

Opening extract from

Flambards

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CHAPTER ONE

A Hunting Accident

The fox was running easily. He came up the hill through the short wet grass, dropped into a ditch and ran up through the flowing water. The ditch was deep, overgrown with hawthorn, and overhung with enormous elms whose last yellow leaves were gleaming against the sky: a wet, November sky, heavy over the hill and over the brimming, water-streaked valley below.

A man hedging saw the fox break cover a hundred yards along and streak away over the adjoining pasture. For a moment it was silhouetted on the crest of the hill, a big dog-fox that had played the game before. The man hedging sniffed, and rested his billhook. In his leather jacket and muddy breeches he was invisible in the shadow of the hedge. He would watch and say nothing. They'll get no help from me, he was thinking. Or as much as I get from them, which is the same thing. See all, say nowt. The thought gave him a nice satisfaction, to break the monotony of hedging from dawn till dark.

Hounds were not long appearing. They poured through the hedge in the lower pasture and came up the hill all in a bunch, making a noise which stirred the stomach of the hedging man, for all his sour thoughts. Even the huntsman was not up with them, and the field was strung out across half a mile of grazing below. The pack of hounds tumbled and scrambled into the hawthorn and broke up momentarily, some bursting out into the far field, some casting along the hawthorn roots. Swirling, yelping, the smooth wave checked, like water dividing

amongst rocks; then an excited tongue from down the ditch drew it together again. The lost, bounding novices wheeled to follow, launching themselves frantically back into the muddy ditch: a splashing, a cracking of branches, a shower of dying leaves like gold pennies and hounds were away, tumbling out into the open with the scent high in their nostrils.

As their clamour died away, the hedging man was conscious of the respite, hearing them go, waiting for what he knew was coming. He shrank back, brown against the brown elm trunks. The air stank of rotting leaves, the musk of the fox. He had seen it all before, the hedger, and knew how his own common sense became over-ruled. Already the thud of hoofs was in his boot-soles. He braced himself, his knuckles tight on the billhook, and watched the spots of red burst out of the trees below. Check, wheel: he could see the score marks of iron-shod hoofs in the wet grass, then the pounding in the hill-side like its own heart beating and the first breast of a big bay horse in his vision, its breath roaring, the huntsman shouting his encouragement as he viewed hounds on the far slope. The man was glancing round for a way through. There was a gate at the far end, but a wasting of precious ground to go through it; the hedger knew the man would jump, and there was only one possibility: a slight gap in the hawthorn and the ditch deep and ugly below, the approach uphill.

The huntsman went through, holding his arm up as the bare twigs thrust at him. The phalanx of riders behind, pounding up the hill, snarled up, separating, some making for the gate, some for the gap, and cursing anyone in their way. The ground shook to the uphill gallop of lathered, shining horses, foam on their bits, eyes frenzied

with excitement. Only the thrusters made for the gap: there was a shouting of advice, some doubt, and a horse pulled up in a great flurry of mud for a sudden failing of courage on the part of his rider. The horse behind was crossed and its rider swore. He was just a boy, but his swearing, and the fury in his eyes, were those of a man. He gave his baulked horse a crack with his whip and went for the gap at an angle, when any sane man would have gone back for a fresh approach. The horse made a desperate leap and in mid-air its rider was twisting round, shouting behind him: 'Come on, Will! It's all right!' There were only three horses to follow, most of the field having opted for the gate, and of these the leader was a grey, whose rider was also a boy, even younger than the one in front. The grey, its nostrils red with blood, its eyes wild with excitement, pounded towards the gap and the tail of its stable-mate, and the boy on top hadn't the strength to change its course. That he wanted to was evident. Unlike the boy in front, his face was closed with fear. Sweat and mud streaked a greenish pallor. His dark eyes, seeing the hedge loom, flared with terror. He flung himself forward, his fingers twisting in the horse's mane, reins flying, but the horse jumped even bigger than the boy was expecting. His seat, the grip of his thin legs, were not enough to hold the boldness of the big, peppered grey gelding; the twigs whipped the boy's face and he fell backwards and sideways through the cracking branches and heavily into the bottom of the ditch. The grey scarcely felt its loss, landed in a smother of flying mud, and galloped on.

