

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



The Corner House

Ruth Hamilton

About the Book

When, one dark night in 1939, young Theresa Nolan was brutally raped by three young men, it was the beginning of a series of tragic and dramatic events. For the young men were not criminals or vagrants, but the sons of wealthy and privileged businessmen. Pregnant, thrown out of her home by her bigoted father, Theresa vowed a lifetime of vengeance on the men who had wrecked her future. Physically frail, but filled with a burning anger that fuelled her weak body, she determined that nothing and no-one was going to deflect her from her path of retribution, not even the gentle man who cared for her during her sickness and whom she eventually came to love.

But there were others caught in the web of violence and deceit: Bernard Walsh and his brother Danny, and Eva, the midwife who had befriended Theresa and had seen her through her pregnancy. Above all there were two children, bonded together from birth, whose lives were to play their part in the drama of Theresa Nolan.

With all the rich characters and traditions of Liverpool and the north-west, Ruth Hamilton has created another magnificent story of passion and conflict.

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Also by Ruth Hamilton

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The Corner House

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CORGI BOOKS

*In memory of Dame Catherine Cookson,
inspiration to so many, kindness itself to me.*

Also Tom Cookson, husband of Dame Catherine.

May God bless and cherish these two fine souls.

In spite of a certain female critic who objects to my 'sentimentality' with animals, I say goodbye on this page to Benny and Scooby, two scruffy little mongrels aged sixteen and fifteen respectively. Both were humanely put to sleep on 1 July 1998 in the Corner House, which happens to be my home. They are so very sadly missed.

I welcome into my life Samson, two-year-old black Labrador with the sweetest temperament.

Also Fudge, chocolate Labrador aged three months, who has, in just over a fortnight, eaten his way through the bottom drawer of my bureau, some trainers with (according to my son) A Designer Name, the landing carpet, something called a joystick, a roll of sticky tape, two kitchen mats and a twenty-pound note. We all love him dearly in spite of his misdeeds.

The seamen's mission depicted within these pages is a mere figment of this writer's imagination and bears absolutely no relationship whatsoever to any of the existing institutions of that nature whose excellent work can only be admired and commended. Liverpool has always looked after its seafarers and may it long continue to do just that.

NOVEMBER, 1964

It was a cold, grey morning with leaden clouds pressing down as if intending to impose their gloomy weight on the Mersey. The Liver Birds continued their eternal vigil; a tanker, its replete belly low in the water, drifted silently towards the next resting place. On the rail that divided land from water, several gulls cast beady eyes over flagstones in search of food.

Bernard Walsh, who was used to ice, did not even shiver as people hurried behind him towards buses with shopping, umbrellas and wailing children. He saw little and heard nothing, simply bowing his head and staring downward with the special passivity that visits the truly absorbed. She was dead. This morning, at the shop, the news had finally arrived. 'Oh, Katherine,' he whispered now. How could he tell Katherine that her mother's life was over?

He hadn't even managed to be at the bedside. His wife had died while he, Bernard Walsh, husband, father and fishmonger, had used his expertise to prepare and sell the chilled, glass-eyed fruits of Britain's coastal waters.

Urging himself to focus, he cleaned thick-lensed spectacles on a handkerchief, then watched the tanker drifting lazily into dock. He dragged his sad mind back into the present tense just as a female child screamed and complained about cold fingers. Katherine did not like the cold. She would be at work now, would be drumming facts into the tousled heads of thirty-four children at St

Anthony's School on Scotland Road. Pretty, talented, happy Katherine, what a blessing she had proved to be.

Liz's sufferings were over. Liz was lying now beneath a snow-white sheet in the morgue at Walton Hospital. No longer would Bernard Walsh spend his evenings in the company of a comatose woman. In recent weeks, he had sat and watched the cruel and unforgiving disease consume his beloved wife. How on earth had he coped without her humour, her tenderness? Towards the end, Liz had drifted away into a morphine-induced retreat of her own, had been fed through tubes, had been bathed and tended by nurses like a helpless child. Even so, she had been alive. Bernard had half expected her to jump up and tell the nurses what to do with all their gadgets and needles, but Liz had remained a poor, crippled, ageing infant. He had never looked at another woman. He had been that rare beast: a happily married man.

Katherine. Newborn, she had been perfect, almost magical. A smile threatened to stretch his lips, and he refused to allow such an unsuitable expression to gain purchase. His wife was dead and, if he chose the path of righteousness, there was further heartbreak to come. The right thing. What was the right thing?

'Bernard?'

