

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Rosa's Island

Val Wood

About the Book

Rosa grew up an orphan in a remote, watery island fastness on the wild East coast of Yorkshire. Taken in as a small child by the motherly Mrs Drew, she realised as she grew up that this large and seemingly close farming family contained many troubled souls. Mr Drew, whose religious fervour held a dark secret; Jim, the eldest son, who was terrified of something from his past; Delia, longing to escape from the island; and tall, handsome, confident Matthew, who wanted only one thing - Rosa herself.

But Rosa's background was one of mystery. Her mother, before she drowned in the sea near their home, had always promised that one day Rosa's father would return to her - a handsome Spaniard, with jewels and silks in treasure chests, sailing in on a ship with golden sails. Mr Drew knew the secret of Rosa's past - and so did the two mysterious Irishmen, who came back to the island after many years and who threatened everything which Rosa held most dear.

Contents

Cover

About the Book

Title Page

Dedication

Acknowledgements

Maps

Prologue

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Nineteen
Chapter Twenty
Chapter Twenty-One
Chapter Twenty-Two
Chapter Twenty-Three
Chapter Twenty-Four
Chapter Twenty-Five
Chapter Twenty-Six
Chapter Twenty-Seven
Chapter Twenty-Eight
Chapter Twenty-Nine
Chapter Thirty
Chapter Thirty-One
Chapter Thirty-Two
Chapter Thirty-Three
Chapter Thirty-Four
Chapter Thirty-Five
Chapter Thirty-Six
Chapter Thirty-Seven

About the Author
Also by Val Wood
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Rosa's Island

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CORGI BOOKS

*To the people, past and present,
of the real Sunk Island*

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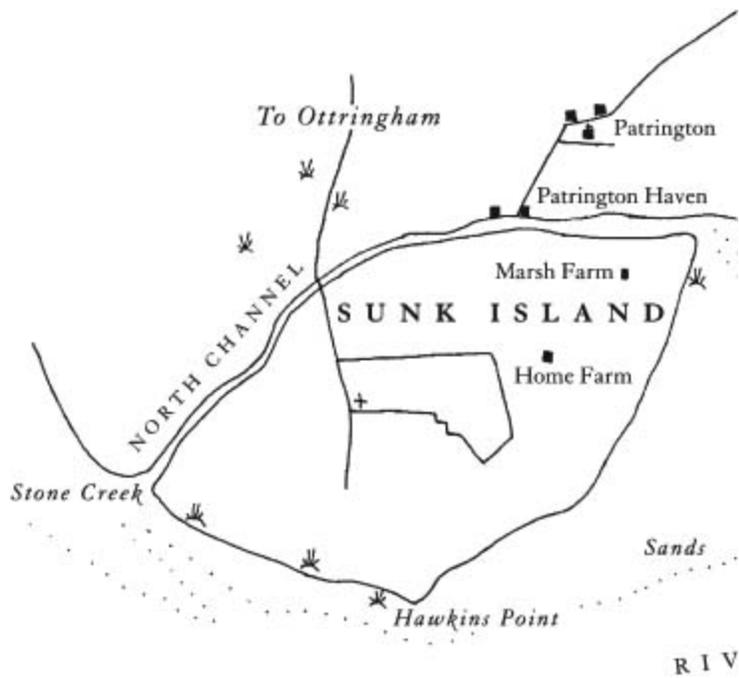
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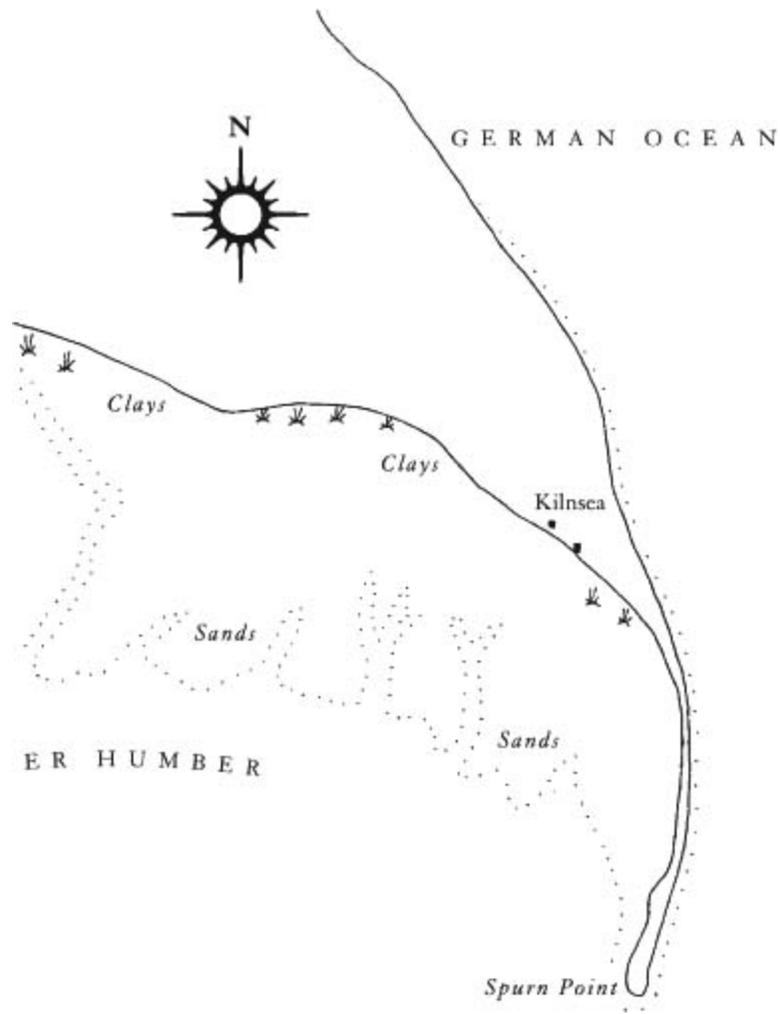
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The Country Life Book of Nautical Terms



