

## CHAPTER III

### THE CAGE

"ARE you awake, Will?"

A stupid thing to ask that since he hadn't slept all night. Nevertheless he must have fallen into some kind of a doze towards dawn, for he had to struggle to recognize Joan standing by his bedside. He pushed his hair out of his eyes, opened his eyes and looked at her.

Joan had entered her fourteenth year this month. She was hardly to be called husband-high, for she would ever be of a low stature, but she was womanly formed and mother had said that it was time she had a bed-chamber of her own, a birthday gift that would cost nothing, since there was only one maid in the house now, and that room at the back going spare. Joan was sent out to do the shopping, and mother and Bet spent a long morning at work in the back chamber. When they had emptied and swept it Bet was set to wash the floor, and Will in his shirt sleeves helped mother carry down Joan's bed with its rush mattress and bedding. An old coffer from the apple-room, dusted and polished till it looked quite handsome, mother put at the bed's foot, in it two sheets from the linen cupboard, a twilled cover, two towels and all Joan's underclothes; on it a wooden tub and an earthenware ewer. Will, with his mouth full of nails fixed a row of pegs along the back of the door; by the window they placed Joan's spinning

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wheel and a stool with a cushion, by the bedside a small table with a brass candlestick.

Joan came back from doing the shopping in time for dinner, and after dinner father led his daughter upstairs by the hand, all the family following. Mother had done the work, but father made the speech. Paused on the landing, he told Joan that she was his sole daughter, and for fourteen years she had been a great charge to her parents. Now that she was a woman—at which she began to gulp—he hoped that she would begin to do her part in repaying them. He commanded her to be a good maid, modest, humble, obedient and dutiful, giving examples from the Scriptures and quoting dog-Latin. When he had got her properly sobbing, he kissed her on the forehead, lifted the latch and displayed to her her own chamber, a great thing as he truly observed, for one of a large family, and a favour shown to few daughters in this town, nay few maidens gently born got such quarters. But your mother has noble notions. . . . Was Joan pleased? Lord, if you had presented her with New Place, the biggest house in the town, complete with its courtyard galleries and gardens, she could not have gone more light-headed. Into Paradise stumbled Joan, ran her hand over the bed-cover, plopped down on her knees in front of the coffer to peep inside. "The second best twilled cover! Can you spare it? Sheets and towels for mine own, of which I am to have sole keeping! A table and brass to polish! A cushion!" Down on her knees again to kiss father's hand and ask his blessing, then with a rush into mother's arms, roaring so loud that little Num, youngest of the family, is set off.

Edmund they had christened that last unwanted child who had come so inopportunately so long after

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the rest of them three years ago—another boy too! Edmund seemed to realize that he had not been wanted. "Num" he had been called himself, odd affectionate little sucker, always climbing round wanting to help you, wanting your attention. Num and Will were mother's children for looks, lightly built, pale, brown-haired, quizzical. Gilbert and Dick who came between them were low-statured, swart, apple-cheeked and noisy like Joan and father. Broken heads got in fights, mountains of pudding, thrashings from the schoolmaster for stupidity and impudence, and gushing cuts from their own knives as they tried to carve sailing ships and spinning tops, were their daily fare.

Will shared a room with Dick, a room in the top of the house, with a dormer window overlooking the street far below, a crooked floor and a low ceiling full of oak beams, which drove you crazy as you lay in bed staring at them with something on your mind. It was cold on this November morning, and Will sitting up in bed blinking at Joan, came to his senses quickly.

"Will, while you were round at Field's last night, such a strange woman came to the door asking for you."

A strange woman! His heart gave a thump.

"What manner of a woman?"

"Oh! an ugly ill-favoured old piece, saucy too, I thought her. She said that she brought you a message, and that you would know. She said that you were to go out to visit her mistress this day between five and six. I gave answer that I knew not if you could, but she said that you would."

"Jugge!" said Will.

"Ay, that was the name she gave. 'Tell him 'twas Jugge,' said she. 'He'll know.'"

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"Thank you, Joan. I'll go," in a voice unlike his own.

"Oh! will you?" Joan lingered. "I thought I would come up myself betimes and tell you alone, not before all at table."

"Yes, thank you. It was kind. Go now, please. I must dress."

