1

I WRITE this sitting in the kitchen sink. That is, my feet are in it; the rest of me is on the draining-board, which I have padded with our dog's blanket and the tea-cosy. I can't say that I am really comfortable, and there is a depressing smell of carbolic soap, but this is the only part of the kitchen where there is any daylight left. And I have found that sitting in a place where you have never sat before can be inspiring – I wrote my very best poem while sitting on the hen-house. Though even that isn't a very good poem. I have decided my poetry is so bad that I mustn't write any more of it.

Drips from the roof are plopping into the water-butt by the back door. The view through the windows above the sink is excessively drear. Beyond the dank

garden in the courtyard are the ruined walls on the edge of the moat. Beyond the moat, the boggy ploughed fields stretch to the leaden sky. I tell myself that all the rain we have had lately is good for nature, and that at any moment spring will surge on us. I try to see leaves on the trees and the courtyard filled with sunlight. Unfortunately, the more my mind's eye sees green and gold, the more drained of all colour does the twilight seem.

It is comforting to look away from the windows and towards the kitchen fire, near which my sister Rose is ironing – though she obviously can't see properly, and it will be a pity if she scorches her only nightgown. (I have two, but one is minus its behind.) Rose looks particularly fetching by firelight because she is a pinkish gold, very light and feathery. Although I am rather used to her I know she is a beauty. She is nearly twenty-one and very bitter with life. I am seventeen, look younger, feel older. I am no beauty but have a neatish face.

I have just remarked to Rose that our situation is really rather romantic – two girls in this strange and lonely house. She replied that she saw nothing romantic about being shut up in a crumbling ruin surrounded by a sea of mud. I must admit that our home is an unreasonable place to live in. Yet I love

it. The house itself was built in the time of Charles II, but it was damaged by Cromwell. The whole of our east wall was part of the castle; there are two round towers in it. The gatehouse is intact and a stretch of the old walls at their full height joins it to the house. And Belmotte Tower, all that remains of an even older castle, still stands on its mound close by. But I won't attempt to describe our peculiar home fully until I can see more time ahead of me than I do now.

I am writing this journal partly to practise my newly acquired speed-writing and partly to teach myself how to write a novel – I intend to capture all our characters and put in conversations. It ought to be good for my style to dash along without much thought, as up to now my stories have been very stiff and self-conscious. The only time Father obliged me by reading one of them, he said I combined stateliness with a desperate effort to be funny. He told me to relax and let the words flow out of me.

I wish I knew of a way to make words flow out of Father. Years and years ago, he wrote a very unusual book called *Jacob Wrestling*, a mixture of fiction, philosophy and poetry. It had a great success, particularly in America, where he made a lot of money by lecturing on it, and he seemed likely to become a

very important writer indeed. But he stopped writing. Mother believed this was due to something that happened when I was about five.

We were living in a small house by the sea at the time. Father had just joined us after his second American lecture tour. One afternoon when we were having tea in the garden, he had the misfortune to lose his temper with Mother very noisily just as he was about to cut a piece of cake. He brandished the cake-knife at her so menacingly that an officious neighbour jumped the garden fence to intervene and got himself knocked down. Father explained in court that killing a woman with our silver cake-knife would be a long weary business entailing sawing her to death; and he was completely exonerated of any intention of slaying Mother. The whole case seems to have been quite ludicrous, with everyone but the neighbour being very funny. But Father made the mistake of being funnier than the judge and, as there was no doubt whatever that he had seriously damaged the neighbour, he was sent to prison for three months.

When he came out he was as nice a man as ever – nicer, because his temper was so much better. Apart from that, he didn't seem to me to be changed at all. But Rose remembers that he had already begun to get unsociable – it was then that he took

a forty years' lease of the castle, which is an admirable place to be unsociable in. Once we were settled here he was supposed to begin a new book. But time went on without anything happening and at last we realized that he had given up even trying to write – for years now, he has refused to discuss the possibility. Most of his life is spent in the gatehouse room, which is icy cold in winter as there is no fireplace; he just huddles over an oil-stove. As far as we know, he does nothing but read detective novels from the village library. Miss Marcy, the librarian and schoolmistress, brings them to him. She admires him greatly and says 'the iron has entered into his soul'.

Personally, I can't see how the iron could get very far into a man's soul during only three months in jail – anyway, not if the man had as much vitality as Father had; and he seemed to have plenty of it left when they let him out. But it has gone now; and his unsociability has grown almost into a disease – I often think he would prefer not even to meet his own household. All his natural gaiety has vanished. At times he puts on a false cheerfulness that embarrasses me, but usually he is either morose or irritable – I think I should prefer it if he lost his temper as he used to. Oh, poor Father, he really is very pathetic.

But he might at least do a little work in the garden. I am aware that this isn't a fair portrait of him. I must capture him later.

Mother died eight years ago, from perfectly natural causes. I think she must have been a shadowy person, because I have only the vaguest memory of her and I have an excellent memory for most things. (I can remember the cake-knife incident perfectly – I hit the fallen neighbour with my little wooden spade. Father always said this got him an extra month.)

Three years ago (or is it four? I know Father's one spasm of sociability was in 1931) a stepmother was presented to us. We *were* surprised. She is a famous artists' model who claims to have been christened Topaz – even if this is true there is no law to make a woman stick to a name like that. She is very beautiful, with masses of hair so fair that it is almost white, and quite extraordinary pallor. She uses no make-up, not even powder. There are two paintings of her in the Tate Gallery: one by Macmorris, called 'Topaz in Jade', in which she wears a magnificent jade necklace; and one by H. J. Allardy which shows her nude on an old horsehair-covered sofa that she says was very prickly. This is called 'Composition'; but as Allardy has painted her even paler than she is, 'Decomposition' would suit it better.

