



Holybourne
The Magic of a Child

by

Carol Jeanne Kennedy



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Dedications

To all my wonderful friends and family who helped me along the way in writing my novels. This book is dedicated to Don Knight, Billy Miller, Jean Gess, Carol Silvis, and Mary Burdick. Also, special thanks to Hennie Bekker whose musical compositions *Algonquin Trails* and *Stormy Sunday* provided the creative spark for *Winthrope*, followed by the rest of my Victorian Collection.

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Chapter 1 – 14 December 1861

14 December 1861

When Mr O’Leary’s carriage approached Holybourne, I hid. The odious gentleman owned the brewery, the inn, and just about everything else in town. He was the only pawnbroker for many miles around, and a nasty sort of man. Mama said he liked little girls.

Now that he was well down the road, I pushed my way through the creaking old turnstile and hurried to the Red Lyon Inn. Mama was the laundress there, and I helped her wash every noon. I dared not tarry for right this minute I could hear the noon stagecoach approaching. The coachman’s shout, the horses’ hooves, and the clang and squeak of the approaching *Londoner* arrived just as the town clock struck one, two ... then just as I turned the corner, upon my horror, I ran directly into Mr O’Leary.

“Well, well, Anne,” he said and tweaked my cheek in rude fashion. Pressing his fat, sweaty body into me, he glanced around smiling. “Why, I don’t see your mother.” The stench of ale belched from his innards. “Have you been searching for me all by yourself?”

Flesh bumps crawled over my skin at his touch. “No, sir, I have come to help Mama.” Just then the twelfth gong struck, and I struggled to enter the inn, but he blocked my way with his bloated stomach. The shiny buttons on his brown wool waistcoat pressed deep into my cheek. I tried to move, but couldn’t. He lifted my chin, but I refused to look him in the eye.

Mr Ruther, who managed the inn for Mr O’Leary, grabbed my arm and pulled me inside. “Your mother is in the cellar falling behind in her work as usual. Hurry her along!”

I rubbed my cheek. Thankful to be away from Mr O'Leary, I nodded. "Yes, sir."

"Then hurry about it, girl! You're late again."

I hurried down the cellar's creaky roughhewn stairs. "Yes, sir."

I helped Mama gather up the dirty linen and ran back upstairs to fetch another armload, but first peeked to make sure O'Leary was gone. Satisfied that he was nowhere near, I hurriedly gathered more of the dirty rags, aprons, and tablecloths.

With nips of snow thick in the air, the patrons, motion-sick, muddy, and exhausted from their ride, crowded into the warm inn. Rubbing their hands briskly at the hearth fire, they spread the dreadful news about Prince Albert dying from the typhoid, and what a terrible disaster for the Queen—she so loved her Prince.

I listened to the news about His Majesty's death with sorrow and reflected that 14 December was an unfortunate day for the Prince, my Papa, and me. My eleventh birthday would not only be remembered as the day my Papa died, but now the same day our beloved Prince was, as the vicar would say, 'called to heaven.'

Ruther was watching me. I grabbed a dirty handkerchief from the floor and scurried down the steps to find Mama sipping from a gin bottle. "Mama, you mustn't. Ruther will catch you and ..."

"Catch her at what?" Ruther growled, coming up behind me.

"Prince Albert died, sir. I didn't want you to *catch* Mama weeping."

* * *

After Mama and I washed and hung the day's laundry, we left for home. It was almost dark, and Mama wanted to return by way of the sacred stream. Mr Braithwaite, the vicar, said that the pilgrims, on their way from Winchester to Canterbury, drank the blessed water. Mama said if it was good enough for the pilgrims it was good enough for her. Often at night she would walk along the banks and listen to the long-departed as they bemoaned their circumstances. Ruther told me that he often spied ghosts about the water, and once his dog chased one until the vision disappeared into thin air.

“Not tonight, Mama.” I shuddered. “If I should stumble ... you know I can’t swim.”

