

Kernow & Daughter

Chapter 1

IT WAS A NEW CENTURY — the Twentieth Century. A new dawn, people said. A new age, full of new ideas ... new this, new that. Above all it was time for the New Woman. But to Jessica Kernow, standing at the drawing room window at Wheal Prosper that Sunday afternoon — the last of the old, fustian Nineteenth Century — it looked depressingly like the same old Cornwall, drowning in the same old rain, and suffocating under the same old ideas that had been around all her life.

In just over a month's time, on the fourth of February, to be exact, the tally of her years would exactly match the tally of the centuries: twenty. Twenty years and nothing done; twenty centuries and so little achieved, except on the surface. Actually, the affinity wasn't as precise as the bald figures made it seem. They called it the Twentieth Century but it would still be nineteen hundred and something for the next hundred years, whereas she would actually *be* twenty-something for the next decade. (Like all sensible people, of course, she ignored those pedants who had nothing better to do than fill the newspapers with the prissy observation that the new century didn't begin until 1901 came around. Apparently such people popped up every century and bored the rest of the world to death.)

The door opened and closed quietly behind her. It was Harry — her elder brother. She knew it without turning to look; no one else in this household came into the room so self-effacingly, not even the servants.

Harry came up behind her, put his arms around her waist, and rested his chin on the top of her head. "Sunday!" he moaned.

She sighed in sympathy but told him that if he intended leaving his chin where it was, he'd oblige her by slipping a small cushion beneath it. He chuckled and heaved himself away from her, resting his hands against the transom of the sash. Harry always had to lean on something. He stared moodily out across the sodden fields to the village — Nancegollan — where wet granite walls and wet slate roofs gleamed soggily in the fading afternoon light.

"Penny for 'em?" she said with little enthusiasm.

"Trying to devise a poem," he replied. "You know how, when Sunday comes around, they lock up all the swings in the children's playground in the park? And the only toy the children are allowed to play with on the Sabbath is a Noah's Ark set? Park-Ark, you see? The rhyme is ready

made but the rest won't come."

She turned from the window and went back to the fireside. Staring into the flames she said, "Perhaps it's God's way of telling you not to write poems on a Sunday, either." The flames put her in mind of hellfire and thus of Reverend Coulter's sermon that morning. Everyone had wanted some message of hope to launch them into the new century. Instead they had been given a dose of good old hellfire; you could have cut the disappointment with a knife. "Have you gone through the figures the old man left with you?" she asked.

He sniffed and cleared his throat. "Are you busy?" was all he replied.

She picked out several lumps of coal with the tongs and placed them in the hottest parts of the fire. Then she sat down and stretched her hands toward the blaze.

"The old man would scalp you if he saw you doing that," Harry said.

"Warming my hands?"

"You know what I mean. A lady rings for a maid when she wants more coal on the fire."

"Where is Father?" she asked.

"Having a nap still."

He did not add 'with Miss Pym,' but she knew it anyway. He came and sat beside her. "Jessie?" he wheedled, running a finger softly up and down her forearm, like a lover pleading for a favour.

She gave out a little grunt of exasperation. "I shan't always be around, you know," she exclaimed. "One day you'll have to do it for yourself — and then you *will* be in a pickle. What then?" Her expression changed from a frown to a genial smile during this brief speech for she really felt a great warmth for her big, useless brother.

Useless? No, that was unfair. He was just useless at doing all the things the old man expected of him. But ask him to draw one of his fantasy pictures or dash off a little jewel of an essay on some utterly trivial topic — and my! You'd see him come to life.

"I suppose he'd kick me out," he replied in a hopeful tone.

"You're incorrigible."

He nodded. "Can't change the old spots, I'm afraid."

"No." Her glum mood returned. "Nothing changes. Nothing will ever change, will it! We'll still be fighting the Boers in the Cape this time next year. It'll still be raining. We'll still be singing *God Save the Queen* — the same old Queen ..."

He laughed and, taking his cue from her, sang: "God save our same old Queen ..."

"*Shh!*" She struck him sharply on the arm and glanced fearfully over her shoulder toward the door.

"What?" Harry sneered. "D'you think he's lurking out there — just

waiting for some excuse to pounce?” His tone strongly implied that their father had much better things to do, but he said nothing directly.

“He hardly needs any excuse to pounce, does he!” she said glumly. “We’re a standing excuse, you and I.” After a pause she added, “Have you got the figures on you?”

He nodded but made no effort to fish them out. Time never bothered him. Their father might come in at any moment — it was, after all, getting close to the hour for pikelets and china tea, the Sunday-afternoon ritual Miss Pym had introduced years ago. But still no sign of urgency ruffled his calm. “D’you know what nags him most?” he asked.

“Father?”

“Yes. He can’t bear to realize that, in the nature of things, we’re going to outlive him. We’ll go our own ways in the end — and he won’t be there to stop us. I’m the daughter he wants you to be, and you’re the son he’d like to see in me! I think it’s bothering him more and more with every week that passes. This dawning of the new century isn’t going to help much. But you just wait till your twenty-first!”