He sighed, and fixed myopic eyes on the man at his side. 'How did you know I'd be here?'

John Povey rested a hand on his friend's shoulder. Since his arrival in Liverpool, Bernard Walsh had always visited the river in times of stress.

'I can't do it,' mumbled Bernard.

'Not today. It doesn't have to be today.' John trembled as a frosty wind sliced like a cruel knife through clothing and into his chest. 'Aren't you freezing?'

Bernard shook his head. The tall, rounded fishmonger seldom complained of cold, though the gradual erosion of

his hair had driven him to wearing headgear: a trilby outside; a white hat while serving in his shop.

'I suppose you'll be used to it.'

'Aye, I am that.' For over thirty years, Bernard Walsh had worked with fish. The skin on his hands was so weathered that a clogger might have pinned irons to it without the need for anaesthesia. 'You've heard, then?'

John nodded. 'I popped up to Walton with some supplies, asked about Liz while I was there. A peaceful end, they said. Given her condition, that was a blessing, old son.' Liz and Bernard had been inseparable. Like Darby and Joan, Laurel and Hardy, theirs had been a double act. He recalled some of the carryings-on, parties where Bernard had been foil to Liz and vice versa. The pair had prayed, played and stayed together. "'I can drink any table under this man,'" said John softly. 'Remember her saying that while in her cups, Bernard?'

'Aye, she was well away that night. I think that was the first time she'd ever had vodka. Up till then, she'd called vodka a heathen drink, something to do with communism.' Bernard dropped his chin and pondered. 'Aye, vodka was her downfall that particular night. Our Liz did her balancing act with the yardbrush and destroyed Dr Connor's chandelier. Austrian crystal. Cost me nigh on eighty quid to have it mended.'

'We'll not see her like again,' said John. 'That mould definitely got smashed.'

'Just like the bloody chandelier.' Bernard sniffed, exhaled, watched his foggy breath as it hovered for seconds in the chill November air. 'One off, was my Liz. She deserved some peace. What she went through was never deserved. I can't think of anyone bad enough to warrant pain like that.'

John thrust his hands deep into coat pockets, cursing himself for forgetting gloves again. 'Will you bury her in Bolton, then?'

Liz had left explicit instructions. Soon after the first operation, she had understood that she would not recover, because the voracious beast within her body had already sallied forth to sink its hungry, sharp teeth into most major organs. 'She's to be burnt - she didn't mind where.' The smile threatened again.

'You can put me on a bloody bonfire like Guy Fawkes for all I care,' Liz had said. 'Just make sure I get scattered properly and give Katherine all my jewellery.'

'Jolly Brows,' said Bernard.

'I beg your pardon?'

'North side of Bolton - that's where she's to be scattered. We used to meet there years back, before we were married. There was a little hillock with a pond nearby. In springtime, loads of baby frogs hatched out and jumped all over us.' Unlike most girls, Liz had taken the frogs in her stride. 'It was the frogs that clinched it at the finish, you see.'

John Povey scratched his nose, did a mental inventory of his famous herbal remedies. What could he brew up to ward off dementia? John, who had perfected the art of sartorial eccentricity, looked every inch the mad scientist: dishevelled hair; clothes which always managed to look like someone else's, seldom fitting, always creased. 'Isn't it enough that I'm daft?' he asked his friend. 'Do you have to catch the same bus as me? Don't start going soft in the head, lad. Don't start copying me.'

'She liked frogs,' continued Bernard. 'She liked most living things. I had to make a contraption when we had a mouse, a box with cheese in it and a door that shut itself once the creature got inside. She used to waltz off up to Blundellsands to release the bloody mice into the wild, as she called it. Any infestations in Blundellsands would be Liz's fault. I kept telling her they weren't field mice, but you know what Liz was like. She said if the mice insisted on living indoors, they'd get a better class of cheese in Blundellsands, a bit of Brie or Danish Blue.'

'She was a character, all right,' agreed John Povey.

Bernard nodded. Liz was a grand woman. Silently, Bernard corrected himself. She had been a grand woman, a lover of animals, a determined minder of wildlife, a protectress of all God's creatures. She had been, but she no longer was. Everything about the woman he loved was suddenly history.

John glanced at the Liver Building clock. 'Did you close the shop?'

'Henry's there.' Henry couldn't fillet a cod to save his life. Bernard Walsh followed the direction of his friend's gaze. 'The largest chiming clock in existence,' he said. Sailors from all corners knew the Liver Building, looked for its twin birds to mark the end of a journey. This, one of the most memorable buildings on earth, was often a sight for the sore eyes of a returning homesick traveller.

