



VINTAGE

THE BACKWARD SHADOW

LYNNE REID BANKS

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About the Book

Jane has had her baby and is living along with him in a country cottage. Her idyllic time there is soon complicated by the arrival of Toby, the love of her life, and her friend Dorothy. The two women start up a shop in the village, and it is their changing fortunes and feelings for the men on whom so much of their lives are staked which form the core of this funny and vividly told novel.

About the Author

Lynne Reid Banks was born in London in 1929 and was evacuated to the Canadian prairies during the war. On her return to England she studied at RADA and was an actress in the early 1950s; later she became one of the first two women reporters on British television. Her first book, *The L-Shaped Room*, was published in 1960 and was an instant and lasting best-seller. Lynne Reid Banks is also a best-selling author of books for children and young adults. Her classic children's novel, *The Indian in the Cupboard*, has sold over ten million copies worldwide. She lives in London.

ALSO BY LYNNE REID BANKS

The L-Shaped Room

Two Is Lonely

Fair Exchange

Dark Quartet

*For Pat, who helped so much,
and my menfolk, who didn't.*

LYNNE REID BANKS

The Backward Shadow

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

Chapter 1

I DON'T know exactly when the restlessness began. I think it must have been round about September. That would fit in with my normal pattern, wherein autumn is always the vigorous, renaissance time. Besides, the lovely novelty of David was beginning to wear off. Not that he was any the less interesting at four months than he had been in the weeks after his early birth; he grew more fascinating daily. But very young babies do have a way of just *lying* there for a lot of the time, leaving any but the most besotted mother (and I was reasonably besotted when he was awake and reacting) with a lot of thinking time on her hands.

During the first few months of David's life, I was content just to enjoy him, and life in Addy's cottage. It was such a marvellous place, full of nooks and beams and angles and little irrelevant flights of stairs, strange-shaped rooms (though none L-shaped) with uneven floors, low ceilings and wide fireplaces. I spent hours and days happily examining it in all its enchanting detail and marvelling at my ownership of it. Strangely, there was very little sadness left over from Addy. She must have been very happy in it, and even as her intentionally lonely death approached, her own natural strength and quietness of spirit must have kept her from destroying the peaceful atmosphere of her home with an overspill of disquiet or fear.

She was still in evidence everywhere—in her books, her arrangements of furniture (always for convenience and comfort, without regard to conventional taste), in her garden, and, it sometimes seemed to me when I was sitting quietly alone, in some less tangible way. Being far too

down-to-earth a person to give much credence to 'that sort of thing' generally, I hesitated to confirm this to myself, but in the end I came around irresistibly to believing that there was something of Addy left to keep me company. How else to explain why I was never lonely? I am far too gregarious to take kindly to living alone in the depths of the country.

'Aren't you nervous-like, alone here at nights?' Mrs. Griffiths, my bi-weekly charlady from the village, would often ask. 'Miles from anywhere—wouldn't do me, I don't mind admitting. Ever so brave you are, or silly, one or the other.' Her voice dropped. 'You hear about Mrs. Stubbs?'

I had, many times, heard about Mrs. Stubbs, who had been strangled (or stabbed, or beaten—it varied) to death one dark night by a demented chalk-pit worker. Only as it happened in 1928, and as nothing, not even the War, had since disturbed the tranquillity of this remote Surrey backwater, I didn't let the poor lady's fate disturb me overmuch—or Mrs. G's ghoulish retelling of it.

Of course I was never alone for more than a few days at a time. Father liked to come down at week-ends, and it was surprising how many other people could manage to get hold of cars and make the journey to the country when they knew that a pretty period cottage equipped with all mod cons and feather beds, an outstandingly attractive baby with an intriguing 'past', and, if I do say it, some rather splendid meals, were waiting at the other end. Most of them nevertheless were full of complaints about how difficult it was to find the way, and how their cars had suffered from the last half-mile of rutted track. They never failed to ask how I could bear to be stuck such miles away from civilisation, or to relate gruesome Mrs.-Stubbs-like tales, the way women delight regaling their pregnant friends with the horrid details of their own deliveries. Furthermore my relations—aunts and uncles on my father's side—actually had the nerve to tut over David's head and mutter about what a shame it was, all right while he was a

baby of course, they don't need their fathers then, but what about later? ... All this, while I was laying on a huge great meal for them, and in point of fact hadn't invited them in the first place.

