RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

Goodbye Piccadilly

Patricia Burns

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About the Book

Thomas Packard is dead and the tensions between his grandchildren mount as to who will get the major shareholding in the store, who will be on the board, who will be chairman. Amelie fights to maintain her position whilst coping with a marriage that is far from perfect and trying to resist a strong attraction to her friend’s husband. Then their world is torn apart by the declaration of war, but business must go on despite staffing difficulties. It opens up new opportunities for Amelie, who is quick to seize them, and puts ever more of her energies into her beloved Packards, but it also stiffens her brother Alec’s resolve to stay firmly in control.

ALSO BY PATRICIA BURNS

Trinidad Street
A Step From Cinnamon Alley
Keep Safe for Me
Packards

Goodbye Piccadilly

Packards at War

Patricia Burns

Century · London

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October 1913

IT WAS FAR too beautiful a day for a funeral.

Golden sunlight shone down from a deep blue sky, turning the yellow brick of Tatwell Court to a mellow honey, glowing on the autumn leaves of great oaks and chestnuts and hornbeams in the park, glancing off the still waters of the lake. It was a day for galloping over the wide grassland and trotting through the woods, or for a shooting party that might bag a record number of birds, a day for bonfires and the making of vast vats of fruit preserves. Instead, the busy, ordered world that was Tatwell was stilled. Even the smoke from the many chimneys hung motionless in the sky.

On the gravelled sweep before the house, the estate workers were gathered, weather-beaten men with leathery hands, uneasy in their Sunday best, unable to keep their eyes from straying to the carriage at the foot of the Palladian stairway. It had been there for fully ten minutes, a hearse of high Victorian magnificence complete with six black horses with plumed heads. There was the sound of motorcar wheels on gravel. The heads of the men turned. A gleaming maroon Rolls-Royce purred round the corner of the house, the head of a procession of vehicles. It drew up behind the hearse. The great front doors of the house swung open.

First came the house staff. They processed out of the doors and lined the steps, the men in black jackets, their heads bare, the maids with black ribbands in their caps. They stood with clasped hands and bowed heads. Then

came the coffin, borne on the shoulders of four of the footmen. The men waiting outside snatched off their hats. Down the steps it swayed, to be slid into the hearse and surrounded by banks of wreaths. Sir Thomas Packard, the man who had come to London at the age of fifteen with three shillings in his pocket and founded the greatest department store in the Empire, had embarked on his last journey.

The mourners followed. Sir Thomas's widow, Lady Margaret Packard, leaned on the arms of her daughter Winifred and son-in-law Bertie. Both women were dressed in black crêpe and heavily veiled. They stepped into the Rolls-Royce. Behind them came the eldest grandson, Edward Amberley Packard, his wife Sylvia on his arm, his expression suitably sombre, his dark eyes lowered so that nobody could see from the gleam in them that this was the happiest day of his life. They boarded the large green Renault that was next in line. After them came Thomas's other two grandchildren, Amelie Rutherford, obviously pregnant, with her husband Hugo, and Perry and his wife Gwendoline. All four got into Hugo's Austin.

Amelie had not realised that grief was such a very physical pain. It was a tangible presence within her, as real and hard as the baby that drummed its sharp little heels under her ribs. She knew its colour, this pain; it was black shot through with red. It spread through her and clawed at her with its talons. She could keep it in check in public, if she concentrated very hard, but now, sitting staring ahead at that gross monstrosity of a hearse, it reached up and clutched her round the throat.

Her brother Perry patted her hand.

'Bear up, old thing.'

She turned on him, raging through the tears.

'Bear up! What do you care? You never loved him. He was just a source of money to you, that's all. Well, I shouldn't

hope for too much from his will, if I were you. He saw through you. He knew just what you are.'

'Really–' Gwendoline began, offended.

Hugo put a restraining hand on Amelie's arm.

'My dear, control yourself.'

He hated public displays of emotion.

Amelie shook him off.

'Don't touch me!'

She felt rather than saw the men exchange glances over her head.

'She's upset,' Perry murmured.

Upset. It was such a feeble term that she almost laughed. Then the motor began to edge forward, silencing her. With the immediate family all present, the cortege was moving off, led by mutes in black frock coats and crêpe-swathed top hats. Other motorcars were drawing up at the steps to take the more distant relatives, the political figures, the founders and current chairmen of other great London stores, the senior management of Packards.