''Ware young Will!'

The man behind dragged at his horse and pulled it from the lip of the ditch to a scorching halt. The other rider also pulled up cursing, and the brown hedger slipped

out of the cover of the elms and was first in the ditch beside the boy, while the other men were still tangled up with their wheeling horses.

'Is he bad?'

The men were hoping they could ride on, but the hedger said, 'Yes, sir. He's bad all right.'

'Ah, damn the brat!' one of the men muttered under his breath. Then, resignedly, 'I'll ride down to the Hall, Tom. Tell 'em what's happened. You'll stay with him, eh?'

'Yes, I'll stay.'

A few tail-enders cantered up to see what was amiss, and between them they dragged the boy out of the ditch and on to the grass. He was barely conscious, but screamed when he was moved, and the men shook their heads.

'That's bad, eh?'

'Who is it?'

'Young Russell, from Flambards.'

'Oh, aye, young William. My God, what'll the old man say about it?'

'He'd worry more if it were Mark.'

'This were Mark's fault, I'd say,' remarked the man who had seen the fall. 'Will was following his brother. Mark went through, like the madcap he is, and shouted Will to follow. Never thought to tell him the gate. Shrimp like Will, to try a place like that!'

'Couldn't stop, I reckon. No more strength than a girl. Not like young Mark.'

'That Mark! He's a real chip off the old block. Old Russell all over again.'

'He never thought to come back, didn't Mark . . .'

Somebody rode off to fetch a sheep-hurdle, and the

others stood round dutifully, having done—by their lights—their best for the boy: laid him in the grass, straightened out his broken limbs and loosened his stock. He was a thin, fine-featured boy, small for his thirteen years. His long fingers were still clenched with trying to steady the big grey, the palms of his hands raw. The horses stood, steaming, snatching at their bits, circling impatiently with a creak of saddle-leather and squelch of hoofs. The hounds had long gone and the rooks were coming back to the elms, circling and croaking.

The sheep-hurdle was fetched and William Russell was laid on it and carried off, lurching, down the hill by four of the hunting men. Two of them led their own horses, and the hedger followed with the two others, thinking, This'll be sixpenceworth, for sure, a shilling with luck. Well done, young Will, you chose your spot nicely.

Five miles away hounds lost the scent in a field of sheep. Mark Russell pulled up and looked behind him for the first time since the jump out of the Hall meadows, and was surprised to see Woodpigeon, William's grey, coming loose, reins and stirrups flying. He rode his own horse off to head him, shouting at him in his rough, imperious voice:

'You old fool horse! Woodpigeon, steady on!' The big grey pulled up and Mark caught his reins, glancing him over for damage.

'And what have you done with that nincompoop Will? Killed him, you old fool horse?'

Christina Parsons sat upright in the pony-trap, watching the sodden autumn fields trot past, hoping it would not rain before they reached Flambards, and spoil her new

hat. The groom who sat beside her had apologized for the trap, explaining that the carriage had had to go out unexpectedly, and if he had waited for it to come back he would have missed meeting her train. Since the explanation he had, respectfully, ventured no more. Christina, not quite sure if a lady travelling alone spoke to grooms, decided not to risk it and stared at the countryside in silence. She looked very self-possessed, perhaps more so than she felt, for in her twelve years she had come to the conclusion that it was rash to show one's feelings too quickly; life had already dealt her some cruel surprises, and the present surprise had yet to reveal its nature, cruel or otherwise.

'Uncle Russell wants you to go and live at Flambards,' Aunt Grace had said, in some astonishment, over the breakfast table. 'Well!' And then, 'Well!' again, this time with a hint of indignation.

