

An Innocent Woman

Chapter 1

THE TRAIN DREW INTO the terminus at a few seconds past 6.35 that Friday evening, the 1st of June. “More than seven minutes late,” Mr Hervey commented severely, making a jotting in his notebook. “I shall write to the company about it. Six minutes at Worcester, eleven at Bristol, four at Plymouth, and now seven at Penzance. Always late, you see. Never ahead of the timetable. It’s too bad.”

“And why on earth we had to wait half an hour at Truro ...” Jane began.

“Ah, but that is clearly shown in the table, my child,” her father pointed out. Within the family circle — which was now reduced to himself and Jane — he considered he held the monopoly in complaints, or, at least, in those that were justifiable. “In fact,” he pointed out, “it is a *forty*-minute wait at Truro.”

“Yet for no apparent reason,” she said, as if anticipating his objection.

But Mr Hervey had no objection to *that* delay, for, as he said, it was clearly shown in the company’s timetables. Annoyed that she should even hint at putting such words into his mouth, he said, “Now I wish you to go to the head of the platform, where you will see an archway to your left. Go through it, turn right, and wait for me just outside. I don’t want you getting smuts all over your dress. And I don’t want you beneath my feet while I see to our luggage.”

Jane obeyed. She did not even think of discussing the matter. True, she was dressed in black from head to foot, being still in mourning for her mother, who had died last November. And true, that same black dress had endured a steady rain of smuts over these past two days of travel from Leeds to Manchester, to Worcester, Bristol ... and all those other places in her father’s catalogue of late arrivals. But, dearly as she loved him, it was so pleasant to escape beyond the range of his all-organizing voice, if only by a few dozen yards, that she did not demur. At the head of the platform, before making for the arch, she turned and glanced at him. His tall, almost cadaverous figure, though bent now with age, was easy to discern; yet even had he been of ordinary stature his gestures would have distinguished him — wagging his finger, counting boxes and trunks and bags, ticking off lists in his ever-handly notebook. She shook her head in fond exasperation and made for the arch.

A warm, westering sun was gilding the granite walls of the station. Jane put up her parasol. Beyond was a yard where drays and hansoms

might load and unload. Through the railings along its farther side she could see the whole of Penzance harbour, bobbing with boats as far as the seaward breakwater, a couple of furlongs away — or chains or cables or however nautical people expressed it. There were trawlers and lobstermen, colliers and steamers, sailing boats and Trinity House tenders. No other sight could have marked better the difference between the life she had left behind her and the new one she was about to begin. Yesterday morning she had bidden farewell to the industrial landscapes between Leeds and Manchester; now here was an industrial scene of a different kind — maritime, yet just as busy, just as casual, just as dirty.

She sniffed at the strong and surprisingly cool breeze from the harbour. What should have been the unalloyed, salt-laden air off several thousand miles of ocean was freshly tainted with the aroma of decaying fish, tar, train oil, and, as in every other town in the land by now, the ammoniac, sulphureous reek of the gas works. She wrinkled her nose and prayed for her father to be done with his fussing as soon as possible. Why had he brought them to this odious end of the world, where they had neither family nor friends?

She became aware that a woman, respectably dressed and about her own age, was standing a few paces off, staring at her with an expression of some doubt. Unfortunately, that was the moment when Jane wrinkled her nose, and, though she was staring through the woman rather than at her, it must have seemed insulting.

Jane smiled. "I'm so sorry. Do forgive me. I was miles away." She moved an inch or so nearer the arch, making symbolic room for the other in case it were her wish to stand beside her and enjoy the warmth of the stone, too.

It apparently was her wish for she settled herself, or, rather, her bustle, a few inches clear of the wall and turned to face the sun; like Jane, she shielded her skin from its harmful rays with her parasol. "Do you have lodgings?" the newcomer asked quietly, giving Jane only the briefest of glances.

"Oh, yes, thank you. My father has bought a house in the district, in fact. Montpelier, in Breage. D'you know it?" She pronounced the name of the village as if it were French: *bree-ahje*.

Her companion frowned and then, with a smile of enlightenment, exclaimed, "Oh, *breeg*. Or, as the Cornish call it, *brayg*. How pleasant for you."