She pulled her shawl up around her neck. “That was clever of you to lie for me in the cellar, Anne.” She ruffled my hair. “You’ll do well in life with your quick thinking.”

“I only lied to protect you, Mama.”

“As you should have, Anne, after all, I am your mother.”

“I suppose now you will be doubly sorry when my birthday comes again, Mama.”

“Indeed, what a burden it has become.”

“The Queen must be very sad, Mama.”

“The Queen.” She sneered. “May she suffer as much as I have suffered with the loss of your father, then she’ll know what real pain is.”

“But, Mama, that was long ago. Surely you must forget.”

She swayed and stumbled, and I felt disgusted at her drinking gin. Earlier, I had prepared a stew—bits and pieces of lamb, potatoes, carrots and turnips, but I knew she wouldn’t eat.

“Mama, you’ve been sipping too much gin again. Ruther will be angry and find someone else to do the work.”

“He won’t find anyone else, my work is too good. Besides all that, I pay him for my gin, so never mind.”

“But we have so little, Mama. Why is it always ‘never mind,’ Mama?” I covered my ears and quickened my steps. I hated the words *never mind*.

When we passed through our wobbly front gate, Mama sighed. “I suppose you must write to Her Majesty and offer our condolences.”

“Very well, Mama.”

“And you must mention how your Mama lost her beloved on the same day. Already I am tired of hearing how *she* will suffer. What about me, Anne? Who offers sympathy to me?”

“I’ll write to her right off, Mama.”

“Indeed you will.” She entered the cottage muttering about the past. “At one time, Anne, your father mingled with wealthy royal society.” She bumped into the table, found her chair and settled heavily into it. “Until I came along—a mere French governess.”

“Yes, Mama.”

The fire in the hearth had gone black, crusty, and cold. “I will rekindle the fire, Mama.”

“Then be about it, girl. I’m chilled to the bone.”



Morning came quietly through the low grey clouds half full of rain and snow. Fetching the morn's water, I felt the stiff brown grass crack under my footfalls. I lugged the sloshing bucket full of icy water into the kitchen. Mama sat in her rocking chair by the fire.

I poured the water into the old black kettle. "Bread, Mama?"

"A slice." She rubbed her head and moaned. Her hands trembled as she reached for her gin cup. "I'm not hungry, Anne."

"You must eat more than a slice, Mama. You know how your hands shake when you don't eat enough."

When she turned to warm her hands at the fire, I emptied half of her gin bottle into the wilting potted vine that had once grown so eagerly; now its flimsy brown tendrils reached thin for that little sliver of light at the window.

"If only he hadn't died, Anne, things would have been better."

"Prince Albert, Mama?"

"Prince Albert?" She flung a log into the fire. "Prince Albert? What about him? I'm thinking only of your Papa."

I never knew my father, and perhaps things would have been better had he not slipped beneath the wheels of the carriage on London Road the day I was born. "I know, Mama. Perhaps if he had lived, I would be happy." I dreamed of happiness as a day without the smell of gin.

She stopped her incessant rocking. "Why should *you* be happy?" Glancing at the last two logs sitting at the hearth, she grunted, "Humph, that's another one of your faults, Anne. You daydream too much and forget to bring in the wood."

Mama resumed her rocking, rocking, rocking. The smell of rancid gin, pungent and sour, was woven into the fabric of our days. I wondered why she could not see as I did—not just on my birthday, but each and every day—the glazed eyes, the twisted lips, the spittle-mixed words. Her sallow face and ashen complexion starved for the slightest stream of sunlight. Her dark dress hung on her body as though draped on a rack.

"I don't think Her Majesty drinks very much, Mama."

"Humph, from now on she will. I am very sure of it. How could she not? If you think about it, her cellars must be full."

“But if her children objected, Mama, they would shun her.”

“Oh, they wouldn’t dare shun their Queen. She’d lop off their heads.”