Christina had heard of Flambards, and Uncle Russell, but had not seen or met either. Nor terribly wanted to, from what she had heard.

'*Live* with him? What's wrong with things the way they are?'

She had been beginning to get used to Aunt Grace, after a year. She was a lot better than Aunt Mildred, the one before, and second-cousin Jessica before that. As an orphan since the age of five, Christina had become used to being shuttled round between the various female relatives in the suburbs of London. But Uncle Russell at Flambards, forty miles out in the country . . . this was a new departure altogether. Uncle Russell had never so much as enquired after her before.

'Why does he bother now?' as Aunt Grace quickly put it, her voice full of suspicion.

'He's after the money,' Christina said, having heard it so often before. She knew, not because anyone had ever told her so but because she had become adept at listening to grown-up conversations when everyone thought she was concentrating on her sewing or her reading, that her parents had left her a lot of money. When she was twenty-one, she would be rich. It was a comfortable thought, but remote, and nothing to do with her present situation. But the adults talked about it a lot. Christina was vague about her relations, but when she thought hard about it she remembered that Uncle Russell was her dead mother's half-brother. Her mother had married a rich young man called Julian Parsons, and they had died together when a packet-boat had foundered in the English Channel six years ago. Uncle Russell, Christina remembered hearing, had said, 'Serve 'em right for being so damned rich.'

'I thought Uncle Russell *was* rich, though?' Christina said, wanting to get things straight.

'*Was* rich, dear. Emphasize the was. Yes.' Aunt Grace was stirring her tea absently. Aunt Grace, once a Russell, now the widow of a bank-clerk, made a fair living for herself as a dressmaker. She did not mind having Christina to live with her, but found her an embarrassment at times, as she lived in hopes of even yet attracting another husband.

'What happened to Uncle Russell's money, then?' Christina asked.

'Flambards took it, and the life he lived, like his father before him. All this hunting: the horses he bought, and the hounds! All he thought about. Still does, I believe, in spite of his accident. He gave up the hounds, but the stables are still full of horses, from what I hear. And only

the two boys to ride them. Uncle Russell can scarcely get out of his chair these days.'

Christina did not think the prospect very attractive. Her life so far had been spent entirely with the female sex, and Flambards seemed to be exclusively male. And she had no great love of horses.

'Who looks after the house, then?'

'Since Isabel died—your Uncle Russell's wife—there's nobody save the servants. And the Lord only knows, Russell's so difficult, he's got them all in tears and giving in their notice before the first week's out.' Aunt Grace checked herself, realizing she was not giving Christina much encouragement. 'But there, you'll have two young cousins to play with. It's time you saw somebody your own age.'

Christina wished they were girls. But she did not argue; she was used to being moved about, following an exchange of letters, or a family discussion. It never occurred to anybody that she should ever be consulted as to what was best for her. It never occurred to Christina, either, that she should. Being told so little, she had learned to use her wits to find out more of what she wanted to know. She was not above a little eavesdropping, or peeking at letters, when her future was in doubt, and the most interesting snippet of information concerning Uncle Russell's sudden interest in her came to her in this way. Aunt Grace had had to answer the door in the middle of writing a letter, and Christina, pretending (even to herself) that she wanted to adjust the gas, got up from her sewing and crossed over to the hissing bracket over Aunt Grace's bureau. The wet ink gleamed on the paper: '. . . shall miss her. Of course, the next thing we shall hear, if I know my dear half-brother, is that she will be married to Mark,

and Flambards will be back on its feet again for another few years. I am sure that is what lies behind it. How else, save through an advantageous marriage, will the poor place be propped up much longer? Russell is—'

Christina's eyes opened very wide. She leapt back to her sewing and went on with her hemming rather recklessly, making stitches that Aunt Grace was later to rip out, with much tut-tutting.

