

Tomorrow's Tide

Chapter 1

SHE HEARD LAUGHTER, a baby's laugh, from beyond the hedge somewhere. It was small and gurgly – the way babies laugh to themselves when they're all alone with a joke not even another baby could share. When grown-ups are around they laugh quite differently. Jennifer, being so much older than her brothers and sisters, knew every kind of baby's laugh there was. She stopped and listened, right there at the bend in the lane where the stream passed through the cundard under the road. Sometimes a bantam hen could make a noise like that, enough to deceive you until you listened hard.

The stream gurgled. The baby laughed again. And this time there was no doubting it. That was a baby's laugh if ever she heard one – and she'd heard plenty, having two brothers and two sisters, all younger. In fact, the laugh she had just heard could easily have come from her latest little brother, Colin – except that she'd seen Mrs Harvey tuck him up in his bassinet, not ten minutes ago.

She moved swiftly and quietly along the hedge, a dozen paces or so to the bend in the road. There a narrow, leafy lane meandered up to the crown of Godolphin Hill. TRESPASSERS WILL BE PROSECUTED at the end. Right at the start of this lane a pair of gates gave access to the fields that flanked it on each side. To the left was a single sty with a grumpy old boar who could break a child's leg off with a single chomp of his jaws. And gobble it down in three more. She could hear him now, fast asleep in the sun, sighing with boredom every now and then.

In the field to the right, where the baby's laugh had come from, were four empty sties. Because Willy Meagor said there was no money in pigs this year, but Daddy said he was too lazy. Anyway, the sties were empty – except, it now seemed, for this laughing baby.

It laughed again, a laugh that ended in a hiccup and then turned to crying. Jennifer peeped through the bars of the gate, waiting to see would the mother tend to it. She was an authority on all kinds of crying, too. This wasn't the full-throated howl that compelled immediate attendance. It was more of an experimental sort of cry, as if to say, 'Do I really feel like doing this? Well, let's give it a try and see if anything happens.'

When nothing happened, it began laughing again. Daddy said all babies were slightly mad. No one would tolerate grown-ups who behaved like them.

She looked around the field, a long, narrow triangle of grazed meadow that flanked the road as far as the spring, which gushed out of the hillside back near the village. She could see every part of it except the insides of the

sties and the bit of field immediately beyond. If there was such a thing as a mother there, she must be lying down inside a sty or behind the far wall.

“I say!” Jennifer called out. Then, “Hallo – anyone there?”

The baby was briefly silent and then began babbling, “Blullum-blala-bloem ...” It must be in the farthest sty. Or just outside, in the shadow of the wall.

Lucky there were no sows there. Even a sow could eat a baby. Sometimes they ate their own babies. And Mary Foster said once in a whisper that Cathy Carney got rid of her baby that way.

The sudden thought that some other delinquent mother might have left this baby here for the identical purpose filled Jennifer with alarm.

“No!” she cried aloud and, heedless of what animals might or might not be at liberty in the field, she scaled the gate and leaped down on the other side, skirts flying.

The baby was not in any of the sties but was lying in the grass, neatly swaddled, in the shade of the farthest wall. Its clothes were clean and of good quality. It was chubby, well fed and cared for, and had a bonny colour to its cheeks. It fixed its eyes upon her and, aiming a single bent finger more or less in her direction, burst into laughter.

“D’you need changing?” she asked hopefully.

It didn’t, but, in ascertaining the fact, she also discovered that *it* was a he.

“Which way did your mammy go?” she asked next.

He crooked his finger still further and swung his arm away to his right, toward the top of the hill. The movement attracted his attention and his eyes followed his hand all the way down to the grass.

I’ve ceased to exist now, Jennifer thought. Daddy said it took a baby a long time to learn that things went on being there even when it wasn’t actually looking at them. It must be wonderful to discover something exciting, then look away, forget it, then look back – and discover it all over again. Daddy also said that a philosopher called Berkeley proved that babies were right – things *did* stop existing when there was no one to observe them.

The baby was watching his own hand opening and closing like a sea anemone. With his ear to the ground like that he also appeared to be listening intently.

“You won’t hear any miners working down there any more, little man,” she told him.

She could only just recall it herself when, at the age of three or four, Mrs Harvey had made her put her ear to the scratching stone in Josie Mollard’s field, near Carleen, just before the appointed hour for dynamiting down in the stopes. That was very loud, of course, but she’d also heard them drilling down there. The ring of hammer on steel was like fairy music. It was eerie to look around the wide, smiling fields and to think of men standing up in vast caverns down there, underneath hundreds of feet of rock. Now it was all silent, however, and those same men had vanished over the seas and far away.

“Where’s your mammy?” she asked.

He sought the face that made the voice, discovered it all over again, and laughed afresh.

“Aren’t you bonny!” She held out a finger for him to grab.

His grip was intense. His stare became fixed. He shivered slightly.

