

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS

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# A Price for Everything

Mary Sheepshanks

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## About the Author

Born and brought up at Eton where her father was a housemaster, Mary Sheepshanks began writing as a child and had her first poem published in the *Sunday Times* at the age of seventeen. She married the headmaster of Sunningdale School while still a very young woman and they ran the school together until 1967 when she and her husband moved to take over his family estate in Yorkshire. Mary Sheepshanks has three children and a host of grandchildren - one of whom refers to her as his 'wild writing Granny'.

*A Price for Everything* is Mary Sheepshanks's remarkable debut novel.

ALSO BY MARY SHEEPSHANKS

Patterns in the Dark 1990

Thinning Grapes 1992

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# A Price for Everything

Mary Sheepshanks



arrow books

*To my daughters and daughter-in-law  
Belinda, Susannah, and Alice  
with love*

# Chapter 1

VISITORS TO DUNTAN, unless they knew the house well enough to take the little road through the village that wandered down to the church and led to the back drive, turned in at the main entrance off the top road. The gates themselves had long since gone, melted down to help the war effort. After the war there had been so many difficulties keeping the house and estate running that no one had even contemplated replacing them. The stone griffins that sat on top of the pillars from which the gates had hung were still there. They had the look of two pugilists pausing between rounds. One had lost a claw and the other sustained serious injury to its beak, and they gave the impression that hostilities were by no means over.

‘Have they been fighting this morning?’ asked Birdie, christened Henrietta but seldom called by that name, bouncing about in the back of the car. She always asked the same question at exactly the same place.

‘I don’t think so, not today.’

‘How can you tell?’

Sonia slowed down and changed gear before rattling over the cattle-grid.

‘Well they’re not out of breath today, and then you see they had such a big battle last week. They’re probably tired.’ Sonia was not in the mood for storytelling. Tom tried to look aloof and uninterested. He would have died rather than admit that he did not really like the saga of the griffins’ battles; that at night, if the wind was howling round the house, the idea that some of the mysterious clangings and bangings might be made by the clash of wings from the two

great beasts fighting overhead was a far from comfortable one. It was odd, because it was Birdie who was the nervous one of the family.

From the main road there was no hint that the land fell away so sharply. It came as a surprise, after rounding the first corner in the drive, to see the whole park sloping away on either side. The sight of the great beeches standing so tall and straight that they might have been lowered from the sky to act as plumb-lines only served to emphasise the steepness of the hill. Halfway down, on a sort of platform above the river, lay the house; then the ground fell away again and the countryside could be seen for miles beyond, stretching into the blue distance.

The house itself was beautiful to look at, but sick within, its perfect proportions and mellow stone showing no signs of the disease that threatened its survival. The stones changed colour with the changing light, so that on wet days it seemed grey as the sky itself, but in brighter weather, when the sun was shining, it took on a yellow colour, as though the light emanated from the stones themselves.

Every time Sonia saw Duntan, the beauty of it struck her anew. She thought she would never get used to it, would never cease to see it with a fresh eye, as she had on her first visit.

The drive curved down to the front door but today Sonia drove through the archway in the wall at the left-hand side of the house, which led into the stable yard. This was partly because it gave the easiest access to the kitchen, but partly because she knew that if she went in at the front she would be faced by two letters which had arrived by that morning's post. They would be lying on the round hall table where she had left them earlier, not feeling strong enough to open them at the time. One she knew contained her bank statement, and though she had a rough idea of what it would reveal she was certainly not anxious for any confirmation. The other letter, equally unwelcome but more

of an unknown quantity, was addressed in the spiky, flamboyant writing of her mother-in-law. Sonia had noticed with a sinking heart that it bore a London postmark, though she had thought her to be at a safe distance in New York; this raised ominous possibilities of an impending visit. In any case, any communication from that quarter always heralded trouble and she decided that she was still not ready to face reading it. The thought of unloading the shopping from the back of the car seemed an unusually inviting prospect as a delaying tactic.

On this particular morning, Sonia staggered along the passage, her arms full of precariously balanced objects. Birdie ran behind her, fielding oranges that had burst from their bag and were rolling over the uneven stone flags, but Tom had vanished, as he was apt to do when help was required.