Christina had never been in the country much before—not country where there was no comforting acreage of stucco and cobbles within easy walking distance. She was used to riding behind the bus-horses, or in a hansom, but not in an open trap, and was amazed at the miles of fields and woods they passed through, with no houses in sight. Under the grey sky she thought it a rather depressing sight, the dark lacework of the naked elms making a stark pattern over her head, the yellow verges splashed with mud and the ditches swollen. The road was narrow and rough, and they met only two other carts, and two riders in scarlet jackets to whom the groom beside Christina touched his cap. The men were covered in mud and their horses in sweat. Christina knew that they had been hunting and, seeing them, she was very conscious of her new life starting. It came to her coldly and suddenly: that this was real. The first cold drops of rain stung her face; the afternoon was already turning dark. The sodden woods stood thick and silent. A great shiver of self-pity shook her, and she had to steel herself not to cry, clasping her hands under the rug the groom had tucked round her. Similar situations in the past had taught her how to cope. With iron self-will she switched her mind to designing herself a new dress, shutting her eyes and summoning a

vision of lavender taffeta, threaded with silver ribbons. Her visions on these occasions were never bounded by the practical considerations Aunt Grace had always brought to bear on making her clothes; she concentrated on extravagance, dining at the Palace, dancing into the small hours all lace and *décolletée*.

'This is Flambards, miss.'

Christina opened her eyes again, and found that the trap was turning left-handed through a pair of gates. A long drive stretched ahead, bounded on the right by a wood and on the other by grazing railed off with an iron fence. At the top of the drive stood the house, but it was so covered with ivy that from a distance Christina could make no guesses as to the architecture that lay beneath. The horse's hoofs spat up gravel. Christina, with signs of civilization in sight, felt optimistic and nervous all together, but no longer like crying.

The house, on closer examination, was a mid-Victorian pile with large bay windows. The drive ran up to the front door. To the right a rambling garden spilled on to the gravel edge, a garden of overgrown roses—some still flowering, balled with wet like tight pink cabbages—and long grass, with a fine cedar-tree set in the middle of what had once been the lawn. On the left the drive passed the house and curved away behind it towards a tangle of walls and tiled roofs beyond, which Christina supposed was the stables. Some big chestnut-trees, now gaunt frames of black, down-spreading branches, lined the drive as it curved away; great heaps of rotted leaves lay tumbled below, with burst conkers spat out over the gravel, the shells shrivelled like little brown oranges. The groom stopped the horse in front of the door, and helped Christina down from the trap. Nobody seemed to be waiting for her.

'I'll carry your trunk into the hall, miss. Go in. The door will be open.'

'Thank you.'

Christina crossed into the porch, which was full of muddy boots, and nervously pushed open the door. She found herself in a big cold hall, with an old foxhound pushing at her skirts. A thin, worn-looking woman, obviously a servant, was coming through a doorway on one side to greet her, and in a doorway on the other side a man on crutches appeared with a bound that gave Christina a start.

'Is it William?' he said. Seeing Christina, he added, 'Oh, no. It's you.'

'It's Miss Christina, sir,' said the woman.

'Yes, well—see to her,' the man said shortly; very rudely, Christina thought, lifting her chin.

She looked at him curiously, having heard so much of Uncle Russell, and found him not unlike she had imagined: a big, but shrunken-looking man, with heavy shoulders over-developed by the crutches, and spindly, trailing legs. He had a craggy red face ('Drink,' Christina said to herself knowingly), a flattened broken nose and very fierce eyes. She thought immediately, I shall keep out of his way, feeling that, with those legs, he would be easily eluded. She said politely, 'How do you do, Uncle,' but he took no notice.

'Tell me when William comes,' Russell said to the woman, but the groom, coming in with Christina's trunk, said, 'The carriage is coming up the drive now, sir, and Dr Porter's right behind.'

Through the open door the scrunch of several lots of hoofs could be heard on the gravel. The woman said quickly to Christina, 'I'll see to you in a minute, miss.