Mama’s thin, worn hand shook as she drained her cup. Wiping her mouth with the back of her hand, she smirked. “You wouldn’t shun me, Anne?”

“No, it wouldn’t matter, Mama,” I whispered.

* * *

It was more than Mama’s penchant to talk to the “bottle” as she so often did with teary-eyed fondness; in reverence, she prayed aloud for a word or two from Papa. Visiting with the mysterious fortune-teller, Madame Pinchot, was a Godsend to her ... or so she said.

Mr Braithwaite, the vicar, insisted such Godsendings lay in God’s house alone. But even before the church bell’s peal on Sunday morning, Mama and I were on the well-worn path to Madame Pinchot’s cottage to see if she had news from Papa.

“Mama, it will soon snow again.”

“Indeed.” She shoved me. “Hurry along then, Anne.” As the snow, mixed with rain, fell heavily upon the leaves, Mama fretted. “Watch your step. You know how Madame fusses about mud.”

I wonder why Madame Pinchot would worry over such a thing. Her cottage was much like ours, with heavy drawn curtains, except that Madame’s candle nubs pooled hard to the dust-covered furniture; her hearth grates were broken and black, and soot thickened into cakes of unkempt char—why would she notice mud?

“Mama, while at the bakery just yesterday, I heard Mrs Braithwaite whisper to Mrs Pennyworth that Madame Pinchot was an evil woman who told nothing but bad fortunes.”

“Hmm, what would she know?” Mama pulled her shawl tighter to her neck and gestured for me to hurry along.

“Yes, Mama.”

With ease, I jumped over mounds of dirt and sidestepped every puddle. When we passed through the gate into the last meadow before The Road, I found a sparrow all aflutter, circling on the ground. It had a broken wing.

“Oh, Mama, it is hurt. A cat must have caught it.” Holding it ever so close to my cheek, I felt its fragile warm body; felt its

fearful little heart beat as if ready to explode. “We have come just in time.”

“Let it go, Anne. It must survive on its own or ...”

I turned away. If Mama couldn't speak with Papa herself regarding her broken heart, then what could she know about my sparrow's broken wing? Sheltering my find, I insisted, “I'll ask Madame Pinchot what to do.”

Mama coughed into her handkerchief and stopped for a moment to catch her breath.

We came to The Road, the London Road that Mama loathed.

“Make haste, Anne. You know I hate setting one foot on it.”

This morning she even went out of her way to find the narrowest place to cross. My father died on this road. In his happy exuberance to hold his first born, me, my father failed to mind his step and slipped—his head was crushed between the wheel and The Road.

To add to the bitter irony for my mother, The Road led to London. It was there that my grandfather Holt declared his distaste for everything French, including Mama, and it was there where His Majesty, Prince Albert died.

I was told that my Aunt, Miss Alice Holt, lived there in a great chateau, Lesington Hall. According to Mama, it was also my Papa's childhood home. She said Aunt Alice was the one good thing to come out of London. She was wealthy and sent us money at Christmas, although she never answered Mama's letters.

Now approaching Madame Pinchot's, I sniffed the air. The smoke that escaped her crooked chimney did not smell pungent and sweet like ours. This wet morning I was careful to avoid the mud, but Misha, Madame's huge dog, greeted me with such wildness that I lost my balance and stepped into the muddiest of puddles.

Mama, too terrified to look the dog in the eye, grabbed my hand, trembling and said, “Come along, Anne.”

Mama spoke French to Madame Pinchot, and that always made Madame smile. She charged Mama half of what she charged her other customers, and that made Mama smile. Everyone was smiling, except me. I was to remain sitting when I most wanted to be playing with the dog.

I was always fascinated with Madame Pinchot as she shuffled her faded and edge-worn cards. She called them her Tarot

cards. Putting her finger to her lips, she shushed Mama and me and began a mysterious chant over the fanned cards. I could hear someone trying to tiptoe in the room just above us. No doubt it was Monsieur Pinchot. Mama later insisted it was Papa's spirit.