'I'm sorry we've been so long,' said Sonia, dumping her first load on the scrubbed wooden table in the middle of the kitchen, 'but the supermarket was ghastly this morning and the trolleys had a conspiracy and would only go round and round, and they'd altered all the shelves again so everything was in a different place.'

Minnie, flour to the elbows, sniffed disparagingly. 'I never did hold with those places. Now in the old days, Mr Moss used to call on your granny regular in his white overall, take an order and deliver it on Wednesdays, and then he used to come into the kitchen, get a nice cup of tea from Mrs Barrett and she'd tell his fortune, after, in the leaves. Proper tea it was then, too, not like all this sawdust in silly little bags.' And she looked scornfully at the super-economy box of tea bags Sonia had just unpacked.

'But Min, she couldn't have told his fortune *every* Wednesday. It wouldn't have changed often enough.' Birdie loved to hear about the old days when Minnie had started in service.

‘Every Wednesday.’ Minnie was firm. ‘A lot can happen in a week. Why, one day she saw *great changes* in Mr Moss’s cup, and the following Friday Mr Moss went home and found Mrs Moss dead as a doornail on the rag rug by the fire. You’d never learn that from a tea bag.’

‘Just as well perhaps.’ Sonia staggered in with a last cardboard box of groceries. ‘If you’ve got the kettle on, Min darling, I’d love a nice safe mug of Nes, and don’t you go peering in it for impending disasters. There’s a letter from Lady Rosamund in the hall, and that’s more than enough to be going on with.’

‘That one,’ said Minnie darkly, ‘she spells trouble like an east wind causes liver chills. You head her off, Sonia, or we’ll none of us have a minute’s peace.’

‘Don’t you like Granny then?’ asked Birdie, helping herself to a dollop of raw pastry.

‘I wouldn’t presume to air my views,’ said Minnie mendaciously, her voice grown suddenly refined. ‘Now take your fingers out of the bowl, Birdie, or by shots you’ll have a lead-lined stomach as’ll give you a pain before lunch. Shall I put these things away, Sonia, or will you? I thought you wanted to paint this morning.’

‘No, I’ll do them. I’ll just go and read the post first. I’ll paint when I’ve cleared up in here.’

Even as she said it, she asked herself why she should so often allow the jobs that she did not want to do to stand in the way of the one job she really did want to do. Minnie would have been quite happy to put everything away on her own, would probably have quite enjoyed doing it, whereas to Sonia it was just a chore, and an unwelcome one at that. In her heart she knew it was largely a fear of failing that held her back. ‘Sonia’s so gifted, you know. She was a promising artist before she married Archie.’ It was pleasant to hear people say that and to rest on this half-earned reputation with no further effort. ‘Isn’t she marvellous? So talented herself and yet she copes with all those children

and that huge great house and all Archie's demands as well, but of course you know it's a wonderful marriage.' Sonia wondered how soon it would be before the cracks that were starting to appear in her marriage would become as obvious as the cracks in the house.

There were in fact three letters on the hall table. The bank statement Sonia decided to ignore, to put off opening it until she felt stronger, but the letter from her mother-in-law might require action and could not be left, so she thrust her finger into the gap in the envelope and tore it open. Archie opened all his letters with an ivory paperknife, slitting them open neatly at the top. He infuriated the children at Christmas by untying the knots on string and ribbon instead of pulling the wrappings off anyhow and diving straight in. It was always possible to tell whether he or Sonia had opened a letter. Sonia read the one before her with a sinking heart:

*Darling Sonia,  
I have been thinking so much about the difficulties which you and Archie are facing, with all the decisions that must soon be taken about the future of the house. As you know, I can't help feeling involved in any troubles that concern you both, and it seems that I may really be able to be of great help in this matter - you might say I have received Guidance! I had intended to stay in the States with Martha this summer, but I have no intention of being selfish when you may need me, and have therefore decided to come over to England. Later on I may rent a flat in London - at the moment we are staying with dear Mimi - but I think Martha could do with some good country air after the long New York winter, and I have much to tell you, so I thought perhaps we would come down to Duntan for a little visit - perhaps even base ourselves with you for the summer??! I long to see the darling children, and it will be a joy to be of real use to you both. Do ring me, darling, at this number and we can have a cosy chat about plans. Dearest love - R.*

What can the old bitch be up to? wondered Sonia. Guidance - unselfish - country air? Oh no. This is all I need.

