super-efficient, assured person I had thought her to be. She needed support and encouragement, and I vowed she would get both from me.

The next morning it was still pouring, the northwest wind drove the rain against the house, and bent the trees until they groaned. I thought with longing of the golden summer days I had left in Norfolk and wished I were back there again.

When Lois and I went to see Marcus he was so much better that Sister said he'd be allowed to leave the hospital after lunch if we'd fetch him.

Grandmother insisted on going with Lois so I was left behind to get tea ready. Mrs. Brunch, Grandmother's daily cook, had made a cake, so we were a cheerful party round the table in front of the fire. I knew by the way Grandmother fussed over Marcus that his accident had affected her more than she would acknowledge.

"You must telephone your father after tea, when he gets home from work, and let him know you're all right again and out of hospital," said Grandmother to Marcus.

"I think we should go home in a day or two," Lois

suggested. "You've been very good to put up with us, Grandmother, but Gerry will be longing to get us home."

Grandmother turned to me. "What about you, Kirsty?" she asked. "Would you like to stay a little longer, or are you dying to get back to Norfolk?"

I had to think quickly. Marcus would be all right now with Lois, and Gory was due home at the end of the week. I did not want to hurt Grandmother but I must get back to Seltingham, back to Jake. I could not bear to be away from him any longer, and there were only two more precious weeks of holiday left.

"Thank you Grandmother, but I think I must get back the day after tomorrow," I said gently, "there's the job, you know."

"Yes," she said teasingly, "and your Meryons!"

When I was ready for bed that night I went along to Grandmother's room in my dressing gown to say good-night. I sat down beside her and chatted for a few minutes about this and that, then she turned and gave me a shrewd look as she asked in her most disinterested tone of voice, "How are things at home—with Lois?"

I stared back at her knowing that she was simply dying of curiosity, and I deliberately misunderstood her.

"Oh, she manages very well, and of course we've still got Janet," I replied.

"That's not what I mean at all," snapped Grandmother. "How do you all get on with her? Does she make your father happy?"

"Yes," I said, "she makes us all happy, she's the nicest person." And suddenly I found myself extolling Lois, championing her in a way I would never have believed

possible. Grandmother had never much liked my mother, and I had sensed during the past few days that she did not like Lois any better. When it came to criticism by an older generation, I found myself firmly ranged by Lois' side.

"I'm glad you find her so estimable," said Grandmother shortly, "it's a tricky situation. Loyalty is a good characteristic to have, Kirsty."

"But I *mean* it!" I cried. "I'm very fond of Lois, and I'm glad about the baby."

Grandmother nodded. "Goodnight, child," she said dismissing me. "Don't forget to come and see me again soon, and bring that Meryon boy with you."

When I left her and got back to my own room, I went to open the window before getting into bed. The wind had risen and a half gale was blowing outside, so I shut it again quickly and snuggled down under the blankets. But for a long time I could not sleep for the wind shrieking round the house, tearing at the windows, the chimneys, battering at the roof and the doors, bent on destruction.

Early next morning when I went out huge waves were thundering at the cliffs far below us; and although the rain had stopped, the whole land was sodden, the sky watery and drained of color like a washed-out cloth.

My thoughts flew to Seltingham and I wondered what was happening there, whether they had had the same storm? Where was Jake? I hoped he was still staying with his school friend, but I must call and find out.

I hurried back to breakfast and turned on the news. The radio reported bad flooding in many parts of the

county, but no mention was made of Seltingham.

"Please can I ring up Jake's home and find out if they're all right?" I asked. I spent a fruitless hour trying first to get through to Seltingham and then to the home of Jake's friend where he had been staying, but it was useless and at last the exchange reported that the lines were down in the storm.

Then I began to get really worried. Surely Jake would realize how anxious I must be and would call me!

Although I was expecting it I nearly jumped out of my skin when suddenly, dramatically, the telephone rang and I rushed to answer it. I hoped it was Jake, but it was his mother.

"Kirsty, can you hear me?" Her voice came distantly high and thin.

"We've had a surge and disastrous flooding," she said, "part of the village has been destroyed. Our house is all right but—I rang to tell you that—"

There was a buzzing disturbance on the line and her voice faded out. I hung on grimly. "Hullo! Hullo! I can't hear a thing! Can you hear me? Are you still there? Is Jake all right? And the Dillons?" I waited straining my ears to catch the faintest word, I could hear nothing except that awful buzzing. I tried repeating what I had said loudly and slowly but I could get no response.

