

A HERO . . . A HERITAGE . . . A HISTORY

WINSTON GRAHAM

Ross Venner Poldark

George Warleggan

John Eveson Cower

THE FOUR SWANS

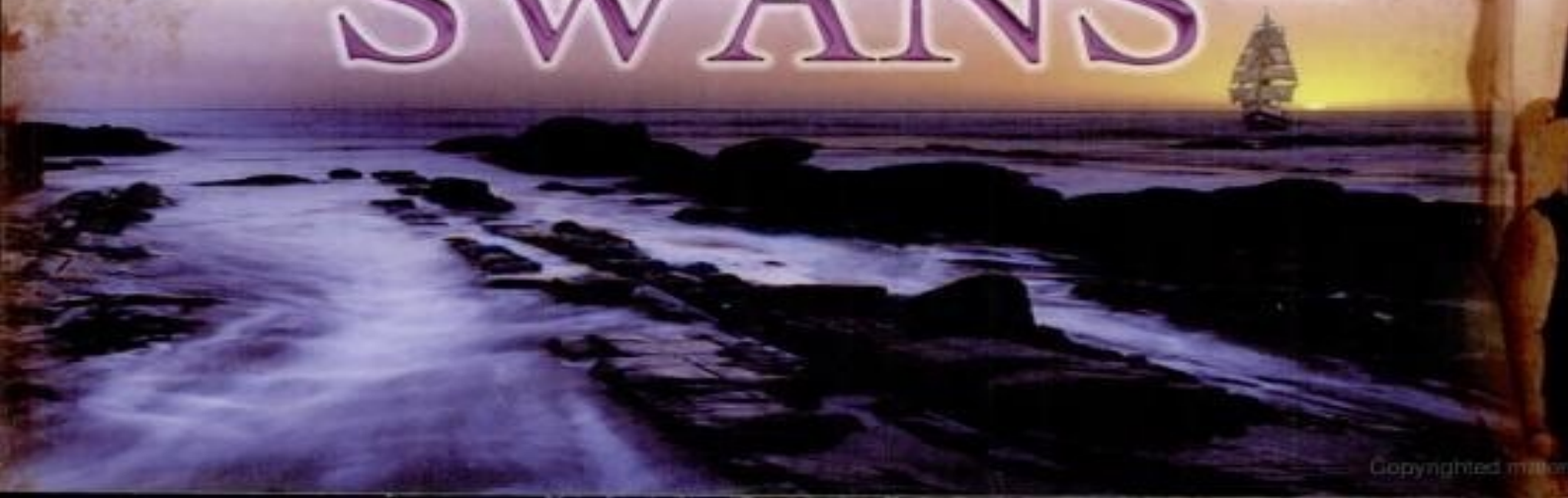


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The Four Swans

A Novel of Cornwall 1795-1797

Winston Graham

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NOTE

Just for the record, and to reassure the cynics, perhaps I should mention that this novel was half written when the television production of the first four Poldark novels was mooted. I have taken some liberty with the dates at which the Truro elections took place, but the events' as here recorded are otherwise very much as they actually happened.

The date of the Camborne riots differs from fact by a year.

W.G.

CHAPTER ONE

Daniel Behenna, physician and surgeon, was forty years old and lived in a square, detached, untidy house in Goodwives Lane, Truro. He was himself square in build and detached in manner, but not at all unkempt, since the citizens of the town and district paid well for the benefit of his modern physical knowledge. He had married early, and then again a second time, but both his wives had died, and he and his two young daughters were now looked after by a Mrs Childs, who lived in. His assistant, Mr Arthur, slept over the stables.

Behenna had been in Truro only five years, having come direct from London where he had not only established a reputation as a practitioner but had written and published a monograph amending Smellie's famous Treatise on Midwifery and since his arrival he had much impressed the wealthier provincials with his authority and skill.

In particular, authority. When men were ill they did not want the pragmatism of a Dwight Enys, who used his eyes and saw how often his remedies failed, and therefore was tentative in his decisions. They did not want someone who came in and sat and talked pleasantly and had an unassuming word for the children, even a pat for the dog. They liked the importance, the confidence, the attack of a demi-god, whose voice was already echoing through the house as he mounted the stairs who had the maids scurrying for water or blankets and the patient's relatives hanging on every word. Behenna was such a man. His very appearance made the heart beat faster, even if, as often happened, later stopped beating altogether. Failure did not depress him. If one of his patients died it was not the fault of his remedies, it was the fault of the patient.

He dressed well and to the best standards of his profession. When he travelled far - as his mounting reputation more and more obliged him to do - he rode a handsome black horse called Emir and wore buckskin breeches and top boots, with a heavy cloak thrown over a velvet coat with brass buttons, and in the winter thick woollen gloves to keep his hands warm. When in town he used a muff instead of the gloves and carried a gold-banded cane which had a vinaigrette in the head containing herbs to combat infection.

In an evening in early October 1795 he returned from local calls across the river where he had prescribed his heroic treatment for two patients suffering from summer cholera and had drawn three pints of fluid from the stomach of a dropsical corn merchant. It had been a warm month after the bad summer and the deadly winter which had preceded it, and the little town had been drowsing gently in the day's heat. The smells of sewage and decaying refuse had been strong all afternoon, but with evening a breeze had sprung up and the air was sweet again. The tide was full, and the river had crept in and surrounded the clustered town like a sleeping lake.

As he reached his front door Dr Behenna waved away a small group of people who had started up, at his coming. In the main the less well-to-do went to the apothecaries of the town, the poor made do with what nostrums they could brew themselves or buy for a penny from a travelling gypsy; but sometimes he helped an odd case without charge - he was not an ungenerous man and it ministered to his ego - so always a few waited about for him, hoping for a moment's consultation on his doorstep. But today he was not in the mood.