"Silly me! Of course I know it's pronounced *breeg*. That's my French upbringing coming out. Perhaps I should introduce myself? I am Miss Hervey. Jane Hervey. Is it a pleasant place?"

"More salubrious than this." She dipped her head with distaste toward the messy sprawl before them. "I am Miss Esther Wilkinson."

“D’you live in Penzance? Are you waiting for someone off the train, perhaps?”

“In a way.” She laughed awkwardly. “Don’t you recognize me?”

Jane thought it an extraordinary question. “I’m afraid not, Miss Wilkinson,” she replied. “I have never visited this part of the world before. Indeed, I have only ever lived in Paris and the North Country.”

“Ah, Paris,” Miss Wilkinson murmured. Then, with a sigh, as if turning from dreams to mundane things, “And what shall you do in Breage?”

“Manage my father’s household, I suppose — until someone else asks me to manage his. The usual thing, you know.”

“Yes. The usual thing. I see you are in mourning. Is it a recent ...”

“My mother died last November.”

“I’m so sorry to hear it. You must still miss her, especially at such a time as this. Both my parents are dead, but I could not afford to ...”

She broke off. A man — and a gentleman by the cut of him — paused before Jane and stared at her in rather an insolent manner.

“I think you’re looking for me,” Miss Wilkinson said. She led him a little way off; they exchanged a few words; Miss Wilkinson returned and resumed her former place. “A small matter of business,” she said lightly. “Well, I wish you luck in your search, Miss Hervey.”

“Search?”

“For a household to manage.”

The ambiguity of the explanation, and the irony in the tone, made Jane pause. Had she implied to this young woman that she was looking for a post as housekeeper? If so, how could she correct the impression? She was still floundering for a response when her father suddenly appeared, red in the face. “Be off with you, you baggage!” he shouted at Miss Wilkinson.

“Father!” Jane cried.

Miss Wilkinson stared him out coolly. Jane, who had turned to apologize, was mesmerized by that look in the woman’s eye — calm, unabashed, yielding nothing to any man. Oh, to be able to be like that when a total stranger turned on you in such a bullying fashion!

“Come, child!” Her father grasped her by the wrist and jerked her back into the station concourse.

“Goodbye!” she called over her shoulder.

“Goodbye!” Miss Wilkinson laughed.

“I had no idea,” her father said — several times. “Until that porter told me, I had no idea. If only Manette hadn’t given in her notice — this sort of thing would never have happened.” He turned and stared at Jane. “You weren’t ... you didn’t ... she didn’t ...?”

“We passed the time of day,” Jane said defensively. “That’s all. Her name is Miss Esther Wilkinson.”

“A fig for her name, miss! You didn’t speak to her? You didn’t permit her to address you?”

“She was a very pleasant, respectable young lady.”

He closed his eyes and shook his head. “She didn’t ... *tell* you anything?”

“Lots of things. Father, why are you behaving in this ...”

“What did she tell you?” He grabbed up her wrist again. “Speak, girl! I must call in the police.”

“She told me that *bree-ahje* is pronounced *breeg*. She said the Cornish ...”

“You told her where we live?” He was aghast.

“What is wrong, Father?” Jane grew agitated. She had obviously done something dreadfully wrong, yet for the life of her she could not think what.

He stared at her, first in one eye, then in the other, as if they might tell different stories. “You have no idea what she ... I mean, who she is, that woman?”

Jane thought it most curious that Miss Wilkinson should have asked the identical question, though in different words. “All I know is that her name is Esther Wilkinson and she lives in Penzance, or somewhere locally, anyway, and she’s waiting for a person off a train — someone who’s going to transact some business with her. And she obviously has no idea what he looks like because ...”

“Business?” Her father picked up the word and stared at her intently.

Jane shook her head. “I’m sorry. She gave no hint of what that business might be.”

He smiled then, a smile of relief which he sought to make genial. “Come!” Now his tone was gentler. “It is a storm in a teacup. Our carriage is up in the main street. We shall be home in an hour.”