With excruciating dignity, the procession crawled through the park. Halfway up a grassy slope, the herd of fallow deer raised their heads and watched, ears flicking nervously, ready to run. Thomas Packard had loved those deer, enjoyed watching them roaming on his land, enjoyed even more eating their succulent flesh. Most of all, he took pleasure in embarrassing his daughter by telling her Society guests that when he was a lad he had been shot at by gamekeepers for snaring rabbits, and now here he was eating his own venison. It never failed to mortify poor Winifred.

Hugo was staring not at the hearse but at the Renault immediately in front of them.

'I cannot think what possessed Edward to buy that French motor. There are plenty of good British models for him to choose from.'

‘I thought the Froggies were our allies. Entente cordiale and all that, what?’ Perry said.

‘Indeed yes. They’re the only truly civilised nation,’ Gwendoline agreed.

Hugo snorted.

‘Believe me, we’re much closer to the Germans. Their thinking matches ours in a great many ways. They’ve just got a bit above themselves, that’s all. Need teaching a lesson on who’s really in charge.’

Amelie ignored him. She had long ago given up trying to understand her husband’s opinions and beliefs. None of them stood up to close analysis; it was best to just let him get on with it. At least he had given up trying to persuade her to take an active part in propagating them. Except when it came to producing children, of course. On that there was no moving him. She rested her hands on top of her belly. Her fourth baby in under five years. She had hoped for a daughter this time, after her three sons. But now, gazing at the black and silver hearse towering above even the massive Rolls-Royce, she wanted another boy. They could not call him Thomas, for her eldest already bore his great-grandfather’s name, but he would be the one who would carry his spirit on into the future. The thought was oddly comforting.

The church contained a satisfyingly important roll-call of names. Mr Lloyd George was there, and Mr Gordon Selfridge, Mr John Lewis, Sir Ernest Maple and many other great men from the world of retailing. But more important to Amelie, and, she was sure, to her grandfather, a contingent from the store had been invited. Her mother had been horrified when Amelie had suggested it, but she had fought fiercely for their inclusion. For once, her brother Edward had agreed with her.

‘This is not a Society event, Mother. Of course there must be representatives from the staff.’

Winifred had been outnumbered.

The store itself was closed today. The great Oxford Street landmark that Thomas Packard had built from a job lot of mourning apparel in a tiny rented shop on the Tottenham Court Road was silent and still, the counters and cabinets swathed in dust sheets, blinds covering the dazzling window displays for which Amelie was responsible. Amelie stared at the coffin just feet away from her in the packed church. Tomorrow she would turn those windows into memorials to her grandfather. She had commissioned large copies of the portrait photograph of him in his prime, and would place one in the centre of every display, draped in black ribbands.

She held on to this idea through what felt like an interminable service. The prayers and the readings seemed to go on and on. She could only mouth the words of hymns for fear of breaking down. Her eyes kept coming back to the coffin. There lay the man who was dearer to her than her mother, far dearer than her husband. He had been such an all-important presence in her life that at times she still could not really believe that he was gone for ever.

Edward got up and walked to the lectern, produced a sheet of notes from his inner pocket, paused. A deeper quiet settled over the church. Edward read well, his voice carrying easily, his tone suitably respectful. As long as he spoke of his grandfather’s achievements, Amelie was all right. Here they were in the realms of fact. But when he started speaking of Thomas’s qualities, of his own sense of loss, she churned with a sick rage at such hypocrisy. She wanted to leap up and accuse Edward of gloating beneath that smooth mask. For gloating he certainly was. With Thomas gone, the store was his. And with Edward in charge, everything would change. Unless, that was, Thomas had left behind some bombshell in his will. There was always a chance of that, a chance that kept Amelie sitting with her hands folded in front of her, outwardly brave and controlled. She stroked the bulge. There at least she had the better of her brother.

Edward had fathered just one child, a girl. She allowed herself a ghost of a smile.

At last it was over, and they were all processing out for the interment. The previous owners of Tatwell had been laid to rest in a family vault in the church, but Thomas had left strict instructions about this. He wanted no stone mausoleum. He was to lie on the earth of the churchyard.

They gathered round the open grave. Amelie's head swam. She caught hold of Hugo's arm, glad for once for his physical strength. He glanced down at her.

'Are you all right?'

Amelie nodded.

'. . . our brother Thomas . . . dust to dust . . .'

She threw the rose she was holding into the gaping hole.

People were moving, she realised. The rector was talking to her grandmother, holding her hand in his. That was it. He was gone. She stared down.