'How long are you planning to stay here?' John Povey asked.

'In Liverpool?'

'No. Here in the freezing cold.'

At last Bernard allowed himself a fuller smile. 'I'm thinking.'

'I know that.'

Bernard shuffled about, faced the river again. He remembered his days on Bolton's fishmarket, the wind blowing through those huge doors, lorries emptying their contents between stalls, early shoppers trying to get the pick of the catch before the market was properly opened except to wholesale purchasers. The rabbit man tramping in with a pole of rabbits; the chicken woman covered in feathers, a couple of sacks dragging from her hands.

He remembered the blue-misted moors, Sundays spent roaming across fields with Liz, evenings enjoyed at home with Mam and Dad. 'There's no going back, is there?' He had considered the possibility of returning to Bolton once before, after the discovery in Liverpool of a certain woman,

but Liz had insisted on staying. She had been dug up once, and had declared her roots now to be settled. 'I shan't stand for another transplant, Bernard,' Liz Walsh had advised her husband. 'I'm all right. I've got friends and I'm used to the shops. Pull me up again and I'll perish like a dried-out bedding plant.'

'I don't know about staying, going, moving on or whatever,' mumbled Bernard.

John dragged reluctant hands from warm pockets and propped his elbows on the railing. 'Do the thing that seems best, Bernard.'

The fishmonger shifted his gaze to the left and looked at John Povey. With his over-long greying hair and intense hazel eyes, the chemist looked a bit like another Einstein. 'I've always done what's bloody best,' said Bernard Walsh, his tone almost snappy. 'And where did it get me? A lock-up on Scotland Road and a lie I've lived for twenty-odd year. There were times, you know. Times when I came near to telling Liz.' He swallowed a lump of pain. 'But I never did. Then, when she took poorly ... Well, that's all over for her now, thank God.'

'Katherine isn't history, though.'

'I know that, John.'

'She's the future. She's a good girl and I know she'll take it on the chin.'

Bernard shook his head pensively. 'There's things I did that I never should have done, then there's other things I should have done that I never—'

'It's the same for all of us. Do you think you're the only sinner, the only chap who's ever made mistakes? You can't change the past, but you can make an effort for the future.'

Firstly, Bernard had to take himself back to Scotland Road, had to tell his one and only child that her mother was dead. Then there were insurance policies to wade through, people to be notified, coffins to pick and choose from. In his house, Liz's belongings would scream at him from every

corner of every room. The house had caused him pain for many a month, but now, with Liz definitely gone, her trinkets and clothes would be angrier, louder, lonelier. And time would continue to tick on, marked by the Liver clocks and by the watch on his wrist, by the hourly beep-beeps on the radio, by the ever-turning pages of the kitchen calendar.

‘Come on, Bernard,’ urged John.

‘Not yet. You go - I’ll be all right.’ He had thoughts to collect, phrases to arrange.

‘Are you sure?’ John Povey’s face was furrowed by concern.

‘I’ve never been sure of owt,’ said Bernard, lapsing deliberately into the idiom that separated him from most of his fellows in this city. ‘Except that I loved Liz and I love my daughter.’

John Povey shuddered again, trembling not only against the chill, but also because of a secret shared for more than a decade. Who could say what was right, what was wrong? Perhaps Katherine should not be told ... and yet ...

Bernard read his companion’s thoughts. ‘I shall have to work my way up to it, John. There’s none but me shall tell the tale, because I know you’ll say nothing.’

John nodded his agreement. ‘I’ll not push you any more, Bernard. You have my opinion, but I shan’t force the issue. You know me well enough by now. I can offer pills and potions, but a cure’s never guaranteed.’

‘Thanks.’ Bernard watched his friend as he made his way across the Pier Head and towards his car. ‘What would I have done without that man?’ he mouthed softly. For a long time, John had been Bernard’s sanity. John Povey was a gentleman of principle, a genius with medicines, an unspoilt, down-to-earth bloke.

A gaggle of youths came into view, shaggy haircuts resembling what Liz had always termed ‘tatty-’ead mops’, the sort that got squeezed out in a special section of a

bucket. Although the Beatles had moved on, the noise continued, bang-banging from the mesh speakers of portable radios, drumming its way through open windows in the summer months, escaping from coffee bars each time a door swung to or fro. And these young lads' heads seemed to warrant mowing, not cutting.

