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CHAPTER I

THE HOUSEHOLD AT HILLPORT

She was walking, with her customary air of haughty and rapt leisure, across the market-place of Bursley, when she observed in front of her, at the top of Oldcastle Street, two men conversing and gesticulating vehemently, each seated alone in a dog-cart. These persons, who had met from opposite directions, were her husband, John Stanway, the earthenware manufacturer, and David Dain, the solicitor who practised at Hanbridge. Stanway's cob, always quicker to start than to stop, had been pulled up with difficulty, drawing his cart just clear of the other one, so that the two portly and middle-aged talkers were most uncomfortably obliged to twist their necks in order to see one another; the attitude did nothing to ease the obvious asperity of the discussion. She thought the spectacle undignified and silly; and she marvelled, as all women marvel, that men who conduct themselves so magisterially should sometimes appear so infantile. She felt glad that it was Thursday afternoon, and the shops closed and the streets empty.

Immediately John Stanway caught sight of her he said a few words to the lawyer in a somewhat different key, and descended from his vehicle. As she came up to them Mr. Dain saluted her with bashful abruptness, and her proud face broke as if by the loosing of a spell into a generous and captivating smile; Mr. Dain blushed, the vision was too much for his composure; he moved his horse forward a yard or two, and then jerked it back again, gruffly advising it to stand still. Stanway turned to her bluntly, unceremoniously, as to a creature to whom he owed nothing. She noticed once more how the whole character of his face was changed under annoyance.

'Here, Nora!' he said, speaking with the raw anger of a man with a new-born grievance, 'run this home for me. I'm going over to Hanbridge with Mr. Dain.'

'Very well,' she agreed with soothing calmness, and taking the reins she climbed up to the high driving-seat.

'And I say, Nora—*Wo-back!*' he flamed out passionately to the impatient cob, 'where're your manners, you idiot? I say, Nora, I doubt I shall be late for tea—half-past six. Tell Milly she must be in. The others too.' He gave these instructions in a lower tone, and emphasised them by a stormy and ominous frown. Then with an injured 'Now, Dain!' he got into the equipage of his legal adviser and departed towards Hanbridge, trailing clouds of vexation.

Leonora drove smartly but cautiously down the steep slope of Oldcastle Street; she could drive as well as a woman may. A group of clay-soiled girls lounging in the archway of a manufactory exchanged rude but admiring remarks about her as she passed. The paces of the cob, the dazzle of the silver-plated harness, the fine lines of the cart, the unbending mien of the driver, made a glittering cynosure for envy. All around was grime, squalor, servitude, ugliness; the inglorious travail of two hundred thousand people, above ground and below it, filled the day and the night. But here, as it were suddenly, out of that earthy and laborious bed, rose the blossom of luxury, grace, and leisure, the final elegance of the industrial district of the Five Towns. The contrast between Leonora and the rough creatures in the archway, between the flower and the phosphates which nourished it, was sharp and decisive: and Leonora, in the September sunshine, was well aware of the contrast. She felt that the loud-voiced girls were at one extremity of the scale and she at the other; and this arrangement seemed natural, necessary, inevitable.

She was a beautiful woman. She had a slim perfect figure; quite simply she carried her head so high and her shoulders so square that her back seemed to be hollowed out, and no tightness on the part of a bodice could hide this charming concavity. Her face was handsome with its large regular features; one noticed the abundant black hair under the hat, the thick eyebrows, the brown and opaque skin, the teeth impeccably white, and the firm, unyielding mouth and chin. Underneath the chin, half muffling it, came a white muslin bow, soft, frail, feminine, an enchanting disclaimer of that facial sternness and the masculinity of that tailor-made dress, a signal at

once provocative and wistful of the woman. She had brains; they appeared in her keen dark eyes. Her judgment was experienced and mature. She knew her world and its men and women. She was not too soon shocked, not too severe in her verdicts, not the victim of too many illusions. And yet, though everything about her witnessed to a serene temperament and the continual appeasing of mild desires, she dreamed sadly, like the girls in the archway, of an existence more distinguished than her own; an existence brilliant and tender, where dalliance and high endeavour, virtue and the flavour of sin, eternal appetite and eternal satisfaction, were incredibly united. Even now, on her fortieth birthday, she still believed in the possibility of a conscious state of positive and continued happiness, and regretted that she should have missed it.