Author's reconstruction c.1833-40
Map by Catherine S. Wood BSc.(Hons)



PROLOGUE

THE RIVER'S WATERS eddied and broke over the bank of sunken sand, covering it with a watery blanket and then retreating. Again it came and drew away. And again. Over the years the sandbank grew wider and higher and the constant rhythmic waves of the estuary surged and flowed and caressed its edges, flooding the greening centre only at high spring tides.

Sonke Sande, a bare and empty lonely isle risen from the deep Humber bed. A still land and silent save for the haunting cry of the wild geese who stretched their wings in flight above it.

'*Tharlesmere. Frismerk. Ravenser Odd's* come again.' The villagers who watched its mystical rising from the marshy mainland shore spoke in whispers of the lost lands of long ago, lands swept away by the swollen waters and their inhabitants drowned. Others shook their heads in disagreement and said that the sea had brought it, washing it down from the eroding cliffs of Holderness and into the estuary.

However it had come, this lonely, mist-shrouded land, there was one opinion on which they were in accord. It was river land and the river one day would claim it back.

CHAPTER ONE

'NOW, LASSIE, TELL us again what your ma said.' The Sunk Island farmer crouched down beside Rosa. 'Where did she say she was going? Was she going to Patrington market?'

Rosa shook her head, her thumb in her mouth, her dark eyes gazing into the farmer's blue ones. Why didn't they listen? She had already told them where her mother had gone. She was going to join her da. She took her wet thumb out of her mouth and wiped it on her pinafore. 'She's gone to Spurn to meet my da's ship.'

The farmer rose to his feet and pursed his lips. 'It don't look too good, Mrs Jennings,' he said to Rosa's grandmother. 'Why would she tek it into her head to go all that way?'

Mrs Jennings looked down at Rosa. 'She's been walking by 'river for 'last few weeks. Took bairn with her most times.'

'We'll organize a search on all of Crown land first, but if she has gone to Spurn we'll have to notify Kilnsea constable. They'll not want us tramping all over peninsula, road's too dangerous. Besides,' he said bluntly, 'we've a lot o' work on now 'weather's turned. We've more embanking to start as well as 'spring sowing.'

'We're talking about a woman's life.' Mrs Jennings's voice was sharp. 'She's been gone since yesterday. Doesn't that mean owt to you?'

His face softened. 'Tha knows as well as me that if Mary's tekken it into her head to go down to Spurn, owt could have happened. She could have tummelled into a ditch or dyke, watter's deep after all 'rain we've had. Or got stuck on 'marsh.' He dropped his voice. 'We all know how she's been

for 'last few years. She's never been right since yon foreigner left.

'But we'll keep looking,' he assured her as she turned away. 'We've got men working on 'river bank and on 'channel. They'll know if she's been down there, they'll have seen her. There's no hiding place on this land.'

'Aye,' she said wearily. 'I know. I know.'

'Will Ma bring my da back home?' Rosa asked eagerly as they went back into the farmhouse. 'Will he come in a ship with golden sails like she said? And will he have gold and silver like he promised?'

'There'll be nowt like that, so don't be thinking it.' Her grandmother was terse. 'Your ma filled you up wi' fancy ideas and none of it was true.'