The boys stopped as if prompted by some invisible cue, drew combs from pockets and passed them through wild, abundant locks. Guitar cases leaned against blue-jeaned legs, while the omnipresent transistor radio sat silently next to a pile of sheet music. The group would doubtless be on its way to practise in the garage or bedroom of some tolerant or absent parent. These were the hopefuls, the also-rans who tried to pursue Ringo and the rest into lives of luxury and lunacy. 'Bloody daft,' muttered Bernard. They should be spending their time looking for a good job. The Beatles seemed to exist on the run, escaping from mobs of screaming girls and from the constant glare of scandal-hungry reporters. Aye, they'd all have been a damned sight better off in fish.

Katherine. She'd been to that last concert at The Cavern, had probably screeched with the rest while John Lennon played and sang in that wonderful, careless, I'm-here-to-enjoy-myself way, his head held up, notes pouring past adenoidal tissue and down a strangely aristocratic nose. Katherine had been through a few phases - pancake make-up thick enough to want scraping off by an interior decorator, white-as-death cheeks, eyes surrounded by spiky, false lashes, the upper lids painted as black as hell.

How could he tell her? How? And must she be told?

The chocolate workers had been sent home on that searing August day, the day of the last Cavern concert, because coffee creams and hazel fudge had melted around them in sticky, shapeless pools. In spite of the heat, Liverpool's young folk had squeezed themselves into that

awful cellar, many fainting for lack of oxygen, some losing consciousness in the presence of their gods.

She had quietened, had attended a Catholic teacher training college in Liverpool, returning each evening to the bosom of her family. They lived in a nice big semi on the Northern Road in Crosby, had four bedrooms, a piano, a man who came round once a week to do the gardening, a lady who tidied up and cleaned the silver. They had a car, an automatic washing machine, a television set and a freezer. Carpets were top-grade Axminster; all rooms were centrally heated. And Liz was dead.

Majorca, Alicante, Venice, Rome - Bernard had taken his two girls on holiday in recent years. In Rome, Liz had discovered her lump, that tiny, hard pebble beneath sun-touched flesh. 'It'll be summat and nowt,' she had declared over a plate of pasta. It had turned out to be summat and everything, the very 'summat' that had finished her happy, selfless life.

A tear escaped and trickled down Bernard Walsh's ruddy cheek. With a numb hand, he dashed it away and steeled himself against its brothers. If he was going to cry, he would do it later, loudly and in private.

'You all right, mister?'

Bernard blinked. It was one of the mop-headed hopefuls, just an ordinary lad with longish hair and a few baby freckles lingering on his nose. 'Aye, I'll be better in a minute.'

'Can I ... Do you want anything?'

He wanted Liz. He wanted his life back, wanted to be the same age as this copy-cat Beatle, wanted the moorlands, the camaraderie of Bolton market, a pie and a pint in the Wheatsheaf for his dinner. 'My wife died today,' he said. 'Thanks for being so kind.'

The boy frowned. 'You shouldn't be on your own. When my old gran died, we all stuck together. Have you got somebody?'

Bernard nodded.

'Do you want a lift? I can take you on the scooter - the lads'll look after my stuff. We were only on our way to practise, anyway.'

'My car's across the road, thanks.'

The boy continued to look puzzled. 'I've got you now,' he announced after a second or two. 'Mr Walsh - wet fish on Scotland Road.'

'That's me.'

The youngster grinned. 'Fridays, we always have fish.'

'Is that Jimmy Morris?' Bernard peered beneath the thatch and into eyes as blue as a June midnight. 'Well, I'd never have recognized you.'

Jimmy laughed, then remembered the sadness. 'Look, I'm sorry about Mrs Walsh. I met her the odd time—'

'Aye, it would be odd and all,' said Bernard. 'She hated the smell of raw fish. I had to go in the back way when I got home, then straight up for a bath. Even then, she'd tell me I stank like fifteen stone of cod.' He shook his head. 'No, she didn't often help in the shop. I had to be at death's door before she'd give me a hand.'

Jimmy reached out and touched the fishmonger's shoulder. 'If you ever want me, we still live over the barber's.' He wandered off to rejoin his companions.

There was hope for the future, Bernard Walsh decided. Jimmy Morris and his crew might look like a lot of big girls' blouses, but the heart was still there. Terry Morris was a barber. He and his wife had raised two boys in the rooms above what he called his 'saloon'. Terry was a good Catholic and a strong believer in cut-throat razors and hot towels. Terry Morris should pin their Jimmy to a chair and give him a short back and sides before the lad crashed his scooter due to impeded vision.

Bernard walked towards his car, waving at the disappearing would-be pop band. He sat for a while, fingers tapping the Rover's steering wheel, mind racing about as

he worked his way through the list of things to be done. At the back of his consciousness, the truth kept its counsel, remained hidden behind names and addresses of those who must be invited to the funeral.