The imminence and the arrival of this dire birthday, this day of wrath on which the proudest woman will kneel to implacable destiny and beg a reprieve, had induced the reveries natural to it—the self-searching, the exchange of old fallacies for new, the dismayed glance forward, the lingering look behind. Absorbed though she was in the control of the sensitive steed, the field of her mind's eye seemed to be entirely filled by an image of the woman of forty as imagined by herself at the age of twenty. And she was that woman now! But she did not feel like forty; at thirty she had not felt thirty; she could only accept the almanac and the rules of arithmetic. The interminable years of her marriage rolled back, and she was eighteen again, ingenuous and trustful, convinced that her versatile husband was unique among his sex. The fading of a short-lived and factitious passion, the descent of the unique male to the ordinary level of males, the births of her three girls and their rearing and training: all these things seemed as trifles to her, mere excrescences and depressions in the vast tableland of her monotonous and placid career. She had had no career. Her strength of will, of courage, of love, had never been taxed; only her patience. 'And my life is over!' she told herself, insisting that her life was over without being able to believe it.

As the dog-cart was crossing the railway bridge at Shawport, at the foot of the rise to Hillport, Leonora overtook her eldest daughter. She drew up. From the height of the dog-cart she looked at her child; and the girlishness of Ethel's form, the self-consciousness of

newly-arrived womanhood in her innocent and timid eyes, the virgin richness of her vitality, made Leonora feel sad, superior, and protective.

'Oh, mother! Where's father?' Ethel exclaimed, staring at her, struck with a foolish wonder to see her mother where her father had been an hour before.

'What a schoolgirl she is! And at her age I was a mother twice over!' thought Leonora; but she said aloud: 'Jump up quickly, my dear. You know Prince won't stand.'

Ethel obeyed, awkwardly. As she did so the mother scrutinised the rather lanky figure, the long dark skirt, the pale blouse, and the straw hat, in a single glance that missed no detail. Leonora was not quite dissatisfied; Ethel carried herself tolerably, she resembled her mother; she had more distinction than her sisters, but her manner was often lackadaisical.

'Your father was very vexed about something,' said Leonora, when she had recounted the meeting at the top of Oldcastle Street. 'Where's Milly?'

'I don't know, mother—I think she went out for a walk.' The girl added apprehensively: 'Why?'

'Oh, nothing!' said Leonora, pretending not to observe that Ethel had blushed. 'If I were you, Ethel, I should let that belt out one hole ... not here, my dear child, not here. When you get home. How was Aunt Hannah?'

Every day one member or another of John Stanway's family had to pay a visit to John's venerable Aunt Hannah, who lived with her brother, the equally venerable Uncle Meshach, in a little house near the parish church of St. Luke's. This was a social rite the omission of which nothing could excuse. On that day it was Ethel who had called.

'Auntie was all right. She was making a lot of parkin, and of course I had to taste it, all new, you know. I'm simply stodged.'

'Don't say "stodged."'

'Oh, mother! You won't let us say *anything*,' Ethel dismally protested; and Leonora secretly sympathised with the grown woman in revolt.

'Oh! And Aunt Hannah wishes you many happy returns. Uncle Meshach came back from the Isle of Man last night. He gave me a note for you. Here it is.'

'I can't take it now, my dear. Give it me afterwards.'

'I think Uncle Meshach's a horrid old thing!' said Ethel.

'My dear girl! Why?'

'Oh! I do. I'm glad he's only father's uncle and not ours. I do hate that name. Fancy being called Meshach!'

'That isn't uncle's fault, anyhow,' said Leonora.

'You always stick up for him, mother. I believe it's because he flatters you, and says you look younger than any of us.' Ethel's tone was half roguish, half resentful.