As he left his horse to the stable boy and entered the house, Mrs Childs, his housekeeper, came out to greet him. Her hair stood out, and she was wiping her hands on a soiled towel.

‘Dr Behenna, sur!’ Her voice was a whisper. ‘Thur be a gent to see ee. In the parlour. He’ve been yur some five and twenty minute. I didn’t know rightly ‘ow long ye’d be gone, but he says to me, he says “I’ll wait.” Just like that. “I’ll wait.” So I put’n in parlour.’

He stared at her while he set down his cloak and bag. She was a slovenly young woman, and he often wondered why he tolerated her. There was only one reason, really-

‘What gentleman? Why did you not call Mr Arthur?’ He did not lower his voice, and she glanced nervously behind her. ‘Mr Warleggan,’ she said.

Behenna observed himself in the mildewed mirror, smoothed his hair back, dusted a freckle of powder from his cuff, looked his hands over to see there were no unpleasant stains on them. ‘Where is Miss Flotina?’

‘Gone music. Miss May be still abed. But Mr Arthur; say the fever have remitted

‘Of course - it will have remitted. Well, see that I am not disturbed.

‘Ais, sur.’

Behenna cleared his throat and went into the parlour, a puzzled man.

But there was no mistake. Mr George Warleggan, was standing by the window, hands behind back, square shouldered, composed. His hair had been fresh dressed; his clothes were of a London cut. The richest man in the town and one of the most influential, there was yet something about his stance, not that he had passed his, middle thirties, which was reminiscent of his grandfather, the blacksmith.

‘Mr . Warleggan. I hope I have not kept you waiting. Had I known...’

‘Which you did not. I have passed the time admiring your skeleton. We are indeed fearfully and wonderfully made.’

His tone was cold; but then it was always cold.

‘It was put together in my student days. We dug him up. He was a felon who had come to a bad end. There are always some such in a big city.’

‘Not only in a big city:

‘Allow me to offer you refreshment. A cordial or a glass of canary.

George Warleggan shook his head. ‘Your woman, your housekeeper, has already offered:’

‘Then pray sit down. I’m at your service.’

George Warleggan accepted a seat and crossed his legs. Without moving his neck his glance wandered routed the room. Behenna regretted that the place was not in better order. Books and papers were jumbled on a table, together with jars of Glauber's salts and boxes of Dover's powders. Two empty bottles with worm-eaten corks stood among the medical records on the desk. A girl's frock was flung over a chair-back beside the dangling skeleton. The surgeon frowned: he did not expect his rich patients to call on him, but if they did this appearance could create bad impression.

They sat in silence for a minute or so. It seemed, a very long time

'I called,' said George, 'on a personal matter.'

Dr Behenna inclined his head.

'Therefore what I have to say must be confidential. I imagine we cannot be overheard?'

'Everything,' said the surgeon, 'everything between doctor and patient is confidential.'

George looked at him drily. 'Quite so. But this must be more

'I don't think I follow your meaning.'

'I mean that only you and I will know of this conversation. If it should come to the ears of a third party I shall know that I have not spoken.'

Behenna drew himself up in his chair, but did not answer. His very strong sense of his own importance was only just contained by his sense of the greater importance of the Warleggans.

'In those circumstances, Dr Behenna, I would not be a "good friend."

The surgeon went to the door and flung it open. The hall was empty. He shut the door again.

'If you wish to speak, Mr Warleggan, you may do so. I can offer you no greater assurance than I have already done.' George nodded. 'So be it.'

They both sat quiet for a moment.

George said: 'Are you a superstitious man?'

'No, sir. Nature is governed by immutable laws which neither man nor amulet can change. It is the business of the physician to grasp the truth of those laws and apply them to the destruction of disease. All diseases are curable. No man should die before old age.'

'You have two young children?'

'Of twelve and nine.'

'You do not think they are likely to be affected by the bones of a felon hanging in their home day and night?'

‘No, sir. If they appeared to be so affected, a strong purging would cure them.’

George nodded again. He put three fingers into his fob pocket and began to turn the money there.

‘You attended my wife at the birth of our child. You have been a frequent visitor; to our, house since You have, I assume, delivered many women.’

‘Many thousands. For two-years I was at the Lying-in Hospital at Westminster under Dr Ford. I may claim that my experience is not equalled in Cornwall and seldom elsewhere. But you know this,

Mr Warleggan. You knew it when your wife, Mrs Warleggan, was with child and you retained my services. I presume that you have not found those services wanting.’

‘No.’ George Warleggan thrust out his bottom lip. He looked more than ever like the Emperor Vespasian being judicial on some matter of empire. ‘But it was about that that I wished to consult you.’

‘I am at your service,’ said Behenna again.

‘My child, my son Valentine, was an eight-month child. That’s correct? Because of the accident of my wife’s fall, my son was born prematurely by about a month. Am I right?’

‘You are right.’

‘But tell me, Dr Behenna, among the thousands of children you have delivered, you must have seen a great many, infants prematurely born. Is that so?’

‘Yes, a considerable number.’

‘Eight month? Seven month? Six month?’

‘Eight and seven. I’ve never seen a child survive at six months.’ ‘And those born prematurely that do survive, like Valentine.

There were distinct and recognizable differences in them at birth? I mean: between them and such as come to the full time?’

Behenna dared to allow himself a few seconds to speculate on the trend of his visitor’s questioning. ‘Differences? Of what nature?’

‘I am asking you.’

‘There are no differences of any importance, Mr Warleggan. You can set your mind at rest. Your son has suffered no ill-effects whatsoever from being prematurely born.’

‘I’m not concerned with differences now.’ Asperity had crept into George Warleggan’s voice. ‘What are the differences at the time?’

Behenna had never considered, his sentences more carefully.

‘Weight chiefly, of course.. It is almost unknown for an eight-month child to weigh more than six pounds. Seldom the same loud cry.