Liz hadn't wanted to come to Liverpool. She had pleaded to stay in Bolton, but Bernard, anxious to be away from the scene of other people's crimes, had dragged his wife and young daughter down the East Lancashire Road. And they had settled, had thrived on the Scousers' love of fresh and salt fish, had become comfortable members of the *nouveau riche* middle class.

And then, after a short lull of relative peace, the woman had arrived and Bernard had suggested another move, perhaps to Bury or Blackburn. 'I'm not going anywhere,' Liz had screamed. 'Why must we be forever shifting about? We've survived the bloody war, we're doing all right, so where's the flaming sense in taking off again?' Liz had made friends in Crosby, good friends, the sort she would not have left easily.

'I just feel like a change,' Bernard heard himself replying. The truth was unspeakable, so he could furnish Liz with no reason for his desire to leave Liverpool, the city which had become the new love of Liz Walsh's life.

'Well, I don't. I'm changing no more than my underwear, you great lummo. I like it here. The shops in town are great and our Katherine's made a lot of new friends.'

They had stayed and had been lucky. The woman had moved to Waterloo, a mere couple of miles from the Walshes' house. 'God must have been on your side,' Bernard told his dead wife. 'Because you never knew.'

She knew now, though. Somewhere above these mucky clouds, a woman with a new halo was looking down on him. He should, perhaps, call in at St Anthony's, should get down on his knees and pray in the church before visiting his daughter's classroom. 'I did it all for you, Liz,' he said.

And for Katherine. Yes, it had been for Katherine's sake, too.

He drove slowly through the city, as if trying to postpone Katherine's inevitable tears. Liz's death had been expected - even hoped for in the darker hours, but every child was shocked by the final disappearance of a parent.

Outside St Anthony's, Bernard turned off his engine and sat perfectly still. In ten or so minutes, the children would dash out of classrooms and Katherine would be free to talk and to listen and to weep.

The broader, merciless exodus from these largely Catholic streets had begun, leaving the area sad and much quieter. Families were relocating to pastures new, nasty little houses built on unloved land. The green that surrounded Kirkby was scrubby, pale and heartless, as if it had given up hope long ago.

'I might as well retire,' he whispered. 'There'll be nothing much left here for me in a year or two.' Katherine would get wed. She had been through so many suitors that Bernard had sometimes considered making a rota just to have things fair and square, equal time and attention for all comers. But now, there was Martin, who had bought an engagement ring, who would be Katherine's husband in a few months.

He entered the church, knelt and prayed for Liz's repose. He prayed also for the woman he had feared, that other poor creature whose soul had departed some years ago. She had left her mark. Theresa Nolan's mark had smudged its path right across Lancashire from the inland foothills to the coast. Her fury had destroyed families, had made grown men cry, had affected innocent children. Yet she, the truly injured party, had simply looked for justice.

'What's it all been about?' he asked his Maker. 'Did I do it wrong from the very start?'

Bernard Walsh closed his eyes. A knock at the door; a woman standing in the street, a newspaper parcel in her

hands. Upstairs, Liz sleeping. Someone else's sin. Fish scales beneath his fingernails, gas lamps doused against possible invasion, silent skies, no bombs yet. Liz too ill for air-raid shelters; instant decision, instant lie.

His eyelids raised themselves. Were there good lies, then? Were there degrees of untruth, some types more acceptable than others? He blessed himself, heard the school bell ringing in celebration of another finished morning.

Genuflecting, he turned his back to the altar and walked slowly down the aisle. Soon, he would face his living conscience.

ONE

By 1940, Bernard and Daniel Walsh were the last surviving remnants of a dynasty that stretched back through more than a century. Their father and grandfather had sold fish on Bolton Market for at least a hundred years, while the Derby Street shop had been in the hands of a Walsh since 1897.

Danny, older than Bernard by seven years, was a dyed-in-the-wool bachelor, unlovely of face, lean, sound in wind and limb. Although he remained blissfully unaware of the fact, Danny Walsh had a sweetness of nature that charmed many women into hovering on the brink of infatuation. But Danny knew exactly what he wanted from life. With a hoe, a rake and a bed of weeds, he was armed and in his natural element.

This older Walsh brother had chosen to live outside the town, in a place where the moors and fields could be viewed and appreciated. His back garden was bordered by a low privet hedge, but it seemed to continue onward and upward for ever, stretching through pasture and arable land, climbing softly, gently, eastward towards the Pennines. The weaver's cottage in Bromley Cross was small, yet its setting was pure magic to a man whose boyhood had been spent among factory chimneys and dark terraced streets.