Actually, there is nothing unhealthy about Topaz's pallor; it simply makes her look as if she belonged to some new race. She has a very deep voice – that is, she puts one on; it is part of an arty pose, which includes painting and lute-playing. But her kindness is perfectly genuine and so is her cooking. I am very, very fond of her – it is nice to have written that just as she appears on the kitchen stairs. She is wearing her ancient orange tea-gown. Her pale, straight hair is flowing down her back to her waist. She paused on the top step and said: 'Ah, girls . . .' with three velvety inflections on each word.

Now she is sitting on the steel trivet, raking the fire. The pink light makes her look more ordinary, but very pretty. She is twenty-nine and had two husbands before Father (she will never tell us very much about them), but she still looks extraordinarily young. Perhaps that is because her expression is so blank.

The kitchen looks very beautiful now. The firelight glows steadily through the bars and through the round hole in the top of the range where the lid has been left off. It turns the whitewashed walls rosy; even the dark beams in the roof are a dusky gold. The highest beam is over thirty feet from the ground. Rose and Topaz are two tiny figures in a great glowing cave.

Now Rose is sitting on the fender, waiting for her iron to heat. She is staring at Topaz with a discontented expression. I can often tell what Rose is thinking and I would take a bet that she is envying the orange teagown and hating her own skimpy old blouse and skirt. Poor Rose hates most things she has and envies most things she hasn't. I really am just as discontented, but I don't seem to notice it so much. I feel quite unreasonably happy this minute, watching them both; knowing I can go and join them in the warmth, yet staying here in the cold.

Oh, dear, there has just been a slight scene! Rose asked Topaz to go to London and earn some money. Topaz replied that she didn't think it was worth while, because it costs so much to live there. It is true that she can never save more than will buy us a few presents – she is very generous.

'And two of the men I sit for are abroad,' she went on, 'and I don't like working for Macmorris.'

'Why not?' asked Rose. 'He pays better than the others, doesn't he?'

'So he ought, considering how rich he is,' said Topaz. 'But I dislike sitting for him because he only paints my head. Your father says that the men who paint me nude paint my body and think of their job, but that Macmorris paints my head and thinks of my body.

And it's perfectly true. I've had more trouble with him than I should care to let your father know.'

Rose said: 'I should have thought it was worth while to have a little trouble in order to earn some real money.'

'Then *you* have the trouble, dear,' said Topaz.

This must have been very annoying to Rose, considering that she never has the slightest chance of that sort of trouble. She suddenly flung back her head dramatically and said:

'I'm perfectly willing to. It may interest you both to know that for some time now, I've been considering selling myself. If necessary, I shall go on the streets.'

I told her she couldn't go on the streets in the depths of Suffolk.

'But if Topaz will kindly lend me the fare to London and give me a few hints—'

Topaz said she had never been on the streets and rather regretted it, 'because one must sink to the depths in order to rise to the heights', which is the kind of Topazism it requires much affection to tolerate.

'And anyway,' she told Rose, 'you're the last girl to lead a hard-working immoral life. If you're really taken with the idea of selling yourself, you'd better choose a wealthy man and marry him respectably.'

This idea has, of course, occurred to Rose, but she has always hoped that the man would be handsome, romantic and lovable into the bargain. I suppose it was her sheer despair of ever meeting any marriageable men at all, even hideous, poverty-stricken ones, that made her suddenly burst into tears. As she only cries about once a year I really ought to have gone over and comforted her, but I wanted to set it all down here. I begin to see that writers are liable to become callous.

Anyway, Topaz did the comforting far better than I could have done, as I am never disposed to clasp people to my bosom. She was most maternal, letting Rose weep all over the orange velvet tea-gown, which has suffered many things in its time. Rose will be furious with herself later on, because she has an unkind tendency to despise Topaz; but for the moment they are most amicable. Rose is now putting away her ironing, gulping a little, and Topaz is laying the table for tea while outlining impracticable plans for making money – such as giving a lute concert in the village or buying a pig in instalments.

I joined in while resting my hand, but said nothing of supreme importance.

It is raining again. Stephen is coming across the courtyard. He has lived with us ever since he was a

little boy – his mother used to be our maid, in the days when we could still afford one, and when she died he had nowhere to go. He grows vegetables for us and looks after the hens and does a thousand odd jobs – I can't think how we should get on without him. He is eighteen now, very fair and noble-looking but his expression is just a fraction daft. He has always been rather devoted to me; Father calls him my swain. He is rather how I imagine Silvius in *As You Like It* – but I am nothing like Phebe.

Stephen has come in now. The first thing he did was to light a candle and stick it on the window-ledge beside me, saying:

'You're spoiling your eyes, Miss Cassandra.'

Then he dropped a tightly folded bit of paper on this journal. My heart sank, because I knew it would contain a poem; I suppose he has been working on it in the barn. It is written in his careful, rather beautiful script. The heading is, '"To Miss Cassandra" by Stephen Colly'. It is a charming poem – by Robert Herrick.

What am I to do about Stephen? Father says the desire for self-expression is pathetic, but I really think Stephen's main desire is just to please me; he knows I set store by poetry. I ought to tell him that I know he merely copies the poems out – he has been doing

it all winter, every week or so – but I can't find the heart to hurt him. Perhaps when the spring comes I can take him for a walk and break it to him in some encouraging way. This time I have got out of saying my usual hypocritical words of praise by smiling approval at him across the kitchen. Now he is pumping water up into the cistern, looking very happy.

The well is below the kitchen floor and has been there since the earliest days of the castle; it has been supplying water for six hundred years and is said never to have run dry. Of course, there must have been many pumps. The present one arrived when the Victorian hot-water system (alleged) was put in.