9Leonora gave a short unsteady laugh. She knew well that her age was plainly written beneath her eyes, at the corners of her mouth, under her chin, at the roots of the hair above her ears, and in her cold, confident gaze. Youth! She would have forfeited all her experience, her knowledge, and the charm of her maturity, to recover the irrecoverable! She envied the woman by her side, and envied her because she was lightsome, thoughtless, kittenish, simple, unripe. For a brief moment, vainly coveting the ineffable charm of Ethel's immaturity, she had a sharp perception of the obscure mutual antipathy which separates one generation from the next. As the cob rattled into Hillport, that aristocratic and plutocratic suburb of the town, that haunt of exclusiveness, that retreat of high life and good tone, she thought how commonplace, vulgar, and petty was the opulent existence within those tree-shaded villas, and that she was doomed to droop and die there, while her girls, still unfledged, might, if they had the sense to use their wings, fly away.... Yet at the same time it gratified her to reflect that she and hers were in the picture, and conformed to the standards; she enjoyed the admiration which the sight of herself and Ethel and the expensive cob and

cart and accoutrements must arouse in the punctilious and stupid breast of Hillport.

10She was picking flowers for the table from the vivid borders of the lawn, when Ethel ran into the garden from the drawing-room. Bran, the St. Bernard, was loose and investigating the turf.

'Mother, the letter from Uncle Meshach.'

Leonora took the soiled envelope, and handing over the flowers to Ethel, crossed the lawn and sat down on the rustic seat, facing the house. The dog followed her, and with his great paw demanded her attention, but she abruptly dismissed him. She thought it curiously characteristic of Uncle Meshach that he should write her a letter on her fortieth birthday; she could imagine the uncouth mixture of wit, rude candour, and wisdom with which he would greet her; his was a strange and sinister personality, but she knew that he admired her. The note was written in Meshach's scraggy and irregular hand, in three lines starting close to the top of half a sheet of note paper. It ran: 'Dear Nora, I hear young Twemlow is come back from America. You had better see as your John looks out for himself.' There was nothing else, no signature.

As she read it, she experienced precisely the physical discomfort which those feel who travel for the first time in a descending lift. Fifteen quiet years had elapsed since the death of her husband's partner William Twemlow, and a quarter of a century since William's wild son, Arthur, had run away to America. Yet Uncle Meshach's letter seemed to invest these far-off things with a mysterious and disconcerting actuality. The misgivings about her husband which long practice and continual effort had taught her how to keep at bay, suddenly overleapt their artificial barriers and swarmed upon her.

The long garden front of the dignified eighteenth-century house, nearly the last villa in Hillport on the road to Oldcastle, was extended before her. She had played in that house as a child, and as a woman had watched, from its windows, the years go by like a procession. That house was her domain. Hers was the supreme intelligence brooding creatively over it. Out of walls and floors and ceilings, out of stairs and passages, out of furniture and woven stuffs, out of metal and earthenware, she had made a home. From the

lawn, in the beautiful sadness of the autumn evening, any one might have seen and enjoyed the sight of its high French windows, its glowing sun-blinds, its faintly-tinted and beribboned curtains, its creepers, its glimpses of occasional tables, tall vases, and dressing-mirrors. But Leonora, as she sat holding the letter in her long white hand, could call up and see the interior of every room to the most minute details. She, the housemistress, knew her home by heart. She had thought it into existence; and there was not a cabinet against a wall, not a rug on a floor, not a cushion on a chair, not a knickknack on a mantelpiece, not a plate in a rack, but had come there by the design of her brain. Without possessing much artistic taste, Leonora had an extraordinary talent for domestic equipment, organisation, and management. She was so interested in her home, so exacting in her ideals, that she could never reach finality; the place went through a constant succession of improvements; its comfort and its attractiveness were always on the increase. And the result was so striking that her supremacy in the woman's craft could not be challenged. All Hillport, including her husband, bowed to it. Mrs. Stanway's principles, schemes, methods, even her trifling dodges, were mentioned with deep respect by the ladies of Hillport, who often expressed their astonishment that, although the wheels of Mrs. Stanway's household revolved with perfect smoothness, Mrs. Stanway herself appeared never to be doing anything. That astonishment was Leonora's pride. As her brain marshalled with ease the thousand diverse details of the wonderful domestic machine, she could appreciate, better than any other woman in Hillport, without vanity and without humility, the singular excellence of her gifts and of the organism they had perfected. And now this creation of hers, this complex structure of mellow brick-and-mortar, and fine chattels, and nice and luxurious habit, seemed to Leonora to tremble at the whisper of an enigmatic message from Uncle Meshach. The foreboding caused by the letter mingled with the menace of approaching age and with the sadness of the early autumn, and confirmed her mood.

