

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



The Stanford Lasses

Glenice Crossland

About the Book

In the small Yorkshire town of Cottenly – dominated by the steel works and surrounded by beautiful countryside – Isaac Stanford lives with his wife Emily and their three lovely daughters, known locally as the Stanford lasses. Alice, the eldest, lives only for her work as a secretary and chapel on Sunday. Fair and loving Lizzie is content with her job making umbrellas – until she falls in love. And headstrong Ruth, the merry one, is intent upon marrying a handsome charmer despite warnings from friends and family.

Already emotionally damaged by a traumatic childhood, Alice struggles to lead a normal life. Poor but happy with her ever-increasing family, the onset of war means Lizzie must face the threat of losing all she holds dear. And Ruth soon realises she has made a terrible mistake in her marriage as she becomes trapped in a life of poverty and violence. As the years pass, each sister is forced to confront her greatest challenge ...

Glenice
CROSSLAND

*The Stanford
Lasses*



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*For my husband, with love and apologies for all
the hours spent with The Stanford Lasses.
Also for my son, Peter, for Elizabeth, Joseph,
Adele, Stephen, Liam and Sadie. Love you all.*

The Stanford Lasses

Glenice Crossland lives in Sheffield. She has loved writing from an early age, only taking it seriously after early retirement from her job in a leisure centre. She has read one of her poems on BBC2, had several read on Radio Sheffield, and more published in various anthologies. She is well known locally for her watercolours of churches and local traditions. Married with one son and grandchildren, she still lives a few hundred yards from the house in which she was born. *The Stanford Lasses* is her first novel.

With thanks to Georgina Hawtrey-Woore, without her this
book would never have seen the light of day.

Chapter One

‘I’m going to tell our dad on thee, our Lizzie.’

‘Don’t you dare.’ Lizzie brushed her hair vigorously, counting subconsciously with every stroke. ‘... eighty-eight, eighty-nine ...’

Young Ruth paused from straightening the feathers on Lizzie’s brown felt hat, to stick out her tongue at Alice. ‘Just like you to tell tales,’ she said, glaring at her eldest sister.

‘I don’t tell tales, except when I’ve good reason to, and when it’s for our Lizzie’s own good. She’ll end up in trouble if she’s not careful.’

‘No I won’t. I only want a bit of fun, that’s all. It’s only once in a blue moon I ask to stop at Annie’s for the night. Our dad wouldn’t let me stay to the end otherwise.’ Lizzie couldn’t help thinking what a sanctimonious old misery their Alice was sometimes.

‘You’re just jealous,’ Ruth said, glowering, ‘because nobody ever asks you to go anywhere.’

Alice coloured. ‘No I’m not, and if they did, I wouldn’t dream of telling lies.’

‘I’m not really telling lies.’ Lizzie flushed. ‘I just said I was going with Annie Hampshire and staying at her house for the night. That’s the truth. It’s just that her dad won’t make us be in by half past nine. Why, it isn’t worth going at all if I’ve to leave at nine. The dancing will only just be starting by then.’

‘But tha didn’t mention that tha’ll be going with George Crossman as well.’

‘No, but there again, nobody asked me, so I didn’t lie.’ Lizzie glared at Alice, becoming more and more exasperated. ‘Oh, come on, Alice,’ she pleaded. ‘It isn’t many people from our end of Cottenly who receive an invitation to the Hall, and it is a special occasion. It isn’t every day they throw a dinner dance to celebrate a new reservoir.’

‘And that’s another thing. There’ll be all those loud-mouthed contractors there as well, not at all fit company for two innocent girls. Half past nine would be quite late enough.’

Lizzie couldn’t help but giggle at hearing herself described as innocent. Not that she had let George do anything really bad, but she wondered what Alice would say if she knew how George made her feel when he kissed her on a Sunday evening on the way home from chapel. Sometimes she even wished he would do something other than kiss her, but George respected her far too much to attempt anything like that.

‘I won’t be with the contractors, I shall be with George. Besides, Annie knows all the contractors by name. After all, she does work at the Hall – that’s why she’s been invited.’ Lizzie wondered if Alice was jealous because Annie hadn’t given her one of the tickets. But no, Alice wasn’t interested in that sort of thing. A social at the chapel was much more in her line.

