WITH LOVE FROM MA MAGUIRE

RUTH HAMILTON

TRANSWORLD
BOOKS

About the Book

From the very first meeting of Philly Maguire and Richard Swainbank, a pattern of overpowering love, conflict, hatred, and secrecy was born. For although Philly and Richard were on opposite sides of the mill floor, they recognised – both of them – that they were equally matched in strength of character and the capacity for overwhelming sexual passion.

Thus began the forty years of conflict between the two families – the Swainbanks, cushioned by wealth but tearing each other to pieces with the violence of their emotions – and the Maguires, proud, betrayed, and led by the vibrant and magnificent Philly.

A major saga of the Lancashire cotton mills – of the strong, violent, real people who both owned them, and worked in them – and of the dangerous things that love can do to families throughout the generations.

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Ruth Hamilton

For David and Michael Thornber, my two wonderful sons.

Also for Aunts Rachel Lundy, Agnes Sexton, Dorothy and Gladys Girling and in memory of Uncle Jack Girling who died during the preparation of this book.

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Part One

1904

Chapter 1

Somewhere above it all, a watery sun was setting. Here and there a few brave rays found access, allowing the scene a strange and eerie light, a mixture of greys and pale sepias that blended well with old brick and stone. School Hill, known far and wide throughout Bolton as ‘Little Ireland’, caught its corporate breath at the end of another Monday, a dawn-to-midday struggle with sheet and quilt, copper and fire, tub and mangle. Now, at six in the evening, the back alleys were denuded of billowing whites and no Irish or Lancashire voice cried out against the coming of a ragman’s cart. But although a thousand chimneys had begun to cool, their legacy hung over the houses, mingling with sulphuric fumes from nearby factories where paper, leather, machine parts and, above all, cotton were produced.

As a church clock chimed the hour, Delia Street came out to await the event which had been the sole topic of gossip all day. In twos and threes they gathered beneath lamps as yet unlit, while every doorway was open and occupied by an aproned female figure. Little noses were flattened against windows smeared with drawings shaped by sticky fingers in mists of breath. Whispered messages passed along the row, words ‘mee-mawed’ by women used to communicating without sound during their childfree days in the mills.

‘I’d have swore it were bound to rain about tennish and me with nowt dry enough to iron. Hey – are you sure he took everything with him, Edie?’

‘Took all his own, I reckon. Her’ll have a paddy on tonight, I’ll bet. She’s told him to go often enough, ’cos I’ve heard it all through me back wall.’

‘What’ll she do?’

‘Nay, don’t ask me, lass. Who can tell what that one’ll do? Never talks to nobody, never lets on in the shops and that. I stood behind her only last week in the tripe queue and she never batted a lid and me her next door neighbour. But she lets on at him, I can tell thee. I’ll swear she throws flat irons or summat at him. Mind you, happen he asks for it. Some of ’em do, you know. We can’t be sure what goes on behind a closed door, though I’ve heard her lose her rag a fair few times.’

‘Aye. Well, same as I’ve always said afore, you can’t treat a man like that for ever, Edie. Mine’d smack me one in the gob if I tret him that road. Who’s she think she is anyrate? All airs and graces, never a good word for nobody. Have you seen her furniture when that door’s open? Table on its own’s worth a few bob. How’d he manage that just selling bottles of rubbish what she throws together in the back scullery?’

‘I’ve heard as how it’s not all rubbish, though. Her black tonic’s supposed be a right pick-me-up according to Elsie Shuttleworth. That eldest lad’s never looked back since he were dosed . . .’

‘Shurrup, Edie – she’s coming!’

Every head turned towards the tall figure which materialized, or so it seemed, out of the fog created by the day’s many labours in mill and scullery. Casually, they leaned against wall and jamb, each pretending not to notice the woman, every last one of them apparently engrossed in studying a pavement crack or a wedding ring.

As soon as she reached the end of the street, she felt the atmosphere, knew that she was somehow the centre of attention. They didn’t fool her, not for a minute. Like a painting forever frozen behind glass, the stillness of the tableau was unreal, unnatural. So lazy they looked, slumped motionless in doorways, yet she knew that any one of them could outrun a galloping racehorse if it meant saving a sheet on a wet washday. She paused at the corner outside

the clogger's where the tap-tap of hammer on nail and wood suddenly ceased as a row of barefooted customers rose in unison to peer through the window. When the woman turned to face them, they backed away from her steady blue gaze, a stare that seemed to penetrate the dimmest of evenings.