A few of Madame's black curls strayed from the scarf knotted behind her head and dangled about her brow. Her squinty black eyes seemed always out of focus. Madame Pinchot wore all of her gold jewellery around her neck, on her wrists and every finger—even her thumbs. I thought perhaps she was worried about a thief in the night.

"Madame Pinchot," I offered in the eerie silence, "if you worry so about someone stealing your jewels, why not gaze into your crystal pebbles there and set Misha on the thieves before they come into your house?"

Mama kicked my leg.

Madame Pinchot ignored my most excellent suggestion. As her hands hovered over the pebbles, one of her long, claw-like fingernails tapped a tattered tarot card. She squinted at me. "Ooh, oui, Nana, someday you marry a man of great riches."

Mama smiled, easing back into her chair. "Did I not tell you so, Anne?"

"Oh, yes, Mama, you did. You did."

"You will be a great beauty." Madame Pinchot's lips were thin and red, thick with paint. Her eyes still squinted as she looked up at Mama. "You, Madame, must see that your daughter's hand is given to the proper man, for there are those who will seek it for ill favour."

"Oh, indeed, Madame Pinchot, indeed, I will hand her over to only the best." She winked. "Only the very best for my Annie."

"Given away, Mama?" I envisioned myself as a bottle of fine wine. But Mama would not give away any bottle of wine—let alone a vintage of 'great beauty.'

Madame Pinchot returned to her cards and waved me away with a dismissive hand. "I give your mother her reading, *au revoir*, Nana."

"*Au revoir*, Madame Pinchot." Removing myself to a stool in a quiet corner, I felt the flutter of my tiny captive yet in my pocket. "Oh, pardon, Madame Pinchot." I held up my bird. "It has a broken wing, Madame. How shall I care for it?"

“A bird?” She frowned. “You trouble me with a bird? C’est horrible.” Glancing down at the Tarot cards, she hastily flipped one over.

Mama gasped. It was the death card.

Pinchot pointed toward the door. “Give bird to Misha.” She cackled. “She know what to do.”

I gasped, my warm breath whispering to the startled creature in my hand, “I won’t.”

To Mama’s obvious relief, Madame gathered up the cards and reshuffled them. Glancing toward an open wine bottle sitting on the sideboard, Mama ventured, “On such a day as this, perhaps a petit glass of vin rouge, Madame Pinchot?”

Still busy with her cards, the fortune-teller chuckled, “Mademoiselle, you never see petit glass in your life.”

Mama drew back at the insult. I knew she would not beg again. She was too concerned whether Madame had heard any words from my dear departed Papa. This time, she had not. Mama stood, not glancing for a third time at the vin rouge. “Very well Madame Pinchot, very well then, perhaps some other time.”

Walking home, Mama squeezed the back of my neck. “You heard what Madame Pinchot said about marrying the proper man, Anne.”

I squirmed away from her grasp. “Yes, Mama, I heard her words.” It was now raining hard, and I snuggled the bird to my neck to keep it warm.

“Speak up, Anne, you mustn’t whisper. I have been noticing of late how you whisper. It has become most annoying, girl.”

“Yes, Mama.” I tried to ignore her sharp tone. The fortune-teller’s stinging rebuke had wounded her into another nasty mood.

“What?” Mama asked.

I spoke up, “We’re coming to The Road, Mama.” I wiped my eyes. “The Road.”

As we waited for a carriage to pass, it stopped. The door opened. A man, sitting quite high and dry, called out, “Mrs Holt would you like a ride home?”

Mama lit up with a smile. Pulling back her hood, she nodded. “Oh, indeed Mr O’Leary; how very kind of you to offer.”

He was never a polite gentleman and made no motion of helping either Mama or me up into the carriage. Rain pelted down upon us as I boosted Mama into the carriage. She tried

hard to keep from splashing him, but with little success. I heard his impatient sigh.

