



**PORTRAIT
OF CHLOE**

ELVI RHODES

TRANSWORLD
BOOKS

About the Book

She was born plain Dora, in a bleak northern town where her future seemed all too predictable. But from her earliest childhood she always went after what she wanted, and at the age of eighteen she wanted freedom and a new life - and a new name, Chloe. She moved to Brighton, to work as a mother's help to a Member of Parliament and his wife, and she glimpsed for the first time a life of luxury and wealth - a life which, she believed, could be hers.

But her new circumstances brought with them difficulties which she could not have foretold, including the passionate interest of her boss and the unexpected bond which she discovered with the small children in whose charge she had been put.

Torn between the interest of an attractive older man and her feelings of affection and loyalty towards his wife and children, Chloe embarked upon a dangerous course. Then a near tragedy changed everything for her, although it also brought a new love into her life and helped her to grow up and to appreciate what she had.

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About the Author
Also by Elvi Rhodes
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PORTRAIT OF CHLOE

Elvi Rhodes

For Shirley Hall, secretary and friend

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Prologue

The baby stands close to the sofa on which her mother is sitting. Today is her first birthday. She has been able to stand unaided, but somewhat unsteadily, for more than two weeks now, but she has yet to take her first step.

The floor is strewn with presents - a teddy bear, a rag book, a golliwog with fuzzy hair and striped trousers, a brightly coloured shiny ball, a pile of wooden bricks. She has played with them all briefly, and with the fancy paper in which they were wrapped. She had seemed more taken with the paper than with its contents, crumpling it in her hands and throwing it around, but in the end she has tired even of that.

She looks around, her deep blue eyes taking in everything: the discarded toys, the tabby cat asleep on the hearthrug, her tall father standing with his back to the fire, not quite obscuring the dancing flames. Her mother, she knows, is behind her, her grandmother in the armchair at the far side of the room. And there, on the floor by her grandmother's feet, she sees the duck!

The duck is of bright yellow felt with a black beak, large black feet and circular embroidered eyes. It has been made by her grandmother from a pattern in a magazine. It is tightly stuffed with old socks, cut up small, and is pleasingly curved. The baby stares at the duck. It is, she thinks, though she doesn't know the words, sublimely beautiful. Why hasn't she noticed it earlier? It is the object of her desire and she must have it.

It comes to her exactly what she must do, even though she has never done it before. She removes her hand from her mother's knee where she has been resting it to balance herself. Then, with careful confidence, she puts one foot in front of the other. And again, and again, and again.

Her parents and her grandmother look at each other, then watch in amazement, hardly daring to breathe in case they should distract her and cause her to fall, as this little girl in her best white and pink embroidered dress walks across the carpet.

The child continues to walk. Momentarily the coloured ball is in her path, but the side of her foot touches it and it rolls away. Her gaze is fixed firmly on the duck. As she nears it the grandmother holds out her arms, pleased as Punch that the child should make for her with her very first steps, ready to catch her when she falls. The baby has not even noticed her grandmother. She has only one thought in mind. She continues on her way until she is within reach of the duck, then she drops to the floor, stretches out her arms and grabs it, holding it tightly to her chest.

'Wonderful!' the mother says. 'My clever little Dora!'

'Splendid!' the proud father cries. 'And on her first birthday! We shan't forget this!'

'She knew just what she wanted,' the grandmother says with approval. 'And she went after it! Mark my words, this one will let nothing get in her way!'

1

'You don't seem to be taking much with you, Dora,' Elizabeth Branksome said. 'Are you sure you'll manage?'

Perhaps the fact that her daughter was travelling light meant that she wasn't leaving home for good. Perhaps, before long, she would return. She was grasping at straws.

'Quite sure,' Dora said. 'When I need more, I'll buy things out of my wages.'

She knew what was going through her mother's mind, she could read her like a book but, as so often, her mother was wrong. There was no way she would ever return to Akersfield. Years ago, while she was still at school, she had planned to leave, though she had confided in no-one. She had kept it to herself, saved for the event in pennies and rare sixpences from her pocket money and in larger amounts once she had left school, completed a secretarial training course, and found herself a job - or, rather, taken the job her father's influence had gained for her in the Town Hall. He was Medical Officer of Health then and had connections everywhere. She had hated the job - Secretary to the Deputy Surveyor - and stuck it only because of the money she could pay into her savings account at the end of every month. It was her leaving home money. She knew exactly what she would do, her goal was fixed. When she had saved the sum of fifty pounds she would give the required month's notice and she would quit.