‘Annie’s sister told me all about working at the Hall,’ young Ruth piped up. ‘All about the food they serve in silver dishes – hams and salmon, and a pig’s head set out on a tray for fancy. She says they can eat all the leftovers and take some home on their days off. I wouldn’t mind working somewhere like that, except that poor Annie has to empty thirty po’s every morning and she says that when the contractors have been on the beer, they’re absolutely full to the brim, sometimes with sick an’ all.’

‘Ruth, shut up,’ Alice demanded, causing Ruth to stick out her tongue once again.

‘Anyway, I’m going to bed. I don’t want black under my eyes for the big night, and we’ve to be up at half past five, don’t forget.’ Lizzie went to the clothes closet for the umpteenth time and peered in, admiring the dress hanging there.

Ruth skipped around the large iron bed and stood beside her. ‘Oh, Lizzie, it is lovely. You’re going to look beautiful, I know you are.’

Lizzie closed the door reluctantly. She could stand admiring the dress all night. Not that it was completely new – nobody ever had brand new except Alice, and that was only since she was set on in the offices and had begun earning more. But nor did they ever go shabby either – their mother saw to that.

Emily Stanford prided herself on being able to make something out of nothing. An excellent needlewoman, she was often called upon to sew for the people up on the hill: everything from curtains to layettes for expected babies and ball gowns for the spoiled daughters of the business folk and managers from the mills and factories. Most of them lived on the hill overlooking Cottenly and were usually referred to by the townspeople as ‘the posh folk’. The majority of ordinary mortals never saw beyond the ornate iron railings and tall poplars surrounding the gardens, but Emily Stanford often had the opportunity to admire the interiors whilst measuring windows, or people, in readiness for curtain or dress making. The ladies of the houses would often pass on cast-off garments to Emily, and it was one of those that had been altered beyond recognition and was now hanging in the closet ready for Lizzie’s big night.

Emily accepted that her sewing for the posh folk was a thorn in the side of her husband Isaac, who considered it demeaning for his wife that she had to work. Unfortunately

Isaac's income as a plate layer on the railroad to the works in Cottenly didn't quite match the family outgoings, and though at one time Emily had been forbidden to lower herself by offering her services, the opportunity had arisen for her to make use of her talents a few years ago, when Isaac went away to fight. On Isaac's return he found a more dominant Emily, already established and according to her clientele indispensable. With three daughters rapidly approaching womanhood Isaac had accepted the extra income grudgingly, but without much persuasion.

'I'm getting in bed.' Ruth leaped on to the high patchwork-covered bed, dived down below the sheets and snuggled into the centre. She had realised long ago that the middle was the warmest place with Lizzie on one side and Alice on the other, even if it had the disadvantage of being between the pillows. Though tonight, with her hair bound in white cotton curling rags, she was able to manoeuvre them into the gap in such a way that they wouldn't stick into her head quite so much.

'Hurry up, Lizzie, I'm cold,' she called, and Lizzie pulled down the sheets and followed her into the lumps and bumps of the flock mattress. Ruth smoothed the front of her white starched nightdress so that no creases would dig into her skin when she cuddled up to her sister, and noticed with a shock that her nipples hardened as her hand cupped each in turn. And the swell of her breasts was more obvious, she was sure of it. At last it seemed the long-awaited development was beginning to happen. For a couple of years Ruth's main ambition had been to have breasts like Lizzie, or even Alice, except that Alice's were always tightly encased in concealing black dresses, and so were almost invisible, except to her sisters when they were undressing. Ruth decided that when her breasts did develop she would wear pretty, tailored blouses to make the most of them. She shifted closer to Lizzie and pressed

her knees in behind her sister's. 'Come on, our Alice. It's all right for you, but we've to be at work for six.' But Alice was still on her knees beside the bed, deep in prayer.

'I'm going to blow out the candle if you don't hurry,' Lizzie grumbled. 'God knows why your prayers take so long every night.'

Ruth giggled. 'Well, if God doesn't know there's not much point in praying, is there?'