'Amelie–'

Her mother's voice, low and urgent, close to her ear.

'Amelie, who arc those people over there?'

'Where?'

Dazed, Amelie looked about. There were people everywhere, family, official mourners, folk from the village and the estate come to pay their last respects.

'Over there, by the cherry tree –'

Then she saw who Winifred meant. A woman and a young man, both in deepest mourning, were standing together, isolated from everyone else. It was hard to tell how old the woman was, for she was heavily veiled, but it was obvious that she was deeply distressed. The young man's arm was round her shoulder and he was trying in vain to comfort her. Amelie was about to tell her mother that she had no idea who they were, when the man looked up, looked right at her. She caught her breath, stared and stared again. It was as if she were looking at a younger version of that photograph she planned to use in the windows of the store. It was not

just the features, it was the expression, that look of fearless determination. She wrapped her free arm protectively round her unborn child.

‘Well?’ Winifred asked.

Amelie swallowed.

‘I – I have never seen them before in my life.’

‘Nor I, so why are they here?’

Amelie dragged her gaze away and faced her mother. It was obvious from the sharp suspicion in her face that she had made the same guess.

‘Why don’t you go and find out?’ she asked.

‘Speak to that person? Certainly not,’ Winifred retorted, predictably.

Amelie stopped short of suggesting sending someone else to speak to them. Her mother might just take up that idea.

Winifred glanced again at the strangers.

‘I wonder if your grandmother –?’

‘For heaven’s sake, Mother! The last thing we want to do is to draw her attention to them. We must make very sure that she doesn’t see them.’ Amelie looked to where her grandmother, supported by Edward, was still receiving condolences from a long line of mourners. There was plenty to distract her there.

‘Of course I wasn’t going to do anything of the kind. The very idea! If they are who they appear to be, then I think it the very depths of bad taste that they should show their faces here at this time. But then I suppose that is all one can expect from those sort of people.’

‘I quite agree,’ Hugo said.

Amelie stole another look at them. She had heard the rumours, of course, and it was hardly unusual for a man to have a mistress. But her grandfather had been eighty-one when he died. Surely that was a trifle old? Or had it all been a long time ago? The son, if he was indeed her son, was at least twenty. The woman’s shoulders were heaving with sobs. He began to lead her away.

‘She must have loved him very much,’ she mused out loud, with a stirring of sympathy.

Her mother snorted.

‘Disappointed at having her source of income removed, I should imagine.’

People were moving over to speak to them. Amelie lost sight of the unknown pair as she shook hands and nodded and said all the things that were expected of her. Through the formal words the genuine feeling reached out to her, comforting.

‘. . . a fine man . . .’

‘. . . a true innovator . . .’

‘. . . will be much missed . . .’

Her sister-in-law Sylvia appeared at her side, impeccably turned out as ever, upright and apparently totally in control. Her veil hid not a face ravaged with grief, but one as calm and cool as if she were hostessing a tea party. Once, Amelie had been sorry for Sylvia, married to her brother and abominably betrayed within weeks of their wedding. But now she was beginning to feel that they deserved each other.

‘Your grandmother is very tired. We are taking her back to the house now.’

Sylvia’s tone was suitably sympathetic. Amelie looked at her. Perhaps she was genuine. She was certainly being considerate of Lady Margaret’s welfare. Who could say what was going on behind that impassive expression? It could be anything or nothing. Amelie rested a hand on her belly, unconsciously drawing attention to her pregnant state. She saw Sylvia stiffen.

‘I was surprised to see you here at all, in your condition,’ she said.

‘You mean it’s not entirely *comme il faut*? I would have thought that a reminder of new life was a comfort at a funeral.’ Between the heads of two distinguished businessmen, she saw her brother escorting her

grandmother towards the Rolls-Royce. ‘Hadn’t you better join Edward?’ she asked.

Sylvia left, leaving Amelie feeling more raw than ever. With the departure of the widow, everyone headed for their motorcars. Perry and Gwendoline appeared and climbed into the Austin with Amelie and Hugo.

‘Well, that all went as well as could be expected, didn’t it? Old boy would have been pleased with the turn-out,’ Perry commented.

‘Yes,’ Amelie said.

‘I say, did you see those rum coves in the graveyard? Young chap looked the spitting image of the old boy. Gave me quite a turn, it did. And the old boiler blubbing fit to burst. I–’

‘Thank you,’ Hugo said repressively. ‘I don’t think we need your views on the matter.’