Rosa sat in a corner and considered. Her mother had promised. She'd said that her da was a Spanish prince and that one day he would come back in a great ship with billowing sails, and sail around the Spurn Point and into the Humber. They would go aboard to meet him and he would dress them in fine silks and jewels and take them back with him to his own country: a country where it was always sunny and warm and the people sang and danced all day and the women wore flowers in their black hair.

'Spain's not windswept and isolated like it is here on Sunk Island,' her mother had whispered in Rosa's ear, 'where 'river is constantly beating at our door, and where we do nowt but work every day that God sends.'

It would seem then, Rosa silently reflected as she sat in her corner, that her mother might have gone without her. It was true, as her grandmother had said, that her mother had frequently taken her down to the Humber, where the water lapped at the marshland and where gangs of labourers were reclaiming the land which the river rejected.

Her mother would stand on the embankment holding Rosa fast by the hand if the tide was high, so that she wouldn't fall into the deep muddy river, shielding her eyes from the

brightness of the water and staring down in the direction of the peninsula where the sailing ships rounding the narrow tongue of Spurn followed the pilot ships to avoid the hidden sandbanks, and came into the Humber.

‘We’ll see him pass, Rosa,’ she used to mutter. ‘Have no fear. He’ll pass Sunk Island and send a signal to us.’

But he never came and Rosa grew cold and fretful and tugged on her mother’s skirts so that they could go home to a warm hearth and the steaming broth that her grandmother always had on the fire.

Her father had gone away before she was born, but she had a picture of him in her head, painted by her mother in bright descriptive colours. ‘He’s so handsome, Rosa,’ her mother would sigh. ‘On our wedding day he wore a black suit and white shirt which showed his sun-browned skin, and his hair is black and sleek, just like yours, and he gave me this ring.’ She held out her left hand. ‘Spanish gold, it is, not base metal like ‘fellows round here give their wives.’

And Rosa had listened to the stories for as long as she could remember, and believed that he would come.

It was nearly a week later that there came a hammering on the door of Marsh Farm and a message for her grandmother to go at once to the village of Kilnsea where the cottages huddled precariously between the river and the sea.

‘Can you tek me?’ Rosa heard her grandmother say to the caller. ‘Mr Jennings is poorly, he can’t go and I daren’t drive ‘trap down that lonely road, I’d be scared of tummelling into ‘water.’

‘Can I come, Gran?’ Rosa asked eagerly, hoping that there was news of her father and his ship.

‘No.’ Her grandmother patted her cheek. ‘It’ll be late when I get back. Stay here and mind ‘house and keep fire in and set table for supper and get whatever your grandfer needs.’

Her grandfather wanted for nothing and the fire blazed with dry driftwood and after she had set the table with a

clean cloth and soup dishes, she sat on a stool by the fire and waited for her grandmother to return with her mother and father.

‘It’s Mary, right enough.’ The boatman came out of his cottage to greet Mrs Jennings, and led her towards his boat shed. ‘I recognized her straight away even though she’s been in ‘water for a while. ‘Constable’s been and agreed wi’ me that it was her. I’m sorry for thy loss,’ he added, ‘and for ‘young bairn.’

Mrs Jennings looked down at the swollen waterlogged body of her daughter, lying in a coggy boat and respectfully covered in a white sheet. ‘I’ve been expecting it for many a long year,’ she said huskily. ‘Poor lass is at peace now.’

The boatman nodded. ‘Aye. Well, ‘sea took her, but ‘river fetched her back like it allus does. We’ll bring her home for thee.’

CHAPTER TWO

'SUNK ISLAND ISN'T really an island, you know, Gran.' Rosa skipped alongside her grandmother. 'So why is it called that?'

Rosa was now seven and had started school for the first time that day. Her teacher had pointed to a large map on the wall and told them that this was the island of Great Britain and was where they lived. It had sea all the way around it.

She had wanted to tell the teacher that she was wrong, that they lived on Sunk Island which had water around three parts of it; but she held her tongue for the mistress was very strict and would brook no disobedience, and Rosa was glad that she had, as the teacher then traced with her cane from the Spurn peninsula and along the river Humber and, pointing to a rounded smudge of land, said that that was Sunk Island.

Her grandmother seemed to be lost in thought. Her head lowered to watch where she was walking was covered by her black bonnet, which hid her face. Rosa shook her hand to attract her attention. 'So why is it called an island?'

'Because once it was,' she murmured. 'You'll learn about it at school afore long. Everybody does. I did when I was a bairn and it was still an island then. Ships came along North Channel then, and we had to get a boat to go to Patrington Market.'

'Where are we going?' Rosa asked. Her grandmother had collected her from school but they were not headed in the direction of home, but walking down a long track towards one of the other farmsteads.

'Home Farm. Visiting Mrs Drew!' Her grandmother was brief. 'Now hold your tongue. I'm trying to think!'