The third letter was from the Heritage at Risk association, which offered an advisory service to the owners of historic houses. Sonia had written to ask for their expert help, though Archie had been against it, convinced of the

pointlessness of pouring money they would have to borrow into a building he felt could never be anything but a liability. The letter thanked her for her enquiry and proposed that a Simon Hadleigh should pay a visit to Duntan as soon as possible to assess the state of the house, the potential of the property and alternative schemes for its future. She supposed she would have to show this letter to Archie. It was, after all, his house, though already she felt a fierce possessiveness about it, and knew in her heart that she would only be prepared to accept advice about its future that tallied with her own existing ideas, and which somehow made possible her passionate desire that they should go on living there.

It was strange to her that Archie should not feel this way too, but his interest lay in the land, in the estate rather than the house, although it was his forebears who had built and lived in it for more than two hundred years. He was by nature so much more conventional than she was that she had expected him to wish to cling on to the house above all else, and it had come as a surprise to her that he would be so easily prepared to let it go. It was nothing to do with pride in the idea of living in so grand a building that made her wish to remain in possession. It was rather that the house itself seemed to possess her. It was a love affair, and like many love affairs, it was inconvenient.

Just to keep the house watertight would be impossible without spending enormous sums of money on the roof, and they were only just beginning to be aware of the extent of other problems. They had known, of course, during his grandmother's lifetime that the house was growing increasingly shabby, but as with the old lady herself, the air of fading elegance had been part of the charm. After her death, however, it seemed as if some new evidence of damp rot, dry rot or mould was always coming to light, as though the battle of the griffins, a product of her own imagination, was becoming a menacing reality. It was as if

some awful guerrilla warfare were going on inside the house, and it was not possible to anticipate from which direction the next offensive would appear. It was not a pleasant thought.

She stuffed the letters into the pocket of her jeans so that she could show them to Archie herself, choosing her moment rather than leaving them open on the table for him to discover when he came in for lunch. She wanted to stop him from hardening his opinions before she had any chance to influence him, though she was uneasily aware that her power to influence him was not what it had once been, that nowadays his admiration for her was too often eroded by dissatisfaction.

## Chapter 2

WHEN SONIA RETURNED, Cassie, the youngest of their four children, was under the kitchen table in a cardboard box, reclining on a pile of tea towels taken from Minnie's washing basket while Birdie crawled round on all fours alternately mooing, baaing and making a noise like the bray of a donkey. Cassie wore her white sunhat but was otherwise stark-naked. She looked very comfortable and rather grand, and from time to time waved graciously out of the box like the Queen in the Ascot procession.

'Come along then, Cassie,' said Minnie. 'Time for rest.'

'No rest,' said Cassie uncompromisingly, her small figure stiffening with resistance and her feet, which were hanging over the side of the box, beginning to drum warningly.

'She's Little Lord Jesus in the manger,' explained Birdie, 'and I'm the Ox and the Ass and the Sheep, and I'm worshipping her.'

'Whatever next?' asked Minnie. 'Well she'll just have to go and be Jesus in her bed,' and she pulled the manger from under the table and held out the discarded clothes invitingly. Cassie, clutching her hat as if it represented the last remnants of decency in a naughty world, started to scream.

'She wants me to go on worshipping her,' said Birdie, who often acted as Cassie's interpreter and despite being three years older always had to play the supporting role in their games. 'And her hat's a halo like in the window in church. Do let her stay a bit longer, Min. She loves being worshipped.'

'I dare say she does - it must be very pleasant - but some of us haven't time for this sort of fool carry-on. Now come

along young lady, up to Bedfordshire.' Minnie scooped up the loudly protesting Jesus and bore her bellowing out of the kitchen.

'It's all spoilt now. It won't ever be the same again. It was a lovely game,' said Birdie tragically.