‘Well, you’re going to get them all the same. Do you think Edward saw them? That’d stir him up a bit, wouldn’t it? Just think, he’s our uncle, after a fashion. Half-uncle or something. Do you think Grandfather’s left them anything?’

‘Perry!’ Something snapped inside Amelie. ‘For God’s sake! We’ve only just buried him. Don’t you care at all?’

Unexpectedly, Gwendoline sided with her, putting her arms round Amelie and turning on her husband.

‘Yes, be quiet, Perry. Haven’t you got *any* sense?’

The tears that Amelie had held back all through the service spilled forth, scalding her throat, racking her body with sobs. Ignoring both men, she gave herself up to her grief.

2

CLOSE TO, THE Packard family were even worse than Alexander Eden had imagined. He had always loathed and resented them, the acknowledged ones, living their lives of ease and splendour in the full glory of the Packards empire while he, his father's only son, did not even bear the Packard name. He sat at the rear of the small church, his mother's arm tucked in his, patting her hand automatically every now and again as she wept silently beside him. Up in the church tower, a single bell tolled. Eighty-one chimes, one for every year of his father's life. If he shifted a little to the right or left, he could see the backs of all their heads. He knew who they all were.

Right at the front, bedside the flower decked coffin, was the small, bowed figure of his mother's rival, Lady Margaret Packard, or simply Her, as she had always been known in his household.

'Your father can't come today, he's got to go somewhere with Her,' was one of the statements he most dreaded in the days of his childhood. It always heralded a spate of bad temper and sulks from his mother.

Even now, at the end of his father's life, She had triumphed, for there she was next to his coffin, receiving the sympathy and condolences of this entire churchful of people, while his mother was here at the back, alone and ignored but for him.

Alec looked along the front pew. Next to Her, he could just see the top of the elaborate hat belonging to his half-sister, Winifred. The discrepancy in age between himself and the rest of his father's family was another thing that vaguely

disturbed him. Winifred was a good few years older than his mother, while her children, his half-nephews and -niece, were older than him. All the same, he felt superior to Winifred. From what his father had let drop, she was a stupid woman, concerned with nothing but appearances and furthering her place in Society. She was not a true Packard.

The same applied to Perry, her younger son. There he was, with all the opportunities he could wish for to make his mark in the Packard organisation, and all he did was fool around. Alec had often seen his name mentioned in the Society columns of the newspapers, but never as having done anything remarkable. He was just there, a member of that privileged set that did absolutely nothing to justify their existence on earth except spend huge amounts of money. As Alec looked to Perry, his wife leaned forward. He could see very little of her, swathed as she was in the obligatory black veil, but he knew from a photograph he had seen in the *Illustrated London News* that she was a very pretty woman. When you had the Packard fortune behind you, you could marry beauty.

The service started. Alec half listened to the prayers, helped his mother to her feet for the hymns. A sense of unreality crept up on him. This was his father's funeral. Thomas Packard had always been the ruling force in his life. The rhythms of the household were attuned to him. He was his mother's reason for existence. And yet he had been absent so much of the time that it was hard to believe that this time he really was not going to return.

While the congregation was standing, he caught a glimpse of his half-niece, and experienced a sour kick of jealousy. Amelie was the one his father loved. His little girl, he called her. Amelie only had to ask, and she got what she wanted. She should have been a mere debutante, graduating to a Society lady, and therefore no threat. But no, she had wanted to be part of Packards, and his father had let her, despite the fact that she was a girl. She had set up and run

her own department when she was only eighteen, then she had been given responsibility for display and advertising, and now she had shares of her own, a place on the board and a real say in the running of the store. Everything was easy for her, everything was possible. And on top of that she had provided his father with more male heirs. Three of them, and another soon to come. And all of them acknowledged.

His mother pulled at his arm. He bent his head to listen to her.

‘All these . . . people, come to . . . see him off.’

She could hardly speak for sobbing.

He was not quite sure what response was expected from him.

‘Yes.’

‘Very . . . important people.’

‘He was well respected, Mother. He was a very important man himself.’

She nodded. He thought she had finished, but she was just gathering breath.

‘But it was . . . it was . . . me that he . . . he loved.’

‘Yes, Mother. Only you.’

She broke down again, weeping into her sodden handkerchief. Alec produced another from the supply he carried in his pocket, rather spoiling the line of his black jacket. Black-bordered handkerchiefs, from Packards. He handed it to her, and she pushed it up under her veil to cover her red and swollen eyes. He didn’t see Her crying like this.