With his pipe, his baccy pouch and his predictable life-pattern, Danny existed quite happily like a man twice his age. He went to the same public house each evening from nine o'clock until ten, then rose at the crack of dawn, travelling to meet the incoming fish trains or to run the Derby Street shop. Catholic to the core, he attended mass every Sunday and on most saints' days unless such items on the calendar of Rome interfered with the progress of business.

The brothers took life in their stride. As providers of essential services, they had been excused call-up, which fact, as each was wont to declare, was a definite plus for Britain, since both men were short-sighted and inclined towards the special headaches that often accompany myopia. 'Guns?' they ruminated from time to time. 'Guns? Our Danny [or our Bernard] couldn't hit a dartboard with a crossbow unless he had a guide dog and a papal blessing.'

During the early months of war, Danny Walsh spent many nights on a makeshift bed in a tiny room behind the Derby Street shop, returning to his cottage only when other duties did not demand his total attention. For five nights of every week, he and Bernard were stand-by firefighters. The blazes they had doused thus far had been caused by domestic accidents rather than by bombings, although both brothers had been mentioned in the press for extraordinary bravery. Bernard was the real daredevil. He had emerged from burning buildings on more than one occasion with his clothes on fire and a child or an animal in his arms.

As January drifted its snow-softened way towards the next month, Danny declared himself to be browned off. Sirens kept sounding, but nothing ever happened. He wasn't complaining about that, because he didn't want bombs, didn't want to be picking up the dead, but he could have been at home, could have seen the moors covered in blankets of silvery-white, could have been feeding his birds and providing water for them.

He sat in his smelly little room. The brothers scarcely noticed the odour of fish unless decay had set in. Danny was of the opinion that both he and Bernard carried cod liver oil rather than blood in their veins. An ancient clock ticked uncertainly; a thin, wartime version of the *Bolton Evening News* lay on the floor next to a faded rug. The unmistakable sound of Liz Walsh's carpet sweeper filtered through the ceiling. It was a waiting game - waiting for the baby, waiting for the Luftwaffe.

Danny checked the black-out, lit a candle, stretched out on his iron-framed cot and used a penknife to prise a few stubborn fish scales from the rims of his fingernails. Upstairs, Liz continued her relentless to-ing and fro-ing with the carpet sweeper. Seven months into her pregnancy, Liz refused to sit down and rest her legs. 'I'll rest when bloody Hitler rests in his grave,' the feisty woman had been heard to shout. 'And I've never sat down since I married yon daft ha'p'orth.' 'Yon daft ha'p'orth' was Danny's little brother, though 'little' went no way towards describing Bernard Walsh. Bernard, in spite of being an active man, was inclined towards rotundity. The general opinion of folk hereabouts was that Bernard was the full fish, while Danny, tall and skinny, was the fish after the cat had been at it - all skull and spiky bones.

The Walshes usually took turns, one remaining at the shop while the second man collected fish and then, after supplying the shop, going back to run Walsh's stall on the market. Lately, Bernard had stuck to the shop in order to keep an eye on his pregnant wife. As a result, Danny was often tired owing to constant early rising and an excess of responsibility, yet he remained even-tempered and benign throughout the most trying of days.

The door opened and Bernard stepped in. He wore the air of a man who had just decided on tactical retreat. 'She won't listen. If she polishes that sideboard again, it'll collapse into a heap of firewood, fit for nowt but kindling.'

Because of his bulk, Bernard seemed to fill the space between bed and door, especially now, with his large arms akimbo.

‘No fires so far tonight, thank God,’ pondered Danny aloud. ‘Nowt for the brigade to go out for.’

‘Not yet.’

Danny placed his knife on a small table and waited for Bernard to let off steam.

‘She’s not stopped since tea-time.’

‘I can imagine,’ replied Danny. ‘She’s swept that carpet to within a hair’s breadth of its hessian backing this past half-hour. She’ll be coming through my ceiling in a minute. Happen you must nail her feet to the floor and chain her top half to the door handle.’

Bernard sat in an old kitchen chair. ‘It’s this baby. She wants everything clean and shiny before it arrives. I reckon she’d Mansion Wax me if I sat still for long enough. And she’s going on and on about moving out, getting away from the shop. Says she doesn’t want her kiddy going to school smelling like somebody’s breakfast kippers.’

Danny raised his shoulders in a shrug. ‘Please yourself. Once the war’s over, we can turn this into a lock-up, let some young couple have the upstairs flat.’