“Why? What’s so special about ...”

“It’s the Great Divide. It’s when life gets *really* serious. You thought it was serious enough already? Believe me — the best is yet to come! If you’re not married by February twelvemonth, or engaged at the very least, he’s going to make life intolerable for you.”

She didn’t want to talk about these things. They might be true — indeed, they almost certainly were true, insofar as anyone could predict another’s future behaviour — but she didn’t want to face it just yet. “Show me the figures,” she said abruptly.

He drew the papers from his breast pocket and tossed them contemptuously in her lap. His contempt was for the paper, though; toward her he felt nothing but gratitude.

She ran a quick tot, adding all three columns — pounds, shillings, and pence — in the same run of her eyes down the page. At the back of her mind a little imp exulted in this skill, even while she exercised it, for her father hated her to add up money in that unladylike way. When a lady added figures, she should roll her eyes in agony and her fingers should beat a surreptitious pitapat against the side of her thigh (oops — her *nether limb*) and she should perform this ritual three or four times and take the average of the three or four answers it provided. That, at least, was Miss Pym’s way with figures, and she was the Kernow family’s authority on all that was ladylike. Cressida Pym was a lady; the Kernows merely had money.

Jessie said, “D’you realize, Harry, that thanks to you I probably know more about our family business than anyone? Probably more than the old man, even.”

“Really?” His expression became animated but she could see he was more interested in the amusing situation her knowledge might give rise to than in the simple fact of it.

“Don’t you *dare* so much as *hint* at it!” She wagged a warning finger an inch from his nose.

“As if I would!” he replied with wounded scorn.

“You might — in one of your moods. I’m just saying don’t!” She looked again at the figures and sighed. “One day he’ll be caught out, you know,” she said. “He leads a charmed existence. What does he do with these papers he gives you? Does he know you treat them so casually?”

He shook his head. “He takes them back and burns them.”

Her lips compressed to a thin, angry line. “Why doesn’t he just tell you? Why run this risk? People can piece together bits of burned paper.”

“I don’t suppose he can just come straight out with it. Not in so many words. He couldn’t bring himself to do it, could he — you know him. You know *us!* We’re that sort of family. We know lots of things we’d never *ever* talk about. Father and Miss Pym, for instance.” He wet his lips with a nervous little dart of his tongue and waited for her to take up the point — for he had run with it as far as he dared.

Jessie, for her part, wondered why she didn’t. It had been on her mind times without number to broach the subject of Miss Pym with her eldest brother — the ‘Surface Angel,’ as they called her. It was certainly not something she could discuss with Frank, though he was only a little more than a year her senior. And Godfrey, at sixteen, would just die of embarrassment; even when they called her the Surface Angel — or, more usually the SA — it made him snigger and blush. So why did she not now take up Harry’s rather obvious offer?

Perhaps because it was rather too obvious. Or perhaps because she’d always promised herself she’d speak to him about it after her twentieth birthday — which was only thirty-six days away now. Somehow it was important not to be something-teen, not even a *nine*-teen, before embarking on such a thorny topic.

He saw she was once again going to duck the issue and so, to make it easier, nodded toward the papers and said, “Is it really so wicked? The figures, I mean?”

She shrugged. “By all we were taught in Sunday School, yes. But by the standards of the real world ... who knows? It’s nothing like as bad as the scandals one sees in the national papers. But it would make one of those sad little paragraphs one sees in the *Helston Vindicator* — or even in the *Western Morning News*. ‘I can’t imagine what possessed me, claims noted Nancegollan businessman!’ So I don’t know what scales to weigh it on.”

“But is it against the law?”

“It’s evading tax — which one hears smart people boasting of every now and then.”

“Do you?” he asked in surprise.

She smiled. “When they believe I’m not actually listening, yes.” She grew serious again. “Listen — don’t go pumping Frank for information. Don’t ask him, even in the most roundabout way, where the law stands and how close one could sail to it and all that sort of thing. He’d smell a rat at once.”

“He’d never peach on the old man, though.” Harry was shocked that she could seem to suggest such a thing.

But she laughed at his assertion. “Of course he wouldn’t — you dear, sweet chump! Not while there was a chance of squeezing himself in there and carving a nice juicy slice off the joint! *Aaargh!*” She raised her face and hands toward the ceiling in her frustration.

He nodded grimly. “You’re right, little face. Why can’t Father see it? He and Frank are two peas from the same pod. Frank should be the one to inherit the business, not me. Don’t you think he’s much the best suited for it?”

She wanted to shout an even louder *Aaargh!* and shake her fists at the ceiling this time — but she had already devalued the gesture. Frank was nothing like their father. He was reserved, cautious, watchful, cool; the old man was outgoing, reckless, observant, fiery. But Harry was an artist; he remade the world the way he wished it to be. So, with a wan little smile and an air of resignation, she picked up the papers, clamped them in his hands, and supplied him with one or two perceptive remarks to try out on their father when it was time to hand them back.