

The Carringtons of Helston

Chapter 1

AFTER TRUTHALL HALT the branch line veers briefly northward, threading its way along the hillside among tiny, stone-hedged fields, meandering lanes, and wind-bowed copses. At the head of the valley it turns southeast again, leaps across a tall viaduct of Cornish granite, and completes its journey to Helston up a short and none-too-gentle slope, which always brings out a fine display of steam from the little saddle-tank engines that serve the line. From time to time the stolid square tower of Sithney church can be seen, a mile and more away, just breaking above the skyline of Sithney Common Hill.

“Is that it?” Leah asked the first time she noticed it, jabbing her gloved finger against the rain-streaked, smut-mottled window of their compartment. “Our church? Or it will be if we buy this farm.”

“We!” her brother echoed scornfully. “I like that! You won’t be buying it.” He looked to their father for support.

Their father raised a sympathetic eyebrow at his daughter. Since their mother’s death in 1910, four years ago now, Leah had taken over the distaff side of the household, making all the decisions and undertaking all the public duties that would have fallen upon her mother. At eighteen it had seemed a heavy burden; now, at twenty-two, she shouldered it as if it had been hers from birth. He would never buy the Old Glebe Farm without her approval – and they all knew it. But William, two years younger than his sister, chafed at every show of her authority, no matter how slight or casual.

“I might, too,” she said airily. “It depends on the price.”

He did not rise to it. He was getting better at not rising to her more obvious provocations.

“Helston,” their father said, leaning back from the other window to allow them a better view.

How often he had heard his old man speak of the little town, even though he, too, had never seen it; in fact, he had been passing on his old man’s boyhood memories of the place, before he took the emigrant boat to America, back in the 1830s.

“I’m all discombobulated now, sir,” William drawled. “Is Helston our old home town? Or is it Leedstown?”

Leah, who had noticed, since their arrival in Cornwall the previous week, how her brother’s rather jocose Americanisms grated on local people, had to restrain herself from speaking out. She, too, was getting better at not rising to

obvious provocations.

“A bit of both, son,” their father replied. “Gran’pappy Carrington called himself ‘William Carrington of Leedstown’ when he first set foot in America. But he had all his schooling right there in Helston and did his early courting there, too. Or ‘couranting’ he called it. So I guess his heart was there.”

“Home is where the heart is,” Leah murmured. And though her gaze was on Helston still, her inner vision dwelled more fondly on a certain quiet street in East Haven, Connecticut, where stood a dear little clapboard house in the Cape Cod style ...

She closed her eyes then, to see it more clearly. Oh, Tom, she thought, holding her breath so that no sudden sigh might give her away, will I ever see you again?

“You okay, sis?”

She opened her eyes once more and found William grinning at her. He knew very well what had been going through her mind – and that the old man’s talk of courting had provoked it. She lowered her eyes and waited for him to tease.

But no words came.

She glanced at him again and was met with an ambiguous expression – almost, one might say, a gaze of sympathy. She looked away hastily, having no means – that is, no experience – of dealing with such a novel emotion from him toward her.

“ ‘Course, in those days,” their father said, “his only way of getting about was on foot. They didn’t even have bicycles. So ‘home’ was a few acres. But our home, I guess, will be the whole of Cornwall. Or West Penwith, anyway, when we get an auto.”

“Where’s West Penwith?” Leah asked.

“Clear to Land’s End from here,” he told her. “A couple o’ dozen miles, mebbe.”

“What sort of car are we gonna get, sir?” William asked eagerly.

Leah let their conversation drift off into the background as she turned her face to the grimy window once more. The train thundered over the viaduct and began its energetic final haul up to the station; it was only two coaches long, so each thrust of the pistons could be felt as a little nudge of the seat against her. They were like the nudges a parent might give a reluctant child: Go on! Go on! Go on!

Do I like this Cornwall? she asked herself, running her eye this way and that, tracing a path as random as the hedges and lanes out there.

Certainly the county was doing nothing to present itself in a good light on this particular day. February-fillydyke, the nursery rhyme said, so the month knew how to behave. Today, a steady, almost invisible rain fell from a sky of uniform gray. Away to the west, crowning Trigonning Hill – the tallest in the district – one long streak of silver relieved that uniformity. But it was not wide

enough to promise any improvement; it merely gleamed off every slate roof, every puddled byway, and each bare branch among the nearer trees, revealing something more profound than simple wetness. Soaking, sodden, sopping wetness. A wetness she could feel in her very bones, even here in the warmth of their first-class compartment. As if to confirm it, the cattle stood up to their bellies in mud, patiently steaming as they awaited their dole of hay.

Her dad once said Gran’pappy William told him he’d felt colder in Cornwall on a wet February day (just like today, in fact) than in New England at ten below. She thought of the crisp, snow-blanketed landscape they’d left behind them three weeks earlier and, this time, permitted herself a sigh. Never another summer on the remote, wild, untrammelled foreshores of Cape Cod ... never another motor ride upstate to picnic by the beaver lake above Bashbish Falls ... never another Thanksgiving with all the ...

Well, at least they could have Thanksgiving – anywhere in the world. Did they have turkeys in England? Never mind. They could get one shipped.

The train clattered and banged beneath the bridge, just before the station, and the sudden noise jolted her out of her reverie. The brakes were already beginning to bite. Baggage, she thought automatically – and then remembered that today was just an outing, to look at this farm in Sithney. Their baggage was all at the White Hart in Redruth, only partly unpacked, waiting a permanent ... yes, she’d soon have to start calling it ‘home.’