Interruptions keep occurring. Topaz had just filled the kettle, splashing my legs, and my brother Thomas has returned from school in our nearest town, King's Crypt. He is a cumbersome lad of fifteen with hair that grows in tufts, so that parting it is difficult. It is the same mousy colour as mine; but mine is meek.

When Thomas came in, I suddenly remembered myself coming back from school, day after day, up to a few months ago. In one flash I re-lived the ten-mile crawl in the jerky little train and then the five miles on a bicycle from Scoatney station – how I used to hate that in the winter! Yet in some ways I should

like to be back at school; for one thing, the daughter of the manager at the cinema went there, and she got me into the pictures free now and then. I miss that greatly. And I rather miss school itself – it was a surprisingly good one for such a quiet little country town. I had a scholarship, just as Thomas has at his school; we are tolerably bright.

The rain is driving hard against the window now. My candle makes it seem quite dark outside. And the far side of the kitchen is dimmer now that the kettle is on the round hole in the top of the range. The girls are sitting on the floor making toast through the bars. There is a bright edge to each head, where the firelight shines through their hair.

Stephen has finished pumping and is stoking the copper – it is a great, old-fashioned brick one which helps to keep the kitchen warm and gives us extra hot water. With the copper lit as well as the range, the kitchen is much the warmest place in the house; that is why we sit in it so much. But even in summer we have our meals here, because the dining-room furniture was sold over a year ago.

Goodness, Topaz is actually putting on eggs to boil! No one told me the hens had yielded to prayer. Oh, excellent hens! I was only expecting bread and margarine for tea, and I don't get as used to margarine as

I could wish. I thank heaven there is no cheaper form of bread than bread.

How odd it is to remember that 'tea' once meant afternoon tea to us – little cakes and thin bread-and-butter in the drawing-room. Now it is as solid a meal as we can scrape together, as it has to last us until breakfast. We have it after Thomas gets back from school.

Stephen is lighting the lamp. In a second now, the rosy glow will have gone from the kitchen. But lamplight is beautiful, too.

The lamp is lit. And as Stephen carried it to the table, my father came out on the staircase. His old plaid travelling-rug was wrapped round his shoulder – he had come from the gatehouse along the top of the castle walls. He murmured, 'Tea, tea – has Miss Marcy come with the library books yet?' (She hasn't.) Then he said his hands were quite numb; not complainingly, more in a tone of faint surprise – though I find it hard to believe that anyone living at the castle in winter can be surprised at any part of themselves being numb. And as he came downstairs shaking the rain off his hair, I suddenly felt so fond of him. I fear I don't feel that very often.

He is still a splendid-looking man, though his fine features are getting a bit lost in fat and his colouring is fading. It used to be as bright as Rose's.

Now he is chatting to Topaz. I regret to note that he is in his falsely cheerful mood – though I think poor Topaz is grateful for even false cheerfulness from him these days. She adores him, and he seems to take so little interest in her.

I shall have to get off the draining-board – Topaz wants the tea-cosy and our dog, Heloïse, has come in and discovered I have borrowed her blanket. She is a bull-terrier, snowy white except where her fondant-pink skin shows through her short hair. All right, Heloïse darling, you shall have your blanket. She gazes at me with love, reproach, confidence and humour – how can she express so much just with two rather small slanting eyes?

I finish this entry sitting on the stairs. I think it worthy of note that I never felt happier in my life – despite sorrow for Father, pity for Rose, embarrassment about Stephen's poetry and no justification for hope as regards our family's general outlook. Perhaps it is because I have satisfied my creative urge; or it may be due to the thought of eggs for tea.

2

LATER. Written in bed.

I am reasonably comfortable as I am wearing my school coat and have a hot brick for my feet, but I wish it wasn't my week for the little iron bedstead – Rose and I take it in turns to sleep in the four-poster. She is sitting up in it reading a library book. When Miss Marcy brought it she said it was 'a pretty story'. Rose says it is awful, but she would rather read it than think about herself. Poor Rose! She is wearing her old blue flannel dressing-gown with the skirt part doubled up round her waist for warmth. She has had that dressing-gown so long that I don't think she sees it any more; if she were to put it away for a month and then look at it, she would get a shock. But who am I to talk – who have not had a dressing-gown at

all for two years? The remains of my last one are wrapped round my hot brick.

Our room is spacious and remarkably empty. With the exception of the four-poster, which is in very bad condition, all the good furniture has gradually been sold and replaced by minimum requirements bought in junkshops. Thus we have a wardrobe without a door and a bamboo dressing-table which I take to be a rare piece. I keep my bedside candlestick on a battered tin trunk that cost one shilling; Rose has hers on a chest of drawers painted to imitate marble, but looking more like bacon. The enamel jug and basin on a metal tripod is my own personal property, the landlady of The Keys having given it to me after I found it doing no good in a stable. It saves congestion in the bathroom. One rather nice thing is the carved wooden window-seat – I am thankful there is no way of selling that. It is built into the thickness of the castle wall, with a big mullioned window above it. There are windows on the garden side of the room, too; little diamond-paned ones.

One thing I have never grown out of being fascinated by is the round tower which opens into a corner. There is a circular stone staircase inside it by which you can go up to the battlemented top, or down to the drawing-room; though some of the steps have crumbled badly.

Perhaps I ought to have counted Miss Blossom as a piece of furniture. She is a dressmaker's dummy of most opulent figure with a wire skirt round her one leg. We are a bit silly about Miss Blossom – we pretend she is real. We imagine her to be a woman of the world, perhaps a barmaid in her youth. She says things like, 'Well, dearie, that's what men are like,' and 'You hold out for your marriage lines.'