The congregation settled into their seats once again. At the front, a tall figure stood up and walked to the lectern. Edward. The enemy. More than Amelie, more than any of them, Alec hated Edward.

He paused for a moment while the shuffling died down, then he began to speak, clearly and with authority, his voice carrying easily to the furthest corners of the church. Alec

stared at him, his face a stony mask. That was his place that Edward was taking. He was Sir Thomas Packard's son. Edward was only his grandson. He should be the one standing there telling these people what a great man Thomas Packard had been. What was more, he knew that he could make every bit as good a job of it. He sat willing Edward to make a mistake, but his delivery was smooth and faultless. Too faultless. He spoke of his own loss and sorrow, but Alec did not believe him. Hadn't his father often said that Edward was heartless? A cold fish, that's what he had called him. But despite that, it was Edward who was heir to the Packard empire.

The service drew to an end. Sir Thomas Packard's remains were borne out of the church by his grandsons and sons-in-law. His son stood and watched the procession pass. He should be there as well; he should carry the weight of the coffin, feel it cutting into his shoulder. The rest of the family passed, sombre and black clad, eyes downcast. Alec hated their hypocrisy. Parading their grief like this, when no doubt they were looking forward to hearing just what they had inherited. He took his mother's arm and guided her out after the VIPs, ignoring the disapproving looks of those whose place in the procession he had usurped. Let them glare. He had a right.

Out in the churchyard the sun shone down out of a perfect blue sky, making him blink after the darkness of the church. He guided his mother towards a tree close to the open grave, where they could watch the interment without being noticed by the family. If he had been there by himself, he would have shouldered his way to the graveside, but he did not want his mother to be insulted. The occasion was proving to be quite enough of a trial for her as it was.

A close-packed phalanx of black-clad mourners came between Alec and his mother and the grave. They could see hardly anything, but the rector's sonorous voice carried

across the churchyard, bringing them the words of the committal.

‘. . . dust to dust . . . in sure and certain hope . . .’

Alec put his arm round his mother’s heaving shoulders and suddenly wished himself a thousand miles away. He had been absolutely determined to come to pay his last respects to his father, and nothing on earth would have kept his mother away, but after all, what good did it do? His father was dead. He didn’t know who was there to see him laid to rest. And his mother was getting more distraught by the minute.

‘It’s all right,’ he said, knowing just how inadequate that sounded. ‘It’ll all be over soon.’

But that only made her weep the more.

The mourners began to move away from the grave. Through their thinning ranks he caught sight of Amelie. She was holding tightly on to her husband’s arm. As he watched, she threw a single red rose into the open grave. Fascinated despite himself, he stayed watching her, unwilling to believe that here might be one member of the acknowledged family who truly cared about his father. She was approached by Winifred, then what he had half hoped for, half dreaded happened. They both turned and gazed at him and his mother. He could not see their expressions behind those veils, but he could guess at their outrage. Defiantly, he gazed back, staring them down until they looked away.

Winifred still appeared to be talking urgently to Amelie, but she did not look at him again, neither did she seem to be agreeing with her mother. Other members of the family were talking to the mourners, conferring with each other. He intercepted other curious glances directed his way, some coldly disapproving, some openly hostile, none sympathetic. It confirmed only too well what he had known all along: he was the outsider, the pariah. He was not wanted. He stood his ground. They were not going to force him to leave. He had as much right to be here as any of them.

Edward assisted Her into the huge Rolls-Royce. It was the signal for everyone else to move. There was an almost visible haze of relief as the rich headed for their motorcars, glad that it was all over.

‘They’re all off to stuff themselves at the big house, I suppose,’ Alec remarked.

His mother did not reply.

The poor folk, estate workers, Alec supposed, and shop assistants and people from the village, dispersed more slowly. Some of them came up and laid bunches of garden flowers beside the heap of florist’s wreaths.

‘Come along,’ he said to his mother.

He led her up to where the gravediggers were already at work filling in.

She stood shaking so much that he had to hold her up. Between her sobs, he could just about make out what she was trying to say.

‘Tommy – Tommy – I love you –’

He took from her hands the wreath she was clutching, and laid it with the others, glancing at the black-bordered card attached to it.

‘To my darling Tommy from your ever loving Dora and your devoted son Alexander.’

Let the rest of the family read that and choke on it.

He gazed into the grave. Only one shiny corner of the coffin could be seen. Even as he looked, it was covered up.