As they set off along the coastal road her thoughts returned to the strange encounter at the station. Obviously Miss Wilkinson was somehow involved in their lives. Her father had recognized her at once, and she had expected Jane to know her, too. In some way she must be connected with those shadowy years when, although her mother and father had been secretly married, they had been compelled to live apart. Indeed, they had lived in different countries and her mother had always claimed that her husband was dead. From her father’s behaviour, she guessed the woman’s connection with them was tainted with scandal.

Would Manette have recognized her? Her father had implied as much. Manette had been Jane’s French maid but she had given in her notice the moment she had heard they were off to such a barbarous place as *Cornouaille*, which she had regarded as even worse than Brittany. There was freedom for you! The servant said, “No thanks, I’m off.” The

mistress had no choice but to go. Yet how could Manette have known Miss Wilkinson? She'd only been engaged by the family two years ago.

Was Miss W perhaps a love-child of her father's brother, her late uncle James? She had no very precise idea what a "love-child" might be, but she knew it tainted people's lives. She had never met Uncle James, nor been told anything of him other than that he had existed; but whenever his name was mentioned there was a certain *je-ne-sais-quoi* in the air. She could hardly be a love-child of Jane's father's! He was so proper; he'd never let any sort of taint into his life.

Were love-children related to the normal kind? Good heavens! If so, she had just stood there, outside the station, chatting with her ... cousin? Half-cousin? Step-cousin? But how exciting! As far as she knew, she had no living relatives of her own age. And to find one as pleasant-looking and well-spoken as Miss Wilkinson — or Esther, as Jane would certainly call her if she were a cousin ...

"The sooner you're safely married, the better," her father muttered, more to himself than her.

Silently Jane hoped she might have some say in the matter but, knowing her father, it would at best be the power to say no. "I wish ..." she mused.

"Yes, yes, what?"

"I wish that I might be allowed to direct the servants at Montpelier. And to arrange our unpacking, and our rooms ..."

"But you will only make a mess of it," her father pointed out.

She sighed, not being able to deny it. The problem was that she could never fuss and fidget with half the devotion *he* put into it. If she had her own household, she knew she'd manage it all perfectly well, but as long as he was there, hovering around, topping up, as it were, her inadequacies as a fusspot, she would, indeed, make a mess of it. "How shall I ever learn?" she asked.

He smiled sympathetically and gave her arm an affectionate pat. "Have no fear," he told her. "I certainly shall not try to teach you. We should only fall out and become enemies for life."

"Father!" She leaned her head against his shoulder. "As if we could!"

He sighed lugubriously. "Not that I shall live for ever. Next year I reach the biblical three-score-and-ten, you know."

She knew. He had reminded her of it often enough since her mother's death. Sixty-nine years old! It was unimaginable to her. "Born 1791." How often did one see that sort of date on tombstones already white with lichen. By grisly coincidence, the three nearest her mother's grave at Adel, north of Leeds, were all dated 1791. She would never forget the look on his face as the realization dawned, when he turned from her newly filled grave and saw it. "God works in mysterious ways, indeed,"

he had said as he wiped away a tear.

“Born 1841.” What would it be like to see her own year of birth on a tombstone? There must already be thousands, of course, yet she’d never seen one. It wouldn’t make her dwell morbidly on her own mortality, she decided. Rather, she’d think of that poor young person lying there with so many dreams and desires unfulfilled.

“Well,” her father went on, “I’m not going to risk the loss of your amity. I value your little bird brain and your cheery smile and your warm heart too much for that, my child. No, I have an idea.”

“What?” she asked in an intrigued tone, snuggling against him like a child about to be told a story — which was something she had never had the chance to do when she truly was a child, for he had not entered her life until she was about twelve. It often struck her that much of their intercourse was like that — making up for those missing years of father-child association. Half-pretending it was there to be revived.

“Well,” he said, just as if his next words would be, “once upon a time ...” He leaned forward and let the window down slightly. “I think we may risk a little sea air now we’re clear of the town,” he explained. “Now tell me — what’s going to happen once we start settling in, eh? People will leave cards. People will call. And the first among them will surely be a lady of eminent respectability, a leader in local society — Helston society, I suppose. A lady with time on her hands ... perhaps her own daughters have fledged and flown ...”