"I'm coming back!" I yelled into the mouthpiece. "Can you hear me? I'll come on the midday train today. Tell Jake. *Is he all right?*"

Suddenly the buzzing stopped and the line went completely dead. I hung up in a fury of frustration. It was maddening not to have been able to hear what Mrs. Mer-

yon had to tell me. I knew nothing about Jake or the Dillons and why had Mrs. Meryon rung me and not Jake himself?

Could anything have happened to him? Even if he was still away from home he *could* have let me know where he was, and that he was safe. But supposing something had happened to him—supposing—“Oh—not Jake,” I groaned. “Please God, let him be safe.”

I ran to tell Grandmother the news, my head churning with old Corpusty’s warnings and my anxieties for the safety of Jake and the Dillons.

“I’ll have to go at once, today,” I cried, “I must get back to help. Jake may be in danger.”

“Hadn’t you better wait for a day or two? Everything must be chaotic now, so how can they cope with visitors? Anyway where will you stay and how will you get there through the floods?” Grandmother asked.

“I’m going back to help, I’m not just a visitor,” I retorted. “I hope Mrs. Meryon heard me on the ’phone, but I can get myself out by bus, it passes the end of their lane, they’re too far inland to have got the worst floods. Mrs. Meryon said their house is all right and I know they’ll give me a bed there. Don’t discourage me, Grandmother, I’ve simply *got* to go.”

“I’ll take you to the train, Kirsty,” Lois offered, “if you really think you should go.”

“Very well, you’d better go and pack while I make some sandwiches for your lunch,” said Grandmother.

Lois went up to my room to pack my things while I peeped in on Marcus who had been made to have breakfast in bed, to tell him what had happened and to hug



him goodbye.

There was only just enough time to slam my case shut and hurry with it down to the car, say a hurried goodbye to Grandmother, and we were off down the road, Lois' foot well down on the accelerator.

We didn't talk as we tore along, and it was not till we were almost at the station that Lois slackened speed.

"I hate to see you so distressed Kirsty," she said, "I do hope you'll find your friends are all safe and unharmed. Try not to worry too much, it may not be as bad as you think."

"It's Jake," I gulped. "I wish I knew that he's all right. You see I've never known anyone like Jake. Oh Lois, what shall I do if anything awful has happened to him?"

We had arrived at the station and Lois turned off the engine. Before she got out of the car she put a gentle hand on my shoulder.

"Don't cross your bridges till you reach them, Kirsty," she said. "Aren't you letting your imagination run away with you a little? You're going to need all your courage when you get there, you know, so try to calm down and relax."

Her common sense was like a cool shower, I was grateful to her for being so matter-of-fact.

The train came grinding into the station, we made a dash for it. I humped my case into an empty carriage and turned to throw my arms round Lois' neck.

"Thank you, Lois, thank you for everything," I cried as I climbed in and shut the door.

"I'll be home in a fortnight," I said, "and you take very good care of yourself until then—that baby, you know!"



Lois smiled.

“Get in touch with us as soon as you can, Kirsty, we’ll be waiting to hear from you, and thank you for coming to my help over Marcus,” she said. “Try to bring your Jake home with you for a few days, your father and I would love to meet him. Goodbye, and good luck.”

The train moved slowly away from the platform as I hung out of the window waving, then when it began to gather speed I sank back into my corner seat.

I opened my book and tried to read but I could not concentrate. In spite of Lois’ good advice I could not overcome my feelings of apprehension about Jake. I could not stop worrying about him. After all, the surge had happened as old Corpusty had said it would and Lois knew nothing about the Whistling Boy.

It was a long day of strain and anxiety. I dozed fitfully and started awake from alarming dreams. I tried to be calm and sensible but as we got further south and drew nearer to the sea and I began to see great areas of flooded land, trees uprooted by the gale, devastation caused by the storm my anxiety grew stronger. What would I find at the end of my journey?

It was nearly seven o’clock when at last I got out of the train and eagerly scanned the platform for a familiar face.

At first I thought no one had come and I’d have to find my own way out by bus, I was not expected. Then I saw Mrs. Meryon coming toward me out of the crowd, her face terribly strained and anxious, although it lightened with relief when she saw me—Jake was not with her.

Impulsively she held out her arms to me, “Dear

Kirsty!" she cried, "I'm so thankful to see you! How good of you to come." I found myself clinging to her.

"So you *did* hear me on the 'phone," I gulped. "Where's Jake? Is he all right? Please tell me."