Alice blew out the candle, used the chamber pot from under the bed and joined her sisters beneath the blankets. She smoothed her nightdress and lay straight and stiff on her edge of the bed. Ruth wondered as she did every night how two sisters could be such complete opposites, Lizzie so soft and cuddly and Alice so cold, as though she was afraid of anyone's making the slightest contact with her body. No wonder she was never invited anywhere except the Bible class or the chapel socials. She was too cold and miserable. Then Ruth suddenly felt mean. Perhaps Alice really did want someone to cuddle her but didn't know how to show it. Reluctantly, she turned over, rearranging her curling rags in the nick between the pillows, and placed her arm round her eldest sister's waist, but Alice still lay there stiff and cold as an icicle. Ruth stuck out her tongue in the darkness, turned back towards Lizzie, placed her cold feet on Alice and drifted into sleep.

Emily normally had the fire well alight by the time Lizzie and Ruth rose for work but today was Friday, the day for blackleading the range. Ruth shivered as she washed at the sink. 'It's not fair,' she moaned. 'Our Alice never has to get up to a cold kitchen. We shall have been on our feet for two hours by the time she opens her eyes.'

'Shut up moaning, our Ruth, and be thankful you've a job to go to.'

Emily poured milk into two cups. She had long since stopped trying to persuade her daughters to take breakfast,

not that she blamed them at this unearthly hour. Instead she made certain the pair had a substantial lunch, already wrapped the night before in squares of damp linen.

‘Some job,’ Ruth muttered in between gulps of the cold milk they were drinking instead of the hot sweet tea they would have had if the fire had been lit. ‘Making umbrella frames, day in day out.’

Lizzie took not the slightest notice. She knew the job wasn’t exciting, but neither was it heavy; it was more tedious than anything else. In fact once all the girls got together in the mill they quite enjoyed themselves, laughing and singing as they worked, Ruth assembling the ribs and Lizzie lacquering them.

‘Trust our Alice to land on her feet.’ Ruth was off again.

‘Your sister’s done well for herself. There’s not many would have spent all those hours labouring over a Pitman’s home study course. Surely you don’t begrudge it to her?’ Emily asked as she shook the tin of blacklead on to the brush.

‘Oh, no, I don’t begrudge it her, but we all know why she’s done well. It’s because she’s a Sunday school teacher and the office manager likes to keep well in with the chapelgoers, that’s why.’

‘Well, if that’s the case you should have gone to chapel more often and then he might have put you a good word in too.’

‘No thanks,’ Ruth sniffed. ‘If it makes one as miserable as our Alice I’d rather be a heathen.’

‘That’ll do, Ruth,’ Emily snapped, though she couldn’t argue with her young daughter’s comments. Her eldest daughter was a constant worry to Emily. Not that she ever set a step wrong, oh no, it would have been more normal if she had. It was just not natural for a young girl to be so involved in religious activities. Oh, well, she supposed Alice had been influenced by Isaac to some extent. He had always been on at the girls to join the Bible class, to help

with Sunday school and read the lesson in chapel, though it was doubtful if he expected to be taken quite so seriously. Even Isaac didn't eat, drink and breathe religion. In fact when he first returned from France, she sometimes wondered whether he still believed in God at all. Where once he would have read a passage from the family Bible each night before retiring, Emily had noticed that the book had remained unopened for many months, except by Alice.

It was only when she questioned him that he revealed the horrors he had witnessed in the trenches, and his doubt that a compassionate God could have allowed them to take place. Then gradually, through Emily, he had relived the nightmare battles he and his comrades had fought, and had finally reached the conclusion that, since he was one of the fortunate few who returned, God must have been guiding him in his fight for survival.

Emily sighed. It was sometimes a strain residing in the same house as two fervent chapelgoers. Not that Isaac wasn't a good man: a kinder, more thoughtful one it would have been difficult to find, but sometimes Emily would have liked to let her hair down, do something frivolous, like making a joke on a Sunday, if she hadn't known that Isaac would be shocked to the core by such behaviour. Poor Isaac. Emily knew it wasn't his fault, any more than it was Alice's. The blame lay at the feet of Isaac's mother if anywhere. It was Grandmother Stanford who had hammered religion into her son's brain, as sure as if she'd used a mallet. Yet was it not Emily herself who was to blame in Alice's case? Should she have allowed her daughter, at the tender age of ten, to become companion to such a cantankerous old woman? Isaac had stressed that it wouldn't be for long: only a matter of weeks. That had been the doctor's opinion when the old woman had lost her legs to gangrene.

