

Mistress of Pallas

Chapter One

ELIZABETH HAD LOST HER WAY. These Cornish lanes were built with such an absurd respect for private property; they hugged the boundaries of every tiny field, twisting and turning. It was a miracle she had not crossed her own path a score of times this past hour, since her fear had caused her to leave the little branch-line train at Pallas Halt. Not unreasonably she had assumed that Pallas House would be somewhere nearby — somewhere prominent; but it was not, and she was lost.

Still, if she had found the big house at once, she would not have stumbled across this perfect country lodge. The roadside wall yielded to a mixed hedge of privet and escallonia; formerly it had been well tended but now it was running wild. Arching raggedly above the gate it framed a view so perfect that, for a moment, she forgot herself, forgot her grief, forgot the dread that had haunted these past weeks.

She had seen many granite houses that day, especially after the main-line train had steamed west of Plymouth, but none had been quite like this. Cornish dwellings are low and stocky, with upper windows that rise to the eaves; in their aggressive plainness they seem to fear any hint of beauty, as if it were a feckless challenge to the gods of the storm. Even on a calm summer's day, like today, they appear to be half battened down against some expected rage of wind and rain.

But this granite house was an essay in elegance. It had high gables whose graceful curves were almost Chinese. The bargeboards at the gable ends were carved in a delicate fretwork that cast fine, lacelike shadows, mellowing the stark gray of the stone walls behind. The windows had arched lintels, with a generous space to the eaves above, where each rafter projected a carved and fluted finial into the sunlight. Bourbon roses grew in profusion beside the pathway, interspersed with bushes of sage and lavender, which laid upon the air a drowsy sense of times forgotten, times foregone.

Neglected it was. Untenanted it was, too, save for a pair of fat doves perched somnolently on the crenellations of the ridge slates. Yet it was perfect. If she had any expectations from her late husband's will, no matter how large they might be, she would gladly renounce them all for this one house, lost in this magical space in this tree-drowned valley, here at the far, far end of England.

Like one possessed she set her hand to the rusted gatelatch and let herself in. The creaking hinges startled the two doves, but they resettled almost at once on a small gable over a window. One or two of the flagstones tilted beneath her feet. Moles had passed this way. The richer flora of the garden, and the profound peace of its neglect, attracted butterflies and birds that were rare in the utilitarian fields around. She had not the country skills to name them, but their variety and abundance were obvious.

She peered in at the dusty, leaded windows and saw bare boards, bare walls, cobwebs. She tried the door. The latch rose on its sneck and the door yielded, but then she lost her courage and closed it again. She made for the side of the house, seeking the tradesmen's entrance. Broad ex-flowerbeds ran along the front walls, skirted by a brick path that led arrow-straight through a hundred yards of garden to a low, woodland gate. At the end of the house the line of its frontage was continued by a series of tall brick pillars, about twelve feet apart. Between them stretched trellisses of roses and clematis, now invaded by bindweed. Her fingers itched to get at this garden; it was still within her powers of rescue. But another two years in the damp, warm, fertile climate of Cornwall and it would need a small army of gardeners.

The trellisses neatly divided the "gentry" half of the garden from its kitchen cousin. The gate between the two had well-oiled hinges. And the kitchen garden, she now saw, was as well tended as the other was neglected. Perhaps the staff of the house were here on board wages? But surely they wouldn't be allowed to neglect the main garden so? She looked along the rows of potatoes, now almost all lifted, cabbages, spring onions, turnips ... at the frames of lettuce and cucumber ... at the orderly heaps of compost, manure, and topsoil ... and wondered who would be allowed to do all this while a once-fine garden went to ruin not ten feet away.

In the yard behind the house someone began to work a pump, five or six strokes followed by a gush of water. She suddenly realized how thirsty the walk and the sun had made her. The heavy black of her full mourning was unbearably hot.

Then she heard a loud gasp, a cry of satisfaction.

The voice was male.

Five more strokes, a lot of splashing and snorting. Then a boyish roar of joy that turned into a laugh.

There was something enigmatic about that laugh — loose, half-surprised, full of self-assurance. Its owner did not fear the sudden appearance of landlord or master.

She rounded the corner as the man was engaged in a third spate of pumping. He was naked.

He was facing away from her, crouched beneath the gushing spout. One lithe arm reached up and worked the handle easily. The muscles on his back rippled and glistened, wet in the sun, which was now falling and reddening in the sky beyond him.