Mrs. Meryon took me firmly by the arm.

"Kirsty—we don't know where Jake is—he's missing."

## chapter 22

SOMEHOW I MUST HAVE CARRIED MY CASE to the car and got in, although I have no recollection of doing so. But I came to myself when I heard Mrs. Meryon saying, "We thought you might have some idea about where he could possibly be—I rang you to tell you."

"But I couldn't hear you, I didn't know what had happened, except that there had been a surge and the village was flooded. Is Dr. Meryon all right and the Dillons? And how can Jake be missing? Do you mean he might have been drowned?" I faltered. "It's strange that nobody's seen him, that he hasn't made some sign even if he's marooned somewhere—unless he's hurt! Oh, surely he can't be lying helpless somewhere with none of us knowing where to find him!" I cried.

"We just don't know. Police and rescue workers, all of us, are searching for him of course, but the chaos and disorganization are so awful, and there's been so much to do and so many people to be rescued that one can't ex-

pect all the time to be given to one boy. The police don't seem too worried about him, they think he's got cut off somewhere by the floods—but it's been two days now."

"Please go on telling me all that happened," I begged. "I want to know." The story Mrs. Meryon told me as we drove toward the coast was a terrifying one.

"I've never seen such rain," she said, "hours and hours of it until the rivers burst their banks. Then when the rain stopped, a gale blew up that carried the unusually high tide through the gap in the dunes in a great surge. There's water everywhere. Several of the village houses nearest the sea have gone, part of Old Manor Farm has fallen in but Suza and Gideon are safe and are staying with friends on a farm further inland.

"Three people were drowned, and there might have been *many* more but for the warning. Someone rang the bell of the old church, the ancient signal of danger from the sea, so people knew to expect a surge shortly before it happened.

"Many got away in time, safely inland, others climbed onto their roofs and were rescued when daylight came."

I waited for her to speak of Jake again but she did not—perhaps she couldn't.

"And Jake?" I prompted her. "When was he last seen? Did he come home from the friend he had been staying with before the surge?"

Mrs. Meryon spoke slowly, jerkily, dragging the words out as if they were reluctant to come.

"He came home two days ago—this is Monday, yes, on Saturday—these last two days seem like a lifetime. The rain had put a finish to the Cricket week. He seemed in

good spirits and he'd enjoyed his visit. He talked about you and how much he was longing to see you again. He seemed completely normal when he went to bed on Saturday night, then we were all wakened by the church bell pealing its warning and although his bed had been slept in, Jake was gone—that was about two in the morning."

"Do you think he rushed out in answer to the bell, to see what had happened?" I asked.

Mrs. Meryon shook her head. "No, we'd have heard him and someone would have seen him. I think he slipped out earlier than that," she said wearily.

"Perhaps the police are right and he's marooned somewhere and is waiting till the water goes down," I suggested. "That's what we hope, but where?" said Mrs. Meryon. "Can't you think of any place where he might be, Kirsty? Some secret place that only you and he know about?"

I shook my head.

"I wish I did," I said, "but don't lose heart Mrs. Meryon. I feel certain Jake is alive, I think I'd know if he weren't, I'd know it in my bones. I'll find him, I promise you I will. I'll find him if it's the last thing I do!"

By this time we had reached the crossroads a mile or two from the village, and although the floods here had subsided the road was very wet and muddy and we had to drive very slowly. We crawled along till we came to the lane, turned along it and stopped in front of Hollies End. I couldn't see any damage except for a great tree blown down in the gale; but the house was full of people from the village who had had to leave their homes. I

staggered into the house with my case, and Mrs. Meryon took me to a mattress in the study where several children were already sleeping.

"Will you be all right here, Kirsty? I'm afraid it's the best we can do. There's some supper in the kitchen as soon as you're ready. I know you're longing to join in the search for Jake but you must have some food first. My husband will be in by then."

Suddenly realizing how terribly tired I was, I'd like to have curled up on my mattress then and there and gone to sleep like the children. But there wasn't time to rest, first I must swallow some supper and then go out to look for Jake.

I washed my face and hands and went down to the kitchen, which was being used as a kind of canteen. A huge pot of soup stood on the stove and a great dish of vegetables, and in the oven was an enormous baking tin of sausages and potatoes. Everyone was helping himself to what food he wanted, and Mrs. Meryon told me to do the same.