When I attempted the first step, mud sucked the shoe from my foot. In my haste to retrieve it, I accidentally dropped the bird. Mama grabbed my hand and yanked me up into the carriage.

Mr O'Leary reached over to close the door. "Drive on," he shouted.

"Wait, wait!" I cried, "My bird."

Mama covered my mouth with her soaked glove. "Pay her no mind, Mr O'Leary, the simple girl found a nasty bird with a broken wing and ..."

As we lurched forward, I pushed past Mr O'Leary and scrambled out the door landing ankle deep in mud. "I'll walk home, Mama."

Rain pelted my woollen shawl. I heard the nasty whip-crack from the coachman as he cursed and whistled at the poor bedraggled horses, "Hup, hup."

Mud from the carriage wheels splattered my face. They left me in the middle of the road, but I couldn't leave my defenceless little bird behind. Being careful where I stepped, I searched the rutted brown ooze. Though I found my shoe, I never found the bird. I fancied she somehow hopped to safety. Perhaps her wing wasn't broken at all, and she had nestled beneath a bush being quiet and still, watching me. A chill swept over me as I felt the rain now soaking me to my skin. How fortunate for the bird, I thought—feathers never soak.

* * *

I took the long pathway home and stopped to pet Mrs Braithwaite's cow and her liver-coloured bitch, Pan. I then hurried along, convinced that Mr O'Leary would surely be gone by now. When I pushed through the turnstile behind our cottage, to my dismay, I spied his carriage. I had always detested him with his swaggering about our village of Holybourne, looking this way and that way, stopping now and again to voice his exalted opinion over things of little consequence.

I entered through the kitchen, quiet as a mouse. I removed my muddy shoes and drippy stockings and then tiptoed my way to Papa's room. It was a place forbidden to visit unless Mama was with me. I knew I could hide there until Mr O'Leary left, but when I opened the door, there he sat with Mama. Her

face was red and her lip rouge smudged. She fumbled with her glass; an empty bottle sat next to a full one.

“There you are, my sweet. Why, I was just telling Mr O’Leary that if you didn’t soon find home, I was going searching for you.” Pushing back her wet, matted hair, she nodded with uncharacteristic sincerity. Her eyes could barely focus.

Mr O’Leary stood. “Indeed, Anne. Indeed, we were both going a searching.”

“I could never get lost on the pathway from Madame Pinchot’s. It is but a little distance.” Thinking Mama would scold me for being late, I added, “I stopped to ... to pet a cow, and then a dog, and then I took a sip from the sacred stream.”

Mr O’Leary drew back. His flabby pink chin hung well over his yellow stained cravat. “Well, well, the sacred stream. Hmm, such a heart you must have.” He leaned toward me. “And you have such a way with words for a little girl. You impress me, child.”

“Sir,” I corrected, “I am not a child. I have a way with words because I read very much.”

His brows raised; his lips formed a smile. “So you do, Anne. So you do.” Patting the chair next to him, he invited, “Come now and sit with me, won’t you, young lady?”

I obeyed, not because I wanted to, but because there was nowhere else to sit. He knew I detested him, though he continued to smile at me a great deal. I noticed his obvious interest in Papa’s books, the wonderful leather-bound volumes stacked from floor to ceiling—the ones I wasn’t allowed to touch, but often did.

My mother followed his gaze. “Mr O’Leary, this is my late husband’s library. Oh, a few are mine.” She flushed. “And with such books about us ...”

“Indeed they are, sir.” I interrupted. “Mama was born in France, she was raised in France and became a beautiful governess. My Papa was a great man and lived in a great chateau in London.” I nodded at Mama. “This room is where Mama had me write to Her Majesty to commiserate with the loss of her prince.” I gestured toward Papa’s desk. “And there is where Mama taught me to read a very long time ago and insisted that I learn to speak as the refined ladies do in the books, for no gentleman of importance and wealth would look my way if I spoke like a washer-woman with an ignorant tongue.”