She would quit the Deputy Surveyor with his boring planning applications, his preoccupation with sewers, road

widening and street lamps; she would quit her comfortable, constricting home – Royal Lodge, Mount Grove, a very good address her mother often said with quiet satisfaction. It would be no effort to tear herself away from what friends she had. If such a thing were possible they were even more boring than the Deputy Surveyor. Their goal in life was marriage to a man with a nice steady job and, as soon as possible, two or three children. The war had been over for nearly seven years now. Everyone, especially everyone in Akersfield, was for settling down, putting down roots.

Everyone except me, Dora thought. No way was she going to settle down, not for a long time, and specifically not here.

‘Why go so far away? Why Brighton?’ her mother asked for the hundredth time.

Dora, not bothering to answer, wrote the luggage label for her suitcase in a clear, firm hand.

Miss D Branksome
C/o Blenheim House
Sussex Square
Brighton.

It looked good, but was she going too far in putting the address where she was, after all, only going for an interview? Was it tempting fate, courting disappointment? She shrugged her shoulders. What harm could it do? In any case, you made your own fate.

‘Why?’ her mother persisted.

‘I’ve told you. The job advertised happened to be in Brighton. It sounded what I wanted.’

‘A mother’s help,’ Mrs Branksome said. ‘Why would you waste a good education *and* a secretarial course on looking after someone’s children. Your father must be turning in his grave!’

If he turns in his grave every time you mention it he must be like a spinning top, Dora thought. She didn’t say so, there

was no point. She had had this conversation with her mother a dozen times and got nowhere with it. She had been quite fond of her father, sorry when he'd died of a heart attack two years ago, but the people who said, after his funeral, 'Life must go on' were quite right.

She had seen the advertisement for the job in a most respectable women's magazine. 'MP and wife seek help with children aged 5, 3 and 4 months. No housework. Must be adaptable'.

It had sounded interesting. She didn't mind children as long as they were someone else's and she reckoned she was adaptable, though she would have to approve what she was required to adapt to. Also, a Member of Parliament and his wife sounded fine. She had no more interest in politics than in planning applications, but at least she might get to meet some interesting people.

Mrs Branksome glanced at the luggage label.

'You're being a bit premature, aren't you? What if you don't get the job?'

'Then I'll try for another,' Dora said. 'There's sure to be something.'

She would be paid her travel expenses and she had at least enough money for a week or more in a boarding house, should that prove necessary. She had no qualms about landing a job of some kind.

'You're always telling me it's impossible to hire anyone to do anything. I'm not worried about finding something.'

'Who knows what might happen to you in Brighton? It does *not* have a good reputation,' her mother warned. 'Quite the reverse, in fact! It's not like Akersfield.'

'Good!' Dora locked the suitcase and put the keys in her handbag.

'Oh, Dora, what am I going to do with you?' Elizabeth Branksome wanted, at this moment, to take her daughter in her arms, but she had never been a demonstrative woman, it wouldn't come naturally to her, nor to Dora for that

matter. She had moved forward on an impulse, and now stepped back again. It was too late.

'Oh, Dora!'

How I hate that name, Dora thought. Who in the world would want to answer to 'Dora'? It sounded old-fashioned, flat, uninteresting. One thing was certain, if she had a child, if *ever*, it would not, definitely not, be called Dora.

She fastened the luggage label securely to the handle of her suitcase. She had bought the suitcase out of her own money and it was not of as good a quality as she would have liked, in fact it was hardly more than cardboard. A person could be judged by the quality of their luggage, but her mother had refused to let her have either of the good pre-war leather cases they had always taken on family holidays. If it turns out that I ever do much travelling, Dora thought, one of the first things I shall buy is a decent suitcase.

Her sister came into the room. Her round face was pale, her eyes red-rimmed. She was dressed in her school uniform, which did not become her, Dora thought. At fourteen Marilyn was plump, bulged in all the wrong places, and was not helped by being short in stature.

'It's not fair!' Marilyn said dismally. 'I shouldn't have to go to school this morning, not when Dora's leaving.'

'You can't just stay away from school,' her mother said. 'Not with exams coming up.'