Dr. Meryon, looking utterly exhausted, came in while I was eating my second helping. He gave me a warm welcome but I could see he was too tired and had too much on his mind to want to talk.

I saw Mrs. Meryon glance anxiously at him, raising her eyebrows as she went to get him some soup. He shook his head wearily and I knew that there was no news of Jake.

He bolted his meal and told me to go and fetch my coat.

"I'll take you to Seltingham, what's left of it," he said.

I tiptoed into the study so as not to waken the sleep-

ing children, got my coat and was about to leave when my attention was drawn to the little glass-fronted wall cupboard. I stopped a moment to peer into it. Fleur's letter was there lying on the shelf, but Jacques' wooden whistle was gone. I glanced quickly along the other shelves, but I could not see it—perhaps Dr. Meryon had moved it. I must ask him.

I hurried out to join him in the car and we drove off toward the village.

"Mrs. Meryon hoped I might know a secret place where Jake might be," I began tentatively. "I don't, but I think Old Manor Farm is the most likely place."

"It's already been searched, and all the outbuildings—unless he was in the wing that collapsed," muttered Dr. Meryon. "But why Old Manor Farm? Why should he go there?"

"Jacques' wooden whistle is not in the cupboard where you put it. I think Jake might have taken it back to the farm."

"In the middle of the night?" asked Dr. Meryon in astonishment.

"I don't know why I think so, but I do," I said bravely. "I think we should search the farm again. I'm sure Jake is still alive *somewhere*."

"We'll have to go by boat," said Dr. Meryon shortly, "and I'm afraid it's a waste of time."

Hollies End was far enough inland and well away from any river, so it had escaped being badly flooded, but as we approached Seltingham village and the sea, the scene spread out before us was appalling. Mud and rubble that had been cleared from the street and houses lay shoveled



into great piles, and although some of the water had gone down it had left frightful debris behind and everywhere was sopping wet. Many of the houses had been flooded out and people were living on their upper floors until their downstairs could be cleaned and dried out.

The lower end of the village nearer the sea was much worse. Several of the fishermen's cottages had collapsed into heaps of stones, others would never again be habitable. Two men and an old woman had been drowned. The pub was badly damaged, half its roof had fallen in, and the family had escaped from the other half by boat.

From the village we drove slowly along the road toward Old Manor Farm. We stopped when we saw a rowing boat tied to a ring at the side of the causeway and got out of the car and stepped into the boat. Dr. Meryon rowed out toward the house.

I found it almost impossible to believe the scene before my eyes. Where only a few days before summer fields had been golden with sunlight, there now lay shallows of water, uprooted trees, drowned creatures, tangled seaweed, mud, stones and piles of wreckage. The floods were going down fast, and beyond the fateful gap in the dunes through which the surge had come, the sea looked placid and innocent.

The road to Old Manor Farm stood on a raised embankment so it was almost clear of the flood water that still covered the marsh on one side of it and the fields of ruined crops on the other. At the end of the road I could see that the house was still surrounded by a shallow sea. I had already been told this but I was horrified to see it before my eyes. I had not been able to realize just what



had happened. The oldest part of the house was gone. Undermined by the water and shaken by the gale it had tottered and crumbled. Now it lay, a huge pile of stones half covered by the water. But the rest of the house stood firm, triumphant, with the great tower of the church behind it.

“Jacques’ room is gone,” I whispered to myself, “it must be the end of the Whistling Boy, he has no place now in the house.”

“Where did I hear Suza and Gideon are?” I asked.

“They’re staying with friends at a farm further inland,” he replied. “The water should have disappeared in a few days and they’ll be able to start cleaning up Old Manor Farm.”



"They must have lost an awful lot, their crops and damage to the house—it's dreadful! Were their animals all right, the pets I mean?" I thought lovingly of Mrs. Muscova and the two dogs.

"They'll be covered by insurance I think," said Dr. Meryon, "and I expect the animals are safe. We'll go over and see soon."

"Oh yes if you have time, please, later I'd like that very much," I said, for I knew how dreadfully distressed Suza and Gideon must be. "But Jake must be found first, then we can help with the clearing up of the mess."

Dr. Meryon rowed right up to the front door of the house, and I climbed out onto the steps. The door was shut but it was never locked, so I opened it and went in.

The whole of the ground floor must have been under water, now it was mostly gone but the mess was indescribable. Dr. Meryon followed me in, we were both wearing rubber boots.

“Jakey! Jakey!” I called loudly, then despairingly “Jakey!”

The empty house echoed hollowly, there was no answering shout, there was no one there.