Bernard mulled this over for the umpteenth time. He didn’t go a bundle on change for change’s sake, wasn’t really struck by the idea of moving. ‘I like it here,’ he said. ‘Near enough to town, near the church and the school.’ The quarters were a bit on the small side, but they had a decent living room, an adequate kitchen, a plumbed-in bathroom, a good-sized bedroom and a boxroom for the baby. ‘We’ve even got the electric, but is she satisfied? Oh, no. She wants something better, she says.’ Liz wasn’t a shrew, wasn’t a moaner, but she knew her mind.

‘Children need grass,’ offered Danny.

‘Well, we never had grass. The only green we ever saw was Queen’s Park or the Jolly Brows. Didn’t do us any

harm.'

'Country's healthier,' replied Danny. 'Fresh air, loads of space. A nice garden, flowers, grow your own veg.' Danny's garden, unlike his house, was meticulously groomed. He grew potatoes, cabbages, lettuce and carrots. In a small greenhouse, he produced tomatoes and propagated seedlings for his many flower-beds.

With regard to the inside of the cottage, Danny's strongly held and often stated belief was that dust settled after a while. Women tended to go into the business of shifting dirt, attacking the stuff with dusters, brushes and mops. Which was all very well, but the dust simply moved round the planet before blowing back to seek out its various sources of origin. Short of blasting the lot into outer space, there was no avoiding muck, therefore it should simply be tolerated. If a person never dusted or polished, things sorted themselves out after a year or two.

'That life's not for me,' sighed Bernard. He couldn't imagine scraping about with rakes and hoes, cutting and rolling a lawn into two-tone stripes, pruning roses, manicuring privets and declaring war on leaf-mould or greenfly.

'Well, you can't stop here for ever,' ventured Danny. 'When Hitler gets beaten up, things'll change. Folk'll likely expect more from life - only young ones setting up'll want to be living above shops. Progress, you see. Our grandad sold fish down Churchgate off a barrow, then in the old fishmarket. This shop must have looked posh to him. Expectations change with every generation.'

Bernard grunted his disapproval. 'They should take what they can get and be satisfied.'

Danny clicked his tongue. 'Listen, our kid. These last few months, women have started to do men's work as well as their own. They'll not step back easy into flowered pinnies and slippers. I know they've always worked in cotton, but they'll be setting their sights on nice houses, carpets,

better jobs and better grub. Whether you like it or not, there'll be change coming.'

Bernard left his brother and trudged upstairs, happily unaware that Danny's warning about change was to remain in his mind for some time to come.

Liz was polishing brasses, her small hands scrubbing furiously at the surface of some inanimate and blameless object. 'You can see your face in this plaque now,' she told him.

Bernard didn't want to see his face. It was all right as far as faces went, but it was a round, very ordinary face. 'Will you leave well alone, Liz?' he begged.

She sniffed the air. 'Shut that door tight,' she ordered. 'I'm not having visitors complaining about the smell of cod.'

They seldom had visitors, though Bernard chose not to remind his wife of that fact. Liz's aversion to the odour of fish had increased in proportion to her girth. With a seven-month belly on her, she could scarcely tolerate the scents that floated up the stairway from time to time. 'Thank God it's winter,' she continued. During the summer months, the stench of fish permeated everything - even her washing out on the line.

Bernard sat down and rattled yesterday's four-paged *Bolton Evening News* into some semblance of order. There was no peace by his fireside these days. He would have to give in gracefully once the war was over, he supposed. It would be Harwood or Bromley Cross, compulsory fresh air and weeding. Liz wouldn't want to stop here, not with a young one to worry about. But there was petrol to consider. Where would he get the extra fuel to drive to the shop? Would petrol rationing be cured as soon as the war ended? If not, he'd have to come down from the moors on buses and trams, he supposed, and leave the van here. What time was the first bus? Early enough to meet the fish trains? And what about the flat over the shop? What about Danny and —?

‘Bernard?’

He sighed, lost the thread of his thoughts, and turned a frail page. ‘Yes, love?’

‘My waters have just gone. All over the rug and all. I cleaned it nobbut half an hour since.’

He jumped up. ‘But you’re only seven months.’

‘Try telling the baby that! Look, send Danny for Mrs Harris on View Street. She’ll have to hurry up.’

Bernard ran out, but returned when his wife howled in pain. ‘Liz?’

‘Are you still here?’ she yelled. ‘Get gone, tell Danny I’ve a baby coming.’