Two years, two whole years for a child in the dark, gloomy house with a slowly dying woman. Not that Alice

had complained: a little angel, she had been. Reading from the Bible every night, sitting by the four-poster bed with the picture of Grandfather Stanford on the wall at its foot – the picture of Grandfather Stanford in his coffin. Emily cringed with shame, shame that she had not intervened and brought her child home from that house of waiting death. Yet Alice bore her burden bravely. ‘I don’t mind, our mam. It won’t be for long and Grandmother’s no bother.’ No bother! To a child who should have been laughing, and playing in the sunshine. No wonder Alice was so dour and lacking in warmth. Why, the lass even talked like an old woman.

‘Come on, Ruth, we’re going to be late.’ Lizzie threw her shawl round her shoulders, picked up her lunch and made for the door, her sister hurrying behind her, still grumbling about the cold, dark morning, and the job.

Cottenly was a harsh and cruel place to be venturing out at this time of the morning, especially in January. The wind from the moors whistled and shrieked through the bare tree branches and round the skirts of the sisters as they battled through the darkness. It was a good mile walk and mostly downhill for which they were thankful, except when the narrow cobbled street was iced over and treacherous. Today however there was no sign of freezing and the journey would be made safely and swiftly. The return journey later would be a different matter, when the uphill climb would be torturous after a ten-hour shift, with no more than a couple of short breaks in which to sit themselves down on the mill floor and rest their weary limbs and aching feet.

Today, however, Lizzie’s exhaustion would soon be forgotten in the excitement of preparing for the evening ahead. At the moment Ruth seemed to be the more excited of the two.

‘Can I do yer hair, Lizzie?’ she enquired as she half skipped, half fought against the wind by Lizzie’s side. ‘How will yer wear it?’

Lizzie shrugged. ‘What do you think?’

‘I could lend you my mother-of-pearl comb, the one our dad gave me for Christmas.’ Ruth turned to peer at her sister through the darkness, ‘I could pile your hair high on your head and slip in the comb for fancy. Or leave it long and fasten it in the nape of yer neck.’

‘Aye, I think we’ll do that. George likes it loose.’

‘Oh, Lizzie, what’s it like to go out with somebody? A boy, I mean?’

Lizzie smiled in the darkness. ‘All right, I suppose. Just like going out with a girl,’ she teased.

‘Except that girlfriends don’t kiss each other, like you and George round the back of the chapel.’

‘Ruth Stanford, you’ve been spying on us.’

‘I haven’t, honest. I found some holly with berries on and was taking it to the grave. I didn’t know you were there until it was too late.’ Ruth giggled. ‘What does it feel like to be kissed? Really kissed, I mean, like George kisses you, for ages and ages?’

‘You’ll find out soon enough.’

‘I doubt it, not if I don’t develop!’

Lizzie frowned. ‘What do you mean, develop?’

‘My chest. If I stay as flat as this nobody’ll ever want to kiss me.’

‘Don’t be daft. You’ll fill out all in good time.’

‘I doubt it. I’m sure your chest had developed long before you were my age.’

‘Well if it had I certainly can’t remember,’ Lizzie fibbed, to make her sister feel better. ‘Besides, you’re lovely as you are. With a face like yours no one would even look at your chest.’

‘You’re just saying that.’ Ruth paused. ‘Although I think I am developing a bit.’

‘I’m sure you are.’ The buzzer from the works interrupted the conversation, much to Lizzie’s relief. ‘Come on, or we’ll be late, then we’ll have old Charlesworth on our backs.’

The street outside the works was bustling now with scurrying figures, heads bowed against the wind, all heading in the direction of the gates.

‘It’s enough to waken the dead,’ commented Ruth, as the sound of the buzzer grew louder. ‘I’m glad we don’t live down here. I don’t know how the little ones ever get any sleep.’