Tears welled in Marilyn's pale blue eyes, and brimmed over, running silently down her face. Dora moved across to her and put an arm around her sister's shoulders. Parting from Marilyn was the only thing she minded about leaving Akersfield, though they did almost nothing together, except share a bedroom, and that Dora disliked intensely. The four-year gap between them was, at this stage of their lives, too wide, but since their father's death Marilyn had chosen to be dependent on her rather than on their mother or their elder brother. In any case, after the honeymoon Maurice and

his new bride had moved smartly out of Akersfield. He was no more than a dozen miles away but in spirit, and even in the flesh, since he seldom visited, he might as well have been in a foreign country.

‘I want to go to the station with you!’

Marilyn pleaded in the same voice she had begged Dora for the last ten days not to leave. That had been a request there was no question of granting, but really why shouldn’t the child go to the station?

‘Please let her go with us, Mother,’ Dora said. ‘What does a half-day off school matter? Just as long as you don’t make a scene,’ she added to Marilyn.

‘Oh, I won’t, I won’t! I promise!’ Marilyn took a crumpled handkerchief from her pocket and dabbed ineffectually at her eyes.

‘Oh, very well!’ her mother said.

It was going to be a bad day. So many of her days went from one defeat to another. ‘A blessing you have three children to comfort you,’ her friends had said when her husband died. It wasn’t true. Her children had never been the blessings she had expected; she had not found the delight in them other people seemed to in theirs. In her widowhood so far they had given her precious little comfort, and she didn’t know why.

‘Then we’d better be off,’ she said.

They got into the car, the sisters sitting in the back, and she drove the two miles to the station.

Dora, sitting with her back to the engine, watched her mother and sister walk away down the platform. Passing the barrier they turned and gave last waves, her mother’s restrained, Marilyn’s frantic. She acknowledged a pang – not of guilt, nothing like that – about her sister. She wished the child had not been so upset, but then that was Marilyn. She would write to her, send her a comic seaside postcard the

minute she was settled in. In fact, she would write to her regularly.

When they were out of sight she moved to the seat opposite, facing the way she was going. It was not only that she preferred to travel thus, it also symbolized her feelings – face to the future.

The train gathered speed through the blackened, stony landscape of the West Riding town. She would be happy never to see this again, never to see another mill chimney etched against the sky. She wondered what Brighton would be like. No-one she knew had actually been to Brighton, though everyone had heard of it. She liked the name.

It was at Doncaster that she saw the man. As the train, drawing into the station, slowed down and then stopped, he was standing on the platform scanning the compartments. He was tall, more than six feet. He had dark hair and his face was tanned as if he had been in the sun. His well-cut, dark grey suit fitted to perfection over his broad-shouldered slender figure, his white shirt gleamed, his silk tie, grey, red, black, was elegance personified. By his side a porter carried a tan leather suitcase and a matching leather briefcase. All the man carried was a neatly-folded newspaper. He was the picture of elegance.

He is not from these parts, Dora thought, that's the kind of suitcase I will have one day, as well as a matching handbag.

As he scanned the train for a moment his gaze met hers. Then the porter spoke to him and they moved together along the platform.

It was clear, she thought, that he was looking for a first-class compartment. Never had she set eyes on anyone more suited to first-class surroundings. She craned her neck but it was impossible to see where he had joined the train. She settled back in her seat and opened her book.

She couldn't read. So many thoughts jostled in her head, so many bright visions of the future. And what was it like,

she wondered, to travel everywhere first-class, to have a porter at one's beck and call, dealing with every last piece of luggage, so that all one was left to carry was a newspaper? She had peered into the first-class compartments as she had walked down the platform at Akersfield, had noted the dark, rich-looking upholstery, the white linen antimacassars on every headrest, the shaded light over each seat; and in the dining-car the tables laid with white cloths and gleaming cutlery. What wouldn't she give to eat at one of those tables as the train sped through the countryside?

'And one day I will!'

She said the words out loud, which didn't matter because there was no-one else in the compartment and somehow it made more of a promise to herself, not just a wishful thought, when the words were actually said.

They had left the towns behind now. The smoke-blackened buildings, the chimneys, the slag heaps, had given way to open country with flat, green fields stretching away to a distant horizon. The landscape was so unlike that of her home, where every viewpoint which was not taken from a hill was bounded by one. Resolutely she turned her thoughts away from what, after all, was no longer her home. She had left it. She would think only of what was to come.