'Oh darling, I am sorry. I do understand, but she gets so grumpy if she doesn't have a rest. Let me shove these things away, and then how would you like to come with me and do some painting?' Sonia looked at Birdie's disconsolate figure, her foot gently kicking the leg of the kitchen table. Not given to the robust rages of her brother and sisters, Birdie was sometimes the more difficult to deal with.

'Really paint, in your studio?'

Sonia nodded. This was a real olive branch, a special treat, because the studio was the one private place in the house where even her children were only welcome by express invitation. Birdie brightened up at once.

Sonia had her studio upstairs in what had once been the sewing room. The deep fitted drawers with open shelves above them where linen requiring mending had once been piled made ideal storage space. Archie's grandmother had installed a double sink there for Sonia so that she could wash her brushes and generally clean up, although it seldom looked as if much cleaning went on. It always amazed Archie, himself so meticulous, that out of the chaos of Sonia's studio such immaculate finished pictures could be produced. He considered her untidy and disorganised in the rest of her life too, and could never understand how she could leave such a trail of chaos behind her and yet manage to achieve a degree of perfection in much that she undertook. Half-finished canvases leant against the walls and pots of paint sat about on the floor, making it hazardous to walk about without getting paint on your clothes. Door handles and light switches were always coated with different colours where Sonia had too hastily opened a door or turned on the light with a painty hand. Along the shelves

were vases and jars, useful for keeping fresh any flowers or leaves she was using for the paintings of plants and foliage that were her speciality. What set her pictures apart from an artistic point of view were the strange, surrealist backgrounds in which she set the precisely painted botanical material. It lifted them above the ordinary and merely decorative, and had very much excited a few critics in her early days, especially at her degree exhibition. But somehow her promise had not been quite fulfilled, and she was miserably aware that her contemporaries at the Slade, no more gifted than she herself was, had gone on to make names for themselves while she had let her first advantage slip. She knew that talent alone is not enough, and that so far she had lacked the drive and determination that were also necessary if she was to reach her potential as an artist. She also knew that had she been perfectly content to find fulfilment as a wife and mother the other would not have mattered, but this split within herself often caused her to be restless and unsatisfied so that she felt herself deficient in both roles.

To begin with, she had kept the studio strictly as a place for work when she was at Duntan, but as the dissatisfactions of her marriage loomed larger she was aware that it was becoming something more, and that she was beginning to bring much-loved books and objects in there, as a dog will take a bone to its basket. She had started to spend more of her time in the studio, doing things she would once have done elsewhere in the house, while actually painting less and less. Once in there with the door closed, it was as if, along with the rest of the household, she could also shut off a part of herself.

It was this feeling that there was a part of Sonia he couldn't reach, which shut him out, that so tantalised Archie. In their early married days she had sometimes tried to let him in, to share her deepest feelings and longings with him, but he had been unable to enter her private world and

had shied off like a frightened horse. He very rarely came into the studio now, for nothing was more calculated to set them on edge with each other. Too often she had made him feel an unwelcome intruder. Lately he had made her feel like a spoilt child who spent too much time selfishly playing alone with a private toy. A telephone had now been installed in the studio, the painty marks on the receiver in their bedroom having become more than Archie could bear. Telephone bills were a cause of friction between them.

'You shoot - I telephone,' Sonia would tell him crossly when she had just had a long gossip with a friend in the middle of the morning and been interrupted by him. Now that he was no longer in the army and was self-employed farming and running the estate, he was too often under her feet and she felt a victim of the old adage 'For better, for worse - but not for lunch'.

The children adored the studio for precisely the reasons that Archie disliked it. Because they were so sure of Sonia, knew that she loved them, it represented no kind of threat, and had the irresistible appeal of all things not easily available. Polly, in fact, drew quite well and showed genuine promise, but because by nature she required a response, whether of praise or criticism, Sonia could never really get on well with her own work when Polly was with her. Tom, who was no artist, would buzz around his mother like a mosquito, constantly picking things up and putting them down, so that in the end she would find herself weakly agreeing to go and play ping-pong or tennis, or to accompany him on some armed expedition, for Tom was a man of action. Of all the children, he needed to be occupied the most, lacking the ability of the girls to withdraw into a totally imaginary world.