Everything's happening at once. Master William's had an accident.'

Christina shrank back out of the way as everyone went to the door. She was not at all sorry to have her arrival overshadowed in this way, being used to taking a place in the background of every house she could remember. In a strange way, it made her feel at home. The fact that Master William had had an accident did not come as a surprise either, after Aunt Grace's descriptions of the hazards of the hunting field. She felt no compassion, only a morbid curiosity to see what had happened to him. She hoped there were no bones sticking out. At least it isn't Mark, she thought, for she was very interested in finding out what Mark looked like.

William was carried into the hall on the sheep-hurdle. Christina, peering, saw a pathetic bundle of mud-stained hunting clothes and a white, upturned face, scratched with blood. To her surprise, she was instantly moved with pity. He looked so small and crushed, and so frail; she had pictured a strapping youth bravely biting his lips and smiling through his pain, but not this utterly vanquished child whose face showed only fear and bewilderment.

Uncle Russell swung across to look at him as the men paused at the foot of the stairs. He looked angry and stared at William with what Christina thought was contempt (or was it merely his natural expression?). He said nothing to him but barked at the doctor, 'Well?'

'Smashed patella, certainly. Femur possibly. I'll tell you more when I've examined him.'

'Horse all right?' Russell said to the groom.

'As far as we know, sir. He didn't stop.'

'Woodpigeon wouldn't,' Russell said. It seemed to give him satisfaction. 'All right. Take him up. That'll finish

his hunting for the season. Someone gone to fetch Woodpigeon?'

'Yes, sir. Dick's gone.'

'Good.'

The awkward burden was manhandled up the stairs, and the thin-faced servant followed it. She turned and said to Christina, 'Come along. I'll show you your room. But then I'll have to wait on the doctor. We've no more help here.'

Christina hurried after her. 'Perhaps, if you like, there's something I could do.'

'It's no task for a girl,' the woman said. 'But I might be glad of your help afterwards. Later on.' She turned and looked at Christina, taking her in more closely than before. Then, Christina had been another body to clear up after, and feed; now, with the girl's remark, the woman saw that she might be more use than trouble.

'You must understand, dear, we're very rough in this house.' She spoke softly and quickly, as if to an ally. 'There's only me and Violet to do it all; I do my best, but I'm only one person. Violet lives out. When something like this happens, his lordship down there—' she jerked her head downstairs to the door where Russell had disappeared—'expects us all to get on as usual. He won't get a nurse. Of course, if it was a horse, that would be different . . .'

'Mary!' It was the doctor bawling from the landing.

'Coming, sir!'

The woman pointed on down the corridor. 'That's your room. Last door on the left.'

They stood on one side to let the men who had carried the hurdle go back down the stairs, then Mary scurried into the room where the doctor was waiting, and the door

closed behind her. Christina looked at the door, and gave a small sigh of sympathy for the boy, her cousin. Like her, he was obviously not used to being mothered. There were times, Christina knew, when it would be very nice to feel loved and wanted and pampered, and she felt that this was one of the times, for William. But he must be used to it, she thought, remembering Russell's contemptuous face. Like me. She felt a pang for William, and a faint, exciting optimism: he might turn out to be a good friend. She had not been expecting too much of her cousins up to now, as far as making friends was concerned. She was expecting to be snubbed and humiliated, in the way that most girls seemed to be treated by boys, in her experience. But William, for some weeks at least, would be in no position to humiliate her. Poor William, Christina thought, genuinely moved by his plight. She had no idea what either a patella or a femur was, but knew that anything broken was exceedingly painful.

In being sorry for William, she had no time for being sorry for herself. True, her welcome had hardly been warm, but the servant—housekeeper, she must be, Christina thought—showed signs of being an ally. Uncle Russell was no more nor less than she had been led to believe. Mark had yet to be revealed. Christina walked down the corridor and opened the door of the last room on the left, and immediately marked up another notch on the credit side of her new home: the room was charming, much bigger and prettier than any she had ever been given before.