So what was the first-class man doing, ensconced in his first-class compartment? Was he gazing out of the window, as she was? Or was he reading his newspaper, which would undoubtedly be *The Times*? So why don't I find out? Dora asked herself. What was there to lose? She had only to walk down the corridor and who was to stop her doing that?

She opened her handbag and took out a small mirror and a lipstick. Carefully, because the train was swaying, she filled in the generous curves of her lips with clear scarlet lipstick. Her mother disapproved of the colour, said it was far too bright, almost common, but Dora knew it suited her, added life to her appearance. With her almost-black hair

and the surprising contrast of her fair skin, the redness of her lips made a striking whole. She surveyed her image in the mirror with satisfaction, smoothed the dark arch of her eyebrows with a damp finger, smiled at herself to show the evenness of her white teeth. She would not use her powder compact; the faint shine on her skin was not unattractive. She ran her fingers through her thick hair which, though most people seemed to admire it, was too curly for her liking. She would have preferred straight hair, it was smarter, more sophisticated, but there wasn't much she could do about that.

She rose to her feet, moved towards the corridor door and then, as a fresh thought struck her, turned back and picked up her suitcase.

It was not easy, negotiating the corridor, case in hand, on the swaying train. She swore that it had put on speed the minute she'd started to move. Will he be alone? she wondered. If he's in a compartment with other men, will I enter? She knew what she was going to say. It had come to her in a flash, which was why she had turned back and picked up the suitcase. She would rather - oh *much* rather - say it to him alone, but if it didn't turn out that way, then it couldn't be helped. They would probably *all* be sympathetic and she'd get her ride in the first-class, hopefully all the way to London.

Luck was with her. Halfway down the first-class corridor she saw him. He was sitting, back-to-the-engine, by the window, he was alone, and he hadn't seen her. She paused, took a deep breath, then summoned up the saddest thought she could possibly think so that tears came into her eyes. It was a talent she had had - and had the good sense to cherish and cultivate - since she was a small child and it had seen her around many a tight corner.

She took a firmer grip on her suitcase and with her other hand quickly opened the sliding door to the compartment, pushed her way in, and sat down, breathing heavily.

The man looked up.

‘What . . .’

‘I’m sorry! I’m sorry!’ Dora gasped. She threw a nervous glance towards the corridor. ‘I thought he was following me!’

The man sprang from his seat, crossed to the corridor, looked both ways.

‘There’s no-one in sight,’ he said. ‘Not a soul! Now get your breath back and tell me what this is all about!’

He has a beautiful speaking voice, Dora thought. It goes exactly with his appearance.

‘What if he comes after me?’ She was all apprehension and the man was clearly interested. I’m doing rather well, she thought.

‘Who is he? And why should he come after you?’ the man asked. ‘Come over here and sit opposite me. I will see that no-one annoys you.’

She moved as he instructed, dragging her suitcase after her. Sitting opposite him she could study him more intently. She liked what she saw.

‘I don’t know who he is,’ she said. ‘Just a man in my compartment. He came and sat by me. Then he . . . he made advances. I had to get out. I was frightened. I’m sorry!’

She spoke in a low voice, in disjointed sentences. The man was concerned, which was interesting because she had thought of this approach only on the spur of the moment.

‘Don’t be sorry,’ he said. ‘You were quite right to move. You were quite right to come in here.’ He opened his briefcase, which lay on the seat beside him, and took out a small, silver flask. ‘Now I’m going to give you a little drink,’ he said. ‘It’s whisky, and you might not like it, but it will do you good, calm you down.’

He filled the cap and handed it to her. She sipped at it, pulling a face, though that was all right because she sensed he would prefer her not to like it and drinking it would give her a good reason to get back to normal, so that they could

have a proper conversation. She wasn't sure how long she could sustain the role of a terrified young lady.

'There!' he said. 'Is that better?'

'Oh, it is!' she said. 'Thank you very much, Sir. I wonder . . .'

'Yes?'

'Do you think . . . I mean, is it possible I could stay here a little longer . . . just until . . .'

'You can stay as long as you like,' he said.

'But this is first-class, isn't it? My ticket's third-class,' Dora said timidly.

'Don't worry about that,' he replied. 'If the ticket inspector comes I'll explain it to him.'

'Oh, thank you!' she said vehemently. 'You're very kind!'