However, I shut my ears to these and similar Cassandral prophecies regarding the future. The policy of getting through one day at a time—or even one minute, when things were really bad—had worked admirably while David was pending, and while he was being born. It seemed fairly fruitless to fret myself to a frazzle now about how I would cope five years ahead. Besides, worry wouldn't do my milk any good. Or so I told myself as an excuse for being happy.

He really was a most wonderful baby. He had one fundamental good quality on which all the rest were built—he didn't seem to resemble his father in any particular. He didn't resemble me either, that I could detect, which also struck me as no bad thing. He was not one of these big flabby babies, but small and neat, with very dark hair and beautifully marked eyebrows, which even the doctor said was most unusual. He was remarkably self-contained, almost from birth, seldom crying except politely to call my attention to the fact that he was wet or hungry, or that he wanted a cuddle. He never made unreasonable demands on me, such as that I should stick strictly to a schedule, something I would have found a great bore as I've always loathed routine. If we were out in the woods, which we often were during the long dappled summer days, and I was doing something interesting like making a moss garden, or reading, or watching a spider, he was content to lie on his rug and stare upwards at the leaf-filtered sky until I was ready to feed him.

It was lovely to sit under the trees in the long grass with the breeze unfamiliarly touching my secret flesh through which the warm milk was drawn into David's strong little body. Nobody ever disturbed us. The birds sang and the sun shone warm and God-like on our faces. Half-naked and

close to the earth, we sat together, the scents of the woods mingling with the smell of fresh milk, my function and David's clearly and simply interlocking like the function of lovers, each to solve the need of the other. Once as we sat like that the sun went in and the sky darkened, and soon a summer rain was pattering on us through the leaves. As the first cool drops fell on my breast and on the baby's little upturned face, he drew away and sneezed, and my impulse was to cover us both up and go home. But after a puzzled moment, he seemed to accustom himself to this new prickly feeling. He made anxious goldfish faces until I restored the nipple to him, whereupon he closed his eyes again in his customary bliss and went on sucking, unaware of the rain which tapped his skin and ran down my breast and into his mouth with the milk. I sheltered him in my arms and stayed where I was until he'd finished, and then carried him slowly home as usual; he laughed briefly and then slept, with the rain still gently falling on him.

So he grew, and I seemed to grow as well. At moments I felt I was growing strong and quiet inside, like Addy. I was sure all this peace, this closeness to nature, was the way to wisdom and self-knowledge. At other times I knew, with equal certainty, that it was the way to complacent cabbagehood. Here there were no problems, no decisions, nothing to face up to—just day after day of tranquillity and pleasure. It was not real life at all, just as my stay here with Addy during my pregnancy had not been real life, just time out of time, a resting space, a period of gathering-together for the plunge back into the complex of living, facing, feeling, deciding.

Here, it was too easy to believe that nothing was more natural than to bring a child into the world, that being married or not married was the merest formality which did not in any way affect the rightness of furthering nature's cycle. My visitors from 'outside', with their reminders of the world's codes, could not really touch me here. I was

armed against their strictures by the strong, primitive inner conviction, reinforced each time I looked at David's healthy body, that I had done well. It was what I had felt making love to my Toby. The word 'immoral' had no meaning whatever in the face of the essential goodness of it.

Among the innumerable books on Addy's shelves was one by Ernest Hemingway in which I found these words:

'What is moral is what you feel good after. What is immoral is what you feel bad after.'

Emerging from the dazzle of finding something which so simply and exactly expressed what I felt, I thought: Nothing that parents, or the Church, or Society can say can basically affect this fundamental truth. One can even tell *oneself* that one is wicked, sinful, immoral, or whatever; if one *feels good*, one doesn't believe a word of it. Yet there must be women who sleep night after night with their husbands in perfect rectitude and feel so guilty and misused afterwards that the mere fact that Society smiles on their state cannot convince them that they are anything but the most depraved and miserable of sinners.