Millicent, her youngest, ran impulsively to her in the garden. Millicent was eighteen, and the days when she went to school and wore her hair in a long plait were still quite fresh in the girl's mind. For this reason she was often inordinately and aggressively adult.

'Mamma! I'm going to have my tea first thing. The Burgesses have asked me to play tennis. I needn't wait, need I? It gets dark so soon.' As Millicent stood there, ardently persuasive, she forgot that adult persons do not stand on one leg or put their fingers in their mouths.

Leonora looked fondly at the sprightly girl, vain, self-conscious, and blonde and pretty as a doll in her white dress. She recognised all Millicent's faults and shortcomings, and yet was overcome by the charm of her presence.

'No, Milly, you must wait.' Throned on the rustic seat, inscrutable and tyrannous Leonora, a wistful, wayward atom in the universe, laid her command upon the other wayward atom; and she thought how strange it was that this should be.

'But, Ma — —'

'Father specially said you must be in for tea. You know you have far too much freedom. What have you been doing all the afternoon?'

'I haven't been doing anything, Ma.'

Leonora feared for the strict veracity of her youngest, but she said nothing, and Milly retired full of annoyance against the inconceivable caprices of parents.

At twenty minutes to seven John Stanway entered his large and handsome dining-room, having been driven home by David Dain, whose residence was close by. Three languorous women and the erect and motionless parlourmaid behind the door were waiting for him. He went straight to his carver's chair, and instantly the women were alert, galvanised into vigilant life. Leonora, opposite to her husband, began to pour out the tea; the impassive parlourmaid stood consummately ready to hand the cups; Ethel and Millicent took their seats along one side of the table, with an air of nonchalance which was far from sincere; a chair on the other side remained empty.

'Turn the gas on, Bessie,' said John. Daylight had scarcely begun to fail; but nevertheless the man's tone announced a grievance, that, with half-a-dozen women in the house, he the exhausted breadwinner should have been obliged to attend to such a trifle. Bessie sprang to pull the chain of the Welsbach tap, and the white and

silver of the tea-table glittered under the yellow light. Every woman looked furtively at John's morose countenance.

Neither dark nor fair, he was a tall man, verging towards obesity, and the fulness of his figure did not suit his thin, rather handsome face. His age was forty-eight. There was a small bald spot on the crown of his head. The clipped brown beard seemed thick and plentiful, but this effect was given by the coarseness of the hairs, not by their number; the moustache was long and exiguous. His blue eyes were never still, and they always avoided any prolonged encounter with other eyes. He was a personable specimen of the clever and successful manufacturer. His clothes were well cut, the necktie of a discreet smartness. His grandfather had begun life as a working potter; nevertheless John Stanway spoke 16easily and correctly in a refined variety of the broad Five Towns accent; he could open a door for a lady, and was noted for his neatness in compliment.

It was his ambition always to be calm, oracular, weighty; always to be sure of himself; but his temperament was incurably nervous, restless, and impulsive. He could not be still, he could not wait. Instinct drove him to action for the sake of action, instinct made him seek continually for notice, prominence, comment. These fundamental appetites had urged him into public life—to the Borough Council and the Committee of the Wedgwood Institution. He often affected to be buried in cogitation upon municipal and private business affairs, when in fact his attention was disengaged and watchful. Leonora knew that this was so to-night. The idea of his duplicity took possession of her mind. Deeps yawned before her, deeps that swallowed up the solid and charming house and the comfortable family existence, as she glanced at that face at once strange and familiar to her. 'Is it all right?' she kept thinking. 'Is John all that he seems? I wonder whether he has ever committed murder.' Yes, even this absurd thought, which she knew to be absurd, crossed her mind.