“Then she will be fat and fully fifty,” Jane complained. She could see this dowager already, with her fine, downy moustache ... not a fastidious washer ... and a little pug dog under her arm.

“She might be younger and childless.” He offered it more as a bribe than as a genuine probability. “Anyway, were she Methuselah’s wife, no matter. As long as she pulls all the strings in the neighbourhood. And when she hears the size of your dowry ... well, I never met a woman yet who didn’t adore being generous with other people’s money. And if she can’t arrange for a trooping of at least three dozen eligible young men for you, then this isn’t England.”

The implication, Jane reflected glumly, was that it would be an ungrateful girl, indeed, who couldn’t say yes to one of three dozen. But she could just imagine them already — clodhopping sons of squires and tin-mine owners, curates with a crozier in their knapsacks, poor officers hoping for better regiments, junior solicitors or doctors with an eye on a larger partnership. The world was full of young men for whom a nice, fat dowry would turn dream into fulfillment. Sometimes she thought life would be so much easier if she weren’t an heiress, if money weren’t so all-important.

Funnily enough it hadn’t been important for most of her childhood —

when she had been too young to appreciate the fact. Her mother must have spent it like water. She remembered their beautiful villa in the Faubourg-St.-Honoré, and all her mother's friends there, during their years of unaccountable exile from England and separation from her father. They were the sort of men she'd really like Mrs Stringpuller to parade before her by the dozen. What a choice — the dashing cavalry officers in those breathtaking uniforms ... the Chevalier this and the Baron that with their impeccable charm ... the fashionable artists ... the pale-skinned poets ... She still could not understand what had made her mother give up all that dazzling society to come back and resume her marriage with this elderly gentleman now at her side. Oh, a decent, kindly man, to be sure; easy to live with if you did what he said. But he wasn't in the same class as those dazzling Parisian friends. They probably wouldn't even have spoken to him — a mere tea merchant!

She stared out through the window for quite a while before she realized she was looking at St Michael's Mount. "Oh, how disappointing!" she cried. "In Turner's engraving it looks so ... magical."

Her father, who was ticking off things in his notebook again, looked up briefly and said, "Oh, yes." But, she realized, there was no one you could write to and complain about it. Turner was dead, and anyway, artists had "licence," which was the freedom to lie and generally behave worse than ordinary people.

The carriage rattled on over an indifferent highway; St Michael's Mount, viewed from an ever-changing angle, grew on one; probably from close-to it looked as imposing as Turner had made it appear from an enchanted distance.

They paid the toll at Marazion. The two horses made heavy going of the hill but once they were up on the Helston turnpike their pace was brisk and they bowled along in the evening sunshine. Jane felt herself awakening to the charm of the countryside. The intensity of the colour was astonishing, especially now, with an almost horizontal sun drawing it out like some inner fire. The entire world was suddenly ablaze with the most saturated hues of green and brown — all made a hundred times more resonant by the deep violet of the twilight half of the sky. Even the granite of which the more substantial houses were built seemed compounded of scintillations of pure colour, which the eye, unable to discriminate among so many, decided to call mere grey.

As they went down into the long, shallow valley above Praa they were overtaken by a featherweight gig driven by a woman of about forty — quite obviously a local eccentric. Her jet-black hair was cropped almost as short as a man's and was covered by nothing more substantial than a sort of Tyrolean hat with a large feather stuck in its band. She stood on the driving platform like a Roman charioteer and cracked her whip fiercely

over the head of her horse, which must have had Derby winner's blood in his veins. Jane half rose and, holding on to her own more elaborate headgear, risked the top half of her head outside the window to watch the progress of this amazing Diana.

The charioteer raised a battered bugle to her lips and blew a nearly musical blast upon it. The dust of the turnpike had almost obscured the legend on the tail of the gig but Jane could just make out: ROSEWARNE'S ALES. That, she reflected sadly, was the sort of thing you could do if you weren't an heiress. The image of the eccentric lady, a figure gilded by the sun, driving like a fury, eyes all aglow with the pleasure of it, lingered long after her dust had drifted away inland.