On the same basis, no amount of rationalisation can save you from a sense of sin if you *have* done something immoral, by Hemingway's definition. I suffered cruelly from it after Terry and I had conceived David so stupidly and lovelessly. I didn't suffer from it after Toby, despite everything, despite the circumstances—it felt *right*, and I felt right about David now. The trouble with this concept was, it didn't give you any real guide to living. There was no way of knowing in advance. I had thought I loved Terry; I had no idea of loving Toby. I'd known Terry for seven years (on and off); I'd known Toby a few weeks. Why was it 'immoral' with Terry and 'moral' with Toby? Why was the conception of David immoral, and yet his birth moral? Could the whole business of morality be based on nothing more stable and predictable than hindsight? Were there no

workable rules, only one's fundamental instincts to go by—and at that, instincts which were only wise after the event?

All these sincere, and sometimes comforting, reflections did not cure my periodic unease. I knew the place protected me, as the L-shaped room in which I had awaited David's birth had shielded me, as much from my own pusillanimousness as from the world's censure. I knew that, however much I might arm myself with self-confidence *here*, it was all likely to crumble into enforced guilt and ruin when the full pressure of public opinion hit me amidships on my return to 'civilisation'.

The obvious answer to that, of course, was—don't return at all. Surely the sensible thing was to stay here, tucked away in my own secure little niche with David for years and years until it was time for him to go to school, by which time anything might have happened. The way moral standards were turning themselves inside out there might well have been a sort of Wolfenden Committee on Bastardy which would end by recommending that illegitimacy should become a privileged condition ... only illegitimate sons could inherit ... 'Bastards of the world, unite!' ... there'd be a tremendous campaign to win public sympathy, all the great bastards of past and present would be enlisted to support the New Doctrine, namely that you couldn't be really intelligent, creative, artistic, etc. etc., unless you were born on the wrong side of the blanket ... When I caught myself indulging in these ludicrous fantasies I always pulled up short, telling myself it was essential to be serious, to appreciate the gravity of what I'd done, and that it showed an immaturity bordering on infantilism to play games with myself like this instead of brooding on my responsibilities. I would laugh the other side of my face, I told myself severely, when the time came for David to understand his situation.

But that time was not yet. The time now was for him to lie in my arms and drink my milk and listen to me talking

and singing to him while growing strong and brown in the sun. The time was for me to nurture the illusion that at long last, after 28 years, I was learning how to live alone.

So the future threw back only a pale shadow. It wasn't that which got under my skin, prickling and irritating like hunger as the summer began to end. I didn't know what it was—a nagging that was more than conscience, a need that was not merely for the city and for real life. It was a sort of superstition, really, left over perhaps from my theatrical days, that nothing good lasts, that it must all be paid for, and that the longer it goes on the farther the luck-pendulum will swing back in the other direction eventually. It was better, this superstition said, to keep a balance by pushing the pendulum back before it went too far, to turn your face voluntarily away from ease and pleasure, for fear the gods would force you to it later, more fiercely the longer you had let yourself relax.

But I waited. I waited for a sign. 'Let's get you safely into the fifth month,' Addy had said while I was under her wing in January. I said the same thing now to David, with a trace of Addy's own acerbity, as if it were David who was nagging at me to leave this haven. But really I was waiting—as I've always waited—for something outside to push me, to give me my direction.

I got my signs in October. They came, as they always seem to, in a cluster—three in one day.

It was one of the first real autumn days, with that faint crisp smoky smell in the air, the smell of things dying down which, perversely, always makes the sap rise in me. I pushed open the mullioned window over the sink which commanded the front path, and noticed that I could see the postman's breath, very faintly; he left footprints in the damp grass as he left the path to pass my letters through to me.

'More visitors announcin' 'emselves?' he asked as I took the letters with one hand and passed him his accustomed

cuppa with the other.

‘Shouldn’t think so. Summer’s over; the country’s not such fun in the winter.’

‘Yup, in for a cold snap all right. How’s the nipper?’

‘Thriving, thank you.’

He nodded to me, drained the tea, and tramped away between the hedges. The sun drifted wanly down, not even strong enough to make the dew sparkle. The dahlias and big yellow daisies were hanging their still-splendid heads, as if the strength had gone out of them overnight.