Birdie was the most peaceful, and was soon happily occupied with drawing paper and crayons. She did not at the moment show any great artistic promise, but could happily create for herself an alternative to the sometimes

rather threatening world in which she lived. In Birdie's private world mothers were totally occupied with their children's welfare. Fathers led unadventurous existences and never went hang-gliding or hunting or raced boats as her own father did. Nobody ever quarrelled. In particular the fathers and mothers never quarrelled with each other. Her drawings were mostly of stiff ladies wearing curious triangular skirts, to the bottom of which their stout legs appeared to be pinned. These rigid ladies, sporting overdecorated floral hats on their round heads, invariably pushed prams or carried vegetable-marrow babies in their arms. Looking at these strip cartoons of uneventful family life, Sonia was always guiltily aware of how far Birdie's real family must fall short of her ideal. She had written a poem at school, currently stuck on the fridge, that reproached Sonia every time she read it:

Mother mother meek and mild  
Love thee thou thy tiny child.  
Comfort it in every way  
And LOVE IT LOVE IT ALL THE DAY.

'You can't say "thee thou thy",' Polly had said scornfully. 'It's not grammar.' But grammar or not, Birdie had obstinately refused to change it, even though Polly could make her cry by mouthing it at her silently as though speaking to someone who could lip-read. Sonia had had to ban a satirical version of the poem produced by Tom, which went:

Birdie Birdie wet and weepy  
Love thee thou thy crawly creepy  
Keep it in a bed of slime  
To slither slither all the time.

As Birdie was known to have a horror of worms, slugs, snakes and all things that go upon their bellies, this was considered the acme of schoolroom wit. Sonia thought it pretty funny herself, but the torrent of hurt tears produced by the author of the original poem was too much to be allowed. Poor Birdie had been born with several skins too few.

For about an hour they worked away in silence. Sonia was trying to get enough paintings together for a small exhibition in the late summer at a local gallery that had recently opened, and found the discipline of having a date to work for helpful in combating her own talent for procrastination.

Because she did not feel in the right mood for creating dream worlds on paper, which required time, it being all too easy to lose the spark of inspiration if the creative process were interrupted, she decided to concentrate instead on finishing a delicate watercolour of 'Angel's Tears' narcissi that she had begun the day before. If she left it any longer the flowers might have opened up too much. Perhaps later their name would give her inspiration for the surroundings in which to place them. As her eye was more involved than her imagination in this occupation, it gave her a chance to think.

Why had she married Archie? Certainly she had always been enslaved by the magic of the house, its feeling of permanence so different from the army quarters that had been home throughout her own itinerant childhood, but she could honestly say that the knowledge that Archie would one day inherit it had not entered into her calculations. She had been very attracted to him at the time, but marriage had also seemed a way out of her self-doubts, a postponing of the decision to go all out for her career. Archie had been a subaltern in her father's regiment. As the General's daughter she had met a lot of young officers, many of whom had been attracted by her vivacity and wit and intrigued by

her talent and lack of convention, and Archie had been no exception. She had mistaken his ready social laughter for a sense of the ridiculous similar to her own, and because he had seemed so delighted by everything she said, had thought they shared a point of view. His grandmother, who was fond of him in a clear but not uncritical way, had tried to warn her about their possible incompatibility but she had not listened.

Archie was not really without a sense of humour, but it was as though his rather bleak childhood had suppressed it and he needed her to activate it for him. It was her ability to make him laugh and look at the world through a change of spectacles that had so captivated him in the first place. She had opened a door into a whole new part of himself he had not known existed, and he had been entranced. But now, having left the army and come to live at Duntan, the spell no longer seemed to be working so well. As she painted, and the small flowers sprang to life on the paper in front of her, Sonia agonised over her marriage, but could reach no conclusions.

When Archie came in for lunch Sonia could tell immediately that he was not in the right frame of mind to be amenable.

At forty he looked in his prime, sleek, energetic and, except with his wife, outwardly very assured; if the leather belt he wore today caused the flesh around the top of his trousers to bulge very slightly, still nobody could possibly call him fat. His fresh-coloured face might one day become florid, but that day had not yet arrived. He smelt a shade too strongly of expensive aftershave from Trumper's, but gave the impression of someone who was in no way above tough manual work. It could be assumed that when he did it, it would be because he would not ask a subordinate to do anything of which he himself was not capable.