‘Goodbye, Father,’ he said. ‘Rest in Peace.’

Somehow, the tried and tested words seemed to be the best.

Then he led his mother away to face the journey back to London.

In the days that followed, Alec began to dread coming home to St John’s Wood each evening. The white-painted house in the tree-lined street that had been home to him all his life was entirely given over to mourning. His mother kept the

blinds down all the time, had the pictures and looking glasses covered over, forbade him to play the piano or the gramophone.

‘How can you even think of it, with your father not cold in his grave?’ she would cry as he shuffled through his collection of ragtime records. ‘Come and talk to me, darling.’

Alec would sit down beside her and try to entertain her with stories of whatever had been going on at the office that day, but she hardly seemed to listen. He might be halfway through a tale of how Ambrose had tried to get the better of Levison but had been foiled, when his mother would heave a great sigh and remark that his father would have been proud to hear how well he was getting on, and it would be the signal for the start of another long round of reminiscence.

‘He was a wonderful man, wonderful. Always so kind and so generous. Some of them aren’t, you know. That Mona Bigley down the road never knows where she is with hers. Always worried she is, that he’s gone off and found someone else. Never knows whether she might be turned out of house and home. But your father wasn’t like that. I was the love of his life, you see. He always said that to me. “Dora,” he said, “you are the love of my life.” And of course there was you. None of the others gave him a son. Not Her, and not any of the other women he had before me. He was so proud the day you were born! You should have seen this house. A bower, it was. A real bower. Flowers everywhere. And do you know what I found wrapped up in tissue paper in the middle of a sheaf of three dozen red roses?’

Alec did know, because he had heard the story a hundred times before. But he knew that she liked to tell him all the same.

‘No, what?’ he dutifully asked.

‘A diamond necklace!’

Alec was suitably impressed.

‘It was beautiful. I put it on then and there, sitting up in bed in my nightgown and bedjacket. I couldn’t bear to take it off. I was still wearing it when he came to visit me. You should have seen his face when he saw me wearing it!

‘“I don’t know what I’ve done to deserve this,” I said, and do you know what he told me?

‘“You’ve given me something more precious than all the diamonds in the world,” he said, “you’ve given me a son.”

‘He did, he did really. That was what he thought of you, you know. And I wore those diamonds to go out. Oh, we went to some lovely places . . .’

Alec let her ramble on while he turned over what she had said. He had to make allowances for her exaggeration, of course. It was quite possible that his father had never said anything like that on the occasion of his birth. Whether he did or not was hardly material now. The fact was that he was not precious enough to be given a part of the store. When he had left school at eighteen his father had found him a place in a merchant bank.

‘Learn all you can about how money works, my boy,’ he advised him. ‘That’s where the power is. Money and land. Learn how to control it and you can hold them all in your hands – tradesmen like me, the aristocracy, politicians – they all need loans at some time. I had to learn about it the hard way. You get in on the inside. Believe me, it’s the right place to be.’

Alec had not believed him, but he had very little choice. His father held the household purse strings, and his word was law. Despite all the romantic stuff about being the love of his life, he knew that his mother was worried about being replaced by someone younger. After all, that was what she had been at first, a replacement, and now she was beginning to look middle-aged, despite lavishing every attention and all the beauty aids known to woman on her face, hair and body. If he had rebelled against his father’s wishes, it could have rebounded upon his mother. Of this

she was convinced. So Alec went to work at the bank, and would have found it interesting had he not felt that he had been fobbed off.

The feeling was even stronger now.

‘If he had really cared about me, he would have left me an interest in the store,’ he said, voicing his thoughts out loud.

‘What?’

‘Nothing,’ he said hastily. There was no point in upsetting her further. She was not actually crying at the moment, which was a real improvement. But she had heard him, and after a few seconds the meaning filtered through to her brain.

‘Alec!’ Slowly, her face crumpled and reddened. ‘How can you say such a thing? Whatever your father did, he did for your own good–’

Alec sighed.

‘Yes, Mother, I’m sure he did,’ he temporised.

But it was too late. She broke down in tears.

‘Oh Alec,’ she sobbed on his shoulder, ‘how am I going to live without him?’

He did not know how to cope with her grief. If there was anything he could have done to bring his father back, he would have done it. Beyond that, he did not know how to console her. There was nothing else in her life.

When the storm had subsided a little, he rang for the maid to take her up to bed, and once she was settled, took her a glass of brandy and water himself and made sure she drank it. He hoped it would help her to sleep.