Joan went, disappointed, curious, and Will with knees shaking got out of bed. With fumbling fingers he drew on pants and undervest, then tipped some cold water into the tub which he shared with Dick, still lustily asleep. "That's better, that's better," he muttered to himself as he splashed his blazing hot cheeks and rubbed his hands dry again. But it was not better. The thing had come to pass, the thing he had been dreading for six weeks. He didn't know what it meant yet.

Nobody must guess. He looked round distractedly. If he was going out to Hewlands this afternoon he ought to wear his best hose, but they were put away out of sight somewhere. He couldn't remember. If things were as bad as he feared, they wouldn't be noticing his hose. He toppled into his everyday pair and then his comforting padded jacket bodice, but his fingers were shaking so that he tied up his points wrong twice. He was in a desperate hurry and worry, quite without plans for his conduct when he got to Hewlands, and could only rehearse to himself over and over again what had happened last time he had gone out there. Juggle's manner had been familiar, and Audrey had said something that he had not liked. She was a clown, almost simple, still . . . After parting from them he had gone on to see Sandells, and been relieved not to find that righteous elderly young husbandman at home. He had met old Whittington, the Hewlands

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shepherd, though—the only soul in that household he truly respected; Anne had let out that they all owed him money—and obliged him by taking back to town a dog the old fellow was returning to Alderman Cawdrey's shepherd, Smith, in Rother Market. A strangely pied shaggy-coated beast, with wild pale blue eyes, he had led it away upon a string, but as soon as he had got out of sight of the village let it go free. It made no attempts to slip back and seemed to accept its new master cheerfully. Trip, by name. It was in the last field, when they had got alongside the thicket that hid the lane from the town that the beast had paused. He had walked on, whistling, but it had not come, and he had been obliged to go back. Trip, with tail waving, eyes alight and paw outstretched to poke at something, was snuffing in the long grass just under the shade of a hazel bush. "Leave it!" cried Will sharply, and dropped on one knee, peering through the fading light. A thistle-cock with a broken leg and glazed eye, frightfully mauled, probably by some poaching cat, met his gaze. He turned it over gently, and as he felt the terror in that soft wounded body that could not escape his giant fingers, and looked into the misted glare of that eye, a thought, dark and strangling as weeds under lake water, caught at his own heart. . . . He had striven to banish it by every means, worked harder than usual by day and tried to get to bed so tired that he must sleep, but from that moment it had never really left him.

He was considering a plan for leaving the town, or at any rate taking up new employment. Aspinall, the schoolmaster, was visiting the shop to-day. He had sent word by Gib and Dick that he was coming before his dinner to choose a pair of gloves for a present and a

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satchel for himself. "I can pass off my best breeches and this coat jacket on his account, if they ask at breakfast," thought Will. He meant to ask Aspinall if he knew of any family needing a tutor, or even a post as pedagogue in any village school.

Master Thomas Aspinall, "the Ass," as the boys brilliantly called him, had never instructed Will. A huge awkward Lancashire man of past forty, with a mop of cheese-coloured hair and a pompous manner, which was a gift to rude lads, he had come to the town from Oxford last autumn. Will and young fellows of his age had suffered under, and caused to suffer, one Simon Hunt, a gentleman of better understanding and scholarship with a tongue like a whip lash and a temper that was maniacal. How were the boys to know as they carved their names on their desks, altered his writings on the notice-board to nonsense, cracked nuts and painted upon one another ink beards and moustachios, that Master Simon Hunt was wrestling with a devil of his own? After four years of sitting in his black gown in his chair of order at the top of that long room over the Gildhall, with its three eastern windows, two roaring fires and fifty-two demons incarnate for inhabitants, Master Hunt left the town quietly one Pentecost. He went to Douai University, entered the O'd Faith, and after a severe period of probation became a priest, a Jesuit. When last heard of he had been in Rome, looking very ill, his cough worse than ever. He was Father Hunt now, and had succeeded a certain Father Parsons as English Penitentiary at St. Peter's, no less! So that was what had been troubling him, he with his red eyes like hot coals and his thin fringe of reddish hair that had always somehow suggested a tonsure.