He had acquired a set of beliefs early in life that until he met Sonia he had never seriously questioned, and he still

felt very much safer if keeping them in a locked drawer. He liked fair play, honest dealings, and a God who was available by appointment at eleven o'clock on Sunday mornings in the Church of England. He was kind, competent, and capable of great devotion, though Sonia was uneasily beginning to be aware that there might be a limit as to how much cold water he was prepared to put up with, either poured over him by his wife or leaking through the roof of his ancestral home.

'Your mother,' said Sonia, 'is coming to stay.'

'Oh, jolly good,' said Archie. Loyalty to family was part of his creed, no matter how deeply the thorns of their presence might penetrate the flesh.

'Your mother,' said Sonia, 'wants to come and live with us for the summer to help us with our difficulties with the house. Your mother has had Guidance.'

'Guidance from who?'

'Presumably from Above. She doesn't specify. Could be the Pope or the Archangel Gabriel. More likely to be Lucifer or some new man.'

Archie looked a little disconcerted.

'Oh well, if she wants to come, of course she must. This is her home, too, in a way.'

'Like hell! If she comes, then it's as a guest. I'm not having her coming the hostess over me in my own house. But I suppose we'll have to have her for a bit. Better to know what she's up to, anyhow, scheming old devil. At least she's good for a laugh if one's feeling tough enough.'

In fact, Sonia enjoyed her mother-in-law's company a good deal more than Archie did. She couldn't quite resist her when she was actually there, whereas Archie, who always defended her in her absence, frequently found her presence trying in the extreme. Minnie always said that Cassie took after her, which boded an eventful future.

Archie had been brought up mostly by his grandmother. His mother, Lady Rosamund, ever a tiger for new

experiences, had quickly become bored by her solid tweedy husband and the heir she had provided, and when Archie was two had left them both for the first time to join an ashram in India. The rigours of the spiritual quest, however, had not been to her taste for very long, and she had been sidetracked by a rajah who owned strings of polo ponies and ropes of pearls. Eventually she had returned to Archie's father, plus the pearls, but minus the ponies and the lover, to take up the reins of her life in English Society, occasionally dazzling her young son with her presence but mostly leaving his upbringing to her mother-in-law and a succession of nannies.

An affair with a rich Italian count had finally proved too much for her bemused husband to accept and had steered her through the divorce courts towards a spell in a castello near Florence. During this interlude she had become very Italian and more Catholic than the Pope. Her first marriage had not counted, she said, since it had only taken place in the Church of England, while the Rajah had been just a small sin of the flesh, on a par, it was to be presumed, with an overdose of Charbonnel and Walker chocolates. Conveniently enough, her second marriage later turned out not to have counted either: because of her divorce it had not been conducted with the full rights of Mother Church and was not therefore a true spiritual union, leaving her splendidly free to embark on her next alliance with an American banker, by whom she had had a child, Archie's half-sister Martha. This marriage had lasted surprisingly well until a couple of years ago when, perhaps unable to stand the pace of life with Lady Rosamund, despite a diet of bran and polyunsaturated oils, the banker had died.

There could be no doubt that the state of widowhood suited her. The little fleshly sins could now be regarded more in the light of a keep-fit regime, a sort of workout in the gymnasium for the purpose of keeping herself in trim. She also had control of the dollars, which was certainly an

advantage. Since Archie's father had been killed in a riding accident during her Italian marriage, she was able to regard herself, if not quite accurately, as twice widowed, a tragic figure. Though she had never actually owned Duntan, she chose, when it suited her, to behave as a sort of Queen Mother, with a right to be consulted about its future.

Through all these storms and flittings, old Lady Duntan had remained, infuriated but amused by her daughter-in-law's career. She had been a not unaffectionate, if somewhat alarming, figure, so determined had she been to instil into him the moral fibre his mother so conspicuously lacked, but she had provided a measure of continuity, and Duntan was the base to which Archie, in truth a lonely little boy, had returned from school or from visits to his mother in various parts of the world.

