

His Father's Son

Chapter 1

A RIME OF FROST LAY THICK on the puddles in Old Common Lane that February morning. The wheels of the carriage broke into it with a sound like gunfire. At least, that was the image it conjured in the mind of Patrick Davy as he waited for the carriage to pull up outside his cottage gate; gunfire was an easy image in many a mind in 1915. He heard the coachman cry *Whoa!* and glanced uncertainly at his wife, Martha. She just sat at the window, staring out with that inscrutable calm of hers, so endearing when they were apart and yet so maddening when he was face to face with it on an occasion like this. The ice on one of the puddles gave out a groan, like a distant cry from the damned, before it splintered. That would be the driver getting down to open the gate for the nurse.

Yes, there was the creak of its hinge; Martha wouldn't let him oil it. And the nurse had iron studs in her boots; they made a contemptuous crunching on the gravel path.

"Aren't you going?" he asked Martha.

"You go," she said, turning to him and smiling. "He's every bit as much yours, too, my dear."

Patrick rose and went to the door, opening it just as the nurse arrived. He nodded to her. She looked at him strangely, surprised to find the man of the house involved in such a business as this. Then she handed him a tight-wrapped bundle; she had held it in her arms for the past half-hour, so her relief was enormous.

As it passed into his uncertain clutch, a mouth buried deep within its swaddling opened and a pair of month-old lungs bellowed lustily. Patrick looked sharply at the nurse and for a moment their eyes were locked; they knew this was a significant moment. That cry of rage and frustration – at that particular instant of transfer – had symbolic meaning for them all. But neither of them could think of the right words for it; in the end they just smiled at something they had recognized and then let it pass.

He hugged the bundle tighter and the howling stopped, just in time for Martha to take both the baby and the credit for pacifying him. The nurse turned and walked back to the carriage. Not a word had been spoken. The coachman dropped a little bag inside the gate and gave the Davys a cheerful nod, as between colleagues. They would not expect him to carry it to their

door; and the baby, too, had just lost all claim to that sort of privilege – so, in a way, it was another symbolic act. Patrick went to retrieve it, and to close the latch properly.

Martha watched the carriage vanish in another fusillade of simulated gunfire, up the back lane to Old Norton. There was no crest on its door, but she needed none; she knew the lady who had borne this child very well indeed – and all her family. She'd made the Lessore beds, washed the Lessore dishes, peeled the Lessore vegetables, and thanked them prettily for her wages, almost as long as she could remember.

She carried the baby indoors and laid him down on a rug in front of the kitchen range. “All this-here tight old swaddling can't be good for them,” she muttered. “I shan't believe it.” As she unwound the bindings she reflected grimly that it would have been better for young Miss Miriam if *she* had been kept as tight-wrapped as this. She remembered the last time they had met – herself, Mrs Lessore, and the daughter – in the business room at Marton Abbey. Miriam, not yet showing her ‘interesting condition,’ had just sat and stared out of the window, as if the arrangements being worked out between the other two had nothing whatever to do with her. Just at the end, though, she had turned and given Martha such a funny look: “I can't think of a better mother than you, Mrs Davy.” That was all she had said – but the *way* she said it ... very odd.

“Look at his little arms and legs, then,” she told Patrick. “All white like that. Starved of blood, they are.”

Patrick stared at that tiny little acorn and thought of his own, rampant and hot in the glade that evening ... and *her*, Miss Miriam, throwing herself on him with a passion that left him drowned and beaten. How long before the same quickening began to spout from that improbable little button down there on that rug?

“On and on and on,” he murmured.

Martha looked up. “You'd best get out and see to your traps,” she said. She loved it when he came back to the cottage after a day in such cold as this, for then he truly relished her cooking – and her warmth in bed afterward.

As she began to rewrap the baby, making his binding much looser, Heather, their only child until now, came sleepily from her crib in the back room. Patrick squatted and hugged her into his arms – from which safe fortress she turned and stared down impassively at the little bundle of wants and imperatives that had just blown in to wreck their lives.

“What's that?” she asked in disgust.

Patrick knew what she was looking at; who ever said little girls are all sweetness and innocence? He craned forward to see her expression; but she had none. She just went on staring down at it; who could ever tell what they were really thinking? Were they born with the knowledge that that funny

little bud of gristle would one day grow into a mighty wrecker of girls' bellies? Or was it just something different, something new?

That was the other wrecker of bellies – the thirst for something new. That's all he had been to *her*, up there in the glade on that hot, hot evening last May – something new. He didn't give himself airs in that department.

"Where's it come from?" Heather asked.

"All the way from France," he told her. "That's where your old dad will be off to, soon enough." He turned to his wife. "What are you going to call 'un?" he asked. "Poor little Fitzie."

"You're not to call him that!" she blazed.

"It's what they call the chance-children of princes," he replied mildly. "Fitzroy, Fitzwilliam ..."

"I'll think of a name, only it's got to be right, see. I've got to look something up. But I'll not have him called Fitzie." She rose and, hugging the nameless baby to her, crossed to the window. There she unbuttoned her blouse and offered him an ample breast.

"What are you at, woman?" her husband asked. He rose, swinging their daughter up until her head was on a level with his.

Across the gulf between them Martha said, "I thought I felt a little milk there last night." The baby sucked greedily. "Yessss!" she murmured ecstatically. "Milk me, you milky little devil!"

Patrick was unable to speak against the sudden pressure of tears behind his eyelids. And Heather leaned her head into his big, strong shoulder, and stuck her thumb into her mouth, and stared at her mother and that strange new toy at her breast.