The Victorian vandals who did so many unnecessary things to this house didn't have the sense to put in passages, so we are always having to go through each other's rooms. Topaz has just wandered through ours – wearing a nightgown made of plain white calico with holes for her neck and arms; she thinks modern under-clothes are vulgar. She looked rather like a victim going to an Auto da Fé, but her destination was merely the bathroom.

Topaz and Father sleep in the big room that opens on to the kitchen staircase. There is a little room between them and us which we call 'Buffer State'; Topaz uses it as a studio. Thomas has the room across the landing, next to the bathroom.

I wonder if Topaz has gone to ask Father to come to bed – she is perfectly capable of stalking along the top of the castle walls in her nightgown. I hope she hasn't, because Father does so snub her when

she bursts into the gatehouse. We were trained as children never to go near him unless invited and he thinks she ought to behave in the same way.

No – she didn't go. She came back a few minutes ago and showed signs of staying here, but we didn't encourage her. Now she is in bed and is playing her lute. I like the idea of a lute, but not the noise it makes; it is seldom in tune and appears to be an instrument that never gets a run at anything.

I feel rather guilty at being so unsociable to Topaz, but we did have such a sociable evening.

Round about eight o'clock, Miss Marcy came with the books. She is about forty, small and rather faded yet somehow very young. She blinks her eyes a lot and is apt to giggle and say: 'Well, reely!' She is a Londoner but has been in the village over five years now. I believe she teaches very nicely; her specialities are folk song and wild flowers and country lore. She didn't like it here when first she came (she always says she 'missed the bright lights'), but she soon made herself take an interest in country things, and now she tries to make the country people interested in them too.

As librarian, she cheats a bit to give us the newest books; she'd had a delivery today and had brought Father a detective novel that only came out the year before last – and it was by one of his favourite authors. Topaz said:

'Oh, I must take this to Mortmain at once.' She calls Father 'Mortmain' partly because she fancies our odd surname, and partly to keep up the fiction that he is still a famous writer. He came back with her to thank Miss Marcy and for once he seemed quite genuinely cheerful.

'I'll read any detective novel, good, bad or indifferent,' he told her, 'but a vintage one's among the rarest pleasures of life.'

Then he found out he was getting this one ahead of the Vicar and was so pleased that he blew Miss Marcy a kiss. She said: 'Oh, thank you, Mr Mortmain! That is, I mean – well, reely!' and blushed and blinked. Father then flung his rug round him like a toga and went back to the gatehouse looking quite abnormally good-humoured.

As soon as he was out of earshot, Miss Marcy said: 'How *is* he?' in a hushed sort of voice that implied he was at death's door or off his head. Rose said he was perfectly well and perfectly useless, as always. Miss Marcy looked shocked.

'Rose is depressed about our finances,' I explained.

'We mustn't bore Miss Marcy with our worries,' said Topaz, quickly. She hates anything which casts a reflection on Father.

Miss Marcy said that nothing to do with our household could possibly bore her – I know she thinks our life at the castle is wildly romantic. Then she asked, very diffidently, if she could help us with any advice – 'Sometimes an outside mind . . .'

I suddenly felt that I should rather like to consult her; she is such a sensible little woman – it was she who thought of getting me the book on speed-writing. Mother trained us never to talk about our affairs in the village, and I do respect Topaz's loyalty to Father, but I was sure Miss Marcy must know perfectly well that we are broke.

'If you could suggest some ways of earning money,' I said.

'Or of making it go further – I'm sure you're all much too artistic to be really practical. Let's hold a board meeting!'

She said it as if she were enticing children to a game. She was so eager that it would have seemed quite rude to refuse; and I think Rose and Topaz felt desperate enough to try anything.

'Now, paper and pencils,' said Miss Marcy, clapping her hands.

Writing paper is scarce in this house, and I had no intention of tearing sheets out of this exercise book,

which is a superb sixpenny one the Vicar gave me. In the end, Miss Marcy took the middle pages out of her library record, which gave us a pleasant feeling that we were stealing from the government, and then we sat round the table and elected her chairman. She said she must be secretary, too, so that she could keep the minutes, and wrote down:

ENQUIRY INTO THE FINANCES OF THE MORTMAIN FAMILY

Present:
Miss Marcy (chairman)
Mrs James Mortmain
Miss Rose Mortmain
Miss Cassandra Mortmain
Thomas Mortmain
Stephen Colly

We began by discussing expenditure.

'First, rent,' said Miss Marcy.

The rent is forty pounds a year, which seems little for a commodious castle, but we have only a few acres of land, the country folk think the ruins are a draw-back, and there are said to be ghosts – which there are not. (There are some queer things up on the

mound, but they never come into the house.) Anyway, we haven't paid any rent for three years. Our landlord, a rich old gentleman who lived at Scoatney Hall, five miles away, always sent us a ham at Christmas whether we paid the rent or not. He died last November and we have sadly missed the ham.

'They say the Hall's going to be re-opened,' said Miss Marcy when we had told her the position about the rent. 'Two boys from the village have been taken on as extra gardeners. Well, we will just put the rent *down* and mark it "optional". Now what about food? Can you do it on fifteen shillings a week per head? Say a pound per head, including candles, lamp-oil and cleaning materials.'

The idea of our family ever coming by six pounds a week made us all hoot with laughter.

'If Miss Marcy is really going to advise us,' said Topaz, 'she'd better be told we have no visible income at all this year.'

Miss Marcy flushed and said: 'I did know things were difficult. But, dear Mrs Mortmain, there must be *some* money, surely?'

We gave her the facts. Not one penny has come in during January or February. Last year Father got forty pounds from America, where *Jacob Wrestling* still sells. Topaz posed in London for three months, saved

eight pounds for us and borrowed fifty; and we sold a tallboy to a King's Crypt dealer for twenty pounds. We have been living on the tallboy since Christmas.