Course, they weren't really a-feared of her. She was just another Irish immigrant, one among many, no better or worse off than the rest of them except for her house being a bit on the grand side. But there was something about her, right enough. For a kick-off, she was a sight taller than many of the men and it wasn't natural for a woman to keep her head so near the ceiling. She must have been not far short of five foot nine or ten, straight as a die and with an odd beauty that was in itself slightly unnerving in an area where the women aged young. Not a line on her face, though she must have been all of twenty-five. But it was the eyes that put most folk off. Never a word, yet she looked straight through a person, as if she could see what he was thinking, as if she knew the deepest and best kept of secrets, the darkest corner. And the way she made a body feel – well, it wasn't easy to express in normal language. Three years she'd lived here and hardly a cough or a spit out of her. Aye well. She'd be getting her comeuppance any minute now. But who would tell her? Which one of them, man or woman, would dare come forward and say . . . ?

They sank on to the bench as the clogger wiped his hands and came round the counter. 'Mrs Maguire?'

She hesitated fractionally before stepping through the front door and into the small room. 'Yes?'

'A word in the back workshop if it's convenient, like . . .'

One of the men on the bench swallowed audibly, blushing under layers of miner's dust. Like many of the poor Irish in this community, he hid his superstitions, laughed at them over a pint in the vault at the Bull, denied the folklore that seemed to follow travellers across dividing waters. But here

was a woman as near a witch as any good man would care to get. Wasn't it said by many that her granny had been given special healing powers and the ability to place the odd curse? And didn't this one here brew weird teas and potions, wasn't she known for her strange silences? All those pots in her back yard too, full of queer-looking plants, they were, stuff she used for her funny medicines that her husband was supposed to hawk about the streets.

The temporary silence was broken as 'Pey' Peter rounded the corner, his high-pitched voice raised in its familiar cry, 'Peys! Come and get your hot peys! Black ones, green ones, fetch the jug, Missus!' and the scutter of clog irons was heard as children and women arrived to buy peas for supper. Most of the pea purchasers craned their necks to peer into the clogger's, but the subject of interest had already disappeared into the back workshop. Those waiting for clog repairs sat rigidly in a line near the wall, incapable of leaving the shop until they were re-shod.

''Er won't take this job well,' muttered an old Bolton weaver who had just popped in on his way off shift to get a new half-set of irons. 'I reckon 'er's not reet in the 'ead.'

'Shush!' whispered the Irish miner. 'Hasn't she the whole street to face just now? This will not be easy for her.' Aye, there was pride in that bonny face, sure enough. And temper too. Hadn't he himself seen Seamus Maguire beating it hell for leather down the street on several occasions as if the devil were on his tail? The four men in the shop seemed to stop breathing as they strained fruitlessly to overhear something – anything at all – from the back room, for wouldn't their wives be agog with it when they got home, mithering over what had been said and how did she take it?

She emerged after several minutes, neither hair nor feature out of place. 'I'll be thanking you then, Mr Chadwick,' she said, her voice firm and clear. 'I knew he'd be going home sooner or later – in fact, I told him to go. Do

not fear on my account, for Seamus will send money. He has . . . interests in Limerick, you see.'

Freddie Chadwick watched the ramrod back as it left the shop and sailed off up the pavement, that familiar Spanish-galleon posture proclaiming her advancing pregnancy. He shook his large head sadly. A fair few comings and goings he'd seen in this street, midnight flits, births and deaths, families near murdering one another when the strain got too much for them. But this was a right bad do, this was. 'Interests in Limerick?' he mumbled to no-one in particular. 'That one's stuck his fingers in more pies than they've got in Tattersall's bakery. She's all right, is Mrs Maguire. Just over-proud, is all. Eeh well.' He lowered himself on to his stool. 'Kiddy coming, no money and no work. There'll be nowt down for that poor lass once the child's born.' He picked up a clog and tore off the irons angrily, then filled his mouth with a dozen or so wooden plugs, thus ending his monologue. There was no merriment in the clogger's that night. He was usually good for a laugh or two, was Skenning Freddie, who had acquired his nickname because of crossed eyes. Yet, in spite of this affliction, he could peg a nail hole with the best of them, while his handmade footwear was reputed to be the finest for many a mile. But this evening he stuck to his work, not a smile nor a joke on his lips.