O'Leary clapped as he giggled. "Indeed not." Now leaning toward me, his face a deep pink, he ran his hairy fingers down my arm. "Dear me, Anne, you are shivering—you must change into something warm before you catch cold." He reached to help me remove my shawl. His touch sent chills up my spine. His breath smelled hot, his teeth yellow and crooked. I jumped up and ran to the door. "Mama, I shall change."

Sipping her gin, she ignored me and turned back to Mr O'Leary.

* * *

When I awoke the following morning, I recalled Madame Pinchot saying that I would marry into wealth, but would I ever be as happy as Mama and Papa once were?

"Anne," Mama called, her voice was hoarse and insistent.

I tossed off my covers, hurried to dress, and then hopped down the squeaky wooden staircase like a rabbit. I first stopped to look into Papa's room to make sure everything was in its place. I hated Mr O'Leary being in his room.

"Anne!"

"Here I am, Mama." The scent of Papa's books still hovered about me.

She sniffed the air, but apparently found nothing to light her eyes.

"Mr O'Leary is coming today. Tidy up now, tidy up."

"Mr O'Leary, Mama?" I shuddered, "but he was here just yesterday."

She eyed me with contempt. "He has promised to bring *you* a fine roast for supper."

Mama smiled toward the ceiling. Her eyes sparkled. "Mr O'Leary was very taken with you, Anne. You behaved quite proper last night." She gave me her most cherished handkerchief. "You may keep it, Anne."

"But Mama—"

"You shall receive many more presents, Love." She poured gin into her hot tea and sipped it. Her voice was now smoother. "Mr O'Leary hinted that you would one day grow into a beautiful lady."

Holding the lacy handkerchief with great apprehension, I thought of Madame Pinchot's prophesies regarding my face. I could feel my stomach lurch. "I don't want to grow beautiful just to please Mr O'Leary, Mama."

Her black eyes flashed in anger. "Anne, your Papa's purse is running low. Now, you must show the gentleman O'Leary what a good girl you are. Smile pretty for him." She took my chin roughly and moved my head this way and that. "There's a girl. Show your teeth for he has promised to take us to the fair."

* * *

Later that afternoon, as we walked about the great Fair with Mr O'Leary, Mama placed me in the middle. I wondered why she would punish me so. Long black hairs curled on the back of his swollen red knuckles; his fingernails were filthy. He would often pick his nose and then admire my 'sweet profile' by running his finger down my forehead, over my nose, across my lips. I grew to hate his hot foul breath when he would whisper the silliest secrets in my ear.

Though Mama walked with her head held high about the Fair's standing pens, jugglers, and food tents, tasting this and that, she was met with sneers. It was only when the bull-necked pawnbroker, Mr O'Leary, flashed his money about, that they stopped jeering.

Mama whispered, "You see Anne, how much respect he brings to our lives?"

His money does, I thought. We walked about, stopping once to poke our heads into a few tents, but then the rains came, and we boarded Mr O'Leary's carriage and returned home. Our splendid meal of roast beef was cooked to perfection. Indeed, I wondered if I would be roasted to perfection as well.

* * *

During breakfast the next morning, Mama poured gin into her coffee and cut into the leftover meat. "Mmm, my love, savour the taste. It's been a long time since we've eaten such a meal."

"Indeed, Mama, the roast was cooked to a turn."

"This morning we are to visit the brewery. You must wash your face, scrub your hands, and brush your hair to a sheen."

"But Mama, what about our work at the inn?"

"No, we will never be going back there again."

“Won’t be going back there?” I frowned, “but, Mama, how will we buy our food?”

“Anne, you must do as you are told.”

I pushed away from the table and ran to my room to put on my only frock. Such as it was, for most of my things were now coming from the vicar’s wife. I had outgrown everything else. Indeed the money Aunt Alice sent was running thin.