'Last year's income one hundred and eighteen pounds,' said Miss Marcy and wrote it down. But we hastened to tell her that it bore no relation to this year's income, for we have no more good furniture to sell, Topaz has run out of rich borrowees, and we think it unlikely that Father's royalties will be so large, as they had dwindled every year.

'Should I leave school?' said Thomas. But of course we told him that would be absurd as his schooling costs us nothing owing to his scholarship, and the Vicar has just given him a year's ticket for the train.

Miss Marcy fiddled with her pencil a bit and then said:

'If I am to be a help, I must be frank. Couldn't you make a saving on Stephen's wages?'

I felt myself go red. Of course we have never paid Stephen anything – never even thought of it. And I suddenly realized that we ought to have done so. (Not that we've had any money to pay him with since he's been old enough to earn.)

'I don't want wages,' said Stephen, quietly. 'I wouldn't take them. Everything I've ever had has been given to me here.'

'You see, Stephen's like a son of the house,' I said. Miss Marcy looked as if she wasn't sure that was a very good thing to be, but Stephen's face quite lit up for a second. Then he got embarrassed and said he must see if the hens were all in. After he had gone, Miss Marcy said:

'No – no wages at all? Just his keep?'

'We don't pay ourselves any wages,' said Rose – which is true enough; but then we don't work so hard as Stephen or sleep in a dark little room off the kitchen. 'And I think it's humiliating discussing our poverty in front of Miss Marcy,' Rose went on, angrily. 'I thought we were just going to ask her advice about earning.'

After that, a lot of time was wasted soothing Rose's pride and Miss Marcy's feelings. Then we got down to our earning capacities.

Topaz said she couldn't earn more than four pounds a week in London and possibly not that, and she would need three pounds to live on, and some clothes, and the fare to come down here at least every other weekend.

'And I don't want to go to London,' she added, rather pathetically. 'I'm tired of being a model. And I miss Mortmain dreadfully. And he needs me here – I'm the only one who can cook.'

‘That’s hardly very important when we’ve nothing to cook,’ said Rose. ‘Could I earn money as a model?’

‘I’m afraid not,’ said Topaz. ‘Your figure’s too pretty – there isn’t enough drawing in your bones. And you’d never have the patience to sit still. I suppose if nothing turns up I’ll have to go to London. I could send about ten shillings a week home.’

‘Well, that’s splendid,’ said Miss Marcy and wrote down: ‘Mrs James Mortmain: a potential ten shillings weekly.’

‘Not all the year round,’ said Topaz, firmly. ‘I couldn’t stand it and it would leave me no time for my own painting. I might sell some of that, of course.’

Miss Marcy said, ‘Of course you might,’ very politely; then turned to me. I said my speed-writing was getting quite fast, but of course it wasn’t quite like real shorthand (or quite like real speed, for that matter); and I couldn’t type and the chance of getting anywhere near a typewriter was remote.

‘Then I’m afraid, just until you get going with your literary work, we’ll have to count you as nil,’ said Miss Marcy. ‘Thomas, of course, is bound to be nil for a few years yet. Rose, dear?’

Now if anyone in this family is nil as an earner, it is Rose; for though she plays the piano a bit and sings

rather sweetly and is, of course, a lovely person, she has no real talents at all.

'Perhaps I could look after little children,' she suggested.

'Oh, *no*,' said Miss Marcy, hurriedly, 'I mean, dear – well, I don't think it would suit you at all.'

'I'll go to Scoatney Hall as a maid,' said Rose, looking as if she were already ascending the scaffold.

'Well, they do have to be trained, dear,' said Miss Marcy, 'and I can't feel your father would like it. Couldn't you do some pretty sewing?'

'What on?' said Rose. 'Sacking?'

Anyway, Rose is hopeless at sewing.

Miss Marcy was looking at her list rather depressedly.

'I fear we must call dear Rose nil just for the moment,' she said. 'That only leaves Mr Mortmain.'

Rose said: 'If I rank as nil, Father ought to be double nil.'

Miss Marcy leaned forward and said in a hushed voice: 'My dears, you know I'm trying to help you all. What's the real trouble with Mr Mortmain? Is it – is it – *drink?*'

We laughed so much that Stephen came in to see what the joke was.

‘Poor, poor Mortmain,’ gasped Topaz, ‘as if he ever laid his hands on enough to buy a bottle of beer! Drink costs money, Miss Marcy.’

Miss Marcy said it couldn’t be drugs either – and it certainly couldn’t; he doesn’t even smoke, once his Christmas cigars from the Vicar are gone.

‘It’s just sheer laziness,’ said Rose, ‘laziness and softness. And I don’t believe he was ever very good, really. I expect *Jacob Wrestling* was over-estimated.’

Topaz looked so angry that I thought for a second she was going to hit Rose. Stephen came to the table and stood between them.

‘Oh, no, Miss Rose,’ he said quietly, ‘it’s a great book – everyone knows that. But things have happened to him so that he can’t write any more. You can’t write just for the wanting.’

I expected Rose to snub him, but before she could say a word he turned to me and went on quickly: ‘I’ve been thinking, Miss Cassandra, that I should get work – they’d have me at Four Stones Farm.’

‘But the garden, Stephen!’ I almost wailed – for we just about live on our vegetables.

He said the days would soon draw out and that he’d work for us in the evenings.

‘And I’m useful in the garden, aren’t I, Stephen?’ said Topaz.

‘Yes, ma’am, very useful. I couldn’t get a job if you went to London, of course – there’d be too much work for Miss Cassandra.’

Rose isn’t good at things like gardening and housework.

‘So you could put me down for twenty-five shillings a week, Miss Marcy,’ Stephen went on, ‘because Mr Stebbins said he’d start me at that. And I’d get my dinner at Four Stones.’