'Not at all! I'll be glad of your company. Train journeys can be quite tedious, don't you find?'

They almost always were, he thought, especially when he had to visit his constituency, which he did as seldom as possible. It was not the constituency he would have liked, it was too far from London and the Home Counties, but his father-in-law's influence had got him the seat, and at least it was a safe one.

'Oh, I do!' Dora agreed. It wasn't true. She'd made very few train journeys in her life and this one, so far, was proving a long way from tedious.

'And when did this young man who annoyed you board the train?' the man asked.

'Right at the beginning. In Akersfield. And he troubled me from the word "Go", but I was determined to sit it out . . . that is . . . until . . .'

 Her voice trailed away.

The man had a sudden memory of this girl's face looking at him from her compartment when he was standing on the platform. Their eyes had met and, for a moment, locked. Her eyes had not been those of a woman in any way troubled, annoyed, distressed. There had been no call for help in those eyes. They had been happily provocative. Is she

having me on? he asked himself. And if so, for what purpose?

'I think,' he said smoothly, 'I think, don't you, that it might be a good idea if we reported this to the guard? The man must still be on the train.'

She looked at him with wide-open eyes, eyes of a blue so deep as to be almost navy, yet as bright as speedwells. Her look was one of great innocence, but it did not deceive him. However, it might be amusing to play her game.

'Oh, no, Sir!' she said swiftly. 'Please don't do that! Men always stick together. He might think . . . he might think I'd encouraged him!'

Which I daresay you would have if he'd existed, the man thought. So what was she up to? Probably any minute now she'd ask for money, spin him a yarn about that. In the meantime he was enjoying the situation, she was fun. He might, in the end, give her a little something. Entertainment value.

'I'm sure the guard would never think that of you,' he said. 'But as you wish. So shall we talk of other things? For instance, what's your name?'

Dora hesitated, but not for long. Wasn't this the perfect moment for throwing Dora out of the window? Would there ever be a moment as perfect as this?

'Chloe!' she said firmly. 'Chloe Branksome.'

'Chloe! A beautiful name and it suits you perfectly!'

It was also interesting because he had seen the label on her suitcase and it clearly stated 'Miss D. Branksome'. Oh well! He wouldn't call her bluff. It didn't matter.

'And you are Mr . . .?'

Chloe ventured.

'Hendon. Charles Hendon.'

'Oh! Well that's a nice name, too. In fact,' she blushed prettily, 'Charles is my favourite name!'

'Thank you. And are you going to London, or somewhere else?'

She told him she was going to Brighton, hoping to land a job. She told him the man of the house was a Member of Parliament and she thought that would be most interesting.

'It will be. It is,' Charles Hendon said. 'And what is this MP's name?'

'Mr Portman.'

So John Portman was going to take on this little beauty, Charles thought. There was no denying she was a beauty. Ought John to be warned, or shall I let him find out for himself? And will even Miss Chloe be any match for Moira Portman? But I'll let them find out whatever there is to be found out, he decided. The thoughts raced around in his mind. Certainly, he would pay the Portmans a visit before too long.

'You'll like Brighton,' Charles said. 'I'd say it will suit you down to the ground.'

'I hope so,' Chloe replied. 'But anywhere's better than Akersfield.'

'And how many broken hearts have you left behind there?' Charles teased. 'Don't tell me you didn't have a string of boyfriends!'

Chloe shrugged. There wasn't one she wasn't happy to leave, but she wouldn't say that in so many words. Men didn't like you boasting about other men. They preferred to think they were the only one you'd ever had, or ever would have. She'd learned that ages ago.

'So you're not going to tell me?'

Chloe smiled and shook her head. 'There's really nothing to tell, Mr Hendon.'

The door slid open and a man in uniform popped his head into the compartment.

'Lunch will be served in the restaurant car in ten minutes,' he announced. 'Will you be taking lunch, Sir?'

'We both will.'

The man was off before Chloe could say a word - not that she intended to protest too loudly, only as much as good

manners dictated.

'Oh, Mr Hendon, I can't do that! I shouldn't really be in here at all! What if . . .?' Her voice faltered. She sounded quite overwhelmed.

'Nonsense!' Charles Hendon said. 'You must be my guest. I can't have you going hungry, not after your unpleasant experience! Not that it will be the best of lunches these days.' He gazed straight into her lovely eyes and the look she returned was as innocent as a baby's.