On closer inspection, it was shabby. The wallpaper, a close design of pink and brown flowers, like old-fashioned muslin, was faded, the washstand china was chipped, and the patchwork quilt was all coming apart, but the

general effect was pretty and homely, with a big window looking out over the garden, and the ivy trailers creeping round the panes. There was plenty of furniture, a big wardrobe, a dressing-table and a chest besides the brass bed and marble-topped washstand, and a carpet on the floor which, after Aunt Grace's cold lino, Christina looked at with great satisfaction. Her trunk stood at the foot of the bed. She opened it and started to put her things away, leaving out her navy-blue serge as a suitable dress to change into for dinner. Christina was used to taking care of herself.

At twelve, Christina was a slightly plump girl, with the beginnings of a bust (which she rather resented), a fine creamy skin and an upright carriage forced on her by the naggings of her female relatives. Her expression was guarded, her features more accustomed to showing obedience than animation. But her dark blue eyes were honest, her mouth composed, and she had a head of thick brown hair which Aunt Grace had once said was a gift straight from heaven. It fell down to her waist, curling just enough to spare Christina the arduous task of putting in curl-papers, but not enough to be too painful to comb. She combed it now, standing before the window, and wondered what she should do when she was finished. She did not fancy going down to Uncle Russell. She took as long as she could about washing and changing, and became painfully aware that she was very hungry indeed. No sounds came from the room across the corridor, and Mary was nowhere to be seen.

She might be there all night, Christina thought. And I can't sit here that long.

She had no alternative but to go downstairs. 'I'll go and find myself some tea,' she decided.

With a watchful eye below on what she thought of as Uncle Russell's lair, Christina descended the stairs. The stair carpet was threadbare, she noticed, and the foxhound had been joined by a second, grizzled with age. They sat by the front door and slowly thumped their tails at the sight of her.

'Not tails,' Christina remembered, 'but sterns. Like boats.' Aunt Grace had always corrected her, with a small sigh of pain, even after all these years of not hunting any more. 'Hounds wave their sterns, dear, not wag their tails.' Christina had always been more interested in trying to picture Aunt Grace on a horse. She skirted the hounds cautiously, never having cared much for dogs—especially smelly ones.

She crossed to the door which Mary had come out of earlier—assuming it led to the kitchen—but became aware at the same time of hoofs once more scrunching on the gravel outside the door. The foxhounds got up, their old eyes brightening; Christina heard voices outside, and felt a hot flush of panic spread through her. She slipped through the door, shut it quickly behind her, and stood in blessed solitude in a dim, flagged passage. Having acted on impulse, she realized at once that she had behaved in an unladylike fashion. She should have waited to meet whoever it was, instead of skulking round the backstairs like a burglar. But now it was too late—and she was glad.

'Mary!' The newcomer's voice was that of a boy's, recently broken. Mark, Christina guessed. Eavesdropping, she heard the thud of Uncle Russell's crutches across the hall.

'Oh, there you are. Mary's busy with William. God knows when we'll get any dinner. Had a good day?'

'Yes! Found in Brick Kilns and killed in Wood End. Not bad, eh? Then we drew Burley Wood and put up a brace, ran to Chancellor's, and lost him in a drain.'

'How did Treasure go, then? Suit you?'

'He goes all right. Can't stop him, in fact. Jumps as big as Woodpigeon, and faster. Is Will home?'

'Yes. Did you see what happened?'

'No. He was following me all right, next I saw was Woodpigeon all on his own. He didn't fall, so I don't know why Will had to come off.'

'Well, he won't have the chance again for a while. His leg is smashed.'

'Oh. Is Mary up there now?'

'Yes, with Porter.'

'What about dinner, then?'

'Hmm. Violet's gone home. Wait, though, we've got another girl in the house now. Hetty's girl has come—what's her name? She ought to be able to cook. What's her name, d'you remember?'