“It’s just occurred to me that we are trespassing,” said Dr. Meryon behind me, “though I don’t suppose the Dillons would mind. Well, shall we go round the house? We’ll have to be quick; it’s getting dark.” Dr. Meryon took a flashlight from his pocket and we went into every room. We searched in the cupboards, under the stairs, in every odd corner I could think of, but there was not a sign of Jake.

When we reached the top floor, the door of my empty room stood wide open and beyond it there was nothing—the room where the Whistling Boy had lived was gone. It had crumbled and fallen away. Had Jake gone with it? I wondered, with sickening fear.

We went silently down stairs without speaking. I felt utterly dejected and Dr. Meryon laid a comforting hand on my shoulder.

“We’ll have to give up for tonight, Kirsty, and go home. There might be some news when we get back.”

On the way back to Hollies End I remembered something that had been at the back of my mind all evening.

“How is Old Corpusty? I noticed his cottage is still standing, though it’s more of a ruin than ever. Is he still in the hospital?” I asked Dr. Meryon.

Dr. Meryon looked at me in silence for a moment, then he rubbed his forehead as if to stimulate his memory and I saw how terribly tired he was.

"Kirsty—I forgot to tell you—there's been so much to do—old Corpusty is dead," he said quietly.

"Dead?" I faltered. "But I thought he was getting better. You said he'd be all right."

"So we thought, but you never can tell with old people. He didn't have a relapse or take a turn for the worse, nothing like that, he just seemed to—fade away as if he was tired of living. There was nothing more we could do for him."

"When did he die?" I asked.

"On the night of the storm," said Dr. Meryon. "He died in his sleep in the hospital."

"Was he upset by the storm, frightened perhaps?" I asked.

Dr. Meryon shook his head. "He didn't seem to notice it much. He was quite happy, he'd withdrawn into a dream world of his own several days before he died. His mind was wandering, and he thought he was a boy again. He got some notion about wanting to be buried at sea—he talked about it a great deal. It was all nonsense, of course, but he made me promise."

"And did you keep your promise?" I asked eagerly. The strange request made sense to me. I thought I understood why Corpusty had made it.

"Of course," said Dr. Meryon, "we carried out his wishes this morning and buried him at sea."

"I'd like to have talked to him again," I remarked. "I felt very sad about him. But you say he seemed contented

and happy, so he couldn't have felt lonely any more, could he?"

"I think he was happier than he'd ever been before; he lost all his old cantankerous spite, he became a different person. He thought he had a friend beside him, you know, to whom he talked a great deal, an unseen companion who never left him—he imagined it all of course, I told you his mind was wandering."

A friend, an unseen companion? A great burst of joy for old Corpusty blazed up in me as I whispered to myself, "It was Jacques—it was the Whistling Boy himself, and Old Corpusty found his heaven with him in the lost village under the sea."

I did not speak again till we reached Hollies End and Dr. Meryon drove the car into the garage.

We got out stiff with tiredness, and Mrs. Meryon met us at the door her eyes questioning.

"We didn't find anything, not a trace," I said despondently.

She had changed tremendously in the few days of appalling anxiety, her detached aloof air had quite disappeared and I could see how she would look when she was an old, old woman. Worry and grief over Jake's disappearance had done this to her—no one could say now that she did not care about him.

She put an arm round my shoulders and drew me into the kitchen, which for now was empty. Dr. Meryon followed us and we all sat down to drink cups of cocoa.

"It seems awful just to go to bed when Jake may be in danger," I said. "I wish I knew what to do."

"It's too dark to do any more tonight and we all need



a good sleep," said Dr. Meryon. "I shall be up at daylight to go along the beaches with Sergeant Nettlesby."

I caught my breath sharply, he meant that they might find Jake's body washed up by the sea.

I bit my lip to prevent myself bursting into tears, as I bent to kiss Mrs. Meryon.

"May I have a bath?" I asked.

"Of course, Kirsty," she cried jumping up. "You must forgive me, I'm afraid I'm not looking after you very well."

The hot water soothed and relaxed me and it sharpened my wits so that when I got into my sleeping bag close to the dreaming children I was able to think clearly, coherently.

The night was very dark, I could see no stars.

"Somewhere out there Jake may be looking for the stars too," I thought and there was warmth and comfort in the thought. I began to think of Old Corpusty, of his end, and what a fitting end it was. Somewhere, I felt, there was a link between him and Jake and the Whistling Boy, a link the significance of which eluded me, lay just beyond my reach.