Lizzie agreed it would be awful to live down here, but for a different reason. The long rows of houses stretched right and left, blackened by the soot and smoke from the mill chimneys, each house a replica of the next. Two up, two down and the stairway up the middle leading to a further curved staircase up to the garret. As the families down here consisted of anything up to thirteen children, the garret was a very necessary part of the dwelling, being large enough to accommodate two double beds – not that many could afford the luxury of beds. The longest row was known as the Twenty Row, for the number of houses it contained. The rest of them, being in close proximity to the fast-flowing river, had been given names like Don View, Little Don Row and Donside. Higher up were the older properties, some of them farmsteads, known as Duncliffe.

Lizzie was always relieved that they lived on the opposite side of the valley which was greener and more fertile. Most of the houses there were no more than thirty years old, and though there were one or two terraces the majority were semi-detached, until Queen Victoria Street wound even higher, leading to where the posh folk lived, in large, detached, gabled properties. Beyond that, the woods and meadows stretched out on to the wild, open Yorkshire moors.

‘See you later,’ Lizzie said as the sisters parted company and made for their separate departments, Ruth to the gitting shop where she would use the gits to fix the ribs together, Lizzie to the Japan shop where she would dip the finished articles into the Japanese lacquer and lay them out to dry ready for the ovens and the hardening.

The girls were both clad in long white pinafores to protect their clothing, and before long Lizzie’s arms would be lacquered as black as the ribs, as far up as her elbows. She didn’t mind the job; what she did mind was the smell of the naphtha used to remove the lacquer which seemed to cling to her body no matter how much she scrubbed herself afterwards. She hoped she could rid herself of the smell tonight – she didn’t want everybody knowing she was an umbrella girl.

By the time Isaac Stanford rose from his bed the fire was glowing brightly, after being urged on by the draw-tin, and the kettle was gurgling merrily on the hob. Isaac and Emily would breakfast together on homemade barm cakes and honey, after which he would enjoy a pipeful of tobacco before leaving to join the railway gang and begin work at eight. Alice could normally be heard pottering about in the bedroom above at about the time Isaac left the house. This morning, however, she was downstairs and pouring a cup of tea before Isaac had finished his smoke.

‘You’re up early,’ Emily said.

‘Aye.’

‘Sit thisen down then, lass, and get thi breakfast,’ said Isaac.

‘I suppose our Lizzie’ll be all worked up about the dance.’

‘Aye, I suppose she will.’ Emily wondered if her eldest daughter wished she was going too. ‘It’s a pity you aren’t going with her, lass.’

‘Nay, I don’t think it’d be in my line. Besides, I doubt if she’d want me watching the goings-on.’

Emily looked puzzled. ‘Goings-on? It’s only a ball, Alice. I’m sure she and Annie would have liked you to join them.’

‘Happen Annie would.’

‘What does tha mean, Alice? Thee and our Lizzie haven’t had words, have yer?’ Isaac frowned.

‘No, it’s just that seeing as she’ll be accompanied by George Crossman, I doubt she’d want me playing chaperon.’

‘She’s going with Annie,’ Emily said. ‘Our Lizzie wouldn’t lie.’

‘Oh, no.’ Alice hoped she was doing the right thing. ‘I didn’t say she wasn’t going with Annie, Annie’s got the tickets, but George’ll be there as well.’

‘Well, perhaps that’s a good thing,’ said Emily, glancing at her husband. ‘He’ll be able to keep an eye on the pair of them.’

Isaac chewed at his pipe and rocked slowly in his wooden chair. ‘George Crossman, you say? Now let’s see, isn’t that Walter’s son? Tha knows, Emily, Walter who married Nellie Sanderson? Didn’t they go live over Warrentickle?’

‘I remember. A lovely lass was Nellie.’

‘Aye, if my memory serves me well they had four, all lads. I can see them now, marching in the Whit Monday procession, as like as four peas in a pod, and just as shining and clean.’

‘She always was spotless, was Nellie. They used to come to chapel regularly before they moved. In fact I’ve seen one of the lads in chapel lately, though I don’t know which one.’

‘That’s George,’ Alice mumbled. ‘On the lookout for our Lizzie, I expect.’

Isaac wrapped his muffler round his neck and picked up his snap. ‘Aye well, our Lizzie could do a lot worse than keep company with a Crossman. Though I should have a

word with her, Emily, if I were thee, make sure she knows right from wrong, if tha knows what I mean.'

'She'll be all right. She's a good lass is our Lizzie, in fact they all are. I reckon we're fortunate, Isaac.'