Nails....’

‘I am told that an eight-month child does not have nails.’ ‘That’s not correct. They are small, and soft instead of hard.’ ‘I am told the skin of such a child is wrinkled and red.’ ‘So is that of many at full term.’ ‘I am told that they do not have hair.’ ‘Oh, sometimes. But it is rare and very thin.’

A cart clattered down the lane. When it had gone George said:

‘The purpose of my questions may by now have become clear to you, Dr Behenna. I have to put to you the final question. Was my son, or was he not, a premature child?’

Daniel Behenna moistened his lips. He was aware that his expression was being closely watched, and he was also aware of the tensions of the other man and what in a less self-possessed person would have been observed as suffering.

He got up and walked to the window. The light showed up the bloodstains on his cuff. ‘On many physical questions, Mr Warleggan, it’s not easy to return a definite yes or no. In this matter you must first give me leave to remember. I am sure you will understand that your son is now - what? - eighteen; twenty months old. Since I delivered Mrs Warleggan I have attended many women in parturition. Let me see, what day did you call me, in?’

‘On the thirteenth of February of last year. My wife fell on the stairs at Trenwith. It was a Thursday evening about six o’clock. I sent a man for you at once and you came about midnight.’

‘Ah, yes, I remember. It was the week I treated Lady Hawkins for broken costae which she had sustained in the hunting field, and when I heard of yours wife’s-accident I hoped she had not been a horse; for such a fall.

‘So you came,’ George said.

‘.. I came. I attended on your wife throughout that night and into the next day. I believe the child presented itself that following evening.’

‘At a quarter after eight Valentine was born.’

‘Yes ... Well, I can only tell you on first recollection, Mr Warleggan, that there was nothing that appeared as strange in the circumstances of your son’s birth. It did not, of course, occur to me to wonder, to speculate, or to observe closely. Why should it? I didn’t suppose there would ever come a time when it would be necessary to pronounce one way or the other on such a matter. On the mere matter of a month. In view of your wife’s unfortunate fall, I was happy to be able to deliver her of a live and healthy boy. Have you asked your midwife?’

George too got up. `You must remember the child you delivered. Did it have fully-formed nails?'

`I believe so, but I cannot tell if ' `And hair?'

`A little dark hair.'

`And was the skin wrinkled? I saw it within the hour and I remember only a slight wrinkling.'

Behenna sighed. `Mr Warleggan, you are one of my wealthiest clients, and I have no wish to offend you. But may I be entirely 'frank?'

`That's what I have just asked you to be.'

`Well, may I suggest, in all deference, that you return home and think no more of this matter. Your reasons for this inquiry I'll not venture to ask. But if you expect to receive from me at this date - or indeed from any other person - a plain statement that your son was or was not a full-term child, you are asking, sir, for the impossible. Nature is not so to be categorized. The normal is only the norm - of which there are wide variations.'

`So you will not tell me.'

`I cannot tell you. Had you asked me at the time I would have ventured a firmer opinion, that is all. *Naturalia non sunt turpia*, as the saying is.'

George picked up his stick and prodded at the carpet. `Dr Enys is back, I understand, and will soon be riding his rounds.'

Behenna stiffened. `He is still ill and will shortly marry his heiress.'

`Some people think well of him.'

`That is their concern, not mine, Mr. Warleggan. For my part I have only contempt for the majority of his practices, which show a weakness of disposition and a lack of conviction. A man without a lucid and well-proven medical system is a man without hope.'

`Just so. Just so. I have always heard, of course, that medical men do not speak well of their rivals.'

Nor perhaps bankers of their rivals, Behenna thought.

`Well...' George got up. `I'll wish you good day, Behenna.'

The surgeon said: `I trust that Mrs Warleggan and Master Valentine continue in good health.'

`Thank you, yes.'

`It's time almost that I called to see them. Perhaps early next week.'

There was a moment's pause, during which it seemed - possible that George was considering whether

to say, 'Pray do not call again.'

Behenna added: 'I have tried not to speculate, Mr Warleggan, on your reason for inquiring into the matter you have raised with me. But I would not be human if I did not appreciate how important my answer might be to you. Therefore, sir, appreciate how difficult that answer is. I could not, and indeed assuredly would not make; a statement which, for all I know might be considered to impugn the honour of a noble and virtuous woman - that's to say, I could not and would not without a certainty in my mind which I emphatically do not possess. Did I possess it, I would feel; it my duty to tell you. I do not possess it. That is all.'

George regarded him with cold eyes. His whole expression was one of distaste and dislike - which might have conveyed his opinion of the surgeon or only what he felt of a necessity which forced him to betray so much to a stranger.

'You will remember how this conversation began, Dr Behenna.' 'I am pledged to secrecy.'

'Pray see that you keep it.' He went to the door. 'My family is well, but you may call if you wish.'

After he had gone Behenna went through into the kitchen. 'Nellie this house is a disgrace! 'You idle away your time gossiping and dreaming and observing the traffic. The parlour is not fit to receive a distinguished patient! See, have that frock taken away! And the shoes. Have a care for your position here!'

He went on rebuking in his strong, resonant voice for three or four minutes. She stood observing him patiently from under her hearth rug of brown hair, waiting for the storm to pass, sensing that he needed to restore his authority after having; it briefly encroached on. It was rare for him ever to have it encroached on, for even when he visited his richest patients they were in distress and seeking his help. So he pronounced, and they waited on his words. He had never attended on George Warleggan himself, - since the man enjoyed abnormally good health. But today, as always when meeting him, he had had to defer. It did not please him - it had made him sweat; and he took it out on Nellie Childs.