The long morning dragged away, and at the end of

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it came Master Aspinall, so full of himself that Will need not have worried. He lacked, he said, a pair of gloves, embroidered, perfumed, but not, mark you, too costly, to give as a present, ay—to a lady! Tee! hee! Pity the boys couldn't see him. Pity Will was feeling so sick. Twice this morning he had to leave the shop and go out onto the landing to shut his eyes and hang onto the stair rail until his knees stopped shaking. He had some difficulty in getting the schoolmaster alone, for father, hearing who was there, came in to serve so honourable a customer. Master Aspinall, followed out into the street, seemed surprised at Will's request. Well he might be, if he judged the family scholarship by Dick and Gib. He cast a cold unperceiving eye over the haggard young man desperately quoting a tag of Latin, alluding too casually to a rare Italian book known even in Oxford only a six months. (Field, the tanner in Back Bridge Street, had a priggish son two years Will's senior who had, like the old cat i' the adage, gone up to London to see the Queen. Richard Field, who was apprenticed to a London printer, sent his father occasionally a book, which Will was at liberty to come round and read, provided that he washed his hands before.) Master Aspinall, impressed, anxious to be impressive, did not know of a vacancy for a tutor in any of the great houses near by. The families at Arrow, at Coughton, at Beauchamp Court, at Grove Park, were all he believed furnished for the nonce. If he should dine again at Charlecote—he had dined there last year—he would bear the matter in mind. Alderman Smith's sons and daughters, of course (a great drop this!) were instructed by his worthy friend, the vicar.

Bet was ringing the bell in the West House in token

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that dinner was served. Will hurried to his seat, helped himself to boiled mutton with dried prunes which he could scarcely wash down with cold small beer, refused cheese, and hurried out again as soon as he could. During the afternoon he had occasion to go upstairs from the shop into the middle chamber above it, which was now stacked to the ceiling with patterns and bales. It occurred to him as he left the stale-smelling chilly little chamber, dreary in the November twilight, that this was the room in which he had been born. His parents had done better to contain themselves, he thought, as he let its latch fall and helped himself gingerly down the stairs like one not wishing to rouse a pain.

The lack-lustre afternoon wore itself out. Penning a set of bills as if his life depended upon keeping his nose down to them, he kept his lurking monster at bay, but with the first stroke of five o'clock sounding outside, a chill like a trickle of cold water running through his veins told him that the hour had come. He reached for his flat felt cap which he had brought down from his room before breakfast, left the house by the shop door and moved off through the darkling streets as if he was being drawn by a magnet.

A light rain was falling, and he had come without his cloak, but he noticed nothing as he almost ran out of the town. At the first stile he slipped, his knees were so unsteady. A mist was rising over the ragged brown fields, and the path was patched with standing pools of clear water on whose surface dead leaves floated serenely. Across the cloudy sky flocks of birds were speeding. One flight passed so close over his head that he could hear the murmur of their wings. He covered the distance quicker than ever before, and came in

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sight of Richardson's farm. No light burned in its lower windows, evidently the master was from home. He realized that he had lost his breath, and must slacken his pace if he was to arrive fit to utter. He sat on the last stile for a little, his heart beats shaking his body, his head swimming as he gulped in great mouthfuls of the indifferent night air. The little osier-banked stream was swollen and irking at its margins. He remembered that a young maid, a poor slut employed at a farm near Tiddington, had drowned herself in the river two seasons ago. Poor maid, poor, poor, mad maid. They said that she had gone out of her wits by reason of being deserted by a lover. She had been buried in the churchyard all right, because someone kindly had given evidence to the Coroner that she was in the habit of making garlands of meadow flowers to fling on the willow branches overhanging the river. A foot might so easily slip. They had found her milk pails nearby where she must have fallen in.

His breath was coming easier. He was nearing the house and must be calm. He had a good mind to go round to the front and yammer with the knocker, but that would mean explanations. On the back doorstep he paused a moment, closing his eyes, then gave himself a smack on the chest and made his common signal. Nobody came to open for him, but he heard voices within, and presently a man's voice called out: "Who's there?" and "Enter."

They were in the small hall at the back, standing gossiping in the glare of the open hearth, Juggle, Sandells, whom he knew well and rather scorned, and Richardson, an older man, whom he knew scarcely at all. So that was why there had been no light in Richardson's window. He gave them good evening

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all, and to Jugge: "You have neighbours!" His eyes becoming accustomed to the light after the dark wetness outside, he noticed that both the men looked as if they had been struck dumb and cut out of wood. Anne must be in the further chamber. "By your leave," said he, forcing a smile, and turned with no other intention than to seek her out, but Jugge had flung herself in front of the door by which he had entered, and Richardson thoughtfully moved to block the other exit. "Nay, that won't do," snapped Sandells. "I'faith and i'faith it won't," cried Jugge. "Young man," said Richardson, "we must have speech with you."