Philomena Maguire entered her house and sank slowly on to the cold stone floor, her back resting against the relative comfort of the wooden door. It had taken every ounce of her fast-diminishing courage to walk the length of a street where unfinished sentences hung on the air like icicles, each one snapping off abruptly as she approached. Caps had been doffed as she passed a lamp, but not one word of greeting had reached her ears. Now they began, cackling and chattering along the terraces, no doubt discussing how Seamus had left with his sack of possessions, probably embroidering the tale to a point where it might become legendary. Oh yes, she listened to them many a time while

she did her washing on a Saturday afternoon in preparation for her week in the mill. Everyone's dirty linen was aired over the backs while she scrubbed her own. Yes, they'd have Seamus's parting words engraved in stone like a new set of commandments by this time. It was a disgrace, the final disgrace for a woman. 'Can't keep her man for two minutes on the trot' and ''course, he left at the finish and who could blame him?' For a second or two, she felt like beating a hasty retreat just as Seamus had, gathering her bags and making off for home. Aye, but to what? Mammy with her gimlet eye and even sharper tongue lashing out because another mouth – soon to be two – would require feeding? All those endless acres of marsh, no movement save for animals and children at play, backbreaking days of dawn milking, churning, mucking out, cleaning? No! Better the mill than that; better still the plan she had laid for the long term, an idea that might give her a business of her own once she got on her feet.

She stirred herself to light the lamp in the centre of the table. If the house remained dark, then those outside would have more gossip to serve up with the black peas for supper. In the brass-framed mirror over the grate, Philomena caught sight of her reflection and she listlessly dragged a few strands of cotton waste from her thick black hair. Another day over. She lowered herself into the good leather armchair and stared unseeing at grey coals. Whatever now? Oh, it had been coming anyway, the end of her time at the mill. Her belly grew bigger by the day; soon, she wouldn't be able to bend and stretch to tend the mule and piece her ends. And she'd been so lucky with her job, for how many women became minders in charge of four part-time piecers after just a few years? It was probably on account of her being so hefty and strong. So much to give up, all that security! But with a baby on the way, no doubt the job must go. Which would have been all very well with a

husband in the background, a regular income to fall back on.

And yet, her feelings were mixed like a ball of tangled wool just now. She was almost sorry he'd gone, sorry for the fatherless child, for herself with all the responsibility to shoulder. And she was concerned about the future, though she'd calculated long enough against this almost inevitable eventuality. But mingled with the mild grief, shining out like a silver strand among plain threads, was a strong sensation of relief. No more worries about how and where he earned his money, no more waiting for a knock at the door, no more watching as he heaved his drunken body across rooms and up stairs. Yes, she was her own mistress now. Alone. Completely alone in a street of strangers.

Oh, if only she'd turned to her neighbours more easily! Not a one of them would stop to help her now, she knew that. But she'd been so ashamed of Seamus and his carryings-on, all that buying and selling, things hidden all over the house, deals made no more than a whisker's width inside the law. And the rows, those terrible endless arguments because she'd known all along that he saw himself as the poor man's hero, stealing from the British to provide funds for his Fenian causes. How could she ever invite a neighbour in with the parlour filled to bursting at times with stuff he couldn't adequately account for? Bolts of good brocade, joints of meat, pots and pans bought as a job lot from 'some feller over to Manchester'. Each working dawn, he would load this contraband on to his handcart, carefully hiding it by spreading a blanket over which he always placed his wife's ointments and medicines. When folk in the mill asked, 'And what does your old feller do?', she answered, as coolly as she could, 'He sells my herbs and other things on markets and the like.' Oh, Seamus sold things all right. Things that made their way as if by magic from Liverpool docks, things that got found before they were ever lost. Or before they were missed, that was more like it.

She shifted in the chair as the child kicked. Thank God for the man's drunkenness at least, because she'd managed to filch enough from his pockets as he slept, a sum sufficient to preclude immediate worry about rent and food. He'd never a notion of how much or how little money he had, so she'd taken advantage of this particular stupidity. Over months, her store had grown to almost forty pounds which she'd hidden in a small box behind a loose brick in the wash-house. So, for a while at least, she would manage.

The noise in the street started up again. In and out of one another's homes by the minute, they were. Pity they'd nothing better to occupy themselves . . . But no, there was a different quality to the commotion this time, the sound of fear interspersed with shrieks of panic and desperation. Whatever was going on at all? Still, she'd herself to see to, a fire to light, an unborn baby to feed . . .

Someone tapped hesitantly at the door. 'Missus? You in there?'

She leaned forward and gripped the arms of her chair. 'Who is it?'

'Come out, Missus! Old Mother Blue's gone missing again, likely up to her armpits in gin, shouldn't wonder. We need some doctoring!'

She strode across the room and threw open the door. 'Then fetch the doctor, child.'

A pair of dark brown eyes stared out of a pale, underfed face. 'We've not paid doctor's man for weeks,' mumbled the boy. 'And we can't find Mother Blue.'