I had had a long day and in spite of my wish to stay awake, to feel that I was keeping a kind of vigil with Jake, my eyelids began to grow heavier and heavier as sleep crept over me.

I was just dropping off when a rustle and a scratching sound startled me wide awake. For a horrible moment I thought there was a rat in the room, but I think it must have been one of the children scratching in her sleep. Rats! I thought of the horrible tame one, fat and evil,



sitting on the doorstep of Corpusty's cottage—Corpusty's cottage—CORPUSTY'S COTTAGE. The words came at me in a vibrating crescendo, and with a lightning flash of understanding I knew where I must look for Jake.

I could hardly wait for morning, and although I may have dozed off for a few minutes at a time, I was wide awake when first light came. I pulled on my clothes without waking the children and crept out of the room.

My rubber boots stood outside the front door where I had left them the night before and I put them on.

There was a thin chill mist lying over the land, and I turned up the collar of my jacket as I left the lane and hurried along the muddy road. I would have to take the long way round past the Jarvis fruit farm since the road through the village was still flooded.

A great urgency drove me along and presently I began to run. Soon I came to the Jarvis farm with its orchards of ghost trees growing out of the mist, past it along the narrow road, then ahead of me I saw old Corpusty's cottage looming up, eerie and derelict. I trudged up the steps breathing hard, pushed open the broken door and went inside.

The place smelled of decay, part of the roof had fallen in and the light such as it was came through this hole rather than the small broken windows. There was a dirty fireplace, a sink in one corner, a table, a couple of chairs . . . and a mattress. As I stared at it my heart seemed to stop beating and I felt unable to move, for across that dim room I could just make out a form lying there.

In a moment I was looking down on the humped shape covered with a dirty blanket and when I dared to lift it to have a look at the face—it was Jake!



I bent closer, my heart thumping in my ears so that I could not hear if he was breathing, but his face was warm when I touched it, and although his eyes were closed he seemed to be quite alive, he was just very fast asleep. His clothes were damp and smelled abominably, his hair was wild, his face filthy, . . . but it was Jake, all right.

I knelt down beside him and a great sob of relief broke from me as I gently shook him by the shoulder.

"Jakey," I murmured, "Jakey, wake up, wake up!"

He opened his eyes slowly and stared at me as if he were surfacing from a great depth, then a grin spread over his face and he sat up.

"Kirsty! Kirsty! Is it really you?" he cried. "I've been having such awful dreams." We fell into each other's arms overcome with delight.

"Ow!" he yelled wincing at the sudden impact and put his hand up to the back of his head. I felt gingerly round his fingers and discovered a lump nearly the size of a golf ball.

"Good heavens! You've had a dreadful bump!" I cried. "Are you all right?"

"I think so, but where is *this*?" Jake asked uncertainly, looking round the hovel.

"You're in old Corpusty's cottage, you've been here for two days. Everyone's been searching for you like mad. I don't know why nobody thought of looking in here—because the floods haven't touched it, I suppose, and it's almost a ruin anyway. We thought you'd either been marooned by the water, or that you'd been drowned in the surge," I said.

"The surge? What surge? And what on earth am I

doing in Old Corpusty's cottage?" asked Jake. "It's not exactly a choice spot!"

I began to giggle weakly. "Oh, I'm so thankful I've found you, Jake," I cried putting my arms round him again. "I think we ought to get you home, your father and mother are terribly anxious about you. Can you walk d'you think?"

Jake got unsteadily to his feet. "I feel a bit lightheaded and empty," he remarked, "but I think I can make it."

"Wait!" I cried. "Sit down again, I've got an apple and some chocolate in my pocket. Here you are, eat up and you'll feel stronger."

I sat close against him while he munched and I wished I'd had more to give him, he was obviously ravenous; after all he'd had nothing to eat for two whole days.

"What's this about a surge?" he asked as he ate.

So I told him. "Far more people would have been drowned, but someone rang the old church bell as a warning," I said, "and saved their lives."

Jake looked embarrassed.

"That was me," he murmured.

"Jakey! Was it really you? Then you're a hero!" I shouted. "But what were you doing out in the middle of the night? And how did you know there was a surge coming?" I asked.