Two dogs prowling in the yard barked at them as they approached the farmhouse door but then wagged their tails and came to sniff at Rosa. 'Wait here,' she was told. 'I won't be long.'

Rosa climbed into an empty hay cart and sat down to wait. She wiggled her toes in her new boots which were too large and made her feet sore, but her grandmother had told her that she would grow into them. It was very tiring being at school and having to pay attention all day, she decided. She had looked out of the window of the old farmhouse, which was where the school was held, as they had no proper school on the island, and saw and heard a flock of wild ducks as they flew towards the marshy land of the estuary. She had craned her neck to watch their quacking flight and the teacher had seen her and brought her to the front of the class and asked what she was doing.

'Watching 'ducks, miss,' she answered truthfully. 'They're flying to 'mud flats.'

'Watching 'ducks!' the mistress said sharply. 'Instead of doing what?'

Rosa couldn't remember what it was she should have been doing, so she was put in a corner with her face to the wall until she could remember. It was only by dint of listening to the teacher and the hesitant chanting of the other pupils that she remembered. They were learning their times tables. She'd put up her hand and was then allowed back to her desk.

It was a warm September day and Rosa was glad to be out of school and into the open air. She hated the closed-in feeling of the schoolroom and constantly had to tear her gaze away from the window, where across the vast fields she could see lines of scythes-men in their cotton shirts and cord breeches, moving rhythmically and in unison, their scythe blades flashing across the ripened corn.

'Hello, Rosa.' Matthew Drew gave her a bashful grin as he crossed the yard. 'What you doing here?'

She shrugged. 'Don't know. I came with my gran. She said I had to wait here.'

'I heard Ma telling our Maggie that Mrs Jennings'd be coming afore long.'

Rosa frowned. Matthew was ten and attended school with her, along with three of his five sisters, Nellie, Lydia and Delia. 'My gran says there's no secrets on Sunk Island!' she said.

There were few families living on Sunk Island and those who had made their homes in the scattered farmhouses and cottages had mostly lived there for generations. With the exception of the wheelwright, the blacksmith, a shoemaker and cow keepers, they were all farmers, tending the rich fertile land as their fathers and grandfathers had done before them.

'I'm going fishing in a minute,' Matthew said. 'Do you want to come?'

Before Rosa could answer, the kitchen door opened, and Maggie, Matthew's eldest sister, called to her to come inside and for Matthew to change out of his school clothes and help Delia feed the hens.

'But I'm going fishing wi' some of 'other lads,' he complained. 'They're waiting on me!'

She indicated with her thumb for him to go inside, then said, 'When you've finished you can go, otherwise you'll be in bother with Ma.'

Rosa followed Maggie inside. Home Farm was a bigger farm estate than her grandfather's and the farmhouse was bigger too. She went first into the back kitchen where a fire burned in the wide fireplace. A crane and hooks were set into the fireback and a piece of beef sizzled and spat as it turned on a spit. In the wall next to the fire was a bread oven, and next to the back door beneath a window was a deep stone sink and a wooden hand pump. In the corner of

the kitchen stood a wooden washtub and posher, and on the shelf above was a row of box and flat irons.

The twins, Lydia and Nellie, were sitting with Delia at a scrubbed wooden table in the middle kitchen. A bright fire was burning in the inglenook and a large kettle hanging over it emitted gentle puffs of steam. The sisters were dressed as Rosa was, in navy dresses with a white pinafore over them, and dark stockings and laced-up boots. They stared curiously at Rosa as she came in, but at a command from Maggie they got up from the table, opened the staircase door and ran up the narrow stairs to change out of their school clothes and put on their old ones. Maggie smiled at Rosa and led her through to the parlour where her grandmother was sitting with Mrs Drew.

'I expected a visit,' Mrs Drew remarked as she opened a cupboard door at the side of the fireplace. There was no fire burning in here but the grate was laid ready with sticks and logs. Mrs Drew wore a plain high-necked grey gown and a white apron, with a flat cotton cap secured by pins set upon her head. After a moment's hesitation, she took down an earthenware tea service with painted blue flowers from the shelf and laid it on the table, then sat down and poured the tea. 'I heard as you might be flitting.'

'Aye, well, word soon gets around in our community,' Mrs Jennings said, 'and I don't mind, as it saves me a deal of explanation if you know why I've come.'

Mrs Drew glanced towards Rosa, who hadn't been invited to sit down and still stood just inside the door. 'Who'll tek over 'tenancy?'

'Fowler, our foreman. He's a good young fellow, we couldn't have managed without him this last year. He asked if we'd put his name for'ard to Crown Agents if - when - Mr Jennings—' She didn't finish what she was saying and pressed her mouth into a thin line.