Raising his face into the gushing freshet he blew out a wide whalespout of spray, iridescent against the early evening light. She knew she ought to turn and go, yet she could not take her eyes away. No immodest pleasure kept her there, but sheer aesthetic joy. Thus she would have watched a young tiger, playing beside a waterhole — and, indeed, there *was* something tigerlike about this young man.

He stood and turned, shaking the water from his long, curly hair and puffing the droplets from his hands and lips. Then he saw her and froze. Her stomach fell away inside her. But another Elizabeth, more inward and more secret, continued to exult in his beauty.

Perhaps he saw it, for he broke into a smile. Raising his hands toward her he said, “Why not come and join me?”

He was tall and fair. His gaze, despite his easy smile, was intense. The water plastered his curls to his brow and gave him a wild, dissolute appearance, like a young Bacchus, not yet fattened on debauchery.

He withdrew the challenge of his invitation. “No?” He shrugged and turned away, crouching again beneath the spout and cranking the handle until the water gushed once more, sparkling into the black of his silhouette. The sun poured oxblood over the wet flagstones beyond him.

He rose at last and walked directly to one of the outhouse sheds on the far side of the yard. Without turning to look at her, he said, “Please don’t go, Mrs Troy. I wish particularly to talk to you. Bill was a great friend of mine.”

With a hop, skip, and jump he disappeared through the door — a curiously adolescent gesture for a man in his mid-twenties.

When the dark of the shed had swallowed him, the spell that held her broke. She almost ran to the pump and cranked gouts of cold, clear water into her naked palm. Her lips sucked at it greedily; the relief filled her mouth and throat like cool fire. A chill pool of it settled in her stomach. She drank until the water backed up and made her choke and splutter.

“Easy now!” His palm fell lightly, repeatedly, on her shoulderblades. She turned. Through the tears of her coughing she saw him smiling at her, knowingly, full of self-confidence. Not pausing to dry himself, he had simply hastened into his shirt and trousers. His skin glistened wet at his open shirtfront. Damp patches were spreading through the cotton material. He was still barefoot.

Again she had the impression that he was both boy and man, or that the man had not cast off the behaviour of the boy. She said, “You have the advantage of me, Mr ..?”

“Rodda. Courtenay Rodda.” He spoke as if the name might already mean something to her. The sun was warm and golden aslant his skin. The fresh coolness within her wanted to touch it, as one wants to touch fine carving.

“Do you own this house, Mr Rodda?” she asked, turning away from him. Looking once more at the generous windows, the graceful proportions, she fell in love with it anew.

“That rather depends on your husband’s will, Mrs Troy.”

She spun back to him, her eyes wide.

“It’s part of the Troy estate. I’m sorry — I should have offered you my condolences at once.”

When she remembered what he *had* offered, she smiled at the incongruity.

He saw it and was angered. “But your grief is already healing, I see.”

“How dare you?” she asked in flat, reasonable tones — so that for a moment he thought she had asked something like, ‘How are you?’

She went on, “How dare you suppose you can measure my grief?”

He lowered his eyes uncomfortably. She saw he did not lose many skirmishes of that kind.

He seemed on the point of withdrawing. She realized she needed to talk to him more than he to her. There were so many unanswered questions. “I saw a stone bench around in the front garden,” she said in a more pleasant tone. “Shall we go there? I have so much I wish to ask you. Or somebody who lives down here and knows the family.”

He nodded. “I have a bar of chocolate.” He licked his lips, as if telling *her* how to respond, and returned to the shed.

Elizabeth wandered lazily back toward the front garden. It struck her that this was the first time in her life she had been alone with a man. Of course, she had walked convalescent officers up and down the gardens of the nursing home, and she and Bill had often been alone together once they were officially engaged; but that was different. Those occasions had been privileged. Now that she was no longer Miss Mitchell, the privilege was general. She relished the freedom of being Mrs

Slightly breathless, he joined her before she reached the seat. His hand poked forward beside her, flat, palm up, framing a jagged lump of chocolate. “Quite clean,” he said, as if she had not seen him washing himself.

“Thank you, Mr Rodda.” The water had made her realize her thirst; now the chocolate did the same for her hunger. As they seated themselves, her stomach gurgled.

“Have it all,” he said, passing the bag to her. “I’ve already made a pig of myself.” He watched her nibble at the next piece. “Of course you were a nurse, weren’t you!” he went on.