I was glad to think that would mean he’d get one square meal a day.

Miss Marcy said it was a splendid idea, though it was a pity it meant striking out Topaz’s ten shillings. ‘Though, of course, it was only potential.’ While she was putting Stephen’s twenty-five shillings on her list, Rose suddenly said:

‘Thank you, Stephen.’

And because she doesn’t bother with him much as a rule, it somehow sounded important. And she smiled so very sweetly. Poor Rose has been so miserable lately that a smile from her is like late afternoon sunshine after a long, wet day. I don’t see how anyone could see Rose smile without feeling fond of her. I thought Stephen would be tremendously pleased, but he only nodded and swallowed several times.

Just then, Father came out on the staircase and looked down on us all.

'What, a round game?' he said – and I suppose it must have looked like one, with us grouped round the table in the lamplight. Then he came downstairs saying: 'This book's first-rate. I'm having a little break, trying to guess the murderer. I should like a biscuit, please.'

Whenever Father is hungry between meals – and he eats very little at them, less than any of us – he asks for a biscuit. I believe he thinks it is the smallest cheapest thing he can ask for. Of course, we haven't had any real shop biscuits for ages but Topaz makes oatcake, which is very filling. She put some margarine on a piece for him. I saw a fraction of distaste in his eyes and he asked her if she could sprinkle it with a little sugar.

'It makes a change,' he said, apologetically. 'Can't we offer Miss Marcy something? Some tea or cocoa, Miss Marcy?'

She thanked him but said she mustn't spoil her appetite for supper.

'Well, don't let me interrupt the game,' said Father. 'What is it?' And before I could think of any way of distracting him, he had leaned over her shoulder to look at the list in front of her. As it then stood, it read:

Earning Capacity for Present Year

Mrs Mortmain	nil.
Cassandra Mortmain	nil.
Thomas Mortmain	nil.
Rose Mortmain	nil.
Mr Mortmain	nil.
Stephen Colly	25s. a week.

Father's expression didn't change as he read, he went on smiling; but I could *feel* something happening to him. Rose says I am always crediting people with emotions I should experience myself in their situation, but I am sure I had a real flash of intuition then. And I suddenly saw his face very clearly, not just in the way one usually sees the faces of people one is very used to. I saw how he had changed since I was little and I thought of Ralph Hodgson's line about 'tamed and shabby tigers'. How long it takes to write the thoughts of a minute! I thought of many more things, complicated, pathetic and very puzzling, just while Father read the list.

When he had finished, he said quite lightly: 'And is Stephen giving us his wages?'

'I ought to pay for my board and lodging, Mr Mortmain, sir,' said Stephen, 'and for – for past favours; all the books you've lent me—'

‘I’m sure you’ll make a very good head of the family,’ said Father. He took the oatcake with sugar on it from Topaz and moved towards the stairs. She called after him: ‘Stay by the fire for a little while, Mortmain.’ But he said he wanted to get back to his book. Then he thanked Miss Marcy again for bringing him such a good one, and said goodnight to her very courteously. We could hear him humming as he went through the bedrooms on his way to the gatehouse.

Miss Marcy made no remark about the incident, which shows what a tactful person she is; but she looked embarrassed and said she must be getting along. Stephen lit a lantern and said he would go as far as the road with her – she had left her bicycle there because of the awful mud in our lane. I went out to see her off. As we crossed the courtyard, she glanced up at the gatehouse window and asked if I thought Father would be offended if she brought him a little tin of biscuits to keep there. I said I didn’t think any food could give offence in our house and she said: ‘Oh, dear!’ Then she looked around at the ruins and said how beautiful they were but she supposed I was used to them. I wanted to get back to the fire so I just said yes; but it wasn’t true. I am never used to the beauty of the castle. And after she and Stephen had gone I realized it was looking

particularly lovely. It was a queer sort of night. The full moon was hidden by clouds but had turned them silver so that the sky was quite light. Belmotte Tower, high on its mound, seemed even taller than usual. Once I really looked at the sky, I wanted to go on looking, it seemed to draw me towards it and make me listen hard, though there was nothing to listen to, not so much as a twig was stirring. When Stephen came back I was still gazing upwards.

'It's too cold for you to be out without a coat, Miss Cassandra,' he said. But I had forgotten about feeling cold, so of course I wasn't cold any more.

As we walked back to the house he asked if I thought La Belle Dame sans Merci would have lived in a tower like Belmotte. I said it seemed very likely; though I never really thought of her having a home life.

After that, we all decided to go to bed to save making up the fire, so we got our hot bricks out of the oven and wended our ways. But going to bed early is hard on candles. I reckoned I had two hours of light in mine, but a bit of wick fell in and now it is a melted mass. (I wonder how King Alfred got on with his clock-candles when that happened.) I have called Thomas to see if I can have his, but he is still doing his homework. I shall have to go to the kitchen – I

have a secret cache of ends there. And I will be noble and have a companionable chat with Topaz, on the way down.

. . . I am back. Something rather surprising happened. When I got to the kitchen, Heloïse woke and barked and Stephen came to his door to see what was the matter. I called out that it was only me and he dived back into his room. I found my candle-end and had just knelt down by Heloïse's basket to have a few words with her (she had a particularly nice warm-clean-dog smell after being asleep) when out he came again, wearing his coat over his nightshirt.

'It's all right,' I called, 'I've got what I wanted.'

Just then, the door on the kitchen stairs swung to, so that we were in darkness except for the pale square at the window. I groped my way across the kitchen and bumped into the table. Then Stephen took my arm and guided me to the foot of the stairs.

'I can manage now,' I said – we were closer to the window and there was quite a lot of the queer, shrouded moonlight coming in.