'I do understand, Mrs Jennings.' Mrs Drew was sympathetic. 'It will be very hard for you.'

Mrs Jennings sighed. 'Aye, it is. A lifetime spent here. But we shan't move yet - not till, well, till Mr Jennings passes on. He wants to die here.'

'Of course he does,' murmured Mrs Drew. 'Of course he does.' She poured two cups of tea, and then got up and taking a small beaker from the cupboard filled it with milk and handed it to Rosa.

'Does Rosa know of 'change of circumstances, Mrs Jennings? That she'll be moving?'

Mrs Jennings sipped her tea and took a proffered slice of fruit cake, and as Rosa was offered a piece also, warned, 'Don't drop crumbs, Rosa! No, she doesn't, Mrs Drew. I wanted to get things settled first before I telled her. You see, my cousin who I'll go to live with in Patrington is a single woman, never been married and had bairns.' She pursed her lips and continued. 'Never wanted any either, and though she's offered me a home wi' her, mainly I have to say because she needs somebody to look after her now that she's getting on in years, she's not keen on having our Rosa.'

She gave a sniff. 'She never saw eye to eye with my Mary and when she married 'foreigner, she vowed she would have nowt to do wi' her again. And she didn't. And she's never seen 'bairn either. Never once.'

'Why ever would you want to live with such a dowly woman, Mrs Jennings?' Mrs Drew was astonished.

'Beggars can't be choosers, Mrs Drew. And by 'time we've sold up, there'll be no house and nowt much left for me to live on.'

'So . . .' Mrs Drew said slowly. 'The purpose of your visit to me?'

'I want to ask if you'll have Rosa to live here with you? Treat her as one of 'family.'

'But I've got a large family already, Mrs Jennings,' Mrs Drew demurred. 'Why, our Delia's same age as Rosa, I don't know if I could manage anybody else's bairn.'

‘Reason I’m asking.’ Mrs Jennings leant forward and Rosa heard her corsets creak. ‘You and our Mary were expecting at ‘same time; she said as how good you were towards her, when it was her first bairn and her husband going missing and all.’

Mrs Drew nodded. ‘Aye, and it was my ninth, and eight of ‘em still living, bless the Lord. She was a right bonny lass, was Mary.’ A slight sad smile lightened her plain features. ‘Such a great pity *he* never came back, though a lot of folk never expected him to.’ She shook her head. ‘He was a foreigner, he never would have settled here on Sunk Island.’

‘But our Rosa is an islander,’ again Mrs Jennings leaned towards Mrs Drew, and again Rosa heard the creak of whalebone. ‘An islander like her ma and me, and her grandfer. It’s said that one of Mr Jennings’s great-grandfaythers worked for Colonel Gilby’s grandson, William.’ She sat back and folded her arms across her ample bosom. ‘And you can’t go back much further than that.’

Rosa had been only half listening but she pricked her ears on hearing the name Gilby. She had heard only today at school of Colonel Gilby, the founder of Sunk Island, who had been leased the land by King Charles the Second when it was little more than a sandbank. Colonel Gilby had built the first house which was still standing, and started the embankments which even today, the teacher had said, were still being raised to save more and more land from the Humber.

‘This is a very special place.’ The teacher had gazed down at them as she walked between their desks. ‘Amongst the richest, most fertile land in England, and all of you,’ her finger had pointed around the room at each of them in turn, ‘should consider yourselves privileged to have been born here.’

Rosa had dared to put up her hand. The teacher had raised her eyebrows. ‘I trust this is a worthwhile question, Rosa Carlos?’ she’d said, ‘and not a time-waster.’

'Miss,' she'd piped up. 'So who does 'land belong to now?'

'A good question and very topical,' the mistress answered, and Rosa had preened. 'It belongs to the King, King William the Fourth. God bless him.'

'God bless him,' the children had chorused.

'All land gained from the river or sea belongs to the King or his successors. Sunk Island has been in the hands of 'Lords of Holderness for many years, and they rented it out to the farmers.' She had gazed at them all in turn. 'But from this year, this year of eighteen hundred and thirty-three, the land is to be leased direct to the farmers who live and work here, so that they may look after it themselves.'

'We'll have a deal of extra expense,' Mrs Drew's voice interrupted Rosa's meditating, 'now that 'Commissioners have leased directly to 'farmers. We've maintenance of banks to fund and Brick Road's been started already. We'll get some help from 'Crown I know, but there's a goodly amount to come out of our own pockets.'

Mrs Jennings nodded. 'I know all that, Mrs Drew. But bit o' money that's left after we've sold up 'farm will be Rosa's, either for her keep or to use if she should wed when she's of age.'