She realized he was doing a pu-pu in his nappy. Moments later her nostrils confirmed her guess. “Oh dear!” she sighed happily and lifted his skirts to unpin him. “Hallo, what’s this?”

The nappy was held by a curious sort of brooch – a penny that someone had soldered onto a common or garden brooch pin. She undid it and, though curious to inspect it, slipped it instead into her pinafore pocket. First things first.

The pu-pu was quite hard, wrinkled like a sheep’s. It had not marked the nappy at all.

“No more?” she asked.

He kicked his legs vigorously, relishing their sudden freedom.

“No wee-wee? Wee-wee-wee-wee?” She touched his tail to encourage him.

He just went on kicking, and grinning to show little nacreous teeth emerging from their gums.

“Don’t go away,” she said. “Jenny’s coming back.”

She carried the nappy to the hedge and threw the stool over into the lane. It had already attracted a small swarm of bluebottles and horseflies. She wiped the cloth perfunctorily in the grass and returned to find a horsefly busy feeding on the baby’s calf. With the rolled-up nappy she swatted it to the ground and then crushed it with the toe of her boot.

He started to cry but stopped again when she gripped both his ankles in her left hand and lifted his botty to slip the nappy beneath him again.

“What’s your name?” she asked. “You’re old enough to have a name, I’m sure. Tommy? Charley? George? No, you can’t possibly call a *baby* George. All Georges have red faces and beards. Frank? Frankie?” As she uttered each name she watched him for signs of recognition – in vain, as it turned out.

“I shall call you Moses, then,” she said at last. “That’s an honour, you know. Moses was just a little foundling, too. And now he’s got a whole book in the Bible, all to himself. So all you need do, if you want to follow suit, is find some people to lead, and get some other people to chase you ...”

The little joke was veering toward blasphemy, she realized. “Never mind,” she said. “Let’s get this nappy pinned up, eh? I’ll bet you’re much more interested in that. I wish I had some talcum, that’s all.”

She held his legs down to stop his kicking. The corners of his mouth dropped menacingly. To distract him she put her lips to his tummy and blew a raspberry on the taut drumskin of his belly. A deep, gurgling laugh rewarded her. She did it again. The laughter rose in pitch and took on overtones of a delighted scream.

“This will end in tears,” she warned herself, and did it again.

More screaming laughter.

Surreptitiously she gathered the three corners of the nappy together and fished the brooch from her pinny pocket. She paused while she examined it more closely. Perhaps there was a name engraved on it somewhere. Someone told her once that you could go to gaol for defacing the coin of the realm like this. You could do it to foreign coinage, of course, but not to His Imperial Majesty's money.

Or *Her* Imperial Majesty's in this case. The penny was one from the reign of the late Queen Victoria – not the very late one, though, where she looked like the Rock of Gibraltar, but the early one, where she had her hair in a bun, and ribbons, like a girl going out to a ball. It said 1854.

There was no name engraved on it, nor on the brooch part of the pin.

She secured the three corners of the nappy and just got in another raspberry before he could cry again.

“Where *is* your mammy?” she asked anxiously over his renewed laughter. “You’re a very careless little boy, Moses, to have gone and lost her like this. You know that? Yes you are! Yes you are!”

To distract him from the raspberry game she plucked a stalk of grass, the one she called ‘tickly brown caterpillar,’ and brushed it deftly over his lips and under his chin.

“The babies that people leave in fields, you know, aren’t chubby, bonny little things like you – with your lovely clothes and all. They’re little piggy-widdens at death’s door. Which way did she go?”

Moses sneezed and began to cry at last, this time in earnest.

She picked him up and, rocking him like one of her dolls, carried him off into the shade of an oak tree that grew out of the hedge a little way uphill from the sties.

“It’s the sun in your eyes, isn’t it. Now you’ll feel better.”

She rocked him steadily and sang *Hush-a-bye baby on the treetop ...* until his crying stopped. Moments later he was fast asleep.

Such trusting natures they had! How did he know she wouldn’t just drop him and run away? How did he know she’d sooner die than do such a thing? But *why* would she sooner die than do that? How long since she discovered him lying there? Ten minutes? Fifteen? What mysterious forces now compelled her to care for him – and allowed him to fall asleep so trustingly in her arms?

Pondering these mysteries she sauntered up and down in the shade of the hedge, putting her own body between his eyes and the sun where the shade was sparse and telling him by telepathy how right he was to trust her so utterly.

“If your mother doesn’t return,” she told him, “I’ll take you home and bring you up myself. I’m sure one more won’t make any difference. We get a new one every three years, anyway, so all it means is that you’re a little early.”

The sound of her voice, babbling on and on, seemed to soothe him as

much as her lullaby. Nothing disturbed his slumber except for an occasional extra-deep breath, which he exhaled with that lovely, shivery sigh which babies make, each one of which was a new Cupid's arrow to her heart. By the time they had strolled to the top of the field and back down again to the gate, Jennifer was as in love with Moses as any young girl of fourteen could be.