‘Push,’ ordered Eva Harris. She was a small woman with a voice that didn’t fit her. The ringing tones seemed too huge for her reed-like frame and thin, prematurely greying hair.

‘You should have been a sergeant bloody major,’ breathed Liz.

And you should have taken things easy, thought the midwife, although she kept this thought to herself. ‘Don’t just lie there like a pound of wet tripe, Liz.’

‘I don’t like tripe. And as for fish ...’ Pain swallowed the rest of her words.

‘I’m not here to talk about menus,’ chided Eva. ‘In case you haven’t noticed, there’s a baby’s head trying to come out of a very small opening in your nether regions. If you’d just shut up and start fettling, we might get somewhere.’

Liz fixed her adversary with as hard a look as she could manage in the circumstances. ‘It hurts,’ she said.

‘It’s supposed to hurt. If it didn’t hurt, nobody’d know they were having a baby. They’d be giving birth on bloody trams, in the Co-op divi queue and all sorts.’

‘God should have organized things a bit better,’ moaned the patient.

‘Tell Him next Sunday,’ snapped Eva. ‘See if He’ll swap nature round to suit you. Save me a job and all if kiddies

gets flown in by stork.' Eva wasn't happy. If Liz Walsh's export department didn't do its job soon, a doctor would have to intervene. Eva Harris, midwife and self-appointed medical advisor of folk from the Daubhill end of Bolton, didn't hold with doctors. They were too happy with their forceps and knives. Such tranklements, as Eva termed them, did far more harm than good.

At last, the head crowned. 'I suppose we should be thankful for small mercies,' muttered Eva. 'At least yon babby seems to have a bit of sense. Now, push when I tell you.'

'I'll push when I bloody well can,' replied Liz.

Eva, keeper of more secrets than any priest, deserted her post and arrived next to Liz's pillow. 'Any more trouble from you and I'll send for the fire brigade.'

Liz managed a watery smile. 'Oh aye? My husband is the fire brigade and you chucked him out of here hours ago.'

'An answer for everything,' complained Eva as she reclaimed her true position in life. Liz Walsh was having a rough time of it, poor soul. She was one of those deceptive women - rounded on the outside, but with a small skeleton. This one wasn't really built for child-bearing, which was a shame, because the Walshes would make good parents.

The child seemed to be stuck. Panic fluttered stupidly in Eva's breast. There was nothing else for it - she would have to send Bernard Walsh for the doctor. The daft lump was just outside the bedroom door - Eva could all but hear him breathing. This was a seven-month pregnancy. Still, better the seventh than the eighth. Eva, like many of her generation, preferred prematures to arrive before lulling themselves into the long, lazy sleep usually enjoyed by the unborn just prior to full term.

As Eva prepared to throw in the towel, the child's head emerged. It was tiny, perfectly formed and with small tufts of brownish hair punctuating the baldness. Eva reached out, guided the shoulders and received yet another life into

expert hands. But this was not another life. Liz Walsh's little daughter was not moving. Eva cleared air passages, slapped and cajoled, massaged the tiny chest, but to no avail.

Liz stared fearfully into Eva Harris's eyes. 'What's wrong?' she managed eventually.

'I'm sorry, love.'

'No,' screamed Liz. 'No, no, no!'

Bernard crashed his way into the bedroom. 'Liz?' he managed.

'Take the baby and put it near the living-room fire,' yelled the demented patient. 'Babies need warmth!'

Eva shook her head at Bernard.

'Do it!' ordered Liz. The chocolate-brown eyes were wide and fearful beneath a tangle of wet, dark hair. She pushed a lock from her forehead. 'Take no notice of Eva Harris,' she commanded. 'There's nowt wrong, nowt at all. Baby's resting after working hard, that's all there is to it.'

Bernard took the dead child in his arms.

'Go on,' yelled Liz. 'Plenty of blankets.'

When Bernard had removed the sad bundle, Liz turned her fury on Eva. 'What would you know? You're not a bloody doctor.'

For an hour or more, Liz Walsh ranted and raved about the various stupidities of humankind, then she settled down very suddenly and gazed in silence at the wall opposite her bed. Bernard came in a dozen times, spoke words of comfort, left without receiving a reply from his wife. Danny, who was easily as distraught as his brother, paid a short visit while the midwife brewed tea. But Liz sat perfectly still in her own little world. Her mind could not cope, so she had simply shut herself down.

In the kitchen, Eva took Bernard to one side. 'Listen, lad,' she whispered. 'If I were you, I'd not be in a hurry to put Liz through this again.'

Bernard swallowed a sob. 'You what?'