'Well, I'll have to speak to Mr Drew of course. Decision will be his.' She gazed at Rosa for a moment before saying, 'I wouldn't want 'child to go where she wasn't wanted. You'd want to see her of course, every so often?'

'Well, Mothering Sunday would be nice.' Mrs Jennings's eyes suddenly became moist. 'Seeing as I've lost my own daughter. But more than owt, I want to be sure that Rosa will be cared for if owt should happen to me, and that she'll stay here on Sunk Island where she belongs.'

'But you'll be here for a good few years yet, Mrs Jennings,' Mrs Drew assured her. 'You're hale and hearty for your years. You'll not be leaving this mortal coil for a long time!'

Mrs Jennings gave a deep sigh. 'God willing I won't.' She repeated, 'God willing.'

CHAPTER THREE

'AND YOU SAY that Fowler wants 'tenancy of Marsh Farm.' Mr Drew was seated by the kitchen fire in his usual chair and addressed his wife as she brought up the subject of them taking the child Rosa.

'Eventually,' said Mrs Drew. 'Though 'day can't be far off. I hear that 'doctor is calling on Mr Jennings every morning.' She clasped her hands together and murmured a quick prayer. 'It would be our Christian duty to take her, Mr Drew. Mrs Jennings wants her to stay on Sunk Island where she belongs.'

'But at whose expense, Mrs Drew?' he said sombrely. 'Have you thought of that? Will 'health and strength of our own kindred suffer if we take on another mouth to feed?' He eyed her keenly and there was a bright spot of colour on each of his cheeks which often appeared if he became overwrought or anxious. 'The good Lord moves in mysterious ways. We must pray for guidance.'

She had expected this. She knew him to be parsimonious. 'Mrs Jennings says there will be a little money left after they have sold up, and Rosa is to have it.'

'Ah!' His small blue eyes glittered. 'Well, we must pray, Mrs Drew, and perhaps by 'morning we'll have the answer.'

Mrs Drew sat on by the fireside after her husband had gone upstairs to bed. She wanted to take the child, not only for her own sake but for her mother's.

She had always liked Mary Jennings. At seventeen she had been pretty and merry, always singing, always a word for everyone she saw, and Ellen Drew, already with six children and heavily pregnant with her seventh, watched her with a

wistful admiration for her energy and enthusiasm for life, whilst she, not yet thirty, felt tired and old.

All the young men on Sunk Island were in love with Mary Jennings, but she would have none of them, she was waiting for someone special, she said, and would know him when he came. They all heard about him when he did come, for he swam across the channel from Patrington to Sunk Island, instead of waiting for a boat to take him across the narrow stretch of water. The men working on the embankment had watched him as he dived in fully clothed, and climbed out to ask them in a strong foreign accent what was this place that was cut off from the rest of the world.

Most of the labourers were Irish, and some of them had replied that it was the Devil's own country, for no-one else would want to live there, in the land that belonged below the waters of the Humber.

He had laughed and shaken himself dry like a dog, and set off walking across the vast treeless pastureland, where the first person he met was Mary. No-one knew what their first words were, they only knew that Mary had met her special person and was quite besotted by the handsome stranger. He appeared to feel the same way about her for they were often seen walking across the flat windswept landscape, where there were no hiding places, with their heads together and their arms entwined, and the older people tutted and said no good would come of it, and the younger ones, Ellen Drew included, gazed with envy at the romance of it.

Mary had brought him to the Drews' farm and whilst Mr Drew took him on a tour of the estate, Mary sat with Mrs Drew as she suckled the baby Matthew, and told her that they were to be married in the church on Sunk Island. The whole of the population turned out to watch Mary marry her foreign gentleman and wild were the rumours as to who he was. Some vowed that he was a gypsy, some that he was an

escapee from the law, but others firmly believed what Mary had told them, that he was a prince, with a castle in Spain.

‘Come along up, Mrs Drew.’ She heard her husband’s voice call from the top of the stairs and she sighed. She had hoped that he had gone to sleep and would permit her to do the same, but it was Saturday night and tomorrow morning he would go to church and pray for forgiveness for the weakness of the flesh. She was now over childbearing years, at least she hoped she was, as Delia, their last child, was now seven years old; her flux had dried up and her husband no longer had the excuse for his excesses, that he was procreating as the Lord intended.

She climbed into the feather bed and closed her eyes as she lay beneath his panting body and hoped that the children in the next room couldn’t hear his moaning and mutterings, asking God to forgive him for his wicked tendencies. She too prayed. I can put up with this, dear Lord, but please don’t let me be caught with child, and she knew that she was being wicked. Her husband had told her so, so many times, when she had begged him not to make her pregnant yet again. She had given birth to Jim when she was nineteen, then Henry two years later, Maggie was born when Henry was two, then Flo when Maggie was one. She had a respite until the twins Nellie and Lydia three years later, then miscarried the following year.