'Oh, you mean from Aunt Grace? Annabel, or something? Christabel?'

To Christina's horror, Uncle Russell dragged himself to the foot of the stairs and bawled, 'Christabel!'

Christina swallowed nervously. Years of embarrassment in strange houses gave her a stiffening of courage: to be out of place was nothing new, but all the same she felt herself going pink with confusion as she opened the door and emerged behind the two men.

'Did you call me?'

Uncle Russell turned round from the foot of the stairs in surprise. 'Oh, there you are. I thought you were upstairs.' The old man stared at her more closely than at their introduction. Christina met his gaze uncomfortably,

very much aware of Mark out of the corner of her eye but not daring to take her attention from her uncle.

'Look here, you might as well make yourself at home,' Russell was saying. 'You'll have to find your way about sooner or later. Go and see what Mary's got in the pantry, and get some food on the table. Mark, go and show her where the things are. And get a move on. We're all famished.'

Mark crossed the hall and came to the door beside her. He looked rather annoyed. Christina had a good look at him, her curiosity overcoming shyness, but in the dusk she could not see his features clearly. He was tall, black-haired, wearing a scarlet jacket covered with mud; he gave the impression of great vitality, although he was obviously tired. He contrasted strangely with the crippled hulk of his father, whose vitality lived only in the bitter, black eyes. Christina could still feel the black eyes on her after she had retreated through the door and was following Mark down the corridor.

'I'd forgotten you were coming,' Mark was saying quite amiably now. 'Sorry you had to arrive when the place is upside-down. Although it's usually a bit of a mess here,' he added. 'Not like when Mother was around. God, I'm hungry.'

'Yes, so am I,' Christina said feelingly.

They were in the kitchen, looking round with a fellow eagerness for signs of food. The kitchen was large, lit with paraffin lamps, and the big wooden table in the middle was littered with half-prepared vegetables. A smell of burning meat was coming from the range, and Christina picked up a cloth and opened the oven door. A leg of mutton, slightly shrivelled but awash in rich fat, tickled her nose invitingly.

'Well, that's something,' Mark said. 'Heave it out. We can eat it with bread. I'm not waiting for potatoes.'

Apart from giving orders, he did not seem to be intending to help, for he went into a dark scullery and started to wash. Christina, appalled at the task before her and frightened of Uncle Russell's reaction if it was not to his liking, had to take a long, cool look around to stop the panic rising again. Almost as if Aunt Grace stood beside her, she could hear the firm voice: 'Be sensible, child. You are perfectly capable.' Aunt Grace, no doubt, would still know her way around this gloomy kitchen. But Christina felt like crying.

She bit her lip hard. There must be a pantry, she thought desperately, and saw one at once. She picked a lamp off the table and started to investigate. By the time Mark came out of the scullery, she had found bread and butter and a cold apple-pie and put them on the table, together with some plates which were warming in the oven.

'Good,' said Mark.

The lamp cast dark shadows on his face. For a boy, it was already a strong face, the eyes very direct, almost black like his father's. The hunting clothes, white stock and red jacket, suited him to perfection; unfamiliar to Christina, the clothes emphasized the strangeness of this new place. This desperation, born of weariness, uncertainty and hunger, shook her again, and she said, her voice shaking slightly, 'Where do we eat it then? Where shall I lay the table?'

'In the dining-room, of course,' Mark said rather impatiently. He picked up the pie. 'I'll show you.'

The dining-room, Christina discovered, was what she called Uncle Russell's lair. It was a long room, with a fire

burning at one end, where Uncle Russell sat crouched in a leather chair. The walls on either side of the fireplace were lined with books. The dining-table was enormous, a vast shining acreage of mahogany on which Mark set the apple-pie rather incongruously.

'The knives and forks . . .' He nodded towards the sideboard which filled one wall. He then crossed to the fire and stood with his back to it, and started to tell his father about the day's sport.