Philomena folded her arms across her chest. Oh yes, she knew of Mother Blue, right enough. A filthy old woman with a black cloth bag who went from door to door 'doctoring'. The drunken fool in her navy straw poke bonnet caused many a mischief, going straight from laying-out to childbed with her hands unwashed, the nails decorated by rims of dirt, her numerous layers of stained clothing reeking of sickroom smells. 'Then why do you come for me, boy?

Answer, for I shall not bite. Though I'm still in want of a supper.' She attempted a smile. 'Why me?'

He swallowed, glancing over his shoulder towards a house across the street. 'Because . . . because you're a . . . a . . . wi—We know you make cures and that . . . Because me mam says as how you know things, like.'

'I do. Sure enough, I know things. We all know things, don't we now? But I'm not a witch, son—'

'I never said—'

'Indeed, you didn't. You didn't say a thing. So, let's away and see what's to be done just now.'

She took the startled child's hand and led him home. The smell at the front door was enough to confirm her worst fears. How many more would perish of this dreaded summer sickness and May not yet over? The room was crowded with inquisitive neighbours and family members. Philomena pushed her way through to the couch where a pale woman lay, legs drawn up to her chest with cramp. A clawlike hand reached out. 'Can anyone help me? The baby gone with it, now it's taking me . . .'

'What has she eaten?' The whole room fell silent as soon as Philomena spoke.

'Pobs,' replied the little boy.

'Bread and milk? Holy Mother . . . Look child, how many are you in the house?'

'Seven with me dad.'

'Then the six of you will remain upstairs except when it is unavoidable. Stay out of this room.' She turned to face the small crowd. 'Will one of you go into my house and fetch my fly killer? It's an odd contraption made by my husband – a sort of rubber ball fastened to a stone jam jar. Don't spill the contents on your skin. And I suggest that the rest of you go out of this place and pray.'

The visitors turned to leave, but she continued to shout after them, 'Clean your drains every day, kill flies and burn

old food. Put fire ashes down the closet morning and night . . .'

They were gone, melted into the dusk. Grimly, she rolled up her sleeves and set to work, washing the fevered woman on the couch, boiling a pan of water for drinking after it was cooled, searching dingy cupboards for necessary ingredients, then finally laying-out the tiny corpse of a baby girl.

She turned from these unpalatable tasks to find Edie Dobson standing behind her.

'I've . . . er . . . fetched your contraption, Mrs Maguire.'

'Thank you.' Philomena took the item, a crude spray made up of tubes, jar and metal funnel. 'It's a bit hit and miss, but it kills a fair few of them.' And she squirted the vile-smelling droplets into the room. ''Tis the flies bring the illness, Mrs Dobson. And in your condition, you had better be going home.'

'But . . . what about you?'

'I've had a touch of it, so I hope I'm still fighting. The mill, you see. I keep the house clean, but the spinning room's a breeding place for this sort of thing. And I'm strong, Mrs Dobson. How many babies have you lost? Didn't you give up your place at the loom to carry this one?'

'Aye. But I didn't know you knew . . .'

'I hear things, I'm not deaf. But let me tell you now – if you want that child in your belly to thrive, keep Mother Blue out of your house.' She turned to stare at the writhing figure on the couch. 'The old woman delivered this last one, I believe. And I've no doubt she killed it too.'

'I'd . . . best be off, then.'

Philomena followed her neighbour to the door. 'Leave some things on the step for me, would you? Go into my kitchen and fetch pearl barley, some lime water and the arrowroot. I shall be here till morning.'

Edie Dobson turned on the pavement. 'But what about your work, Mrs Maguire?'

‘Ah, no matter. I’ve been up many a night at a calf-birthing and with my own mother’s labours too. There’s no rest for the wicked, is there now?’

‘Right enough.’ Edie paused and studied this odd, tall person who had been labelled ‘queer’ and ‘witch’. ‘Only you’re not wicked, are you?’

Philomena smiled. ‘Ask my husband – if you can find him. Good night now.’

She sat for an hour with the delirious patient, spooning drops of boiled water between parched lips to prevent a total drying out. With no outward sign of revulsion, she cleaned away the constant messes and sponged the fevered body with cool cloths. At eight o’clock, she went to the foot of the stairs. ‘Master?’ she called. The man of the house, a thin, sad-faced creature, presented himself on the small landing. ‘I’ve placed a pan of boiled water on the stairs. You and the children will drink from it. If it tastes a bit sour, sure that’s only a drop of lime added in. You will eat nothing for two days.’

‘What about me work?’

She shrugged her shoulders. ‘If you want to give this sickness to your fellow men, then I cannot stop you.’

‘And the kiddies are clemmed – can’t they have some bread and milk?’