‘You have enough children, Mrs Drew,’ the doctor had informed her. ‘What need do you have for more? You must speak to your husband and advise him it will not be good for your health to have another child.’

She had told him, but he said that it was the Lord’s doing, that the act of marriage was designed for the procreation of children and that they must not go against His teachings. He was a churchwarden and a lay preacher and he addressed assemblies, bringing into the text that the Lord’s word was to be obeyed. And so she became pregnant with Matthew and nearly died.

He left her alone for a time after that, and made more frequent visits into the town of Hull, when sometimes he would stay overnight. He would dress in his best grey coat and his stovepipe hat and make the difficult journey from Sunk Island across the wide landscape of Holderness into the port of Hull. But when he returned he spent so much time on his knees praying to the Lord that his work was neglected, the embankment on which his men were supposed to be working was breached and he was called before the Lords of Holderness to explain himself. So she let him back into her bed, and Delia was conceived.

When she heard that Mary too was carrying a child, she wondered how it was that she could look so fresh and radiant. Even though Mary was overcome with grief at her husband's disappearance, when her dark-haired, dark-eyed child, Rosa, was born, the baby delighted everyone with her blithe and sunny presence, whilst her own pale-faced child, Delia, lay still, viewing everyone with sad grey eyes and petulant mouth.

'Have you thought any more about the Jennings child, Mr Drew?' she asked after supper the next evening.

'You mean 'Carlos child,' he remonstrated and she was surprised that he had remembered Rosa's proper name, for she was often referred to as the Jennings child. 'Yes, I've been to talk to Mrs Jennings today. Mr Jennings is in a poor way. He'll not be much longer on this earth but will be joining our Heavenly Father.'

Mrs Drew caught sight of a look between Maggie and Henry and saw a warning raise of Maggie's eyebrows at Henry's impudent grin.

'The Lord be praised,' said Mrs Drew firmly. 'And save us sinners.'

'Amen,' said Maggie as she cleared the table, but Henry grinned again and went out of the room.

'So are we to take her? What decision shall we make?' she asked, whilst knowing that the decision wouldn't be hers.

'We are to take her under certain conditions,' Mr Drew replied. 'The money Mrs Jennings will have left can't be ascertained until 'effects have been sold up, but I have asked Mrs Jennings to speak to 'Crown agents on behalf of Mr Jennings who can't speak for himself, to put forward our name to take over 'lease of Marsh Farm.'

His bottom lip protruded defiantly as if he expected his wife to object, and Mrs Drew glanced at Maggie as she heard her draw in a sharp breath.

'But Jack Fowler wanted it! Mrs Jennings told me that he'd asked her to put his name forward!'

'Aye, so she said, but that was 'stipulation I made. If we're to have 'child, we want 'tenancy.'

'But we've more than enough land,' his wife demurred. 'Why would we want that small acreage?'

'It's prime land and near enough to 'river for further embanking. Our Jim is twenty-one, another couple o' years and he'll want his own farm. Marsh Farm will do very nicely.'

'Whatever will Mrs Jennings say to Fowler?' Mrs Drew glanced again at her daughter who had sat down on a chair near the wall and was clasping and unclasping her hands.

'That's up to her, though she doesn't have to tell him owt, she just has to speak to 'agents, and if we don't get it then we don't take 'bairn.'

He pulled himself up in the chair, he was only a short man and he expanded his chest like a turkey cock. 'The child's not our responsibility. Not our fault that her mother went off her head after he went away. We don't owe them owt.' He fired off these statements in rapid succession and his wife wondered at it.

'No,' she said slowly. 'Of course we don't.'

Maggie was on her knees blackleading the kitchen range when her mother came down the next morning. She muttered good morning.

'You're up early, Maggie,' her mother said, getting oats out of the cupboard to make porridge. 'Couldn't you sleep?'

Maggie shook her head. 'No,' she said miserably. 'I kept thinking of Jack Fowler and how disappointed he'll be if he doesn't get Marsh Farm.'

'Were you walking out?' her mother asked gently.

'Not exactly.' A faint blush came to Maggie's cheek. 'But we were heading that way. I've seen him once or twice. Accidentally, like.'

'I see.' Her mother stirred the porridge and added a pinch of salt. 'Don't let your da see you. Not yet. Not until things are settled about Marsh Farm, anyway.'

Maggie gave a short laugh. 'Well, he won't stop on Sunk Island if he doesn't get it! He won't want to work for our Jim. They don't get on. So that'll be 'end of my chances.'