After that he wandered restlessly round the house. The heart, the point of it had gone with his father. It was still home, but it was empty at its centre. He stopped in the dining room. Here, during the last two or three years, he had begun a new, adult relationship with his father. They had talked about money and trade and politics. His father had taught him to appreciate a good cigar and a fine port. He had learnt about his father’s own youth, about how he

had come to London with three shillings in his pocket, about his early struggles and the growth of the shop that was to become the greatest department store in the British Empire. Slowly, Alec pulled out a chair and sat down. The terrible ache in his heart seemed to be choking him. His father had been a unique man. He thought with deep regret of all the lost years, the time when he had hated his father. All through his adolescence he had loathed him because it was his fault that they were not the normal happy family he had assumed them to be in his childhood. He was different, marked out, a bastard. He had to tell lies and make excuses to his friends in order to cover up the shameful truth. He had hardly spoken to his father during that time, beyond the bare demands of good manners. Now he was overwhelmed with sadness at so many wasted opportunities. There was so much he would never know about the man who had been Thomas Packard, and now it was all too late. Alec lowered his head into his arms as his body was wracked with harsh sobs.

It was some time after midnight when he made his way upstairs. Emptied of emotion, practical worries came back to possess him. He was the man of the house now. He fervently hoped his father had made some provision for his mother’s future. The house might be quite modest by Tatwell standards, with only four bedrooms and three servants, but his salary would not cover the rent and the servants’ wages, let alone the food and his mother’s clothing bills. If they had to move, his mother would be devastated.

Alec stood at the window of the frilly guest bedroom which had never been used and looked out into the darkness of the garden. One thing he did know: he was not going to let his father’s other family get it all without a fight.

3

MAY HOLLIS STOOD at the kitchen door. Her mother was stirring porridge on the stove. Even her back, thin and resolutely straight, spoke disapproval.

‘I’m ready now, Mum,’ May said.

A selection of May’s younger brothers and sisters jumped up and hurled themselves at her, the smallest ones sniffling. Mrs Hollis turned slowly.

‘You’d best be off, then. Don’t want to miss the train.’

Tears pricked at the back of May’s eyes. She walked across the tiny room and leaned forward to kiss her mother’s unyielding cheek.

‘I’ll be a good girl, Mum. Honest I will. I won’t get led astray or nothing. I’ll go to chapel twice every Sunday and I’ll write to you every week.’

Mrs Hollis made a non-committal noise in her throat.

‘That’s the least I expect of you, my girl. I still don’t see why you got to leave your family and go to that wicked city. You could have got a job at the big house same as your sisters.’

May sighed. They had gone over this argument so many times before.

‘It’s not that much different, Mum. I would’ve been living in there. And I’m still working for the family, only at the store, not the big house.’

‘It ain’t the same at all.’ The two lines running down from Mrs Hollis’s nose to the sides of her mouth deepened into furrows. ‘If you was up at the house, you could come home on your half day. Up in that evil London, you’ll be open to all

sorts of temptations in your spare time. I've heard about what happens to young girls there.'

'It won't happen to me, Mum. I'll be strong. I'll stand up to the Devil, I promise.'

Mrs Hollis only snorted.

May blinked back the threatening tears.

'I got to go, Mum.' And as her mother still made no move, she begged, 'Won't you just give me your blessing?'

Mrs Hollis hesitated, then gave her a quick peck on the cheek.

'Be strong in the Lord.'

May hugged her resisting body. Her big brother Silas appeared and picked up the stout wooden box that held all her belongings.

'Ready, Sis?'

'Yes.'

Surrounded by an assortment of brothers and sisters, May walked down the muddy village street. All her life she had lived here in Tatwell. Her friends lived here, in these cottages. She had been educated there at the elementary school. She had run errands for her mother to the baker's and the butcher's. She had worked since leaving school at the general store, until the owner's daughter was old enough to take over her job. She had attended the little corrugated iron chapel twice every Sabbath without fail ever since she could remember. Now that the time had come, she could hardly believe that she was leaving home. She felt both exhilarated and afraid.

People came out of cottages and shops to call out and wave. Her friend Mabel, who had started school the same day as she had, ran over to give her a hug.

'You off to the big city, then? Lucky thing, you! Wish it was me as well. Here,' – pressing a small object wrapped in a twist of paper into her hand. – 'this is to remember me by.'

'Oh, Mabel, thank you . . . Oh, you shouldn't have . . .'