Jake looked dazed and puzzled for a moment as if he was struggling to remember, then he brightened, "Now it's all coming back to me," he cried. "I'm beginning to remember what happened the night I came home from the cricket match. I was tired, so I went to bed early but I couldn't go to sleep. I was terribly restless. After a while

I got up and wandered about a bit, and I went into father's study. There I saw Jacques' whistle. I picked it up and held it in my hand. A strange feeling came over me, a sense of obligation, of compulsion, a certainty that I had to return it to Old Manor Farm where it belonged. I pulled on some clothes and slipped out of the house.

"The rain had stopped, but a strong wind had sprung up and was becoming stronger every minute. It was very dark as I made my way along the road to Old Manor Farm. The house was in darkness, everyone asleep, but the dogs in the yard began to bark as I lifted the latch—the door is never locked—and walked in.

"I stood for a moment at the bottom of the stairs, shivering, the whistle clutched in my hand, and I wondered what to do next. I felt a curious compulsion to go up to the attic where you found the whistle and the letter, but I fought it with all my might, and I managed to gather enough strength to stand firm.

"With tremendous relief I saw the sitting room door standing open beside me and on an impulse I rushed in and placed the whistle on the smoldering embers of the fire. I held my breath. There was a flash of fire as the flames leaped up and covered it, and in a few moments there was nothing left but ashes.

"I slid out of the room, out of the house, took several deep breaths of air, and began to run toward the dunes behind the farm. I felt as if I had conquered something big and I wanted to fill my lungs with the exciting salty breath of the sea before I went back to bed, to sleep.

"I battled my way against the gale to the highest point and there I stood gasping—looking down on the waves

as they raced thundering up the beach in the highest tide I had ever seen. Great towering walls of water reared up threatening to overtop the dunes. I could see that although the beach shelved steeply below the gap, nothing could stop the sea from pouring through it and flooding the village.

“I knew I had to raise the alarm, I had to send out a warning if only I could do it in time.

“I turned and ran faster than I had ever run before to the old church behind the farm. I pushed open the great door, seized the rope hanging from the belfry and pulled on it for all I was worth.”

“But suddenly there was a tremendous crash and one of the roof beams splintered and pieces of wood fell around me—one of them must have hit me a good whack judging by the lump on my head—and that’s all I remember until you woke me up, Kirsty. I suppose I started running home from the church and felt too weak or exhausted to go on, so I stumbled into Old Corpusty’s cottage and collapsed on his bed.”

“It’s a splendid saga,” I cried. “Now let’s get you home so that you can tell it to your parents.”



## chapter 23

IT WAS NEARLY ANOTHER WEEK before the water around Old Manor Farm completely disappeared but even before that I was able to help Suza and Gideon start cleaning the house, though I still stayed with the Meryons. Jake helped in the village in any way he could, while I, over with the Dillons worked harder than I had ever worked in my life, clearing up the mess left by the flood.

One wall of my room was damaged, and the room below, which was Suza's and Gideon's, had bad cracks in it and great patches of damp, but these could be repaired. A small room on each floor was gone entirely.

My suitcase of belongings that I had left when I went to Grandmother's was quite safe but the entire ground floor was covered with mud and sand, broken bricks, chunks of plaster, pieces of furniture, strands of sea weed and endless debris.

Suza and Gideon and the dogs and Mrs. Muscova were safe; Suza had kept them all upstairs in the house until a



boat arrived to rescue them.

"It don't do to ask her about that night," Gideon had warned me. "Suza can't talk about it yet." So I just tried to help her in every way I could, to show her how terribly I cared about the damage to the fine old house that was her home.

Hour after hour we shoveled and scraped and scrubbed until at last the Dillons were able to move back into the house again, and I realized that it was almost time for me to go home.

I had a letter from my father, soon after the flood telling me that Marcus was fine and Gory was home again; Janet was coming to stay with Suza for a week when I got back. "*We are all looking forward to having you home again,*" he wrote and I understood this was his way of telling me he knew about Lois and me and was glad. Perhaps through Lois now that she and I were friends, I would be able to come closer to my father.

He enclosed a check for The Flood Relief Fund in Seltingham, which I thought very generous of him since the village meant nothing to him. It was then I decided to give half my fruit picking earnings to the same cause. I felt really wealthy—the amount entered in my Post Office book was over £40.

I was very glad that most of the Jarvises fields had not been flooded, they were far enough inland to have escaped, so the Jarvises had not suffered too much.

When it was nearly time to go home, I talked with Lois and my father on the 'phone and told them how I had found Jake in the ruined cottage and that he was the hero of the village.

"I want to bring him home with me," I said. "It'll be only for a few days before school begins again, but he says he'd love to come."