Since Archie had appeared to take the news of his mother's impending arrival with equanimity, Sonia took the plunge.

'Here's another letter perhaps you should look at.' She flicked the one from Heritage at Risk across the table, backhanded, as the children threw Frisbees. It landed neatly on Archie's side plate. It was an irritating talent of which she was proud.

'Who the hell?'

He read the letter with a look of growing annoyance.

'Look, darling. I'm sorry.' Archie had on his patiently-explaining-for-the-twentieth-time voice. 'We cannot afford to go on living in this house. The fact that you've got hold of some lily-fingered queer who's good at advising people how to spend money they haven't got is not going to make any difference.'

'That's not fair,' said Sonia. 'You haven't even met him. It's free advice. We're not committed.'

'What's lily-fingered queer?' asked Birdie.

'Shirley Gillespie's mother,' said Polly, shovelling macaroni cheese into her mouth and using her parents' argument as

a shield to cover her second Coca-Cola, 'says queers are men who like sleeping together.'

The advantage of having Shirley Gillespie as a best friend was that her mother, who lectured in feminine psychology at the university, believed in having *frank open discussions* about the *truth*. There had to be some advantage. Shirley Gillespie was rather a dull little girl, but some of the things her mother told her were absolutely thrilling.

'The art beak at school's a queer,' said Tom. 'We call him Sponge Fingers. Sponge because he drinks, and Fingers because -'

'Yes, well.' Archie gave his children a dissatisfied look. 'If you children got on with your lunch and shut up, your mother and I might be able to have a decent conversation.'

Sonia tried not to laugh, and put on her most wheedling voice.

'Archie, darling, please think about it - just for me. You don't know anything about this chap. He might have a really bright idea.'

'That's what I'm afraid of,' said Archie gloomily. 'Too many god-damn bright ideas. But have it your own way. You usually do. Let him come if you must, but let me make one thing clear: I am not, repeat *not*, selling any land to finance the upkeep of this house. Enough of that has gone on already. You don't begin to realise what the income required just to live here would be, let alone what we'd have to spend to make it all sound in the first place.'

Sound was a favourite word of Archie's, and could be applied alike to houses and horses, politicians and parsons. She wondered if Archie tapped his fellow members on the county council, to which he had just been elected, to see if they rang hollow. She supposed it must be awful for him to have both his wife and his mother so thoroughly unsound.

'And another thing. I do wish you'd realise what a much better lifestyle we could have if we were in the Dial House. What is the point of living in this house and spending the

whole time in the kitchen while water pours in everywhere else and ruins the furniture?’

‘You don’t mean a better lifestyle, you mean a grander one. Fewer rooms but more butlers.’

Birdie started to scrape her bottom lip with her top teeth, and crossed her fingers for safety. The argument was becoming horribly familiar to her, and the macaroni cheese, so lovely and liquid in the dish, seemed to have formed itself into a solid lump somewhere between her ribs.

‘Nothing wrong with butlers. Jolly good if you can get ’em.’ Archie might have been talking about fruit out of season. ‘And while we’re on the subject, you might like to get a proper cook lined up before the shooting season starts. If I manage to get all the guns, there’ll be endless shooting lunches to be provided. Far too much for you and Minnie to do, and I know you want a bit more time to yourself to get your little exhibition going,’ he added kindly.

Sonia started to clear the table.

‘Why do you always have to call it my “little exhibition”?’ she asked, though she always called it that herself. ‘It sounds so patronising.’

‘I’m sorry,’ said Archie stiffly. ‘I was just trying to be helpful. You always say I don’t take any interest in your painting. When I do, you bite my head off.’

‘Oh well, I’m sorry,’ said Sonia, feeling that she had gained her point about the Heritage at Risk appointment. ‘No need to get all hot and bothered about it.’

‘I am not hot or bothered.’

‘Well, you’re sweating under your left armpit.’ A small dark stain disfigured the broad blue and white stripes of Archie’s New and Lingwood shirt. It was a warm April day and he had thrown his regimental blazer over the back of a chair. Furiously he put it on again and glared at Sonia. She shot him a mocking look, which was a mistake because it caused her to catch her toe in a hole in the worn linoleum so