I sat on a high stool by the sink and examined my letters. There were three, or rather, two and a postcard. The postcard was typewritten; it said: ‘This is a tip-off. The Michelin Man will call at your establishment after closing-time tonight, disguised as a weary traveller. Give of your best, and you, too, may have a crossed knife and fork in the next *Guide*.’

It was unsigned. The style was familiar, but elusive. Dottie? Possibly. She’d just bought a car ... I decided to lay on a sumptuous feast just in case, and keep David up later than usual. She hadn’t seen her godchild since the christening.

The first letter had a businesslike look about it which made me distrust it. But the other had the name of my bank on the envelope, which was considerably more ominous. I’d been living very cheaply, but a capital of £123 10s. doesn’t last forever unless you’re actually dead, and that was all I’d amassed at the time of David’s birth and my retirement to Addy’s cottage. Addy’s other assets, also left to me, had consisted of a few Greek Government Bonds bought impulsively years ago after a holiday there and now down to £14 in the hundred, and the rights to a book she’d written which I had edited and typed. Not a penny of actual cash—her annuity had died with her. Father would help me if I asked him, of course, but I didn’t want to ask him. And I didn’t want Terry’s help, either, though he’d begged and

begged me to let him give me an allowance. I felt a bit mean for refusing; I could see it would make his conscience infinitely easier if I let him pay something ... but that would give him rights, would sanction his paternity, and I shrank from that. David was mine. I'd earned him all by myself—or at least, with no help from Terry—and I wasn't going to let anyone horn in on him now if I could help it. I saw my fierce independence for the stubborn, unlovely thing it was, and didn't flatter myself; but I could not deny it.

I turned from the two discouraging red figures at the bottom of my bank statement to the other typewritten envelope. It had been forwarded from Fulham. I tore it open.

Dear Miss Graham,

Sorry I've been so long getting in touch with you about your aunt's book, but I wanted to wait till I had something good and definite to tell you. Now I have. As I suspected, the English publishers, always inclined to be timorous, have all shaken their money-wise old heads (some with genuine regret, I think). So I tried across the water, and halleluia! one of the New York firms has come up with an offer. It's a very good list, and your aunt can congratulate herself on landing in it with her first book. They're very enthusiastic, as you'll see by the enclosed copy of their letter. Once it comes out there, I think it'll undoubtedly find a place here too.

Will you now ask your aunt to get in touch with me direct? I don't seem to have her address. I'm simply longing to meet her. I still think it's one of the most fascinating pieces of writing that's ever come into my hands.

Yours sincerely,

Billie Lee

I fell off the high stool, and tottered to the living-room to seek something more stable to sink into. The truth was, I'd

forgotten all about the tough, hard-bitten little red-headed literary agent to whom I had taken Addy's manuscript months and months ago. I remembered her now, though, clearly—small, tightly corsetted, smartly dressed and coiffured, three charm-bracelets jangling on one tiny wrist and a man's watch incongruously strapped round the other. An impression of compactness, self-assurance and determination ... Where had I heard of her? Oh yes, from Toby. She must be his agent ... I read the letter again, letting my eyes slide over the final paragraph. I would think and feel about that later. After my first outburst of grief when Father told me of Addy's death, I hadn't shed one tear for her; it seemed oddly incongruous to mourn her here, where she still seemed alive. But now I was going to have to face those realisations which are a far sadder part of death than merely missing the person—those if-only-she-could-have-been-here-for-this regrets.

But first the letter from the American publisher. I was disappointed to see it was a carbon copy on commonplace flimsy, not as I had hoped the impressive original on high-quality airmail paper. The letter itself was very dignified and restrained, quite English in fact—a far cry from the sort of uninhibited New World enthusiasm I would have expected from an American firm. But a genuine excitement was apparent between the lines. Secure in the knowledge of being alone, I read it aloud to Addy's shade. I read Billie Lee's letter aloud, too. Then I put them both in my apron pocket, went out into the autumn garden, and wept.