On my last day in Seltingham I got my exam results—I'd passed everything to my huge relief. Jake too had done well enough, and now he'd go back to school for his last year. He meant to try to get a University entrance. I also had a letter from Dinah, a letter that made me very happy for her.

*"Mum may be getting married again," she wrote, "to someone who works at the hospital where she is just now. But the most wonderful news is that she feels she's cured. She's really changed, Kirsty. And she has a job. So now I can go on at school and try to get my University entrance. Oh Kirsty, you can't imagine what this means to me—I've been let out! Now I can be just a schoolgirl, and I'll have time to live my own life, time for friends, time for fun, and Mum will be all right."*

I passed her letter to Jake to read. "It's the best thing that could have happened," I cried.

Suza had asked us to Old Manor Farm for a farewell supper. "If you can shut your eyes to the state of the kitchen," she said.

It was a beautiful evening, making it almost impossible to believe in the recent storm, even the sea looked benign. Jake and I propped our bicycles against the wall of the ruined garden—those solid walls had withstood the surge—and I looked at Jake.

"All right?" I asked. "You're coming in?"

"Of course," said Jake. "I want to."

We stepped into the house together and Suza hurried

forward to welcome us in. Nothing was said about Jake coming inside the house, but I noticed he was rather quiet at first.

"It's different," he whispered to me finally, "the house feels—empty."

When supper was finished and we had helped Suza to wash up, I asked if I might go round the house with Jake. I wanted to say goodbye to it before we went back to Hollies End for my last night in Seltingham.

I took Jake by the hand and led him up the stairs to the second floor and then up to the attics.

First we went into my room and stood there for a moment in silence while I let my glance wander around it lingeringly, absorbing the atmosphere, taking in the details and folding them away in my mind to remember.

"I've been happy here," I sighed. "I wonder if I'll ever come back?"

Jake put his arm round my shoulders, "Of course you will," he said, "often and often. You know that."

The passage beyond my room had been boarded off where the corner of the house had collapsed, but by peering through the cracks between the boards we could see that there was nothing left of the room next door to mine. It was open to the sky and the wind. Only the great beams stood firm, though the roof and the floor had gone and the walls had fallen away, except the one damaged wall that was also the wall of my room.

"It's the end of the Whistling Boy," I said, "he's gone and he'll never come back. You can see his place is empty, a void. You broke his spell by destroying his whistle, perhaps. Or maybe it's that the room is gone. What-

ever, you're safe now, Jakey. Come and sit on the stairs. I want to tell you old Corpusty's story, about what happened to him when he lived in Jacques' room, the room that you lived in too, the room that's no longer there."

Jake listened in silence till I had finished, then he said quietly, "You think that because I was lonely I fell under the same spell as old Corpusty, the spell of the Whistling Boy?"

"Yes, I do," I answered. "I think you might have followed him into the sea—you very nearly did but Gideon saved you. I think that's why you've always been afraid to come inside the house again."

Jake looked me straight in the eye and his smile was enigmatical and slightly mocking as he said, "Perhaps you're right, but we'll never know for certain, will we, until I remember."

I had the distinct feeling that he already had remembered but he meant to keep his secret.

"Come on," he cried suddenly jumping to his feet and pulling me up. "It's getting late and you haven't said goodbye to the Dillons yet."

We went down the stairs together and into the kitchen where Suza and Gideon were still working on repairs to the room.

"You'll come back again, lovey, won't you, once the house is straight—next holidays perhaps?" said Suza.

I hugged her warmly, and then Gideon. "Thank you for everything, *everything*, I'll write." I gulped suddenly and found that I could not speak, I could not tell them what those weeks in their home had meant to me, how their understanding had helped me over a bad patch and

enabled me to find myself again.

They stood at the door together waving us off until we turned the corner of the garden wall and were lost to sight.

"I'd like to walk down the old causeway just once before we cycle back to Hollies End," I said.

We walked down it slowly to the end, to the gap in the dunes with the sea beyond. The tide was out and in the dusk there were strange shadows so that it was easy to imagine we were not alone. I thought of others who had stood on this spot before us, people who had lived in the village long ago, old Corpusty, the Whistling Boy—they were gone, all forgotten. For them life was over, finished, ended.

Jake must have had the same feeling.

"It's only the beginning for us, Kirsty," he said, "we've got all our lives before us."

Suddenly we turned and clung together, our backs to the sea, then with our arms around one another we strode up the causeway to the land.





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