‘Not before Wednesday night. And no milk at all this week, for milk can be a killer. But a body never died for two days without nourishment. Keep the closet clean and let me know if anyone else becomes ill.’ She closed the stairway door firmly.

It was an endless night and from time to time it looked as if all might be lost, for the wretched soul on the couch had few resources to call upon. Malnourishment and poor housing had left her weak, while recent childbirth had also taken its inevitable toll. But by morning the fever had broken and a transparent hand reached out gratefully to

encircle the visitor's wrist. 'I'm reet now. I'll not forget thee, Missus. You've saved me, God knows.'

'Not yet, I haven't. You're still weak as a kitten from childbed. Now, listen to me carefully. See these three cups? This is all you can have today. This large one is plain boiled water – take as much of that as you can hold. Then I've brewed up some pearl barley and here's a nice lime drink. No food at all, especially milk. I'll be back to see you after work.'

Philomena Maguire made her weary way across the street. It was five-fifteen and her shift would begin at six. When she opened the front door her breath was taken away by what she saw. A small fire burned in the grate, the copper kettle bubbled on the hob while the table was set with bread and Lancashire cheese for breakfast. She sank on to a chair, tears coursing freely down her cheeks. How did they know that the woman had survived? Ah yes, news soaked through walls in this street. If you sneezed twice, the clogger at the other end would get to know.

The front door opened and Edie Dobson's head poked through the gap. 'Are you alreet, lass?'

She dried her streaming eyes. 'Yes, thank you.'

'Don't fret thyself, for we shall see you right, Missus. "Pey" Peter's going to take you to work on his cart, save you walking. Can I come in?'

'No! I've the disease on my clothes.'

'Oh.' The young woman hesitated before continuing. 'I'll be baking today, later on, like. Will tatie pie and peas do you a supper? Only I know you'll be busy seeing to Mrs Critchley . . .'

'Mrs Who?'

'The lass you've been all night with! Eeh, to think you've likely saved her life without knowing her name!'

'Death and illness don't know any names, Mrs Dobson. And I'll be glad of your pie, just as I'm grateful for this.' She waved an arm towards the fire. 'The . . . the baby's body is

in a box in the back yard. I meant no disrespect, only to save the rest of them . . .'

'Aye. It'll all get seen to, don't you fret. No need for tears, Mrs Maguire.'

'My name's Philly.'

'Is it? Like a young horse?'

'Yes. Like a young horse.'

'Bet you feel ninety this morning though, eh? I'm Edie, by the way.'

'I know.'

'Oh.' The small round face broke into a hesitant smile. 'I'd best get going, then. See you later, eh?'

'Yes. See you later.'

As she stripped off her clothes for a wash in the scullery, Philly Maguire found herself humming quietly in spite of tiredness and the sound shocked her to the core. Singing? When did she last have a tune in her? She looked round the whitewashed brick walls and all along the shelves where her bottles and jars sat. And in that moment, she recognized that she was happy because she was at home. Philly belonged, would make a place for herself. For the first time since her marriage, she had stopped feeling alone.

The morning was long, tiring and tedious. By the time eight o'clock arrived with its half-hour breakfast break, Philomena was too exhausted to eat her meal of bread and butter. Everyone else sat round the edges of the room, some on skips, others on the floor, eating their food on the oil-covered boards, using as tools fingers thick with heavy yellow grease. Her stomach heaved and she made a mad dash for the toilet. There was only one on each floor, so she was forced to stand and gag while others took their turn. When at last she closed the door and relieved herself, she noticed, not for the first time, the degree of infestation in the tiny room. A particularly vile type of cockroach – a strange and unusually huge beast – patrolled this area in vast numbers and she reached for the worn-out brush that

had been placed here to keep these foragers at bay. It wasn't right, any of it. Fifty-five and a half hours a week she worked in this place for a few paltry shillings, out of which sum she was forced to pay her little- and side-piecers, children who would break their backs for a chance of an extra penny. For what hellish reason? For them all to finish up sick or dead, killed off by accident or by disease carried on the backs of rodents and other vermin?

During the rest of that morning, Philly looked at the spinning room with newly opened eyes. Twelve-year-old half-timers slid about in thick oil, bare-feet skating to keep up with the work. From time to time a shrivelled little-piecer with the body of an infant and the face of an old man ducked under a mule with brush and wiper to clean, bent over double so as not to break the precious ends of cotton. Although she was paid by the draw, which meant she depended for her living on how many times her mule opened and closed, she deliberately slowed herself down to look around. It was a waking nightmare of dirt, noise, heat and damp.