Bounding back down the stairs, I found Mama dozing in her rocking chair by the fire. *What business could we have at the brewery? Why was Mama now not going to work?* Rubbing her shoulder, I woke her with a whisper, “You look pretty, Mama.”

Standing up, she set her cup on the mantle and rubbed her arms. “Fetch me my shawl, my warmest shawl.”

“Yes, Mama.” I found it hanging behind the door on a peg, her bonnet alongside. Bringing them to my nose, I took in the scent of her hair. It was a warm, familiar scent, not flowery clean and weatherly like outside, but rather old hearth fire and dust. I handed Mama her bonnet and shawl.

“We are going to the brewery, Mr O’Leary’s office, Anne. He will handle Papa’s affairs from now on.”

A deep sickening thought worked its way from my heart and inched up into my throat. I recollected the scheme in Mr O’Leary’s eye last night as he perused Papa’s handsome leather-bound books. Leather-bound black words lying face-to-face, touching on warm yellow paper, words combined to share truths. Perhaps those truths were the same for Queen Victoria, born in starry sparkles of wealthy heavens, as for those who lived in much worse circumstances.

I didn’t want to cross Mama early on, but the disobedient words leapt from my tongue all the same, “Oh, I pray you aren’t selling Papa’s books, Mama.” After the plea, I froze. *Had I planted a seed?*

“Nothing of that sort, Anne.” She fussed with her bonnet. “Mr O’Leary will be handling your father’s financial affairs.”

“But I thought we didn’t have any financial affairs, Mama.”

“Mr O’Leary is quite adept at turning nothing into something, Anne.”

“Will he handle Aunt Alice’s Christmas money, Mama?”

She glared at me, her palsied hands shaking as she fluffed the bow beneath her sagging, yellowish toned chin. “Fortunate for us, Miss Chatter-Box, the kind Mr O’Leary has consented to

handle those matters that I find most annoying. Your Aunt Alice's Christmas money doesn't annoy me. But regarding others—he will know how to deal with those sorts.”

I was sure Mr O'Leary did know how to handle *those* sorts of people. His voice sounded smooth and narrow; his tongue sharp and pointed, and with such hairy hands, who would dare refuse him? He was the most powerful man for miles around. I was quite sure even Madame Pinchot would be nervous around him.

Now approaching the centre of the village, Mama took my hand. “Walk straight past the draper's shop, Anne. Don't glance in. We will not be stopping there today.”

“Very well, Mama.” I knew she was too ashamed to enter the shop. We owed them money too, but just as we were to pass his door, Mr Buffle hurried out.

Stepping in front of Mama, he nodded. “Good day, Mrs Holt. I saw you and little Anne crossing The Road yesterday. Hmm, pennies for Madame Pinchot, but nothing for me?”

Through Mama's yellow-grey pallor, her face splotched crimson. “In the future, Mr Buffle, Mr O'Leary will be handling our affairs. He'll soon pay our debt.”

“Indeed.” He backed away with a sneer. “So, you're now rich enough to have Mr O'Leary handle your affairs? Well, well, then. I shall look forward to his visit.”

I could feel his gaze on us as we proceeded up the wooden walk.

“Impertinent man,” huffed Mama. “Imagine accosting a widow and her daughter on the street in such a manner. Is there no shame, Anne?” She coughed violently into her handkerchief.

“Indeed, Mama.” I patted her back. “Mistress Shrieve, the baker's wife, commented just yesterday as she handed me our bread saying that I had better bring money next visit, or she would soon put me to work.”

Mama gripped my hand. “Such a nerve, Anne.”

“But Mrs Pennyworth, who stood alongside, drew back, saying, ‘Mrs Shrieve, where is your Godliness? You must never refuse beggar children bread.’”

“A beggar child?” Mama stopped. Her voice grew hoarse again. “She called you a beggar child?”

“Yes, Mama, and Mr Pennyworth gave me a slice of cheese, fresh from his wrapper.”