A lovely thing about living miles from anyone else is that you can cry out loud, luxuriously. How well I understand the Irish and other women, who wail and keen over their dead! How it helps, and how much more, instinctively, you feel you are paying tribute to your dead when you don't bottle it up, but let it all come out with a lovely, mournful, anguished sound! I could imagine how Father, and my aunts and uncles and cousins, had blinked back their tears

with stiff upper lids at the funeral (I was still in hospital from David), concealing their genuine grief behind impassive British façades. I imagined Addy, somewhat improbably dressed in her voluminous canvas gardening apron, so tough she could keep shears in its pocket, and her muddy Wellingtons, looking on with disappointment and contempt. As I bent now over the drooping dahlias, scattering them with un-English tears and making a noise that would not have shamed an Arab wake, I could hear her saying: 'That's more like it! I was beginning to wonder if anyone had noticed I was missing!' Suddenly the misery of wanting her sank down another fathom inside me; my legs went weak with sorrow and I found myself sitting on the wet grass, bawling, my head between my knees ...

Suddenly I straightened up and listened. I had competition—David was bawling too. I rushed in to him; even by my haphazard standards, it was hours past his feeding time. I scooped him out of the wooden cradle so swiftly I left it rocking, and in two seconds the bawling had stopped—both lots. It was difficult to be unhappy with him in my arms, quite impossible while he sucked me. He tucked his near-side arm under mine, and I could feel his hand clutching my ribs in spasms of ecstasy as he drank.

I dressed him more warmly than usual (a jacket as well as a nightgown) and put him down to sleep in his pram in the garden. He didn't feel like sleeping right away, so we had a nice long stare at each other, which was good for meditation. His eyes were not going to be blue, after all—one more unlike-Terry item which I added to his mounting score of good points. His hair, practically partable already, looked rather like Kenneth Kaunda's—it gave him a perpetually startled look, even when he was asleep. Suddenly, for no good reason, he grinned at me. It was his first recognisable smile *at me*, as distinct from indiscriminate face-experiments. I straightened up from my slouched position over the pram-handle. His eyes followed

me, and he grinned again. I felt like a lioness whose offspring brings her his first kill.

If only Dottie *would* come tonight! Perhaps he would do it again for her. Her reactions to such an achievement were bound to be entirely satisfying. Only it wasn't Saturday, so how could it be her? Tantalising. I left David asleep, climbed into Addy's aged Morris, and drove into the village, where I resolutely put the two red figures on my bank statement from my mind and laid in a pot roast with every trimming I could think of, including a bottle of Chateauneuf du Pape.

While I was in the pub I put through a call to Billie Lee. It was not very easy to say what I had to say, but she was so unexpectedly good about it—sympathetic in a terse how-*damned-awful-I-am-sorry* way—that I didn't start crying again as I'd feared.

'Well, m'dear,' said her deep, mannish voice, 'it all devolves on you, then.' She paused, and then added, 'You know, I'm not only sorry for you, losing your aunt, I'm actually jolly sorry for myself as well. I *had* so looked forward to meeting her ... damn. What a bitch life is. Oh well, I suppose we must just do our best for her book ... she's left something of some importance behind, at least, which is more than most of us will.'

She went on to tell me the details of the American sale. It seemed the advance royalties were something in the neighbourhood of four hundred pounds, and even while I was glorying in relief, I was wondering for the first time whether there wasn't something rather dreadful about spending Addy's money. I felt I should keep it for her, somehow—as if she'd be needing it.

You poor eedjit, what d'you think I left it to you for? And mind you do something exciting with it, too, and don't just let it dribble away.

I put the pot roast in the oven early, and David and I spent a restless two hours waiting for the 'Michelin Man'. Finally I couldn't keep the poor child hanging on any longer, and reluctantly gave him his supper and put him to bed. I waited another two hours, unable to settle to anything, listening attentively for a car. The oven was turned down to almost off, the living-room fire had had four replenishments of pine-logs and I was getting decidedly sleepy myself, not to say hungry and a bit cross. Perhaps the card was someone's idea of a joke? Finally I could stand it no longer. I slammed down my book, stamped to the elegantly-laid table and swept one lot of cutlery back in the drawer.

Right on cue came a double knock on the door.