'Ais, sur,' she said,. and 'no, sur,' and 'I'll see to'n tomorrow, sur.' She never failed to call him sir, even when he followed her into her bedroom; and this was the basis of their relationship. There was an unspoken; quid pro quo between them. So she took his reprimands seriously but not too seriously; and when he had done she began quietly to tidy up the parlour while he stood by the window, hands under his coat tails, thinking of what had passed.

'Miss May'll be wanting for to see ee, sur.'

'Presently.'

She tried to gather up all the slippers, and dropped two. Her hair ballooned over her face. 'Reckon tis rare for the gentry to call on ee,' like that, sur. Was he wanting for something medical?'

'Something medical.'

‘Reckon he could’ve sent one of ‘is men for to fetch something medical, don’t ee reckon, sur?’

Behenna did not answer.- She went out with the slippers and returned for the frock.

‘Reckon I never seen Mr Warleggan come here, afore like that. Praps twas private like, not wanting his household to know?’

Behenna turned from the window. ‘I think it was Cato who said : ‘Nam nulli tacuisse nocet, nocet esse locutum.’ Always bear that in mind, Mrs Childs. It` should be a guiding principle of yours. As of many others.’

‘Mebbe so, but I don’t know what it d’mean, so I cann’t say, can I?’

‘For your benefit I will translate. “It is, harmful to no one to have been silent, but it is often harmful have spoken.”’

II

George Tabb was sixty-eight and worked at the Fighting Cocks Inn as a horse keeper and porter. He earned 9s. a week, and sometimes received an extra shilling for helping with the cocking. He lived in lean-to beside the inn, and there his wife, still an industrious woman in spite of ill-health, made about an extra £2, a year taking in washing. With the occasional pickings that come to a porter he therefore earned just enough to live on; but in the nine years since his friend and employer Charles William Poldark had died he had become too fond of the bottle, and now often drank himself below subsistence level. Emily Tabb tried to keep a tight hold on the purse strings, but with 5s. a week for bread, 6d. a week for meat, 9d. for half a pound each of butter and cheese, a shilling for two pecks of potatoes, and a weekly rental of 2s. there was no room for manoeuvre. Mrs Tabb endlessly regretted - as indeed did her husband in his soberer moments - the circumstances in which they had left Trenwith two and a half years ago. The widowed and impoverished Elizabeth Poldark had had to let her servants go gone by one; until only, the faithful Tabbs were left; but Tabb in his cups had presumed too much on his indispensability and when Mrs Poldark suddenly remarried - they had had to leave:

One afternoon in early October George Tabb was brushing out the cockpit behind the inn to make ready for, a match that was, to take place the following day, when the innkeeper whistled to him and told him there was someone to see him. Tabb went out and found an emaciated man in black, whose eyes were so close-set that they appeared to be crossed.

‘Tabb? George Tabb? Someone-want a word with you. Tell your master. You’ll be the half-four.

Tabb eyed his visitor and asked what it was all about, and who wanted him and why; but he was told no more. There was another man outside in the street, so he put away his broom and went with them.

It was no distance. A few yards down an alley, along the river bank; where another full tide glimmered

and brimmed, up a street to a door in a wall, across a yard. The back of a tall house.

‘In here.’ He went in. A room that might have been a lawyer’s office. ‘Wait here.’ The door was shut behind him. He was left alone.

He blinked warily, uneasy, wondering what ill this summons foreshadowed. He had not long to wait. A gentleman came in through another door. Tabb stared in surprise.

‘Mr Warleggan!’ He had no forelock to touch, but he touched his wrinkled head.

The other George, the infinitely important George, nodded to him and went to sit down at the desk. He studied some papers while Tabb’s unease grew. It was on Mr Warleggan’s orders when he married Mrs Poldark that the Tabbs had been dismissed from her service, and his greeting today had shown no amiability.

‘Tabb,’ said George, without looking up. I want to ask you a few questions.’

‘These questions are questions that I’ll put to you in confidence, and I shall expect you to treat them as such.’ ‘Yes, sur.’

‘I see that you left the employment I obtained for you at Mrs Warleggan’s request when you left her service.’ ‘Yes, sur. Mrs Tabb wasn’t up to the work and..

‘On the contrary, I understand from Miss Agar that it was you who were unsatisfactory, and that she offered to retain Mrs Tabb if she would stay on alone.’

Tabb’s eyes wandered uneasily about the room.

‘So now you eke out a miserable living as a pot boy. Very well, it is your own choice. Those who will not be helped must take the consequences!’

Tabbb cleared his throat.

Mr Warleggan put fingers in his fob pocket and took out two coins. They were gold. ‘Nevertheless I am prepared to offer you some temporary easement of your lot. - These guineas. They are yours, on certain conditions.’

Tabb stared at the money as at a snake. ‘Sur?’

‘I want to ask you some questions about the last months of your employment at Trenwith. Can you remember them? It’s little more than two years since you left.’

‘Oh, yes, sur. I mind it all well.’

‘Only you and I are in this room, Tabb. Only you will know the questions I have asked. If in the future therefore ‘I hear that the nature of these questions is known to others - I shall know who has spoken of

them, shall I not?’

‘Oh, I wouldn’t do that, sir

‘Would you not? I’m far from sure. A man in his cups has an unreliable tongue. So listen, Tabb.’

‘Sur?’

‘If ever. I hear word spoken of anything I ask you this afternoon, you will be driven out of this town and I’ll see that you starve. Starve. In the gutter. It is a promise. Will you in your cups remember that?’

‘Well, sur, I promise faithful. I can’t say more’n that. I’ll-

‘As you say, you can’t say more. So keep your promise and I will keep mine.’

Tabb licked his lips in the ensuing silence. ‘I mind those times well, sur. I mind well all that time at Trenwith when we was trying; me and Mrs Tabb, to keep the ‘ouse and the farm together. There was no more’n the two of us for all there was to be done--?’