Freed from responsibility for counting trunks and carpet bags and valises, she rose to her feet and punched her gloved fists alternately into their opposing palms, trying to get some warmth back into her fingers.

“There’s our man, I guess.” Her father had let down the window and, shielding his eye against smuts from the engine, was scanning the platform as they juddered to a halt. “Mister Coad?” he called. “Over here.”

Steam from worn couplings rose around them as they stepped out.

“Mister Carrington. I’m glad to make your acquaintance, sir.” The auctioneer shook hands all round as the old man introduced his offspring. “I’m sorry Helston can’t put on a better welcome.” He shot an accusing glance at the rain clouds above, which had just opened in a new downpour.

Although the canopy protected them from direct assault, it could not shield them from that which splashed obliquely off the curved roofs of the carriages.

“It’ll pass,” Coad assured them. “At least, it did yesterday – eventually – and the day before. And the days before that. Shall we have a cup of tea while we wait?” He nodded toward the tea-room at the end of the building.

“What are all these?” William asked, tapping his cane on the nearer of two large stacks of crates, which impeded their progress along the platform.

“Winter greens, dead rabbits, daffodils ...” Coad said. “They’ll all be in Covent Garden or Smithfield by this time tomorrow.” He grinned. “If you think the price of land in these parts is outrageous, there’s one explanation for it.” He jerked a thumb at the stacks of crates. “We can now get all our produce

fresh into the London markets – within a day of harvesting, in fact.”

“Well, I won’t be farming the Old Glebe,” John Carrington said. “As I explained in my letter, I want to make a garden of it. A big garden ... a return to Eden, if that doesn’t sound like blasphemy.”

Coad went first through the tea-room door and held it ajar, first for them and then for a rather fussy couple who had been tormenting a porter all the way along the platform behind them.

“There’s something in all of us that yearns for such a return,” Coad said.

“I beg your pardon, sir?” the fussy gentleman exclaimed.

By gesture alone Coad managed to convey a petty apology and the explanation that he was actually talking to the Carringtons.

“Furriners!” he murmured as he joined the three Americans.

“Oh?” Leah was surprised. “They sounded very English to me. ‘Veddy’ English, as we say.”

“Yes, they are.”

“You call English people ‘foreigners’?”

He chuckled. “You bet! – as you also say.”

“What does that make us, then?” William asked.

“Oh, but you’re Cornish, of course. The Carringtons of Leedstown.”

They stared at him in disbelief, suspecting a bit of salesman’s persiflage. But he was clearly sincere.

The waitress interrupted at that moment to take their order – tea for four and toasted tea cakes all round.

“You’ll meet scores of people who still remember William Carrington of Leedstown,” Coad said when she withdrew. “Not all of them kindly, I have to warn you. Celtic memories are long – as I’m sure you know. Even death will hardly make them fade.” He smiled at each in turn, ending with his eyes on Leah.

She had taken an instant liking to him, not just because he was both presentable and easygoing but also because he had an air of culture about him. His demeanour suggested he was an auctioneer and realtor only to earn money for more important ends. Not ‘realtor’ – estate agent. Much grander-sounding.

“Oh?” Carrington had caught something in Coad’s tone when he said that not all local people would remember his gran’pappy kindly. “Something I ought to know about?”

Coad stared briefly out of the window, marshalling his words. “I don’t suppose William himself made too many enemies ...” he began.

“Hardly old enough,” Carrington put in.

“Just so. But his family did, I’m afraid. There’s one incident in particular that I have in mind, and it’s pertinent to our present business. His uncle – who would be your great-great-uncle, sir – ‘Honourable’ Carrington ... his real name was Hannibal ...”

“Right.” Carrington nodded.

“But schoolboy humour traded it for ‘Honourable,’ so it stuck to him for life. Anyway, he was a clerk to the Pallas venturers, who had a group of tin mines between Sithney and Carleen. I’ll point them out to you. They’re all abandoned now but that was their heyday. He lived in Sithney, not far from the Old Glebe, in fact. And he was one of the leading lights of the parish council. Indeed, he was its chairman in the year in question – the year of eighteen and forty – when the Old Glebe was declared redundant by the church and they put it up for sale. And Honourable Carrington insisted on a covenant to the title deeds, ensuring, in effect, that the farm never fell into the hands of dissenters and nonconformists. Of course, it has been voided since then, but it remained in force for about twenty years. No Methodists, no Baptists, no Christadelphians ...”

“No Methodists!” Carrington exclaimed. “I can imagine how popular that must have been down here!”

“And the others I mentioned. There’s a fair sprinkling hereabouts. But one family in particular took great offence at it – the Liddicoats. Staunch Methodists to the last man, woman, and child. They saw the covenant as a device to exclude them in particular. I think James Liddicoat, especially, was very keen to buy. And Honourable knew it. So of course Liddicoat took it personally. Who wouldn’t!”

“But all that was more than sixty years back,” Carrington protested. “D’you mean to say ...”

“Remember what I told you about Celtic memories?”

“Sixty years, though!” He shook his head in amazement.

“Is this James Liddicoat still alive, then?” Leah inquired.

Coad smiled as if he’d just been waiting for someone to ask it. “His son is. Clifford Liddicoat.”

“Drop the other boot,” William said. “He still lives in Sithney, right?”

Coad nodded. “At Grankum Farm. The farm across the valley from the Old Glebe. In fact, he has the renting of the Old Glebe fields until Midsummer Day.”

“Don’t tell me!” Carrington exclaimed. “Now it’s on the market again, he’s interested.”

Coad grinned. “You bet!” he said again.