Why ‘of course’? she wondered. Then she saw he was seeking excuses for her calm response to his nakedness. Was he piqued? Did he find it unflattering?

“That’s how I met Captain Troy. I was his nurse during his convalescence.”

Perhaps he was also trying to excuse her lack of outward grief. She ought to have said, *Yes, I’m used to pain and death.*

He asked, “Did you meet after that fall he had on manoeuvres this spring?”

“Yes.”

“I understand it was another fall that killed him last month? Funny thing that — Bill was a fine horseman. He and I often hunted with the Cury and the Fourborough, whenever he got leave.”

Was he obliquely accusing her of something? Neglect? Failure to cope with Bill’s sudden bouts of falling? She felt she had to explain: “It wasn’t a fall that killed him, actually. It was a stroke. It was probably a stroke the first time, too, when he was on manoeuvres. We all thought he was completely better. The doctors said he was. Otherwise I assure you ...”

“But there was a horse. They shot a horse, I heard.”

“A pony. I’ll tell you how it happened.”

She hesitated long enough to provoke him into saying, “Oh please — if you’d rather not ...”

“No — I’ll have to get used to telling it. Everyone’ll want to hear. Anyway, we were in a pony and trap, Bill and I. It was such a short drive, you see — only from the church to ... I mean, I wouldn’t even *consider* travelling for our honeymoon, especially as we were already in Brighton. So it was only the drive from the church to the convalescent home, to pick up our bags, and then on to the hotel. Only a mile. And then, when it happened, I was so desperately trying to stop him from falling out of the trap that the reins were just left dangling. The pony must have taken fright and we struck a tree or a bollard or something. Anyway ...”

“You were lucky to have escaped with your own life.”

“I wonder.”

His eyes were suddenly inscrutable. She looked for sympathy — or mockery — and saw nothing. He was listening to this account of Bill’s death but he was searching her eyes, her voice, for something beyond it. He nodded, rather slowly, and said with great assurance, as if he most particularly wished to persuade her of it, “Oh yes — you *were* lucky!”

“I don’t see one bright sign anywhere.”

“You’re alive. You’re young still. You are beautiful. And now you’re free to be free.”

His compliment excited her, but also gave her a moment of panic, as if she were being uprooted, taken from a safe place. She stared at him and thought, *He has not had much experience of strangers. He wonders how to behave with me and what I think of him.*

He went on, “Also you were a nurse. You *chose* to be a nurse, I presume, so you must feel you have plenty to ...”

“I didn’t say I was a good nurse. As a matter of fact, I think I was awful. I only became a nurse because after my father died I found I couldn’t go on living at home, and because there’s very little else open to a respectable woman with not much education and very small means.”

It wasn’t true, or not the entire truth. Life with her mother would have been impossible. but also she had been desperate for some way of life with a discipline to it. Her own disorderly impulses, secret, suppressed inside

her, had been frightening.

He said, “You could have trained to be a typewriter. That’s the modern thing, you know.”

She shrugged.

“And yet you chose nursing. That must mean something.”

“Are you a barrister?” she asked.

Her abrupt tone displeased him.

She popped another piece of chocolate into her mouth.

When he saw he wasn’t going to draw her back into talking directly about herself he swallowed his annoyance, and became pleasant again.

“What d’you think of your new family?” he asked.

“I’ve not met them yet.”

He frowned. “Didn’t they meet the train in Helston?”

“I got off at Pallas Halt.”

“So that’s why you’re out here all alone.”

“How did you know who I was, by the way?”

“You’ve been expected for days. And Cornwall isn’t exactly Picadilly Circus. The only visitors we get in these parts are all a bit loony — vegetarians, people who wear Jaeger’s woollen underwear all summer ... that sort. So who else could you have been?”

“I’m afraid to meet Bill’s people, Mr Rodda. I’m sure they’ve all formed quite the wrong impression of me.”

“Why d’you say that?”

“Isn’t it obvious? Bill and I knew each other for such a short while. It was all so fast — you know what a whirlwind he was. And then for him to die like that, between the wedding and the breakfast ... I mean, even to me it looks dreadful. Suppose he’s actually left me some money or something.”

“What if he left it *all* to you!”

She looked at him in disbelief and then laughed. “That’s out of the question.”