‘I know - I know. And you traded on your position. So you lost your employment. But in recognition of your long service another position was found for you and you lost that. Now, Tabb, certain legal matters bearing on the estate wait to be settled and you may be able to help me to settle’ them. I first want you too remember everyone who called at the house. Everyone you saw, that is. From about April 1793 until June of that year when you left

‘What called? To see Mistress Elizabeth, d’ye mean? Or Miss Agatha? There was few what called, sur. The house was real bye ... Mind, there was village folk. Betty Coad wi’ pilchards. Lobb the

Sherborner once weekly. Aaron Nanfan - George waved him into silence. ‘For the Poldarks. Socially. Who called?’

Tabb thought a few moments and rasped his chin. ‘Why you, sur. You more’n anyone! An’ for the rest, Dr Choake to see Miss Agatha, Parson Odgers once a week, Cap’n, Henshawe, the churchwarden, Cap’n Poldark over from Nampara, Sir John Trevaunance maybe twice; I believe Mrs Ruth Treneglo once. Mrs Teague I seen once. Mind I was in the fields half the time and couldn’t hardly.

‘How often did Captain Poldark come from Nampara?’ ‘Oh ... once a week. There or thereabouts.’ ‘Often in the evening?’

‘Nay, sur, twas always avnoon he. come. Thursday avnoon. Took tea and then off he’d go.’

‘Who came in the evening, then?’

‘Why no one, sur. Twas quiet - quiet as the dead. One widow lady, one young gentleman scarce ten years old, one rare old lady. Now if you was to ask me ‘bout Mr Francis’s time; thur was times then:

‘And Mistress Elizabeth no doubt she went out in the evening?’ Tabb blinked. ‘Went out? Not so’s I

know, sur.'

'But in the light evenings of that summer -April,-May and June, she must have ridden abroad.'

'Nay, she scarce rode at all. We'd sold all the 'orses, save two which was too old to be rid.'

George fingered the two guineas, and Tabb stared at them, hoping that this was all.

George. said : 'Come, come, you have earned nothing yet. Think, man. There must have been others about at that time.'

Tabb racked his brains.: 'Village folk ... Uncle Ben would be there wi' his rabbits. Thur were no outlanders nor-, 'How often did Mistress Elizabeth go to Nampara?' 'To Nampara?'

'That's what I said. To visit the Ross Poldarks.'

'Never. Not ever. Not's I know. No, not ever.' 'Why did she not go? They were neighbours.'

'I reckon - I reckon mebbe she never got on so well with Cap'n Poldark's wife. But tis merest guessingwork fur me to say.'

There was a long silence.

'Try to remember particularly the month of May. The middle or early part of May. Who called? Who called in the evening?'

'Why ... why no one, sur. Not a soul I ever seen. I said so.' 'What time, did you go to bed?'

'Oh ... nine or ten.-Soon as it went dark.. We was out and about from cocklight to cockshut and

'What time did Mistress Elizabeth retire?' 'Oh .. bout the same. We was all spent.' 'Who locked up?'

'I done that, last thing. Time was when we never locked, but wi' no other servants; and all these vagrants about...'

'Well, you have earned nothing, I fear,' said George, moving to put the money away.

'Oh, sur, I'd tell ee if I knew what twas ye wanted for me to say!'

'No doubt you would. So tell me this. If someone called after you went to bed, would you hear the bell?'

'At night, d'ye mean?' 'When else?'

Tabb thought. 'I doubt.- I doubt there'd be anyone t'hear. Twas in the lower kitchen, the bell was, and we all slep' well above.' 'Never? Would you have known?'

'Why - yes, I reckon. What would, anyone want t'enter for except to steal?-and there was little enoug

to steal.'

'But is there any secret way into the house that you know of one that would be known perhaps to a member of the family?'

'Nay ... None's I know. An' I been there five and twenty year.' George Warleggan got up. 'Very well, Tabb.' He dropped the coins on the table. 'Take your guineas and go. I enjoin you to say nothing to anyone - not even to Mrs Tabb.'

'Shan't tell she,' said Tabb. 'Else ... well, sur, you know how tis.'

She'd want for to put this money away.' 'Take your guineas,' said George.; 'And go.'

Elizabeth Warleggan was thirty-one, and had two children. Her eldest, Geoffrey Charles Poldark, would soon be eleven and was, in his first term at Harrow. She had so far received three grubby letters which told her that he was at least alive and apparently well and getting into the routines of the school. Her heart ached every time she looked at them, folded carefully in a corner of her desk; in imagination she read so much between the lines. Her younger son, Valentine Warleggan, was not yet two years old and making a slow recovery from a severe attack of rickets he had suffered last winter.

She had been out to a card party with three old friends - it was one of her pleasures in spending each winter again in Truro; everyone played cards in Truro, and it was so different from those dull and lonely winters at Trenwith with Francis, and after Francis died. Life with, her new husband had its trials, particularly of late, but there was so much more, stimulus in it, and she was a woman who responded to stimulus.

She was wrapping a small parcel in the parlour when George came upon her. He did not speak, for a moment but went across to a drawer and began to look through the papers there. Then he said 'You should let, a servant do that.'

Elizabeth said lightly: 'I have little enough to employ my time. It's a present for Geoffrey Charles. His birthday comes at the end of next week and the London coach leaves tomorrow.'

'Yes, well, you may include a small present from me. I had not altogether forgot.'

George went to another drawer and took out a small box. In it were six mother-of-pearl buttons.

'Oh, George, they're very pretty ! It is good of you to remember ..;. But d'you think he should have them at school? May they not get lost?'

'No matter if they do. He is rather the dandy - a tailor there will be able to make use of them for him.'

'Thank you. I'll include them with my present, then. And I will add a note to my birthday wishes telling him they are from you.'

In his letters home Geoffrey Charles had omitted any reference to or message for his stepfather. They had both noticed this but avoided mentioning it.