'Aye, well, we've done our best. See thee tonight then, lass.'

'Yes, well, take care with the engines.'

Isaac went out, closing the door behind him.

Emily poured another cup of tea. 'And what was all that about?' She narrowed her eyes as she looked at Alice.

'What? What was all what about?' Alice sounded innocent enough but the flush of colour gave her away.

'Perhaps I was wrong, I hope I was, but I had a feeling you were trying to make trouble for our Lizzie.'

'Nay, Mother, I don't want to make trouble, I want to keep her out of it.'

'How? By stopping her going to the ball with George Crossman?'

Alice almost told her mother about Lizzie's intention to stay out beyond half past nine, but she didn't like the look on her mother's face. 'Well, I just thought our dad should know, that's all.'

'Well, so now he knows.' Emily sighed. 'Our Lizzie's growing up. In fact she is grown up, and so are you, Alice. No doubt you'll be next to find yourself a young man.' Alice shuffled uncomfortably. 'And when you do, I trust you'll know how to conduct yourself just as I trust our Lizzie. I wish you were going with her, lass. You deserve a little fun now and again.'

Alice jumped up and grabbed her coat from the peg behind the door. It was a nice coat, her mother considered, good quality but more suitable for an older woman. Emily sighed. And she was so pretty. Alice had beautiful eyes. Emily watched her put on her hat, grey to match her coat, and pull it down so that her thick dark hair was completely hidden.

'I'll be off then, Mother.' She kissed her mother dutifully on the cheek, but with no sign of affection.

'Aye, don't be late, lass.' Emily knew that Alice would consider it a sin to be even a second late. The girl glanced at the wall clock just as it began to chime the quarter, picked up her gloves and strode purposefully out of the house. Shaking her head sadly, Emily watched her until she disappeared from sight.

'If only our Alice would let herself go a bit, if only she would laugh, she could be the bonniest of the three,' she said to herself, but she had a feeling it would never happen.

Alice was sorry now that she had said anything; it had only started her mother on about her needing some fun. She tried to convince herself that she had only mentioned it to protect their Lizzie, but somehow it didn't ring true. She wondered if she was jealous, as Ruth had suggested. Not that she wanted to go to the dinner dance, but Lizzie's suddenly acquiring herself a young man had made her think. After all, Alice was the oldest. She flushed at the thought of Joe Jackson. Not that he had paid her any attention; well, no more than as the girl clerk in the outer office. Except that he had offered to escort her home from the works' Christmas social, and then she had almost snapped the poor man's head in two. 'I'm with my sisters.' Oh, why couldn't she have smiled and thanked him nicely? The truth was that she hadn't taken much notice of him until then. The relationship had been entirely that of supervisor and secretary. From that night, however, Alice had seen Joe in an entirely different light, but by then it was too late.

She waited on the pavement for a trap to pass, the clip-clop of the horse's hooves breaking up her thoughts. At this time the upper management were all turning in for work. Those who had come from Sheffield to make their weekly tour of inspection were travelling by carrier cart; others,

immaculate in dark suits and bowler hats, were glancing at heavy gold pocket watches as they walked briskly into the office building. In another hour they would probably have both foremen and factory workers quaking in their clogs, as the weekly assessment was made and wages paid out accordingly. One or two would no doubt have been sacked and others set on. Alice would know the names of the unfortunate ones even before they themselves heard about their dismissal, but being the soul of discretion she never discussed her work with anyone. The truth was that Alice Stanford was a lonely young woman who had built a cage round herself, a cage which could have been made of iron and from which she was finding it impossible to escape.

Wormleighton Hall had once belonged to a wealthy family of the same name, but that was before misfortune and financial ruin made it necessary for the place to be sold. Far from being acquired as a family residence, the Hall had been purchased with the intention of turning it into a profitable business. The state rooms and the marble ballroom remained as they had for generations, but the bedrooms had been refurbished, new bathrooms and heating had been installed and extra staff had been employed. Apart from being run as a residential hotel, the Hall was also hired out for banqueting and as a ballroom. Such was its reputation that gentry from as far away as Leeds and Manchester were eager to flaunt their wealth and outdo their friends by holding their family celebrations at Wormleighton Hall.