Christina, with hot cheeks, pulled open the drawers of the sideboard. There was no cloth to be found, so she set the cutlery on the bare table and went back to the kitchen. Several journeys, the last one with the hot, shrivelled meat, saw the strange meal safely transported, and the men came to the table and made no remarks about anything out of place, to Christina's intense relief. Mark got some glasses out of the cupboard, and a bottle of port, which he poured out all round while Russell carved the joint. Christina sat down timidly. The glass before her was brim-full, and the large plate swam with thick cuts of the greasy meat.

'Cut the bread,' Russell said to her.

They all ate, fast and hungrily, in silence. Christina, relieving this trembling emptiness inside her, felt a marvellous release, because no one criticized. No one told her to sit up, wipe her mouth, put her knife and fork properly. Russell and Mark ate with their heads down, mopping plates with hunks of torn bread, and washing the meat down with gulps of port. Christina did not touch her port, until Russell said gruffly, as he refilled his own glass, 'Drink up, girl. Good for the blood.' The table was lit with white candles; after a few sips of the port, Christina felt mellow, almost happy. The tight spring of

fear inside her unwound. How strange it is, she kept thinking. The hunting talk was resumed after the initial hunger was appeased, and it swam round her head: draws and casts and checks and points. She saw how the old man came out of his surliness, and nodded eagerly at Mark's comments, his face for the first time showing a light of pleasure. It was as if he could not hear enough, drawing out Mark's opinions and descriptions. Mark, flushed with wine, started making diagrams with bread-crumbs on the polished table, of a clever move on the fox's part, but he was interrupted in this demonstration by a knock at the door.

'Come in!' Russell bellowed.

The doctor came in, a little apprehensively Christina thought.

'Have a glass of port,' Russell said. 'Get a glass, Mark.'

The doctor sat down with a nod of thanks.

'How is he? All right?' The animation had left Russell's face.

The doctor shrugged. 'It will be a long job, and whether it will heal without leaving its mark, I cannot say.'

'You mean there'll be two lame ducks in the family?'

'I hope not, sir.'

'Hmm.' William's disaster seemed to affect his father more with anger and contempt than sympathy. 'The boy's only himself to blame. The horse jumped clean enough, according to Mark. I bought Woodpigeon off that parson at Knowsley, especially for William. The animal is as sage as they come—bold, I'll say that for him, but clever. And looks after himself. Which is more than you can say for the boy. I don't know where Will gets it from, Porter. There's never been a Russell that rode as badly as William. Why, even the women rode better. His mother would have

thought nothing of a place like that, and my sisters—they took everything as it came. Even this girl here, if she's anything like Hetty—' His bloodshot eyes, full of pain and drink and disappointment, wandered to Christina, and rested on her face.

'Can you ride? Your Aunt Grace teach you?'

'No, sir. I've never ridden.'

'Good God, girl. What an admission! We'll have to remedy that. That mare would suit her, Mark, the strawberry-roan. Sweetbriar. She's gentle. You teach the girl to ride on Sweetbriar.'

Mark made a face. 'Me teach her? Surely Dick could teach her? I'll take her out when she's ready.'

'Yes, all right. She can start with Dick tomorrow. You got anything to wear, child?'

Christina, mute with apprehension, shook her head.

'Stand up!' Russell said. 'Let's look at you. Turn round. Hmm.' He considered, as Christina did as she was told. 'Plenty of flesh there. I reckon Isabel's old habit would fit you. Tell Mary to get it out and do whatever's necessary. Or get a dressmaker to do it. We might have you hunting by Christmas if we're lucky.'

Christina stared at him. The whole room seemed to whirl round her head and come to rest again with an awful, horrid reality. She saw the men with the sheep-hurdle, and William's sweating white face, and those men on the road, all spattered with mud.

'But—'

Russell's gaze stopped her. She knew then that everybody in this house did as he said. Even poor William.