'In fact,' she admitted, 'I do have a sandwich my mother made for me. I could eat that.'

Mousetrap cheese and pickle, she thought. How very common!

'Now do you want a minute to pretty yourself up?' Hendon asked. 'Not that you need it - in which case you can join me in a few minutes in the restaurant car.'

'I'll go with you now,' Chloe said. She saw herself, Chloe (late Dora) Branksome, walking into the restaurant car by the side of this most attractive man, fussed over by waiters, fed and cosseted. It was an attractive picture.

Everything exceeded her expectations, especially the waiter, who was more than attentive.

'I'm afraid the food isn't all that much,' Charles Hendon said. 'Blame rationing!'

'It is to me, Mr Hendon,' Chloe told him. 'I have never been in a restaurant car before. It's wonderful to me!'

She was at her best when she was honest and simple, without airs and graces, he thought. Alas, he doubted she would believe that.

They spent a long time over the meal, drinking endless cups of coffee while the waiters hovered around, wanting to clear away. By the time they returned to the compartment they were nearing London, though Chloe only guessed at this by the density of the buildings, which seemed to go on for miles.

Charles Hendon looked at his watch.

‘We should be on time at King’s Cross. I’ll see you into a taxi. Since you don’t know your way around it’s the easiest way to get to Victoria.’

Stepping off the train, he had only to lift a finger to summon a porter. Chloe half ran to keep up with his long strides as they followed the porter to the taxi rank. She was disappointed that she was going no further with him but it had been fun while it lasted.

‘There you are!’ he said, helping her into the taxi. ‘Take the lady to Victoria.’ He pressed money into the driver’s hand.

Chloe held out her hand.

‘Thank you very much, Mr Hendon. You’ve been so kind.’

‘Not at all,’ he said politely.

‘I don’t suppose I’ll see you again?’ Her tone was a question.

‘Who knows?’ he said – and was gone. Who knows, he thought as he hurried away. I’ll make a point of it, see how Portman is getting on.

I would like to see him again, Chloe decided, sitting in the train on the way to Brighton. I think I might get somewhere with Mr Charles Hendon. But when she thought about it further it came to her that she had told him a great deal about herself yet, beyond his name, she knew nothing of him.

2

The train slowed, and finally stopped. So at last this was Brighton! The hour's journey from London had seemed almost as long as the journey from Akersfield to King's Cross, possibly because this time there had been no-one to talk to, no adventure, no Mr Charles Hendon who had so enlivened the earlier part of the day. He had been gracious to the last. She had half-hoped - they had got on so well - that he might just have arranged to see her again, but nothing had been said beyond his cheerful farewell.

'Thank you for your company. I enjoyed it.' He'd smiled at her. He had a beautiful smile in which his whole face took part, his rather large mouth widening to reveal a set of strong, perfectly even teeth, his eyes narrowing, crinkling at the corners.

She picked up her suitcase and left the train, following the crowd to the barrier. Giving up her ticket she thought how odd - but how lucky - it had been that the ticket collector on the train to London had never put in an appearance once they'd left Doncaster behind, nor had there been anyone to check at King's Cross. Not that it had bothered her at the time. If there'd been any trouble she was sure Mr Hendon would have dealt with it.

She walked out of Brighton station half expecting to be met by the sight of the sea but alas there was no sign of it. Buildings on either side lined the broad street which led from the station, though that was the only resemblance to Akersfield. Here the buildings, though still shabby from

wartime neglect, were clean; in Akersfield they were blackened by smoke and soot. As a child she had thought that stone came out of the ground coal-black.

So where should she go from here? Mrs Portman had given her no directions whatever, simply the address, that she would be pleased to interview her at whatever time in the afternoon she might arrive, that her travelling expenses would be paid. Does that, Chloe asked herself, mean that I can take a taxi? What if Sussex Square was miles and miles away and it cost pounds to get there? Perhaps she should investigate the trolley bus which was standing a few yards away?

‘No I won’t,’ she decided. ‘I’ll do no such thing. Why should I?’

She joined the short queue for taxis. ‘Blenheim House, Sussex Square,’ she said grandly to the driver when her turn came.

A posh address, he thought, but with that suitcase she’s going for a skivvy. There would be no tip from this one so he wouldn’t bother to help her with her case. On second thoughts, though, she was young and pretty, so he got out of his cab and heaved it in for her.