Tonight would be an exceptional occasion, as for the first time the working people of Cottenly were to be admitted to the splendid and luxurious establishment. The Hall was surrounded by green parkland and it was said that deer could be seen in the forest beyond. Amongst the attractions for house guests were the grouse and pheasant shoots, and in the hunting season the gentry were invited

to join the chase in the hills and moorland surrounding the park.

In the valley below, work on a new reservoir had just begun and would benefit not only Cottenly but also towns and villages further afield. The ball tonight was in honour of everyone concerned in the enterprise: engineers, surveyors and lowly labourers. The girls employed at the Hall had been invited to bring friends, mainly to swell the number of female guests for the pleasure of the menfolk. George Crossman was invited to represent the tyre mill in Cottenly, where he was employed. The dam project would bring business to most of the local firms and the tyre mill's profits were expected to be inflated as the working vehicles needed frequent tyre replacement. The prospect had encouraged the tyre mill to replace its old engine with a new 600-horsepower one. The plant already housed a hammer and a 1250-ton press, and the tyres were rapidly gaining a worldwide reputation. George had managed to acquire an invitation tonight by bribing the fellow concerned with handing out the tickets: he would be walking to work for the next month whilst the bloke concerned rode in style on George's bicycle. It would be well worth the three-mile trek if George could spend a few hours tonight with Lizzie Stanford. According to George, Lizzie was the most beautiful, adorable creature ever to walk Cottenly, and not many in the town would disagree. For some time past George and his brothers had cried off from attending chapel, but once George had caught a glimpse of Lizzie as she and the rest of the umbrella girls came out of the mill for a breath of fresh air at snap time he had suddenly developed religious mania, and couldn't wait for Sunday evening to come round. He had even attended Bible class one Wednesday and been sadly disappointed to find only Alice Stanford amongst the students. His sudden resumption of worship was not entirely necessary, as he could have waited outside the

chapel for Lizzie, but he was hoping to be noticed by Isaac Stanford, for to get on the good side of Lizzie's father would be crucial if he meant to ask for Lizzie's hand in marriage. And since he and Lizzie had kissed, out there in the graveyard, marrying Lizzie Stanford was the most important thought to occupy George Crossman's mind.

Lizzie felt like a queen in the midnight blue velvet gown. Emily had added a collar and cuffs of fine white lace and taken in the waist to fit Lizzie's slender frame. Ruth had dressed her hair, which was the colour of sunkissed corn, and she was wearing a neck chain of shimmering silver which Emily had inherited from her mother and also her grandmother's ring. Jewellery was sparse in the Stanford household, but what items Emily owned were shared with her daughters on occasions such as this. Isaac stared, and thought how much Lizzie resembled her mother when he had first courted her.

'Eeh, lass, thar a sight for sore eyes.' He wished he could dress his daughters in such finery all the time. As always, he regretted the fact that Emily was willing to accept charity from the posh folk, but it was worth it on this occasion to see the joy spreading forth from his daughter's countenance.

'I've done our Lizzie's hair,' Ruth informed him proudly.

'Aye, lass, and right pretty it looks too.' He glanced at Alice, the only one who didn't look pleased at Lizzie's appearance. Happen she was wishing she was going with her, though he somehow doubted it.

'What does tha think, Alice? Doesn't our Lizzie look grand?'

'Oh aye, she looks right grand. I just hope she keeps away from those contractors, that's all.'

'She must be civil to them, Alice. They're only human, after all,' Emily said.

‘You needn’t worry, Mother. I know how to behave, and Annie’s brother is fetching us home at—’ Lizzie almost let the cat out of the bag, ‘when it’s time,’ she corrected herself.

‘You’re going to feel the cold, lass,’ Emily said, looking out at the dark, frosty night.

‘Well, I’m not wearing my coat. It’ll only spoil the look of my dress. Besides, it’s too short, and it’s faded.’

‘You can borrow my shawl,’ Alice suddenly offered. ‘The new one I bought for the social.’ Everyone stared at her in silence. She flushed, knowing they were all taken aback at her show of generosity.

‘Oh, Alice, I couldn’t. It must have cost you the earth ... oh, but it is lovely and warm.’