He still kept hold of my arm. 'I want to ask you something, Miss Cassandra,' he said. 'I want to know if you're ever hungry – I mean when there's nothing for you to eat.'

I would probably have answered, 'I certainly am,' but I noticed how strained and anxious his voice was. So I said:

'Well, there generally is something or other, isn't there? Of course, it would be nicer to have lots of exciting food, but I do get enough. Why did you suddenly want to know?'

He said he had been lying awake thinking about it and that he couldn't bear me to be hungry.

'If ever you are, you tell me,' he said, 'and I'll manage something.'

I thanked him very much and reminded him he was going to help us all with his wages.

'Yes, that'll be something,' he said. 'But you tell me if you don't get enough. Goodnight, Miss Cassandra.'

As I went upstairs I was glad I hadn't admitted that I was ever uncomfortably hungry, because as he steals Herrick for me, I should think he might steal food. It was rather a dreadful thought but somehow comforting.

Father was just arriving from the gatehouse. He didn't show any signs of having had his feelings hurt. He remarked that he'd kept four chapters of his book to read in bed.

'And great strength of mind it required,' he added.

Topaz looked rather depressed.

I found Rose lying in the dark because Thomas had borrowed her candle to finish his homework by. She said she didn't mind as her book had turned out too pretty to be bearable.

I lit my candle-end and stuck it on the melted mass in the candlestick. I had to crouch low in bed to get enough light to write by. I was just ready to start again, when I saw Rose look round to make sure that I had closed the door of Buffer. Then she said:

'Did you think of anything when Miss Marcy said Scoatney Hall was being re-opened? *I* thought of the beginning of *Pride and Prejudice* – where Mrs Bennet says, "Netherfield Park is let at last." And then Mr Bennet goes over to call on the rich new owner.'

'Mr Bennet didn't owe him any rent,' I said.

'Father wouldn't go anyway. How I wish I lived in a Jane Austen novel!'

I said I'd rather be in a Charlotte Brontë.

'Which would be nicest – Jane with a touch of Charlotte, or Charlotte with a touch of Jane?'

This is the kind of discussion I like very much but I wanted to get on with my journal, so I just said: 'Fifty per cent each way would be perfect,' and started to write determinedly. Now it is nearly midnight. I feel rather like a Brontë myself, writing by the light

of a guttering candle with my fingers so numb I can hardly hold the pencil. I wish Stephen hadn't made me think of food, because I have been hungry ever since; which is ridiculous as I had a good egg tea not six hours ago. Oh, dear – I have just thought that if Stephen was worrying about me being hungry, he was probably hungry himself. We *are* a household!

I wonder if I can get a few more minutes' light by making wicks of match sticks stuck into the liquid wax. Sometimes that will work.

It was no good – like trying to write by the light of a glow-worm. But the moon has fought its way through the clouds at last and I can see by that. It is rather exciting to write by moonlight.

Rose is asleep – on her back, with her mouth wide open. Even like that she looks nice. I hope she is having a beautiful dream about a rich young man proposing to her.

I don't feel in the least sleepy. I shall hold a little mental chat with Miss Blossom. Her noble bust looks larger than ever against the silvery window. I have just asked her if she thinks Rose and I will ever have anything exciting happen to us, and I distinctly heard her say: 'Well, I don't know, ducks, but I do know that sister of yours would be a daisy if she ever got the chance!'

I don't think I should ever be a daisy.

I could easily go on writing all night but I can't really see and it's extravagant on paper, so I shall merely think. Contemplation seems to be about the only luxury that costs nothing.

3

I HAVE just read this journal from the beginning. I find I can read the speed-writing quite easily, even the bit I did by moonlight last night. I am surprised to see how much I have written; with stories even a page can take me hours, but the truth seems to flow out as fast as I can get it down. But words are very inadequate – anyway, my words are. Could anyone reading them picture our kitchen by firelight, or Belmotte Tower rising towards the moon-silvered clouds, or Stephen managing to look both noble and humble? (It was most unfair of me to say he looks a fraction daft.) When I read a book, I put in all the imagination I can, so that it is almost like writing the book as well as reading it – or rather, it is like living it. It makes reading so much more

exciting, but I don't suppose many people try to do it.

I am writing in the attic this afternoon because Topaz and Rose are so very conversational in the kitchen; they have unearthed a packet of green dye – it dates from when I was an elf in the school play – and are going to dip some old dresses. I don't intend to let myself become the kind of author who can only work in seclusion – after all, Jane Austen wrote in the sitting-room and merely covered up her work when a visitor called (though I bet she thought a thing or two) – but I am not quite Jane Austen yet and there are limits to what I can stand. And I want to tackle the description of the castle in peace. It is extremely cold up here, but I am wearing my coat and my wool gloves, which have gradually become mittens all but one thumb; and Ab, our beautiful pale ginger cat, is keeping my stomach warm – I am leaning over him to write on the top of the cistern. His real name is Abelard, to go with Heloïse (I need hardly say that Topaz christened them), but he seldom gets called by it. He has a reasonably pleasant nature but not a gushing one; this is a rare favour I am receiving from him this afternoon. Today I shall start with:

How We Came to the Castle

While Father was in jail, we lived in a London boarding-house, Mother not having fancied settling down again next to the fence-leaping neighbour. When they let Father out, he decided to buy a house in the country. I think we must have been rather well-off in those days as *Jacob Wrestling* had sold wonderfully well for such an unusual book and Father's lecturing had earned much more than the sales. And Mother had an income of her own.

Father chose Suffolk as a suitable county so we stayed at the King's Crypt hotel and drove out house-hunting every day – we had a car then; Father and Mother at the front, Rose, Thomas and I at the back. It was all great fun because Father was in a splendid mood – goodness knows he didn't seem to have any iron in his soul then. But he certainly had a prejudice against all neighbours; we saw lots of nice houses in villages, but he wouldn't even consider them.