I'd heard no car, and there was no question of having missed it as you could always hear them, woomphing and protesting in bottom gear over that last half-mile of pot-holes. Even a cycle could be heard swishing through the puddles, and any light at all on the road shone through the big bow window onto the whitewashed wall opposite. I felt a marked twinge of fear, remembering poor Mrs. Stubbs and her chalk-dusted assailant ('Like a proper *gole* he must've looked, dear, face and 'ands and clothes all white—but they wasn't white for long, oh no!') But there was a chain on the door, and after all, I was expecting *someone*.

I went to the door, put the chain on it, and opened it resolutely to its full six inches. Through the gap a hand, a small, strong, familiar hand, snaked in and made a strangler's gesture that was straight out of a Danziger Brothers B picture. I looked at it, dumbly, for a moment, until that well-remembered voice said plaintively: 'Well, come on! How can I *do* you if you don't let me in?'

'Idiot, *idiot!*' I said a moment later, my face turned down against his shoulder and our arms round each other too

tightly for normal breathing.

‘Who’s an idiot? You don’t mean to stand there and tell me you didn’t know who to expect?’

‘How could I?’

He drew away and looked at me, the blackbird’s face that wasn’t like a blackbird any more wrinkling up with astonishment. ‘You mean there’s somebody *else* who sends stupid cryptic messages instead of just writing a sensible letter saying “I’m coming”?’ he asked on a bleat.

‘I thought Dottie?’

‘Dottie schmottie.’ He sniffed the pot-roast-scented air. ‘Ah, Bisto! Let’s be ‘avin’ it. I’ve walked all the way from the village.’

‘But it’s miles!’

‘You’re telling me?’

‘You’re mad!’

‘You’re telling me?’

He kissed my cheek lingeringly, and then my lips briefly, and looked at me for a moment. His wise bright eyes seemed to take in every detail, seeing my face and what lay behind it with equal ease.

‘You’re all right, aren’t you?’ he asked, softly but with some surprise. ‘I thought your letters sounded almost too cheerful, but I see now you didn’t lie.’

‘I never lie.’

‘That’s fairly true, now I come to think of it.’

‘It’s not to my credit. I can’t put a brave face on anything. If I’m miserable I show it. As you know.’

‘I never did like these noble selfless women who never share anything important like misery,’ he said. ‘It makes a man feel left out in the cold. That’s one thing you never did with me.’ He hugged me again. With each minute that passed I was sinking back deeper and deeper into my love for him. It gave me a panicky feeling. I’d been congratulating myself during the last few months on the

completeness with which I had let him go, just when I needed him most—I *had* felt secretly rather noble and selfless about it, actually. I hadn't wanted to be an emotional burden to him, just when he was beginning to find his feet as a writer and as a man, so I'd waved him an apparently cheery goodbye and gone off to the country with David, leaving Toby to the rigours of his basement flat in Holland Park and his second novel. We'd written occasionally—brief, terse notes from him, ending always 'Love, Toby,' and from me gay, flippant letters which were intended to convey how well I was making out by myself and how free from responsibility he was. It hadn't been too difficult, because I *was* happy most of the time, but whenever I got his letters or sat down to write one to him I would remember with poignant clarity those extraordinary weeks of our love in the L-shaped room in Fulham, a love which had sprung on me from behind, so to speak, and then grown and deepened as naturally as roots going into the earth until he was absolutely a fundamental part of my life. At such times I would feel the stretched-elastic tension still there between us, dragging, dragging ... and the flippancy and carelessness hadn't always gone easily onto paper.

And now here he was, his hands absently slipping up my arms under the sleeves of my cardigan, his eyes watching every tell-tale change of expression on my face. He did not have to look up or down to meet my eyes, in fact if I leant straight forward it was not his lips I kissed, but the tip of his beaky nose. I did it now, from habit, and suddenly he caught his breath and took me in his arms and we stood there in the little tiled hall, oblivious, kissing and kissing ...

'I didn't intend any of *this* nonsense,' he said at last, a little gasp audible in his voice. 'I just came to see you.'

'Of course.'

'And to be fed.'

'Naturally.'

'Not to resume intimate relations,' he said severely, like a domestic court magistrate.