At the end of the village stood the smithy, now doubling as a garage for the motorcars that passed through their way to the big house. Jim the apprentice straightened up and pushed his cap back on his head. He stared at May but said nothing. She felt a blush flooding her face. She and Jim had had words over her going away. She took a deep breath and marched up to him, holding out her hand.

‘Won’t you part friends, Jim?’

Jim held her eyes for a moment. Then, slowly, he wiped a large paw on his trousers and shook hands.

‘Bye, May.’

‘Goodbye, Jim. The Lord be with you.’

Then they were out of the village and passing the few outlying cottages. In the fields the plough teams were out, and two ancient men were at work cutting and laying the hawthorn hedge by the side of the road. There was a wide silence, but for the stirring of the wind in the remaining November leaves, the chattering of the children, and the distant whistling of the ploughboy. Soon she would be in the great city, where there was noise and bustle and excitement day and night.

‘Don’t you wish you was coming with me, Silas?’ May asked.

Her brother shook his head.

‘Not me. I’ve no mind to be galivanting off. No more would you, if you had any sense.’

May shrugged.

‘You’re an old stick-in-the-mud, you are. Don’t you want to see the world?’

‘Tatwell’s good enough for me,’ Silas said. ‘Should be good enough for you, too.’

‘I want to better myself. I don’t want to be no skivvy.’

‘There’s nought wrong with honest labour.’

It was no use arguing with him. He was just like their mother and father. None of them understood her desire to get out of the confines of the village. Why, there were

people in Tatwell who had never been further than Hertford in their whole lives, who thought going to Sawbridgeworth was an adventure. She did not want to be like that, nor did she want to be a housemaid, and since that was the only job open to her now that her place at the general store had been taken over, she had taken her courage in both hands and approached Sir Thomas Packard, just a week before he died, and asked him if there were any positions available in his famous store. Pleased with the service she had given him when he'd called at the village shop, he had said that he was sure he could find something for her. And sure enough, he did. It must have been one of his last acts, for just three days after the funeral, a letter had come for her, offering her the post of junior assistant.

Getting the job was the easy part. Then came the task of persuading her parents to let her take it up. There were great consultations amongst the elders of the chapel. In the end, the fact that Sir Thomas was now dead swayed them: it gave the offer more authority, coming as it did almost as his last wish. Much thought was given to May's moral safety. Conditions inside the store were perfectly acceptable. She would be well supervised and kept busy all day long. It was her leisure hours that caused the anxiety. Packards no longer provided bed and board for employees. They had to find their own lodgings, although the store had a list of approved places they could apply to. This was not good enough for the chapel elders. They contacted a sister establishment in Clerkenwell and arranged for May to stay with one of their members. Only then were they satisfied that she would be properly watched over. May had no choice but to go along with all these arrangements. It was that or not go at all. Besides, even though she wanted to get out into the big wide world, it was a frightening step, and it was quite nice to have something familiar to go to.

So now here she was, on her way at last. Silas and the little ones tramped the mile and a half to the station with

her and joined the collection of people gathered for the London train. Stiff in her Sunday best black jacket and skirt, a plain felt hat anchored firmly to her scraped back brown hair with a steel hat-pin, May stood clutching her brand-new umbrella. A small figure with a resolute expression on her face, she looked younger than her eighteen years, an impression heightened by the dusting of freckles across her snub nose.

Silas, never one to chat, fell silent, and May felt too sick with nervous excitement to say anything. Only the children chattered and played round them.

‘It’s coming!’ one of them called.

Sure enough, there was a puff of smoke in the distance. The small crowd stirred, gathering up parcels, checking tickets. Suddenly, May did not want to go. But it was too late to back down now, and besides, she had her pride. She swallowed, and held on to her umbrella just a little more tightly as the train steamed into the station. Silas climbed into the third-class carriage with her and put her box up on the luggage rack. May put her hands on his shoulders and planted a swift kiss on his cheek.

‘Thanks, Silas. The Lord be with you.’

Silas flushed. They were not given to displays of affection in their family.

‘And with you,’ he replied gruffly and retreated to the platform.

The guard blew his whistle. May let down the window and hung out.

‘Goodbye, goodbye!’ she called, blowing kisses to the children.

The train started. Silas stood rock still on the platform, but the little ones ran as far as they could then gathered in a little group at the end, jumping up and down and waving. May watched them until they were out of sight, then sank down on to the hard seat. She felt very alone.