It was late autumn, very gentle and golden. I loved the quiet-coloured fields of stubble and the hazy water meadows. Rose doesn't like the flat country but I always did – flat country seems to give the sky such a chance. One evening when there was a lovely sunset, we got lost. Mother had the map and kept saying the country was upside down – and when she got it the right way up, the names on the map were upside

down. Rose and I laughed a lot about it; we liked being lost. And Father was perfectly patient with Mother about the map.

All of a sudden we saw a high, round tower in the distance, on a little hill. Father instantly decided that we must explore it, though Mother wasn't enthusiastic. It was difficult to find because the little roads twisted and woods and villages kept hiding it from us, but every few minutes we caught a glimpse of it and Father and Rose and I got very excited. Mother kept saying that Thomas would be up too late; he was asleep, wobbling about between Rose and me.

At last we came to a neglected signpost with TO BELMOTTE AND THE CASTLE ONLY on it, pointing down a narrow, overgrown lane. Father turned in it at once and we crawled along with the brambles clawing at the car as if trying to hold it back – I remember thinking of the Prince fighting his way through the wood to the Sleeping Beauty. The hedges were so high and the lane turned so often that we could only see a few yards ahead of us; Mother kept saying we ought to back out before we got stuck and that the castle was probably miles away. Then suddenly we drove out into the open and there it was – but not the lonely tower on a hill we had been searching for; what we saw was quite a large castle, built on

level ground. Father gave a shout and the next minute we were out of the car and staring in amazement.

How strange and beautiful it looked in the late afternoon light! I can still recapture that first glimpse – see the sheer grey stone walls and towers against the pale yellow sky, the reflected castle stretching towards us on the brimming moat, the floating patches of emerald-green water-weed. No breath of wind ruffled the looking-glass water, no sound of any kind came to us. Our excited voices only made the castle seem more silent.

Father pointed out the gatehouse – it had two round towers joined halfway up by a room with stone-mullioned windows. To the right of the gatehouse nothing remained but crumbling ruins, but on the left a stretch of high, battlemented walls joined it to a round corner tower. A bridge crossed the moat to the great nail-studded oak doors under the windows of the gatehouse room, and a little door cut in one of the big doors stood slightly ajar – the minute Father noticed this, he was off towards it. Mother said vague things about trespassing and tried to stop us following him, but in the end she let us go, while she stayed behind with Thomas, who woke and wept a little.

How well I remember that run through the stillness, the smell of wet stone and wet weeds as we crossed the

bridge, the moment of excitement before we stepped in at the little door! Once through, we were in the cool dimness of the gatehouse passage. That was where I first *felt* the castle – it is the place where one is most conscious of the great weight of stone above and around one. I was too young to know much of history and the past, for me the castle was one in a fairy tale; and the queer heavy coldness was so spell-like that I clutched Rose hard. Together we ran through to the daylight; then stopped dead.

On our left, instead of the grey walls and towers we had been expecting, was a long house of white-washed plaster and herring-boned brick, veined by weather-bleached wood. It had all sorts of odd little lattice windows, bright gold from the sunset, and the attic gable looked as if it might fall forward at any minute. This belonged to a different kind of fairy tale – it was just my idea of a 'Hansel and Gretel' house and for a second I feared a witch inside had stolen Father. Then I saw him trying to get in at the kitchen door. He came running back through the overgrown courtyard garden, calling that there was a small window open near the front door that he could put Rose through to let us in. I was glad he said Rose and not me – I would have been terrified to be alone in the house for a second. Rose was never frightened

of anything; she was trying to scramble up to the window even before Father got there to lift her. Through she went and we heard her struggling with heavy bolts. Then she flung the door open triumphantly.

The square hall was dark and cold and had a horrid mouldy smell. Every bit of woodwork was a drab ginger colour, painted to imitate the graining of wood.

'Would you believe anyone could do that to fine old panelling?' exploded Father. We followed him into a room on the left, which had a dark red wall-paper and a large black-leaded fireplace. There was a nice little window looking on to the garden, but I thought it was a hideous room.

'False ceiling,' said Father, stretching up to tap it. 'Oh, lord, I suppose the Victorians did their worst to the whole place.'

We went back to the hall and then into the large room which is now our drawing-room; it stretches the whole depth of the house. Rose and I ran across and knelt on the wide window-seat, and Father opened the heavy mullioned windows so that we could look down and see ourselves in the moat. Then he pointed out how thick the wall was and explained about the Stuart house having been built on to the ruins of the castle.

‘It must have been beautiful once – and could be again,’ he said, staring across to the field of stubble. ‘Think of this view in summer, with a wheat field reaching right up to the edge of the moat.’

Then he turned and exclaimed in horror at the wallpaper – he said it looked like giant squashed frogs. It certainly did, and there was a monstrosity of a fireplace surrounded by tobacco-coloured tiles. But the diamond-paned windows overlooking the garden and full of the sunset were beautiful, and I was already in love with the moat.

While Rose and I were waving to our reflections, Father went off through the short passage to the kitchen – we suddenly heard him shouting, ‘The swine, the swine!’ Just for an instant I thought he had found pigs, but it turned out to be his continued opinion of the people who had spoilt the house. The kitchen was really dreadful. It had been partitioned to make several rooms – hens had been kept in one of them; there was a great sagging false ceiling, the staircase and the cupboards were grained ginger like the hall. What upset me most was a bundle of rags and straw where tramps must have slept. I kept as far away from it as possible and was glad when Father led the way upstairs.

The bedrooms were as spoilt as the downstairs rooms – false ceilings, horrid fireplaces, awful