“It wouldn’t be anything very grand, even so. In fact, you’d inherit a millstone. The grand old days of the Cornish estate, with tin repaying the adventurers at a thousand percent — they’re gone these long years.”

She didn’t even want to think of the inheritance. She shifted her position, preparing to rise. “I suppose I’d better go and find Pallas House. Can you perhaps tell me the way?”

He looked searchingly at her. “Surely you passed a once-fine old gateway back there in the woodland — a heap of rubble now?” She nodded.

“Well, that’s where you should have turned in. That’s Pallas — the ‘grand house’ of the district. A millstone, as I say.” He saw her reluctance and asked, “Are you afraid of your dear sister-in-law? Did Bill tell you about her?”

“Morwenna?”

His smile was malicious. “The Gorgon herself. They went into Helston to meet you, you know. The two women — not Hamill Oliver.”

“Oh yes — Bill told me about him, too. His uncle?”

“Not really. Bill always called him uncle because of the difference in age. Actually they were cousins. Hamill is the ruin of a once-fine man.” He tipped an imaginary glass down his throat. “So it was only the Gorgon and poor little Pettitoes who went in to meet you. I passed them on my way here. She’ll be furious. The whole of Helston will be laughing at it — the Gorgon standing bootless upon the platform! Why did you get off at Pallas Halt?”

“I suddenly realized I couldn’t face them.”

“You’re probably right. Morwenna terrified Bill. He knew — years ago — he knew he ought to come back here and start managing the estate properly. Morwenna is ruining it. But he could never face her.”

Was it true? Rodda’s assurance annoyed her; but she found it difficult to sustain any emotion these days. Thinking back over what Bill had said — about resigning his commission and coming back here to manage Pallas with her at his side, she felt herself becoming enmeshed in a web of expectations, threads from beyond the grave.

She said, “Considering that Morwenna was more like his mother than his sister, I hardly think that’s surprising, do you?” She suddenly felt more alone, or more aware of her loneliness, than at any time since Bill’s death. “Were you and Bill close friends?” she asked.

“Ever since I can remember.”

“I hope we’ll meet again then. I’d like to share your memories of him. What were you doing here this afternoon?”

“I was making a hide.”

“D’you mean *curing* a hide? Oxhide or what?”

He smiled. “Come and see it. It’ll save ten minutes of explanation.” He rose and dusted nothing off his trousers. The damp spots had nearly all dried.

She followed him around to the yard again, to the gloomy shed where he had dressed so hastily.

It was even darker now and the heat was oppressive. The room was a workshop, with the dying glow of a blacksmith’s forge at the back. It smelled of coke and male sweat. She felt diminished by it, standing there at the brink of a world she did not understand.

As her eyes grew dark-accustomed she saw on the floor before her a contraption of bent iron rods, welded under the hammer to form a kind of man-high cage. “Now that’s a hide,” he said. “It hides me from the birds. I take photographs of birds.”

She still could not see how it worked.

“I clothe it with grass and leaves, of course.”

“Ah. It looks enormous. You could practically live inside it.”

“I use wet plates, so I need my dark-room with me. Locally, you know, I’m considered a pretty good photographer.”

Her mind was blank. What else was there to say. “May I see your

photographs?’ But she had no desire to see them. “Is it you who keeps the kitchen-garden so immaculately?” she said at last.

He laughed. “My name means nothing to you, does it.”

She shook her head and turned toward the door. “I’d better go. I should think Morwenna’s come back from Helston by now.”

“Not her! I’ll wager she won’t be back until supper. The moment she found you weren’t on the train, she’ll have invented a dozen other reasons for going in to Helston this afternoon. Collecting you will instantly be demoted to something she intended to do in passing. More an act of charity than anything.”

His assurance began to annoy her. “How awful to know as much about people as God himself,” she said.

He bowed his head, pretending to accept her rebuke. “One day I’ll come the most terrible cropper.” He stretched forth his hand. “Good evening, Mrs Troy. I’m sure we’ll meet again soon.”

While she had been looking at the hide he had rolled up his sleeves. His arms were strong and wiry. The low, slanting light from the doorway sculpted the muscles in high relief. Again that aesthetic joy filled her, as strongly as when she had first seen him at the pump. And because it was so pure, it banished all necessity to think, to speak, to have a response prepared for him.

She shook his hand, only to watch his flesh in motion, to give herself that last pleasure. Then she drifted out into a darkening world.