George said: 'You've been out?' 'To Maria Agar's. I told you.' 'Oh, yes. I had forgot.'

'I so much enjoy Maria's company. She's so light and jolly.'

Silence fell. It was not a restful silence.

Elizabeth said: 'Valentine was asking for you today.'

'Oh? Valentine?'

'Well, he said repeatedly: "Papa! Papa! Papa!" You haven't seen him for some days and he misses you.'

'Yes, well . tomorrow perhaps.' George shut the drawer. 'I saw your old servant today. I chanced upon him at the Fighting Cocks.'

'Who? What servant?'

'George Tabb.'

'Oh ..., Did he seem well?'

'He tried to talk about the old times.'

Elizabeth refolded the end of the parcel. 'I confess I have felt a little conscience-stricken about him since he left.'

'In what way?'

'Well, he worked for us - I mean for my father-in-law and for Francis for so many years. It's hard that he should lose everything because he grew above himself in the end.'

'I gave him two guineas.'

'Two guineas ! That was more than generous!' Elizabeth stared at her husband, trying to read his unreadable expression. 'I've sometimes wondered, though, if we should not take him back. He has learned his lesson.'

'A drunkard? Drunkards talk too much.'

'What could he have to talk about? I did not know we had any secrets from the world.'

George moved to the door. 'Who has no secrets? We are all vulnerable, aren't we, to the whispered calumny and the scandalmonger.' He went out.

Later they supped alone. Elizabeth's father and mother had remained at Trenwith, and his father and mother were at Cardew. Recently they had been silent meals. George was an unfailingly polite man with narrow variables of behaviour. Her first husband; Francis, she had known high-spirited, moody, cynical, witty, urbane, coarse, punctilious and untidy. George was seldom any of these things; always his emotions were under a rein. But within those limits she had come to read much, and she knew that over the last two months his attitude had greatly changed towards her. Always he had watched her, as if striving to see if she were really, happy in her marriage to him; but of late his watching had become hard to tolerate. And whereas in the old days if she looked up and met his glance his eyes would remain steady, openly brooding on her but in a way that caused no offence now if she looked up he quickly looked away, taking his thoughts out of her reach before she could comprehend them.

Sometimes too she thought the servants watched her. Once or twice letters had reached her which looked as if they might have been opened and re-sealed. It was very unpleasant, but often she wondered how much her imagination was at fault.

When the servants had gone Elizabeth said: 'We still have not replied to our invitation to Caroline Penvenen's wedding. We must soon.'

'I've no desire to go. Dr Enys has airs above his station.' 'I suppose all the county will be there.' 'Maybe.'

'I imagine he will have quite a hero's wedding, having been just rescued from the French and barely, survived the ordeal.'

'And no doubt his rescuer will be there too, receiving all the admiring plaudits for an act which was criminally rash and lost the lives of more men than he saved.'

Well people; love the romantic gesture, as we all know.'

'And the romantic figure too.' George rose and turned away from her. She noticed how much weight he had lost, and wondered if his changed attitude was a result of some changed condition of health. 'Tell me, Elizabeth, what do you think of Ross Poldark these days?'

It was a startling question. For a year after their marriage his name had not been mentioned.

'What do I think of him, George? What do you mean, what do I think of him?'

'What I say. Just what I say. You've known him for what - fifteen years? You were to state the least of it - his friend. When I first knew you, you used to defend him against all criticism. When I made overtures of friendship to him and he rebuffed them, you took his side'

She stayed at the table, nervously fingering; the hem, of a napkin. 'I don't know that I took his side. But the rest of what you say is true; However ... in the last years my feelings for him have changed. Surely you must know that. Surely after all this time. Heavens!

'Well, go on.'

'My change of feelings towards him began, I think, over his attitude to Geoffrey Charles. Then when married you, that was clearly not to his liking, and his arrogance in forcing his way into the house that Christmas and threatening us because his wife had got at cross with your gamekeeper - it seemed to me intolerable.'

'He did not force his way in,' George said quietly; 'he found some way in that we did not know of.'

She shrugged. 'Does it matter?'

'I do not know.'

'What d'you mean?'

They listened to a tapping on the cobbles outside. It was a blind man feeling his way along, his stick like an antenna plotting out the path. The window was an inch open and George shut it, cutting out the sound.

He said : I sometimes think, Elizabeth; I sometimes wonder...'

'What?'

'Something that you may consider an unsuitable thought for a husband to have of his wife...' He paused. 'Namely that your new enmity for Ross Poldark is less genuine than your old affection...'

'You are right!' she said instantly. 'I do consider it a most unsuitable thought! Are you accusing me of hypocrisy or something worse?' Her voice was angry. Anger to drive out, apprehension.

In their married life they had often had differences of opinion but had never quarrelled. It was not that sort of a relationship. Now on the verge he hesitated, drawing back from a confrontation for which he was not fully prepared.

'How do I know?' he said. 'It may not even be hypocrisy. Perhaps it is self-deception.'

'Have I ever - have I ever at any time in these two years given you reason to suppose that I have warmer feelings for Ross than my words suggest? Name a single time!'

'No. I can name none. That's not what I mean. Listen. You are a woman of enduring loyalties. Confess that. Always you stand by your friends. In those years when you were married to Francis your friendship with Ross Poldark never wavered. If I mentioned his name you froze. But since we married you have become as unfriendly to him, as unwelcoming as I. In all controversy you have taken my side--'

'Do you complain?'

'Of course not. This has pleased me. It has gratified me to feel that you have changed your allegiance. But I'm not sure that it is in your character so to change. It's more in your character to support me with reluctance against an old friend - because as my wife you feel it your duty to support me. But no

with the strong feelings that you appear to show.' Therefore at times I suspect them. I say to myself: perhaps they're not true. Perhaps she is deceiving me because she thinks it pleases me. Or perhaps she is deceiving herself into mistaking her own feelings.'