They paid no further toll at Ashton, being by then in their own parish. The charioteer-bugler had driven straight through as well, so she must also be fairly local. Then a few more twists and turns brought them within sight of Breage and to the gates of Montpelier House, on the seaward side of the road.

"Do our grounds go all the way down to the sea?" she asked.

"In a way. They are cut across by a public byway. But we own the cliffs beyond and a couple of little coves at their feet — as far as the high-tide line, anyway."

It gave her visions of tripping down for an early-morning dip, but she did not like the sound of the byway. Perhaps if it were a hardly used byway it would be all right.

The gatekeeper, a bald old arthritic, came hobbling out of his lodge, wiping the supper from his lips. "Welcome Mister Hervey, sir," he cried in a strange sing-song as he opened the first gate. And then, as he skipped painfully to catch the second, which swung open of its own accord: "And you, too, Miss Hervey, ma'am. Welcome to your new home."

"Pengilly," her father murmured wearily, as if the three syllables said all that was needed to be said about *that* man.

"He's rather sweet," Jane replied.

As they drove past she stared at him and nodded a gracious thank-you; only then did she realize he was quite blind. She leaned out and called back to him, "Thank you, Mr Pengilly."

"No need for the mister," her father chided.

"That's my French upbringing," she told him — thinking at once how odd it was to have given that explanation twice within the hour.

After a pause he said, "My dear, I wish you to say as little as possible to local people about your upbringing in Paris."

"Is it a secret?" she asked excitedly.

"No, no, if we make a secret of it, that will only whet their curiosity. Just volunteer nothing. Answer courteously if asked, but in the briefest fashion that is consonant with good manners." After a pause he added,

“And it might be best to say nothing about that strange childhood illness of yours — the one that damaged your memory. It would do nothing to help you get a husband.”

The drive curved gently, first right, then left, for about a quarter of a mile through rhododendrons and azaleas, some still in the last of their bloom. Then the view opened over a half-furlong of well-clipped lawn and rose beds, from which reared the pleasing granite façade of Montpelier House. It was what they called “a house of the middle size.” A great landed family would class it “a shooting box”; a retired tea merchant would affect to call it “my place,” but he would think of it, secretly, as a mansion — which is what, in simple truth, it was.

On the ground floor it had a morning room, a drawing room, a dining room, a ballroom, a library, and a business room — though the estate whose business had once been transacted there had long since been sold off to Squire Pellew of Skewjack Hall. There was also a splendid antechamber and hall, with a grand staircase like a Y curved back on itself. The first floor had a dozen or so bedrooms, boudoirs, and dressing rooms; and there were as many rooms again for the female servants on the top floor, which was arranged around the square of the entrance hall and its domed light. The menservants slept in cubicles and dormitories in an annexe that linked the house to the stables — except for the butler and one footman, through whose bedrooms one had to pass to reach the silver safe.

Jane knew all this from her father’s descriptions and from the plans he had brought back with him to Leeds. What she had not been prepared for was the sight of all the servants lined up on each side of the pillared portico — thirteen indoor servants to her left, twelve outdoor to her right.

The butler, Hinks, introduced the three footmen and her father’s valet; then the housekeeper, Mrs Tresidder, introduced the two upstairs maids, Mrs Gill, the cook, her assistant, and the three scullery maids. The head gardener, Silcock, introduced his four assistants and two boys, then Veryan, the head groom, who had driven them out from Penzance, introduced his second and the three stable lads.

“We’ll dress for dinner and dine in about an hour,” her father told them as they dispersed to their stations.

“I thought you might welcome a bath after such a fatiguing journey, Miss Hervey,” said Mrs Tresidder as she ushered her into her new domain — or, rather, as he had already made clear, her father’s new domain; the arrangements for dinner ought really to have come from Jane.

One of the upstairs maids, Margaret Banks, was to act as her lady’s maid until she found a replacement for Manette. She was a rather stolid, watchful woman in her mid-twenties, not addicted to smiling, yet pleasant enough and she seemed quite as efficient as Jane might have wished.

The footmen carried the pails of hot water from the kitchen to the stair head, from where Banks and another maid carried them into the bedroom and filled the bath. In fact, there were two baths, one in her father's bedroom as well, so the footmen worked double tides. Two baths was a luxury that not even their house in the Faubourg-St.-Honoré had boasted.