‘Is it far, Sussex Square?’ Chloe asked.

‘Ten minutes at most,’ the driver answered.

He drove down the street, past office buildings, assorted shops, a cinema, hotels, and suddenly there was the sea, the English Channel, bluer by far than the sea at Morecambe or Scarborough. When they reached the bottom of the street where it led into the promenade, two piers – one to the left and one to the right – came into view. The latter they left behind as they turned left.

This was more like it, it was the Brighton she had imagined! On the clear May day with the sun shining on the water and fluffy white clouds scudding across the sky, and scores of people strolling on the seaward side of the

promenade, it lived up to its name. She couldn't have thought of a better one.

'What a lot of people about,' she said to the driver.

'Not really,' he said. 'It's out of season now. Just you wait until July and August, *then* you can talk! All coming back since the war, the visitors. Practically walking on each other's heads they are in August.'

Beyond the pier - Palace Pier the driver informed her, the other one is the West Pier, a bit more posh - he drove past terrace after terrace of elegant houses and hotels built of cream-coloured stone or perhaps painted cream, she couldn't tell which. Either way, they looked wonderful. That they were in need of repainting didn't detract from their style. Then, with a sharp left turn, they were in Sussex Square and the taxicab drew up.

'Here's Blenheim House,' the driver said.

It wasn't the first time he'd been here. He often picked up a bloke from the station and brought him here. An MP, he was.

It was a tall house, several storeys high, and the last word in elegance and style, with its large windows and a porticoed entrance. Chloe (as she already thought of herself), opened her purse and, to the driver's surprise and her own - but she was in such a good mood at the sight of everything - gave him a sixpenny tip on top of the fare, for which he carried her case to the very doorstep.

She pressed the doorbell and waited. No-one answered, though she could hear it ringing in the house. She lifted her hand to ring it again and at the same moment the door was opened by a young woman holding a baby in her arms and with a small child standing behind her.

The woman smiled at the sight of Chloe, but it was a strained smile which did not reach her eyes. She looked pale, and there were blue shadows under her brown eyes.

'You must be Miss Branksome,' she said. 'Dora Branksome.'

‘Chloe. Dora *is* my name, but everyone calls me Chloe. I don’t know why.’

So far, she thought, no-one had called her Chloe, but from now on they would. Dora was done with.

‘I’m Moira Portman. Please come in.’

The first thing Chloe saw, even before she had shaken hands with Mrs Portman, who stood on the other side of it, was the large doormat, sunk into a brass-bounded well, into which the name ‘Blenheim House’ was woven in capital letters. She was impressed. When she had greeted Mrs Portman she allowed her gaze to wander to the spacious entrance hall from which a wide staircase rose to the upper floors. The elegance of the hall, with its elaborately moulded cornice, and a ceiling rose of similar design from which hung a crystal chandelier, was somehow mitigated by its untidiness. Toys – a kiddie-car, a discarded doll, a picture book, several bricks and a jigsaw puzzle – made an effective obstacle course across the floor. A child’s coat was draped over the newel post, a school hat occupied the chair.

‘Will you come down to the kitchen,’ Mrs Portman said. ‘I was just giving the children their tea.’

She led the way to the back of the hall and down a flight of wooden stairs, less elegant than the main staircase. Chloe followed.

‘I’m afraid this is a house with lots of stairs,’ Mrs Portman said. ‘We would like to have the kitchen moved on to the ground floor, but it’s impossible at the moment. There’s such a shortage of materials – and labour – since the war. I expect you know that.’

Chloe murmured agreement.

‘My mother says she can never get anything done to the house.’

‘My mother disapproved of the children eating in the kitchen, and even more of us having our dining-room on this floor,’ Mrs Portman said. ‘But it’s easier. When my mother lived here she had a cook, two maids and an odd-job man. I

keep telling her, those days are gone for good. All I have is Mrs Wilkins who comes for two hours every morning to tidy up. Not that anything ever stays tidy!’

‘Does your mother live here?’ Chloe enquired. She devoutly hoped not. She didn’t like the sound of her.

‘No,’ Mrs Portman said. ‘The house is mine, now. Mama has more sense. Since she was widowed she lives in a nice little service flat in Hove.’