Then, just before the dinner hooter was due, a minder across the room trapped his piecer when the mule returned to its creel. No screams were heard above the deafening noise of machinery, yet some instinct told everyone that something was amiss. Work stopped as the limp child was carried out in the minder's arms, then resumed as soon as the drama was over. With a living to earn and piecers to pay, no spinner could pause for more than a minute. Within half an hour, the child had been replaced and life continued as if the incident had never occurred.

When the dinner break sounded, Philly stopped her mule and walked over to the accident site. 'How is he?' she asked.

The man shrugged thick shoulders. 'Alreet. Lost a finger, though. I've had a look round, can't seem to lay me hand on it at all.' He grinned crudely. 'I'd have a job to find it round

here, wouldn’t I? Never mind, the mice’ll happen get a good supper . . .’

She delivered a resounding slap to the side of his surprised face. ‘I see it,’ she said. ‘And it will be eaten by no mouse.’

Philly stalked out of the room, her heart pounding loudly. Well, today was as good a time as any other to leave this infernal place, she reckoned. Boldly, she hammered on the manager’s door.

‘Come,’ boomed a loud voice.

She entered the small office only to find no less a person than Mr Richard Swainbank himself, mill owner, landlord, gentleman farmer and respected citizen of these parts. He sat at the large desk, thumbs in waistcoat pockets, heavy gold chain across his chest, a diamond pin securing his silk tie. She took in all the trappings, the shiny black hat on the table, a silver-headed cane leaning against bookshelves, a pair of handsome grey kid gloves tossed carelessly on to a chair.

She hesitated fractionally, her hand resting on the door knob. Swainbank was a quantity relatively unknown, a being that passed occasionally through the spinning room with a time-piece in its hand. A spectator. A creature that escaped frequently to fresher and cooler air. This was a hard man, one whose supposedly regal posture commanded immediate respect and unquestioning obedience.

‘Well?’ he asked, a straight eyebrow raised towards thick brown hair. ‘What can I do for you?’

With a bravado fed by anger, she fixed her eyes on him, although her knees seemed to have gone to jelly. The cotton barons of Bolton were a breed apart, a breed that defied both description and explanation. Here sat a gentleman who was not a gentleman, a monied person who owned lands and cattle without ever touching plough or feedbag. Yet his vowels were often as flat as those of any winder, while his manner fell far short of the genteel. What was he, then? A

self-made man? No. His money was old, passed down along the line from earlier generations of mill tyrants. But this man of means had been known to roll up his sleeves a time or two during epidemics, could kick a mechanical mule to life when every engineer in the town had signed its death certificate. Aye. She nodded slightly. Himself would work the mills until the day he died . . . A self-made gentleman? Was such a creature a possibility, even a fact? He was, she concluded with an almost imperceptible shrug, an improbability . . .

‘What is it you want?’ He folded his arms and leaned back in the chair.

It was the edge to his words that thrust her forward, propelled her through the space between door and desk. The tone, the very cadence of his voice, that mixture of superiority, condescension and . . . and amusement! With grim determination, she stared into eyes as black as hell itself, irises of a brown so dark as to leave the pupils unremarkable. Richard Swainbank was a man of great beauty, the sort of beauty that went beyond the merely handsome. In spite of more than forty summers, his face remained unmarked by time, while the odd combination of colourings with which he was endowed set him even further apart from the general run. Hair and whiskers were fair to mid-brown, while lashes and eyebrows echoed the darkness they so clearly framed. But Philly was not impressed by such arresting packaging.

‘Well?’ he asked impatiently.

Her hackles were fully risen by this time. He was known far and wide for his tantrums, was Mr Swainbank, had never been averse to on-the-spot sackings or wage dockings. But she didn’t care, didn’t choose to care! Straightening her shoulders, Philly slapped the grisly parcel on to his desk where, lying between inkstand and blotter, it slowly unwound to reveal the sad contents.

‘I expected the manager, but I suppose you’ll have to do. That, Mr Swainbank, is a severed finger. The child to whom it was recently attached is twelve years old with ricketty legs and not a pick of flesh to his bones . . .’

‘Bloody hell!’ He returned the woman’s furious stare. She talked as if she were educated, as if she imagined herself to be his equal! ‘And what, pray, would you have me do with this item? Shall I use it as a paperweight? If the damn fool lad can’t run fast enough to save his hands, then he’s no use to me!’

She leaned forward, tightly clenched fists pressing against the edge of the desk. ‘You can shove it, Mr Swainbank!’

‘Pardon?’ The second eyebrow joined its twin.

‘You heard me sure enough! Shove that and the job up your waistcoat front!’

He fought a chuckle that rumbled ominously in the region of his chest. What a fighter, eh?