She got up at last from the table and went towards the fire, which had only recently been lit and was burning low.

'Have you seen Ross today?' She tucked a wisp of hair into the comb she was wearing, making the movement as cool as her words. 'No.'

'I wonder, then, what makes you bring this charge upon me now?' 'We were talking of his certain presence at Caroline's wedding. Is that not enough?'

'Not enough to justify these ... imputations. I can only assume you've long felt this suspicion of me.'

'It has crossed my mind from time to time. Not frequently. But, I have to tell you, I have wondered.'

There was a long silence, during which Elizabeth with an effort took control again of her fluctuating emotions. She was learning from George.

She went across and stood beside him, like a slim virgin. 'You are unduly jealous, my dear. Not just of Ross but of all men. D'you know, when we go out to a party I can scarce smile at a man who is under seventy without feeling you are ready to run him through!' She put her hand on his arm as he was about to speak. 'As for Ross - you thought I was turning the conversation but you see I am not - as for Ross, I do sincerely care nothing for him. How can I convince you? Look at me. I can only tell you that I once had feeling for him and now have no feeling for him. I do not love him. I would not care if I never saw him again. I scarcely even like him. He has come to seem to me a braggart and something of a bully, a middleaged man trying to assume the attitude of a young one, someone who once had a - a cloak and a sword and does not know they have, gone out-of-date.'

If she had had longer to choose her words she probably would never have found any so suitable to convince him. A declaration of hatred or contempt would have carried no conviction at all. But those few cool, destructive sentences which put into words very much his own opinions, though in phrases he would not have been perceptive enough to use himself, these brought a flushing reassurance to his soul.

He did flush in the face, an exceedingly rare symptom with him, and said: 'Perhaps I am unduly jealous. I can't tell, I can't tell. But you must know why.'

She smiled. 'You must not be. You have no one to be jealous of. I assure you.'

'You assure me.' Doubt flickered across his face again, darkening it, making it ugly. Then he shrugged and smiled. 'Well...'

'I assure you,' she said.

CHAPTER TWO

I

Dr Dwight Enys and Miss Caroline Penvenen were married on All Hallows' Day, which in 1795 came on a Sunday, at St Mary's Church in Truro. Killewarren, Caroline's house, was in the parish of Sawle-with-Grambler; but Sawle Church would hardly have been big enough, Truro was more central for most of the guests, and November with its heavy rains was not a time for country travel.

It was a big wedding after all. Dwight had objected from the start, but she had over-riden his protest while he was still too feeble to be emphatic about anything. Indeed his recovery from his long imprisonment was not yet sure. He had long spells of listlessness and inertia and he could not get rid of a troublesome cough and a breathlessness at night. His personal inclination had been to postpone the wedding until the spring, but she had said

'Darling, I've been an old maid long enough. Besides, you must consider my good name. Already the county is scandalized because we're living in the same house without the benefit of chaperone during your convalescence. The grannies are insisting that you hasten to make an honest woman of me.'

So the date had been agreed, and then the nature of the wedding. 'It is no good being ashamed of me,' Caroline had said. 'It's embarrassing that I have so much money, but you knew that all along, and a big wedding is one of the consequences.'

As Elizabeth had predicted, most of the county, or that part of the county within reasonable travelling distance, was there. Heavy rain in the night had been followed by a bright day with the puddles in the streets glinting like eyes where they reflected the sky. Caroline wore a gown of white satin with the petticoat and facings covered with a rich gold net, her hair held with a coronet of seed pearls. Her uncle from Oxfordshire gave her away, and after the wedding a reception was held at the Assembly Rooms in High Cross,

Elizabeth's persuasions had finally resulted in George's agreement to go with her, and he very quickly spied his old enemy standing with his wife near to the bride and groom. In his present mood it was almost more than he could bear, to go up and pass close beside them, but only Elizabeth noticed his hesitation as they went on.

Ross Vennor Poldark, owner of 100 acres of rather barren and unproductive farmland on the north coast, sole proprietor of a small but highly profitable tin mine, one-time soldier and perpetual nonconformer, was dressed in a black velvet coat cut away at the front to show the grey suede waistcoat and the tight grey nankeen trousers. The waistcoat and the trousers were new but the coat was the one his father had bought him for his twenty-first birthday and which he refused to replace, even though he could now well afford to. Perhaps there was a subtle pride behind his refusal, pride that in fourteen years he had, neither fattened nor grown more lean. Of course the cut was out of date but those who observed that, Ross thought, had no claim on his opinion or consideration.

Nevertheless he had insisted that his wife, Demelza, should have a new gown, even though she herself protested it unnecessary. Demelza Poldark was now twenty-five, a young woman who had never been

a raving beauty but whose eyes and smile and walk and general exuberance of spirit always drew men's attention like a magnet among iron filings. Childbearing had not yet coarsened her figure, so she was still able to wear a tight-waisted frock of green damask embroidered with silver trimmings, had cost more than she could bear to think, but which she still constantly thought about. In it she looked as slight as Elizabeth, though not as virginal. But then she never had.

The two neighbours and cousins by marriage bowed slightly to each other but did not speak. Then the Warleggans passed on to the bride and groom to shake their hands and wish them a happiness which George at least begrudged. Enys had always been a protegee and a creature of Ross Poldark, and while still a struggling and impecunious mine surgeon; had turned away from the rich patronage of the Warleggans and made it plain where his loyalties lay. George observed today how sick Dwight was still looking. He stood beside his tall radiant red-haired wife, who topped him by an inch and who looked the picture of youth and sophisticated happiness, but himself thin and drawn and grey at the temples and seemingly devoid of muscle and flesh within his clothes.