A little girl sat at the large kitchen table with a glass of milk and a plate of bread, spread with Marmite, in front of her. This must be Janet and if so she was five years old, Chloe thought. Mrs Portman had said little about the children in her letter, just their names and ages. The little boy keeping so close to his mother was Robert and the baby in his mother’s arms was Edward. They looked like perfectly normal children, Chloe thought. She didn’t think she’d have much trouble with them. Well, she wouldn’t put up with it. If they behaved well she’d treat them well and if they didn’t they’d soon find out what they were up against.

‘This is Janet and this is Robert and the baby is Edward,’ Mrs Portman said. ‘Say hello to Chloe, you two!’

Neither child said anything. Janet’s clear grey eyes met Chloe’s in an unblinking stare; Robert, eyes downcast to the floor, continued to stand beside his mother. He is far too quiet for a three-year-old, and Miss Janet Portman is far too bold, Chloe decided. Nevertheless she favoured Janet with a dazzling smile. If the children showed no liking for her she’d not get the job, and what she’d seen of Brighton, and the house, told her she wanted it. At least to begin with. Afterwards, who knew?

‘Please sit down,’ Mrs Portman said. ‘Perhaps you’d like a cup of tea? You’ve had a long journey.’

The baby began to grizzle, then to whimper.

‘He’s fractious,’ his mother apologized. ‘It’s almost his feed time. You wouldn’t like to hold him, would you, while I put the kettle on?’

'Of course! I'd love to!' Chloe's voice was eager, which was not at all how she felt. The truth was that, aside from Marilyn, who was after all only four years younger than herself, she had no experience of small children, let alone of babies. She presumed, and fervently hoped, that babies slept most of the time. But what she lacked in experience she made up for in confidence. She'd learn, and hopefully so would the children. When you looked at the people who *were* parents, she consoled herself, it couldn't be all that difficult.

She held out her arms and Mrs Portman put the baby into them and, wonder of wonders, he stopped whimpering at once.

'My goodness!' said his mother, 'you have the right touch. Are you used to babies, then?'

'Oh, yes!' Chloe said with confidence.

I might just have found myself a treasure, Mrs Portman thought, filling the kettle, switching it on, carefully measuring the tea into the pot. And a beautiful one at that, for the girl's looks were quite simply stunning, with her combination of almost black hair, deep blue, wide-spaced eyes, and a bone structure which would last her for life. The painter in Moira Portman, for that was her profession which she followed whenever she could get time away from the children, which was hardly ever, felt her fingers itch to set up a palette, to put this girl's beauty on canvas. She would dress her in red, her looks were enough to stand against it. Or, perhaps better still, she would paint her in the nude.

Of course someone, especially in a place like Brighton, which swarmed with theatre folk, would snatch her up and put her on the stage, or in a film. In the meantime, she thought, I reckon I'm going to be happy to have her looking after my children.

She made the tea, poured it.

'I'll take the baby now,' she said, 'while you drink your tea. It's no use putting him down. At this time of the day he

would just cry.'

Chloe handed back the baby. She hadn't done too badly on that one.

'Now, tell me something about yourself!' Mrs Portman invited.

Chloe put down her cup, sat demurely upright in her chair, and prepared to tell whatever the lady might like to hear.

'So, I think the first thing is, are you fond of children? You'll agree that's important?'

Chloe opened her eyes wide, nodded her head.

'Absolutely, Mrs Portman. Of course I *adore* children. Why else would I have applied for the job?'

Why? Well if you knew Akersfield you'd know just why! Without speaking, she turned her head and smiled in the direction of the children.

'Quite. But it's such a distance to come. All the way from the North of England to Brighton. Are you sure you won't be lonely, won't get homesick?'

Her husband had queried the wisdom of it when she'd written to offer an interview to a girl from the North.

'It's too far away,' he'd pointed out. 'She'll mope for the moors and all those mill chimneys. And she'll have a terrible accent. You'll have the kids speaking broadest Yorkshire in no time at all.'

'Not necessarily,' she'd told him. 'I had a friend at school from Bradford and she spoke perfect English. As good as yours or mine.'

'She would,' he'd countered. 'Yours was an expensive boarding school in Kent. This girl won't be like that.'

In fact, Mrs Portman thought, listening to Chloe, the girl's voice was quite pleasant. True, there *was* a Northern accent, but was that any worse than a London or a Brighton one? And the fact that she was a long way from home meant that she wouldn't be tempted to run back too quickly. Just as long as she didn't mope - and she didn't look a moper. She was far too bright.