'What nonsense, girl.' Her mother turned to smile at her and was surprised to see the look of misery on her face. 'There's lots of young men that would fall over themselves for you.'

'Where?' Maggie demanded. 'Not on Sunk Island, there are not! And when do I get 'chance to go anywhere else? Fayther won't hear of me even going to 'village fairs without Jim or Henry go with me.'

Her mother nodded. Mr Drew was especially strict with Maggie and with Flo. The twins Nellie and Lydia had much more freedom, but then they were only just twelve and he didn't consider that they had yet joined the ranks and perils of womanhood.

'I'm sorry, my dear,' she said softly. 'But that's 'way that it is.'

Maggie picked up her brush and polishing cloth and got up from her knees. 'To my way of thinking,' she muttered, 'as I've observed with other families, firstborn daughter nearly allus stops at home and looks after 'parents in their old age, whilst other, younger daughters go off and get married and have families of their own.'

'I'm sure you're right, Maggie. My older sister stayed at home with our parents, but she wanted to do that. She allus said that she didn't want to swap a familiar hearth for an unknown one.' Ellen Drew looked wistful. 'She made 'right choice, I think. She was content.'

Maggie gazed at her mother for a moment, then said with a catch in her voice, 'Fayther would say it's in hands of 'good Lord. I just hope and pray, Ma, 'good Lord doesn't tek you first and leave me with me fayther.'

CHAPTER FOUR

MR JENNINGS, ROSA'S grandfather, lingered for another six months, and two months after his death, after consultation with the agents of the Crown, it was agreed that the tenancy of Marsh Farm should be given to Jim Drew and that Rosa should go to live with his family.

Jack Fowler packed his bag and prepared to move on. This spelt disaster to him, he said, happening when it did. 'I'll have to get casual work till Martinmas,' he told Mrs Jennings. 'Nobody'll tek me on contract until then. I'm that mad,' he said bitterly. 'This would have been a right good chance for me. Drews have plenty o' land without this, enough for all their sons to work.'

'Young men don't allus want to work for their fathers,' Mrs Jennings interrupted. 'Maybe Jim Drew wanted his own place. This is a good size to start up on your own.'

'But it won't be his own, will it?' Fowler said. 'He'll have to farm it as his fayther says. He won't brook any arguments, won't Mr Drew.'

'Well, I'm sorry, Jack. I'd have liked you to have it, especially after all 'help you've given us over 'last couple o' years. But I had Rosa to think of. They wouldn't have taken her to live with them if I hadn't put his name forward.'

'I'm not blaming thee, Mrs Jennings,' he said and shouldered his pack. 'It's that scheming old hypocrite James Drew that I blame.'

'Why dost call him that?' she asked curiously.

'Just what I heard tell once, over in Kilnsea, afore I came to work on Sunk Island. I overheard some boatmen talking over their ale. They clammed up when they realized I was

listening and said no more.' He gave a lopsided cynical grin. 'But I'd heard enough to know that that God-fearing law-abiding preacher isn't all he seems to be.'

'Be careful what you say, Jack Fowler,' Mrs Jennings warned. 'It doesn't do to blacken somebody's name. Not without proof.'

He walked to the door. 'I don't have that,' he said. 'And I wouldn't even bother to try and get it. I onny know what I heard. Anyway, I'm off. Sunk Island won't see me again.'

'No?' She lifted her eyebrows. 'No pretty girl to tempt you back?'

'No,' he replied. 'Not now. Maybe once, but not any more.'

Rosa had overheard the conversation outside the kitchen door and as soon as she heard the outer door open and Jack Fowler's voice calling goodbye, she came into the kitchen. 'When do we leave, Gran?' she asked. 'Will it be soon?'

Mrs Jennings nodded. 'Furniture's to be sold tomorrow, and we move out 'day after.'

'Don't you want to take it with you to Aunt Bella's house?'

Mrs Jennings gazed around at the furniture, the wooden table, the old oak chairs which had belonged to her parents, the pendulum clock ticking on the wall. 'There's no room at Bella's house; besides, she says that her furniture is better quality than mine.' She wrinkled her nose. 'But it's not. This is good solid furniture, handmade by a craftsman, your great-grandfayther himself. Hers, why, you hardly dare sit on it in case it collapses.'

'But I'll tek my linen, my second best, and I'll pack up 'good quality for Mrs Drew to give to you when you grow up. And my best china that's hardly been used since I was a young bride. It would have gone to your ma, to Mary,' she said softly. 'If she'd set up in her own home.' She gave a deep sigh. 'But of course she never had 'chance.'

Next day after school Rosa helped to empty drawers and cupboards and lined a deep pine chest with clean brown paper. This was to be packed with the belongings she was