Alice ran upstairs and brought down the beautiful checked shawl. ‘Here, put it round thee.’ She suddenly smiled, and looked beautiful. ‘Who knows? I might want to borrow thi frock one of these days.’

Lizzie threw her arms round her sister. ‘Oh, Alice, you can borrow it any time, I promise.’

‘Well,’ Alice muttered to cover her embarrassment, ‘tha’d better not keep Annie waiting.’

Lizzie snuggled into the lovely fringed shawl, picked up a carpet bag containing a nightdress and checked herself in the mirror over the mantelpiece, then hurried off to Annie’s a few doors away. Ruth waved as she passed the window and Alice was surprised at how uplifted she was feeling, so much happier than this morning. Why, she almost wished she was going to the do herself. She frowned as she wondered why she couldn’t be kind and cheerful all the time, and was disturbed by the memory of how she had snubbed Joe Jackson.

The orchestra could be heard in the stillness of the night as the two girls approached the drive. A carriage ambled past

and Lizzie gasped in amazement. 'Gosh, I didn't know the gentry were honouring us with their company.'

'Course they are. There's to be speeches after the meal, just like when it's a do for the nobility.'

Lizzie giggled. 'I hope they don't ramble on too long. I've come to dance, not to listen to speeches.'

Annie put Lizzie in the picture. 'Everyone involved in the reservoir construction will be here. Engineers, financial experts, lawyers, surveyors, labourers, drivers, men from the water works – even the humble chambermaids who look after the upper crust when they stay at the Hall, like me.'

'Oh, Annie, I hope we don't show ourselves up.'

'Why should we? We're as good as that lot any day. They might look all posh in their top hats and tails, but some of 'em have manners worse than pigs. You should see the state of the rooms some of them leave. Too drunk to use the chamber pots, some of 'em are, so they just pee the beds.'

'Oh, Annie, and you have to clean up after them?'

Annie shrugged. 'It's a job, and we have some laughs, I can tell yer.'

They entered the reception area and Annie took Lizzie's shawl.

'Oh!' Lizzie exclaimed. 'I hope it doesn't get lost. It belongs to our Alice.'

'It won't. I'll ask Miss Tudor to take special care of it. She's usually on reception but she's looking after the cloaks tonight.'

Lizzie was mesmerised by the wide, open staircase, lit by a huge crystal chandelier.

'Come on!' Annie grabbed her by the arm and led her into the ballroom. Tables were set round three sides of the room, the other already occupied by the orchestra. Lizzie had never before seen such finery. Flowers had been arranged in huge Grecian urns between the tables and the dance floor, and chandeliers glistened like icicles along the

patterned ceiling. An assistant in scarlet livery winked at Annie and bowed.

‘Your card, my lady?’ he said formally and Annie giggled.

‘I’ll give yer mi lady tomorrer, Sammy.’

Sammy whispered in Annie’s ear, ‘Don’t eat too much tonight, Annie, then we can have a fuddle tomorrow with what’s left.’

Annie laughed and then said seriously, ‘Why, I’ve a good mind to report you to the master, my boy.’

Lizzie chuckled and they handed the tickets to Sammy, who showed the two friends to their places. ‘Trust them to put us at the end,’ Annie grumbled. ‘Oh, Lizzie, you do look lovely. You are lucky having a dress like that – it must have cost a fortune.’

‘Aye, when it was new.’ Lizzie grimaced. ‘I only hope nobody recognises it.’

People were taking their seats at the tables and Annie and Lizzie joined them. ‘You see him over there?’ Annie said. ‘The handsome one with the black, curly hair? He’s Irish; five brothers there are, came over specially to work on the dam. There’s another of them, the one at the opposite end of the table. I think he’s lovely – the one with the black hair, I mean.’

‘He’s handsome right enough, but you should be careful. I’ve heard the girls at work – they say the Irish can charm the bloomers off a girl just by opening their mouths.’

‘Lizzie Stanford! Whatever would your Alice say if she heard you?’ They began to giggle.

‘Oh, she’s not so bad really, Annie.’

Annie raised her eyebrows. ‘Oh? You’ve changed your tune.’

‘Oh, I know, but I sometimes feel sorry for her, like tonight. I could have sworn she’d have liked to be coming with us.’

‘Well I for one can’t see your Alice letting her hair down and dancing.’