'Where's Rose?' he demanded suddenly in 17the depressing silence of the tea-table, as if he had just discovered the absence of his second daughter.

'She's been working in her room all day,' said Leonora.

'That's no reason why she should be late for tea.'

At that moment Rose entered. She was very tall and pale, her dress was a little dowdy. Like her father and Millicent, she carried her head forward and had a tendency to look downwards, and her spine seemed flaccid. Ethel was beautiful, or about to be beautiful; Millicent was pretty; Rose plain. Rose was deficient in style. She despised style, and regarded her sisters as frivolous ninnies and gadabouts. She was the serious member of the family, and for two years had been studying for the Matriculation of London University.

'Late again!' said her father. 'I shall stop all this exam work.'

Rose said nothing, but looked resentful.

When the hot dishes had been partaken of, Bessie was dismissed, and Leonora waited for the bursting of the storm. It was Millicent who drew it down.

'I think I shall go down to Burgesses, after 18all, mamma. It's quite light,' she said with audacious pertness.

Her father looked at her.

'What were you doing this afternoon, Milly?'

'I went out for a walk, pa.'

'Who with?'

'No one.'

'Didn't I see you on the canal-side with young Ryley?'

'Yes, father. He was going back to the works after dinner, and he just happened to overtake me.'

Milly and Ethel exchanged a swift glance.

'Happened to overtake you! I saw you as I was driving past, over the canal bridge. You little thought that I saw you.'

'Well, father, I couldn't help him overtaking me. Besides — —'

'Besides!' he took her up. 'You had your hand on his shoulder. How do you explain that?'

Millicent was silent.

'I'm ashamed of you, regularly ashamed ... You with your hand on his shoulder in full sight of the works! And on your mother's birthday too!'

Leonora involuntarily stirred, For more than twenty years it had been his custom to give her a kiss and a ten-pound note before breakfast on her birthday, but this year he had so far made no mention whatever of the anniversary.

'I'm going to put my foot down,' he continued with grieved majesty. 'I don't want to, but you force me to it. I'll have no goings-on with Fred Ryley. Understand that. And I'll have no more idling about. You girls—at least you two—are bone-idle. Ethel shall begin to go to the works next Monday. I want a clerk. And you, Milly, must take up the housekeeping. Mother, you'll see to that.'

Leonora reflected that whereas Ethel showed a marked gift for housekeeping, Milly was instinctively averse to everything merely domestic. But with her acquired fatalism she accepted the ukase.

'You understand,' said John to his pert youngest.

'Yes, papa.'

'No more carrying-on with Fred Ryley—or any one else.'

'No, papa.'

'I've got quite enough to worry me without being bothered by you girls.'

Rose left the table, consciously innocent both of sloth and of light behaviour.

'What are you going to do now, Rose?' He could not let her off scot-free.

'Read my chemistry, father.'

'You'll do no such thing.'

'I must, if I'm to pass at Christmas,' she said firmly. 'It's my weakest subject.'

'Christmas or no Christmas,' he replied, 'I'm not going to let you kill yourself. Look at your face! I wonder your mother—'

'Run into the garden for a while, my dear,' said Leonora softly, and the girl moved to obey.

'Rose,' he called her back sharply as his exasperation became fidgetty. 'Don't be in such a hurry. Open the window — an inch.'

Ethel and Millicent disappeared after the manner of young fox-terriers; they did not visibly depart; they were there, one looked away, they were gone. In the bedroom which they shared, the door well locked, they threw oft all restraints, conventions, pretences, and discussed the world, and their own world, with terrible candour. This sacred and untidy apartment, where many of the habits of childhood still lingered, was a retreat, a sanctuary from the law, and the fastness had been ingeniously secured against surprise by the peculiar position of the bedstead in front of the doorway.

21 'Father is a donkey!' said Ethel.

'And ma never says a word!' said Milly.

'I could simply have smacked him when he brought in mother's birthday,' Ethel continued, savagely.

'So could I.'

'Fancy him thinking it's you. What a lark!'

'Yes. I don't mind,' said Milly.