"Well, well, Anne, on our way to the brewery this morning, you must curtsy as I showed you. Bow and nod, you'll soon learn to recognise those worth noting."

"Who might they be, Mama?"

"I will tell you, Anne." Adjusting her shawl, Mama lifted her chin quite high. "Indeed, tomorrow Holybourne's beggar child will be debtless. They'll then see who begs for bread." Mama stopped for a moment to catch her breath. After she dabbed her lips, we moved on. A group of ladies from the church approached. Mama nodded, but they ignored her.

"Why do they not speak to you, Mama?"

"I suppose they are heathens, Anne."

"But, Mama," I pulled my hand from hers, shocked at her appraisal. "Mrs Braithwaite is the vicar's wife."

"Going to church doesn't make one a saint, Anne. The sooner you find that out, the better your thinking."

I turned and watched the ladies scurrying up the path hovering and whispering. Glancing down at my ill-fitting frock, I pulled my shawl tighter about my neck. "But Mama, Mrs Braithwaite is the lady who gave me this frock."

"With mends, stains, and no buttons, but of course she would, my little rag and bone girl. Her Christian duty conscience nicely sorted out. I assure you, Anne, I will never wear a stitch from her or hers."

"Indeed, Mama."

* * *

I sat alone in Mr O'Leary's waiting room for what seemed an hour and wiggled one of my baby teeth loose from its socket.

Mr O'Leary's door opened.

"There now, miss," he glanced at me with a smile. "Come in, come in. What a pretty shawl you are wearing."

"Thank you, sir." I glanced at Mama feeling my tooth settle back in its gummy little socket.

"Well, well," he said, "come right over here to my desk, little miss. I have something I wish to show you." He pushed a few papers in front of me. "Do you know how to sign your name, little girl?"

I frowned. *Little girl? Did I know how to sign my name? Of course I did. I fancied my hand just as delicate as Queen Victoria's.* With indignation, I huffed, "Indeed I do, sir."

Tapping his pen to the bottom of the paper in front of me, he smiled. "Then let me see for myself such an exquisite hand as your mother has been bragging about."

Mama came to my side, gushing. "There's my girl. Sign your name, Anne. Sign it in your best, loveliest scroll."

I signed where she pointed.

"There now." She exhaled heavily and signed her name next to mine. "Your father's financial affairs are quite out of my power." She fanned her face with her handkerchief. "Oui, oui, it is over."

Smiling, Mama offered up her hand to Mr O'Leary and took my arm. "We must go now, sir, until tomorrow, then."

Stepping out into the cold noon air, I squinted up into Mama's face. She was humming. "You are now happy, Mama?"

"Oh, yes, Anne. My worries are over." She tweaked my nose. "As long as I live, I shall never have to worry over money for bread or cheese or"

"Or gin, Mama."

"Speak up, Anne. You know how I hate it when you whisper." Smiling, Mama inhaled a deep breath and moved on toward home. And all the while, she did not find one person to whom I was to curtsy.

* * *

The very next day, Mama made me stand out in the cold and wait for Mr O'Leary's carriage. I was to alert her of his coming so she could better prepare herself. 'To look more presentable.' I knew the truth of the matter, she needed time to hide her bottle and then I was to run up the lane full of smiles and welcomes for the man. Oh, dread the moment. "But Mama, I assure you, I know when Mr O'Leary is coming, I do not need to stand and wait for him."

"Never mind, Anne, do as I say."

Indeed, Mr O'Leary's coachman seemed to delight in snapping the whip, cracking it just above the horses' ears, shouting and cursing so. I felt sorry for the poor creatures as their ears were twitching for the mean sharp snap of pain that seemed forever just a wrist flick away.

A rickety old cart followed directly behind Mr O'Leary's carriage. Miss Tilly Marvel, the Braithwaite's dairymaid, sat in it, crumpled up fat and tight. A sharp-boned cow was loosely