‘The poor boy is no use to anyone from this day! And that is your fault!’ After a moment or two, she added a derogatory ‘Sir’ to this shouted accusation.

His whole countenance was suddenly darkened by a rush of colour as he jumped to his feet. ‘Get out of here, Mrs . . . Mrs . . .’

‘Maguire,’ she spat. ‘I was going anyway for my health’s sake. This place is teeming with disease – do you hear? Tics, fleas, rats, mice, cockroaches as big as horses . . .’

‘Silence!’ He held up a large hand and she studied a heavy gold cufflink that peeped out beneath the sleeve of his jacket.

‘All right then,’ she whispered. ‘Silence me, why don’t you? I’m used to it, so I am, for me husband tried often enough – too often for his own good . . .’ Her voice was rising now, quickening in tempo, keeping pace with the temper that had long plagued her, a temper that would, according to her family at least, be her downfall one day.

‘And so he should try!’ shouted Swainbank. ‘With you in the house, he’d need the patience of a saint!’

‘He’s not in my house any more. I have ways of ridding myself of vermin!’

They stared at one another for several moments of crackling tension.

‘So have I!’ he yelled now. ‘Full name?’

‘Philomena Theresa Maguire,’ she replied at the top of her not inconsiderable vocal powers.

‘Address?’

‘34 Delia Street.’

‘Good!’ He glanced across at the workers’ register which lay on top of the bookcase. ‘You will be struck off the list as from this noon.’

‘Ah no!’ She wagged a finger dangerously near to the end of his nose. ‘You will not strike me off, Mister, for I came in here just now to withdraw without notice!’

‘Excellent. I don’t need your kind here, Mrs Maguire. Barging around as if you own the place . . .’

‘Own it? Own it? God help me, I live in it except when I’m asleep – which is more than you do!’

His pulses were racing erratically as he slumped back into the chair. It wasn’t just her appearance, though that alone would have made her special in spite of her advanced pregnancy. No. It was something else, something beyond those intelligent blue eyes, that pale smooth skin, the fine high cheekbones, the glossy raven’s wing sweep of her hair. This was a woman, a real woman with the ability to warm a room simply by being in it. She was magnificent. Insubordinate, out of order, uncontrollable and bloody magnificent!

‘And keep off the port!’ she snapped wickedly. ‘It’s killing you, all that good living. Here we die of starvation. Up on the moors, you’re seeing yourselves off by over-indulging. From the colour of your face just now, I’d say you’ve ten years at best left, Mr Swainbank. And a good riddance too!’

‘You . . . little . . . bitch!’

She laughed heartily at this and he marvelled at such a courageous display of nonchalance. ‘I’m not little, Mister. And I’m no female dog to be running at your heel! Well now, did I upset you by answering back, by sticking out for me own rights? Isn’t that a desperate shame?’

‘You’ll never work in this town again!’

‘Away with your bother! I can take care of meself, Mister!’ She marched to the door then turned, hands on hips, eyes flashing blue fire. ‘A curse on you and yours, Mr Swainbank! And I bid you the worst of days.’ She nodded slowly. ‘I hope you live to rue setting eyes on me. But I suspect that you will not survive long enough!’

She slammed the heavy door behind her.

Richard Swainbank reached for his cane and threw it across the room. Bloody woman! How dare she? How dare she walk in here like the Queen of Egypt with all the colours of the Nile reflected in her eyes and . . . Oh, damn her! He rose stiffly and stared into a small mirror between the two high windows. How would she look with the hair uncoiled? With a mighty roar, he turned and swept everything off the desk, his eyes fixed to a small bloody bundle as it tumbled across the floor. Fifty pounds. He would find the damned lad and give him fifty, that would be enough . . .

Philly stood on the landing, a hand pressed against the wall as she fought for air. He was wicked, the devil incarnate, so he was . . . Not one jot did he care for anyone, not for the poor lad with his finger gone, not for the sickly folk who forced themselves daily into this place of endless drudgery. Behind her he crashed about the room and she allowed herself a tight smile of triumph. He was off the horse for a minute or two and she must take credit for having unseated him.

The door flew open. ‘Mrs Maguire?’

‘Yes?’ She quickly raised herself into an upright and steady position.

‘Er . . .’ His eyes wandered down the stairwell while he pulled at his waistcoat, then he passed a hesitant hand through the mop of dishevelled hair. ‘What . . . er . . . what’ll you do?’

Philly put her head on one side while she studied his obvious discomfort. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Well . . . er . . . husband gone and . . . and . . .’

‘Baby coming?’ Her tone, in direct contrast to his deepening blush, was light. ‘I shall take care of meself, Mr Swainbank.’