They moved on again and, spoke for a while with the Reverend Osborne and Mrs Whitworth. Ossie as usual was dressed in the extremity of fashion, and his bride of last July had got a new outfit of a snuff brown, which did not suit her because it made her dark skin look darker. For the most part she kept her: eyes down and did not speak; but when addressed: she looked up and smiled and answered politely, and it was really not at all possible from her expression to perceive the misery and revulsion that was burning in her heart, nor the nausea caused by the cellular stirrings of an embryonic Ossie in her womb.

Presently George moved away from them and drew Elizabeth towards a corner where Sir Francis and Lady Basset were talking. So the pleasant conversazione of the wedding reception went on. 'Two hundred people, the cream of the society of mid-Cornwall, squires, merchants, bankers, soldiers, fox-hunters, the titled and the landed, the untitled and the moneyed, the seekers and the sought. In the melee Demelza became separated from Ross, and seeing Mr and Mrs Ralph-Allen Daniell, went to speak to them. They greeted her like an old friend which, considering they had only met her once, was gratifying, and, considering that on that occasion Ross had refused to oblige Mr Daniell by accepting magistracy, even more pleasing. Standing near them was a sturdy, quietly dressed, reserved man in his late thirties, and presently Mr Daniell said 'My Lord, may I present to you Mrs Demelza Poldark, Captain Ross Poldark's' wife: the Viscount Falmouth.'

They bowed to each other. Lord Falmouth said: 'Your husband has been very much in the news, ma'am. I have yet to have the pleasure of congratulating him on his exploit.'

'I am only hoping, sir,' Demelza said, 'that all these congratulations will not go to his head and induce him to embark on another.' Falmouth smiled, a very contained smile, carefully poured out, like a half measure of some valuable liquid and not to be wasted.

'It is a change to find a wife so concerned to keep her husband at home. But we may yet have need of him and others like him.' 'Then,' Demelza said; 'I believe neither of us will be lacking.'" They looked at each other very straightly.

Lord Falmouth said: 'You must come and visit us sometime,' and passed on

The Poldarks were staying the night with - Harris Pascoe, the banker, and over a late supper in his house in Pydar Street Demelza said

‘I’m not, sure that I’ve done good for you with Lord Falmouth, Ross,’ and told of the interchange.

‘It’s of no moment whether you’ pleased or, displeased him,’ Ross said. ‘We do not need his patronage.’

‘Oh, but that is his way,’ said Pascoe. ‘You should have known his uncle, the second Viscount. He had no appearance but was arrogant withal. This one is more easy to treat with.’

‘He and I fought in the same war,’ said Ross, ‘but did not meet. He being in the King’s Own and a rank superior to me. I confess I do not take greatly to his, manner but I’m glad if you made a good impression on him.’

‘I do not at all think I made a good impression,’ said Demelza. Pascoe said: ‘I suppose you know that Hugh Armitage is a cousin of the Falmouths? His mother is a Boscawen.’

‘Who?’ Ross said.

‘Hugh Armitage. You should know Lieutenant Armitage. You rescued him from Quimper gaol.’

‘The devil ! No, I don’t know. I suppose. we spoke little on the way across.’

‘It should make the family feel somewhat in your debt.’

‘I don’t really see why. We didn’t at all set out to rescue him. He was one of the lucky few who made use of our entry to escape.’ ‘Nevertheless you brought him home.’

‘Yes ... we brought him home And useful enough in navigation he was on the way...’ ‘Then we are in each other’s debt,’ said Demelza.

‘Did you speak with the Whitworths?’ Ross asked her.

‘No. I have never met Morwenna, and I did not ever very much care for Osborne.’

‘At one time he appeared to have a distinct taking for you.’

‘Oh, that,’ said Demelza, wrinkling her nose.

‘I spoke with Morwenna,’ Ross said. ‘She’s a shy creature and answers yes and no as if she thinks that makes a conversation. It was hard to tell whether she finds herself unhappy.’

‘Unhappy?’ said Harris Pascoe. ‘In a four-month bride? Would you expect it?’

Ross said: ‘My brother-in-law, Demelza’s brother,’ had a brief and abortive love attachment for Morwenna Whitworth before she married. Drake is still in deep depression over it and we are trying

find some sort of life for him that he will accept. Therefore it is of interest to know whether his loved one has settled comfortably into a marriage Drake says she bitterly opposed.'

'I only know,' said Pascoe, 'that for a cleric he spends f-far too much on this world's attire. I don't attend his church but I understand he is careful about his duties. That at least makes a welcome change.'

After Demelza had gone to bed Ross said:

'And your own affairs, Harris? They prosper?'

'Thank you, yes. The bank is well enough. Money is still cheap, credit is readily available, new enterprises are growing; up everywhere. In the meantime we keep a careful watch on our note issue and lose trade thereby but as you are aware I am a cautious man and know that fine weather does not last for ever.'

Ross said: 'You know I am taking a quarter interest in Ralph

Allen Daniell's new tin smelting house?'

'You mentioned it in your letter. A little more port?' 'Thank you.'

Pascoe poured, into each glass, careful not to create bubbles. He held the decanter a moment between his hands.

'Daniell is a good man of business. It should be a useful investment - Where is it to be built?'

'A couple of miles out of Truro, on the Falmouth road. It will have ten reverbatory furnaces, each about six feet high by four broad and will employ a fair number of men.'

'Daniell cannot have w-wanted for the money himself.'

'No. But he has little knowledge of mining and offered me a share and a say in the design and management.'

'Good. Good.'

'And he does not bank with the Warleggans.'

Harris laughed, and they finished their port and talked of other things.

'Speaking of the Warleggans,' Pascoe said presently. 'Something of an accommodation has been reached between their bank and Basset, Rogers and Co., which will add to the strength of both. It is not of course anything like an amalgamation, but there will be a friendly co-ordination, and that could be of some disadvantage to Pascoe, Tresize. Annery acid Spry.'

'In what way?'

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