'Certainly not. That's quite understood.'

We went into the living-room with our arms companionably round each other.

'How lovely and cosy it is here!' he exclaimed, looking round. *'What a difference after my place! An open fire, and comfortable armchairs ... Gosh, if I'd known there was all this, I'd have overcome my natural reluctance to see you and wished myself onto you ages ago.'*

'Why didn't you come before?' I heard myself asking.

He grinned up at me from where he'd crouched in front of the blazing logs.

'I had nothing to show you before,' he said.

He reached into his pocket, and brought out a small book with drab paper covers.

'What's that?' I said, although I knew.

In the firelight his face was glowing, and all the shadows struck off it so that he looked about sixteen, or even younger, like a thin beaky little boy with tousled black hair and his wrists growing out of his jacket. He held the book up to me, his lips curled up in the tight little grin of pleasure.

I'd often wondered about the novel he had been struggling to write when we were both living in that bug-run in Fulham. This, then, was it—the finished product of all those months of driving himself against the grain of his own self-confessed indolence, dredging up the wisdom that lay beneath his apparently frivolous nature, and sweating out a style which could not be traced to the despised articles from which he had earned a thin living. It felt strange, almost it gave me a sensual thrill, to hold the solid little blocks of pages in my hands, to riffle through them and see the black streaks flipping past, each streak a word written by Toby, accepted, acknowledged as worth-while

and printed by other, unknown men who had set their favourable judgement on his talent.

I crouched beside him suddenly, hugged his small head in the crook of my arm, and kissed him. I was moved, for a moment, almost to tears of pleasure.

‘Do you like the title?’

I hadn’t looked at it, but now I did. It was *Brave Coward*.

‘Ouch! No.’

He rose on his knees with a roar. ‘WHAT!? Why the hell not? What’s wrong with it?’

‘It’s awful, that’s all. I hate those two-contradictory-word titles, like I hate those the-this-and-the-that ones they’re always using for films.’

‘The what and the what? What are you talking about?’

‘The-Young-and-the-Squalid, The-Vile-and-the-Sacred, The-Bright-and-the-Brutish.’

‘Never heard of them,’ he said blankly, looking at me as if I’d gone mad.

‘You *know* what I mean—titles like that.’

‘But *Brave Coward* isn’t—’

‘*Toby*. Look, what does it matter? It’s a very *catchy* title —’

‘CATCHY!’ he yelled. ‘Christ! It’s not a pop tune! Catchy! The publishers said it was *absolutely brilliant*.’

‘It probably is. I’m probably crazy.’

‘There’s no bloody probably about it!’

‘Okay, then.’

‘Okay!’

There was a long, ill-tempered silence. He took the proof-copy away from me protectively and pretended to be glancing through it. I could almost see the steam rising from him.

‘It’s a marvellous title,’ he mumbled at last.

‘Yes, darling.’

Suddenly he turned round, flung the book aside, and with a loud snarl of frustrated fury threw himself on top of

me. I found myself on my back on the hearthrug, having my head bumped against the floor.

'Toby! Let go! Get off my stomach, you're curdling my milk!'

'Funny place to keep it. Say uncle.'

'Uncle!'

'Say it's the best title in living memory!'

'“Uncle” is the best title in living memory.'

'Aaargh!'

He rose in disgust and stood over me, the book in his hand.

'You're a nice friend!' he said. 'I might as well throw the damn thing in the fire as show it to you. I suppose you'll pick holes in every blasted line!'

'I won't! I—'

'You won't, because I'm not going to show it to you!'

'Oh, darling—'

'What?'

'I half-think you mean it. You are a baby still.'

'Don't try me too far! Since you knew me, let me tell you, I've become absolutely the most adult adult I know. I'm so mature I had to shave my beard off for fear of it turning white. Is a lioness infantile because she springs to the defence of her cubs, when some crass, callow, invidious, insidious female *jackal* creeps up and tries to bite their titles off? What do you know about titles, anyway?'

'Nothing, Toby. Let's forget it.'

'You're so brilliant, what would you have called it?'

'How can I—'

'Just give me one better one. Anything.'