He thrust a large hand at her. ‘Here,’ he barked. ‘Take it. It’s what’s due in wages and a bit on top – get yourself a perambulator or some such article . . .’

Her jaw must have been hanging open, for she heard it shut with a snap as she inhaled deeply. Was he going soft? Wages when she was walking out? Wages after she’d told him what he could do with his blessed job?

‘Take it!’ he snapped. ‘I don’t dole out spare cash every day of the week.’

Slowly she reached out and accepted the proffered notes and coins, her eyes widening as she realized that there must be all of six or seven pounds here. ‘It’s . . . it’s charity,’ she heard herself saying.

‘If it’s charity, then it’s bloody history in the making too,’ he replied with sarcasm in his tone. ‘I’m not noted for good deeds. I shall see to the lad, him that lost the finger.’ He stared at her for a moment or two, then, after walking back into the office, slammed the door firmly home.

Philly counted the money, placed what was due to her in a pocket, then posted the remainder through the brass letterbox in the office door. His curses were audible above the sound of dropping coins, yet he made no move towards the stairs. Again she smiled grimly. She would take what was owed, no more than that. If the man was feeling generous, he could give this small amount to some deserving cause. She turned away, a sudden sadness

invading her heart, a new weakness making her catch her breath as anger evaporated. What was this picture in her mind? His eyes . . . so . . . so full of grief and . . . and was that loneliness? Still, he deserved to be lonely. No! She must not pity him, must not feel grateful or indebted! These wages she had sweated for, this money she would keep!

After composing herself, Philly descended the stairs until she was out in the open air. Across the mill yard, she caught sight of her own piecers on their way to half-time school. They ran to her side. ‘What’s up, Mrs Maguire?’

‘I’m off for good. Tell the afternoon lads, will you? I shan’t be back.’

‘Aw, Missus. You were a good minder, sixpence extra we always got!’

‘You know where I live. Take care of yourselves now!’ She watched the weary boys as they made their way towards school where, no doubt, they would be severely beaten at some stage for sleeping at their desks after six long hours in the mill.

All afternoon, she wandered aimlessly about the town. In less than twenty-four hours, her life had changed completely. Seamus was gone for good, of that she felt sure. Now she’d thrown away her job, slapped it on the table with that poor little mite’s finger – dear God, whatever next? Yes, she knew what next. It had to be done and she was the one to do it. Might as well get it all over in the one day.

After checking Bessie Critchley’s progress, she ate a tasty meal brought in from Mrs Dobson’s kitchen, then changed into one of her two good dresses, a soft ankle-length grey that wouldn’t quite fasten because of her increased girth. To hide this gap, she picked a soft shawl from the drawer and folded it around her shoulders, pinning the edges together with the tiger’s eyes brooch given her by Uncle Porrick many years ago. She smiled as she fastened the stiff clasp. Uncle Porrick had always been her favourite man, while she was his ‘best girl’. He’d taken the brooch from a leprechaun,

or so he always insisted – especially when his tongue was loosened by poteen. Ah well. If the stone really did have magic powers, which she sorely doubted, then she would need its help tonight!

Philly had never been in a public house before, so it was not without trepidation that she approached the Bull. A nauseating smell of stale beer hung in the air outside the two entrances and she hesitated before choosing which door to use. The flagged vault with its ever-open door did not seem the right place somehow, so she chose the door leading to two others marked ‘Open Bar’ and ‘Bar Parlour’. She studied these legends for several minutes before making a decision. The door on the right was quite ornate, seemed a more likely place for a woman, so she entered and was surprised to find a pleasant room, thickly carpeted and with an open fireplace covered by a large brass fire screen. No-one occupied any of the seats. Philly made for the bar where a small woman was polishing glasses. ‘Yes?’ asked this red-faced female. ‘What’s your pleasure, Missus?’

‘Well, I don’t want a drink, thank you.’

‘Really?’ A sarcastic smile broadened the tiny features. ‘This is a pub, love. Usually, folk what come in here want a drop of something or other.’

‘I’m looking for somebody.’

‘Missing persons? Try the police, dear . . .’

Philly bridled. ‘I am looking for an elderly woman who calls herself Mother Blue. I don’t know where she lives, so I came here.’

The woman placed glass and cloth on the counter, then beckoned Philly to come nearer. Dropping her voice as if the room were full, she mouthed silently, ‘In the vault, love. She’s as drunk as a bucket of tiddlers. Aye, I’m not surprised you don’t know where she lives. Never goes home till closing, spends many a night rough, I reckon. If you’d take her off our hands, we’d be grateful . . .’

‘I just want to see her. It’s important.’