Miriam Lessore sat at her window in Marton Abbey and stared vacantly out over the frostbitten lawns. It was done at last. What a year that was!

Her father, the Colonel, always said that, when he sampled a good vintage: What a year that was!

A little smile played at the corner of her lips – he certainly wouldn't say it about the summer of 1914, no matter if the vintage proved to be the best of the century. No, 1914 would always be the year when the Lessores had been brought down in shame and ignominy, when their daughter disgraced their ancient name. The irony was that the first of them – the one to whose loins they so proudly traced their lineage back in 1072, was a bastard of the Conqueror, who was, in turn, a bastard of the Norman duke. How often had her father boasted of it when he showed visitors round the gallery of ancestors ... "Yes" – tap on the nose and a wry little grin – "there he is! Old William Lessore. Born the wrong side of the blanket, you know, like his pater before him – old Billy the Conk!"

Well, Miriam thought to herself, if she'd done nothing else, she'd saved countless future pilgrims to the Abbey *that* little joke. Poor Dad! He couldn't help being such a crashing bore.

We treat our bastards differently now, she reflected sombrely. We don't give them abbeys and estates, we give them away.

Her eyes walked the lawns where, one blistering hot evening in May, in that never-to-be-a-vintage year that was not yet a year gone by, she had wandered in distraction, knowing that her entire world had just been shattered. The heat was the culprit. But for the heat she would never have wandered into the old summer house, carrying a message from Windsor for the Prince; but for the heat Sidney would never have dared caress Margot like that; but for the heat Margot would never have undone so many buttons.

Her mouth went dry now, even at the memory. Suppose they had seen her, just standing there gawping at them!

But for the heat she would have run away across the lawns, on and on in heedless fright until the woods had safely devoured her. Instead, her errand forgotten, she had walked in a daze; and her leaping, bursting heart, having no tired muscles into which to pour its excess, had instead claimed all her attention, demanding to know why it was so strangely stirred as she sauntered away over the lawns, down into the haha, and out across the stubbled hay field to the woods.

It was the primal shock of the thing. All those sniggers after lights-out in the dorm, all those whispered confidences from giggling girls back after their Continental holidays – they were one way in which young girls prepared themselves for the event, but not for the shock that went with it. To imagine a young man's hand upon a girl's naked breast was one thing; but to see it actually happening, there, before your goggling eyes, was altogether something else. It was like a physical blow in the stomach.

And all during that violent-leisurely walk she had been forced to tell herself, again and again, that it really did happen. Not in some clandestinely borrowed book, not among people who ended up in the newspapers, but right here, among her own friends – the salt of the earth ... people like Sidney Lang and Margot Drysdale. *That* was what changed it, for if them, then why not her? It suddenly put her among them. Her own breasts, which until now had been just awkward lumps stuck on the front of her – good handwarmers on a frosty night – were suddenly available, too, in that way.

And so she had stood in that little clearing in the woods, and eased her blouse out of her waistband and undone all its buttons and closed her eyes and tried out the idea on herself – never realizing how quietly a gamekeeper could creep up on her.

“I want to make it so good for you, Miss Miriam.”

That was all he said, or needed to say.

And by heavens, she'd do it all again – even knowing what it had led to. She wouldn't relinquish her claim to one second of the hour they had spent together that evening. Fate had intended it. Why else, the minute she

emerged from the woods, had she practically bumped into the Prince and Colin Henderson and Arthur Pelham, walking back up the hay field?

“Oh Sir! I’ve been searching everywhere for you ...”

And all was explained – her long, unchaperoned absence, her dishevelled state – everything! That had to be Fate.

She stiffened, and returned to the present, to the frozen lawns and the ice-pictures on the windowpanes.

“What are you thinking, dear?” her mother asked nervously from somewhere behind her.

She said the first thing that came into her head: “I was wondering if, when Jack Frost shows people around *his* portrait gallery, does he ever mention which side of the blanket they were born?”

Her mother sighed and, coming close, put her arms around her, cocooning her, rocking her gently. “Poor darling! You’re not going to mope for ever, are you?”

“I’m not going to mope at all. My God! One month of mewling and puking was as much as I want in all my life!” In a quieter tone, almost to herself, she added, “Which is just as well, perhaps.”

“Your father wonders if you mightn’t like to go back to France until the end of the summer? In the south, you know – well away from all this wretched fighting.”

Miriam did not respond. She herself had ideas of going to France – but very close to ‘all this wretched fighting.’

“Mmmm?” her mother prompted.

Miriam sighed. “I think I might go to London, actually. Stay with Margot. She’s organized the most splendid tea service at Victoria, for the troops, you know.”

“I know – and no chaperons,” Mrs Lessore said with a ritual sort of hand-wringing vexation in her tone.

Miriam gave a single hollow laugh. “Dear Mama! When this war’s over, you know, the word *chaperon*, just by itself, will be a side-splitting music-hall joke.”

The other let a silence grow before she said, “I don’t suppose you’ll ever tell us who the father really is?” By now she no longer waited for the girl’s affirmation. “Well, your Loyalty” – and she always gave the word Loyalty an extra-special emphasis – “does you great credit, my darling. The Colonel says if we make no fuss, take it on the chin, there could be a baronetcy in it for us, so I won’t press you on it.”

When she had gone, Miriam laid her forehead against the ice-crystalled glass and rolled it gently, this way and that, relishing the numbness it brought.