"The range must be covered in pans for all this hot water," she commented, seeing the depth to which they had filled the bath. She stepped in and gasped with pleasure at the heat of it.

"Oh no, miss," the maid told her, "they've put in a new boiler as draws its heat directly off the fire in the range. You can have all the hot water you do want, and any time you do want, day and night."

Wonders would never cease! She wriggled as the maid tipped in the last of the pails. The heat swirled around her like living tendrils.

"Mr Matthews do make them," she went on. "He belonged to be steam engineer up Wheal Vor afore it closed."

"Was that a tin mine? I've been reading about them, but I didn't notice any on our way here."

"No, you wouldn't, not from the turnpike. A lot do go round Goldsithney, see, to avoid the toll. You'd of seen them all if you'd a' done that. Over to Carleen. 'E's only two mile away up the valley. The other side Trigonning Hill."

"Is that the big hill opposite our front gate? I'll tell you one thing I did see — a most extraordinary sight. A woman driving along like a demon, blowing a bugle for all she was worth."

The maid laughed. "That's Mrs Moore. She's some famous in these parts. She and Dr Moore do live up Lanfear House. That's on the Penzance side of Trigonning, like. She do own Liston Court in Helston, too."

"Ah, no doubt I shall be meeting her."

"I shouldn't hardly think so, miss."

"Why? Is there some scandal? Could you just scrub that bit I can't reach — just at the bottom of my shoulder blades?"

After a pause the reply came, "She don't go about much, as the saying is."

"Well, she was certainly going about this evening! Oh, that's lovely. I feel so much more refreshed now. If ... what's the other maid's name, Kemp? — if Kemp has finished unpacking the larger trunk, you may lay out my pale-blue evening gown. We've dropped full mourning *en famille*, but I'll wear the purple sash. Oh, and bring me some clean underwear."

Dressed for dinner she felt like a new woman. She went out onto the gallery at the head of the stairs just as her father emerged from his dressing room. He paused and shook his head vigorously, as if to clear it of something. "For a moment you looked so like your mother." He smiled

and stepped out to join her.

She took his arm and they started down the stairs. "I'm sorry."

"No, no. I'm proud of you."

"I can't *not* wear her clothes. She had so many, it would be a wicked waste — and I've grown to fit them exactly."

"As I've just been made uncomfortably aware! But you are right. You must use her things as often as possible. Make them your own. Her memory does not need that trivial sort of protection."

"No, indeed."

They continued in an easy, reminiscing sort of silence to the foot of the stair. There, just before they went into the dining room, he said, "I hope you'll feel safe here, my dear."

"Safe?" she echoed, a little surprised at the word.

"Yes. We had to be so careful in Leeds, your mother and I, notwithstanding my elevated position in the community. With a marriage as unconventional as ours had been — until your mother came back to England, anyway ... well, we had to be so careful. But here" — he drew a deep breath through his nostrils — "don't you already smell a certain freedom?"

She sniffed the air as he had done, and laughed. "If it has the same sort of aroma as veal casserole, yes, I do."

In the moments before sleep claimed her that night she thought back over the strange things that had begun to happen from the moment they had arrived in Cornwall. First the enigmatic Miss Wilkinson, who was somehow mixed up in Hervey family affairs; then the amazing Mrs Moore, to whom, despite Banks's refusal to confirm it, she felt sure there attached some scandal; and finally that strange word of her father's: *safe*. Why safe? she wondered.

Had they been under some kind of threat in Leeds? She had never been aware of it. They enjoyed the usual circle of friends that the family of a prosperous wholesale tea merchant might expect to enjoy, all of whom had seemed as affable and charming as such people ought to be. Why would her father talk of being *safe* from them?

And as for her companions at Miss Moreton's Ladies' Academy ... she thought of Sally and Eglantine and Gervaise and Barbara ... and almost burst into tears at the realization they might never meet again. To talk of feeling safe, because all those dear, dear people were several hundred miles away, was absurd.

So her thoughts returned in those moments before sleep to that puzzling question: Safe — from *what*?