'*The Brave and the Cowardly.*'

He turned away, waving his arms wildly as if invoking God's aid. Then he spun round, did an elaborate windup like a baseball pitcher, and flung the book straight into the fire.

For a moment we both remained motionless, paralysed. Then, as one man, we flung ourselves forward. I grabbed the tongs, he the poker, and in a second we had raked the scorched volume out of the wood-ash. Toby sank onto the rug again, and closed his eyes. He'd actually gone pale.

'Are you completely potty?' I ventured to ask curiously.

'No. I just can't throw. I meant it to miss.'

He sank slowly down until he was lying with his head in my lap. I stroked his silky black hair and after a while he began purring softly, as of old.

'I really don't seem to have grown up much, do I?' he said humbly at last.

'No, thank God.'

'What do you mean?'

'When I saw you after that long gap—when Terry fetched you and you came to the L-shaped room, the day I had the baby, and when you came to the hospital afterwards—I could see you'd changed. You were so self-assured. I knew it was a good thing, and yet ... I was afraid you'd got too serious, that you'd disciplined the fun out of yourself ...' I leaned down and kissed his mouth upside-down. He reached up to touch my face and said 'Another thing I haven't disciplined out of myself is wanting you. You do look funny the wrong way up.'

'Let's eat, eh?'

'Good God, haven't we done that yet? I've stopped being hungry.'

'That's temper.'

'It's not.' He drew my head down again and kissed me in a special way he had which made my blood beat suddenly and almost painfully upward, like a steep musical crescendo. The effect behind my closed eyelids was as if a mountain had abruptly risen out of a calm sea, lifting me off the surface of things into a rarified isolation, all commonplaces sinking below me into unimportance and oblivion.

I opened my eyes and looked at Toby. He was frowning deeply, as if concentrating on subduing a sharp pain. His body was utterly still. After a long moment of waiting, he looked up at me and smiled, quickly and painfully, and touched my arm as if in reassurance. He was breathing heavily.

‘No,’ he said. ‘I don’t think so.’

My first reaction was one of unmixed and bitter disappointment. ‘Why not?’ I cried childishly. He smiled and leaned his face against my shoulder.

‘Because, my dear, my darling Jane,’ he said softly, ‘all it needs is that, for me to be utterly in love with you again, and you, correct me if I’m wrong, with me. And that would be less than wise.’ I said nothing, feeling too desolate to speak, and after a moment he went on:

‘Apart from anything else, I haven’t the wherewithal to keep a wife and son. Or two. Yet.’

‘What about this?’ I inquired in a faint voice, indicating the scorched proof.

‘A hundred advance, half on sig, half on pub. The sig half’s spent, the pub half’s mortgaged to the hilt. Do you know how many novels are published every year? Thousands. You only make money from movie sales.’

Trying to recover from what felt like the deathblow of his not wanting to make love to me, I said facetiously ‘I can see it on the marquees now—Toby Coleman’s *Brave Coward*—’

‘Cohen, if you don’t mind,’ he said quietly. He straightened up, pushing back his tousled hair. ‘And that’s another thing.’

‘If you *really* want to insult me, try implying that *that’s* a factor.’

He looked at me, all the sparkle gone. ‘It can be a factor without you knowing it,’ he said.

We stared at each other. Suddenly I shook myself free of the spell of depression I was enmeshed in.

'I can't think why you're going to all this trouble to explain why you can't marry me,' I said brightly. 'I don't even remember asking you.' I saw his face soften and begin to lean helplessly towards me, and I got quickly to my feet. 'My lovely dinner, worth at least three crossed spoons and forks, is now a cinder. Go to the table and wait while I bring you your nice crunchy charcoal.' I went into the kitchen, ran the end of the roller-towel under the cold tap, and held my face in it until the water wasn't cold any more. Then I served the meal. That's the good thing about a pot-roast, it doesn't spoil with keeping, and the wine helped. Toby spent the night in the guest-room and neither of us slept a wink, and in the morning he went away again, leaving the charred novel for me to read. It was so good it hurt me. I wanted to be proud of him but as he wasn't mine, I couldn't. That was when I decided that I would have to go further than Surrey if I were really going to learn self-sufficiency.