'You are a brick, Milly. And I didn't think you were, I didn't really.'

'What a horrid pig you are, Eth!' Milly protested, and Ethel laughed.

'Did you give Fred my note all right?' Ethel demanded.

'Yes,' answered Milly. 'I suppose he's coming up to-night?'

'I asked him to.'

'There'll be a frantic row one day. I'm sure there will,' Milly said meditatively, after a pause.

'Oh! there's bound to be!' Ethel assented, and she added: 'Mother does trust us. Have a choc?'

Milly said yes, and Ethel drew a box of bonbons from her pocket.

They seemed to contemplate with a fearful joy the probable exposure of that life of flirtations and chocolate which ran its secret course side by side with the other life of demure propriety 22acted out for the benefit of the older generation. If these innocent and inexperienced souls had been accused of leading a double life, they would have denied the charge with genuine indignation. Nevertheless, driven by the universal longing, and abetted by parental apathy and parental lack of imagination, they did lead a double life. They chafed bitterly under the code to which they were obliged ostensibly to submit. In their moods of revolt, they honestly believed their parents to be dull and obstinate creatures who had lost the appetite for romance and ecstasy and were determined to mortify this appetite in others. They desired heaps of money and the free, informal companionship of very young men. The latter—at the cost of some intrigue and subterfuge—they contrived to get. But money they could not get. Frequently they said to each other with intense earnestness that they would do anything for money; and they repeated passionately, 'anything.'

'Just look at that stuck-up thing!' said Milly laughing. They stood together at the window, and Milly pointed her finger at Rose, who was walking conscientiously to and fro across the garden in the gathering dusk.

Ethel rapped on the pane, and the three sisters exchanged friendly smiles.

23'Rosie will never pass her exam, not if she lives to be a hundred,' said Ethel. 'And can you imagine father making me go to the works? Can you imagine the sense of it?'

'He won't let you walk up with Fred at nights,' said Milly, 'so you needn't think.'

'And your housekeeping!' Ethel exclaimed. 'What a treat father will have at meals!'

'Oh! I can easily get round mother,' said Milly with confidence. 'I *can't* housekeep, and ma knows that perfectly well.'

'Well, father will forget all about it in a week or two, that's one comfort,' Ethel concluded the matter. 'Are you going down to Burgeses to see Harry?' she inquired, observing Milly put on her hat.

'Yes,' said Milly. 'Cissie said she'd come for me if I was late. You'd better stay in and be dutiful.'

'I shall offer to play duets with mother. Don't you be long. Let's try that chorus for the Operatic before supper.'

That night, after the girls had kissed them and gone to bed, John and Leonora remained alone together in the drawing-room. The first fire of autumn was burning in the grate, and at the other end of the long room dark curtains were drawn across the French window. Shaded candles lighted the grand piano, at which Leonora was seated, and a single gas jet illuminated the region of the hearth, where John, lounging almost at full length in a vast chair, read the newspaper; otherwise the room was in shadow. John dropped the 'Signal,' which slid to the hearthrug with a rustle, and turned his head so that he could just see the left side of his wife's face and her left hand as it moved over the keys of the piano. She played with gentle monotony, and her playing seemed perfunctory, yet agreeable. John watched the glinting of the four rings on her left hand, and the slow undulations of the drooping lace at her wrist. He moved twice, and she knew he was about to speak.

'I say, Leonora,' he said in a confidential tone.

'Yes, my dear,' she responded, complying generously with his appeal for sympathy. She continued to play for a moment, but even more softly; and then, as he kept silence, she revolved on the piano-stool and looked into his face.

'What is it?' she asked in a caressing voice, intensifying her femininity, forgiving him, excusing him, thinking and making him think what a good fellow he was, despite certain superficial faults.

25'You knew nothing of this Ryley business, did you?' he murmured.

'Oh, no. Are you sure there's anything in it? I don't think there is for an instant.' And she did not. Even the placing of Milly's hand on Fred Ryley's shoulder in full sight of the street, even this she regarded only as the pretty indiscretion of a child. 'Oh! there's nothing in it,' she repeated.