

A CALAMITY OF MANNERINGS

'This book is bliss.' HILARY MCKAY

'So much fun! So clever, with such wonderful characters who I can still feel breathing and squabbling around me. I kept on guffawing with laughter.' NATASHA FARRANT

'I couldn't put it down. Wodehouse is alive and she's beautiful!' EMMA CARROLL

'Flawless. Fabulous. Austen meets Mitfords, Durrells and *Bridgerton*.' RACHEL DELAHAYE



For my union sisters: Carrie, Lucy, Lucy, Celia, Rachel and Eliane – we fought a good fight

A Calamity of Mannerings is a uclanpublishing book

First published in Great Britain in 2023 by
uclanpublishing
University of Central Lancashire
Preston, PR1 2HE, UK

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978-1-915235-09-1

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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Set in 10.5/17pt Kingfisher by Becky Chilcott.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

JOANNA NADIN



A CALAMITY OF MANNERINGS

ILLUSTRATED BY EMMA BLOCK

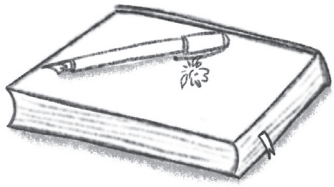
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‘Sisters are a shield against life’s cruel adversity.’ Nancy Mitford
‘But sisters *are* life’s cruel adversity!’ Decca Mitford
The Mitford Girls by Mary S Lovell



JANUARY





FRIDAY 25 JANUARY

11 A.M.

It is a curse to be born a girl.

There, I've said it. If not out loud, then on paper, and in crimson Indian ink. Aster says the shade is tasteless, but I say it is just the thing for chronicling the downfall of us Mannerings, and Marigold agrees. Aster said Marigold *would* agree, being ten, and strange, but I am ignoring her, just as I am ignoring her belittling my very endeavour, which *is* an endeavour because, since Siegfried got in and chewed the electrics, the light in the morning room has been exceedingly dim.

'What on earth is the point, Panther?' she demanded. (Panther is not my real name, but the less said about that for now, the better.)

'So that I may look back in years to come and weep at the sorry state of the nation,' I replied. 'That, in 1924, merely being in possession of a P-E-N-I-S still seems to guarantee one supremacy, regardless of talent or even aptitude.' (I had to spell the p-word out because of Marigold.)

'You're hardly Pepys,' Aster pointed out needlessly, and much we may regret it.'

'Tradition *is* a penis,' said Marigold, making a mockery of my spelling attempts, and everyone's attempts to render her language and behaviour more ladylike, all while barely looking up from one of Daddy's old farming manuals. 'And I bet Pepys was as well.'

Aster made a noise of utter disgust.

For once, I am with Aster and Grandma: it is Daddy's fault Marigold is so uncouth, on account of him allowing her unfettered access to *Gray's Anatomy* and *The Daily Mirror* (Grandma says she doesn't know which is worse). Just as it is Daddy's fault that I am so despondent about the state of the nation and its ludicrous laws, because it was he who pressed the *Hansard* parliamentary debate report on to me after I asked him what on earth he did all day.

But then it is also Daddy's fault we are in this wretched position in the first place. If he hadn't gone and died, then the future of Radley Manor and the Mannering clan wouldn't be in doubt. It's not as if it were even in the Great War, which would at least have had an element of heroism about it. As it is, there

is nothing remotely heroic about getting run over by a dustcart on Whitehall, especially five years into peacetime.

I realise this all makes me seem utterly unfeeling, which I must insist I am not. Not a day goes by in which I don't find myself practically weak with grief. Daddy was the very heart of the house, and, even though he *did* have the essential appendage, he didn't wield it with any authority. He preferred art to archery and gardening to blood sports. He never once shouted at us unless we were in mortal danger (though in Marigold's case this was rather often). Mama said he was a fool for us three girls and would have given his right arm for us, if he could. He certainly went without cigars one Christmas so that Marigold could have sheep feed, Aster a new canvas, and I a pair of pink kid gloves. Which, now I consider it, was rather greedy and conceited of me as I promptly lost one, so have never even worn them. Poor Daddy.

But still, he did get us in this terrible mess.

I suppose I should be grateful that at least he left Mama pregnant, so there is one last-gasp chance of an heir (and any moment now, judging by the sounds upstairs). Otherwise the house, estate and title will all go to Cousin Valentine, much to our great sadness, and Grandma's rather greater anger. It is because Valentine is half-Italian and an actor and both are equally unsavoury in her book – to be avoided like nits or dysentery, as if they might be catching. It is lucky that she doesn't yet realise he is also homosexual, which would be the

very cherry on her cake of menace. She has still not forgiven Daddy for becoming a socialist, which is on a par with treason and murder as far as she is concerned.

'Can't we pretend?' said Marigold then. 'If it's a girl, I mean. We could call it one of those vague names that can be either, like Vyvyan, or Evelyn, and dress it in blue?'

'Won't they want to inspect it?' I suggested, unsure though I was as to who 'they' might be.

'Oh,' said Marigold, deflating like a tired birthday balloon. 'I hadn't thought of that.'

Which only goes to show how ridiculous it is that a bit of skin and whatnot, a mere few inches of flesh, should change one's life so drastically – alter the course of history, even. It's not like it's a magic wand. Not that I've seen one, unless you count Bobby's. But Bobby is a dog, and smelly and ancient, and I'm not sure he's ever really used it for its intended purpose anyway. I suppose Siegfried has one, but with sheep it is hard to tell what's what, with the wool. We all thought he was a ewe for months until Rapsey (the yard man) put us right when he caught Siegfried trying to harass a hay bale.

Though I expect at some point I shall have to face up to one – a penis, I mean – and quite literally. Books don't really prepare you for the anatomical aspect. Only for the romance, with which, I have to say, I am slightly more eager to engage. I have read *The Sheikh* several times now, and am already quite au fait with the savagery of love: the mouth 'bruised by brutal

kisses', the waist 'gripped by manly hands', the cheeks 'scalded by hot tears', all of which is vaguely anatomical, I suppose.

As Margot, my best friend since Hedingham Prep, would say, 'Sigh'. This is because Margot is perpetually in love. Although mostly of the thwarted, doomed or unrequited kind, not least because the men she falls for are invariably poetic, foreign or louche. I wouldn't mind being in love, even thwarted, doomed or unrequited, but so far the closest I have come is the fictional sheikh.

Aster says the novels are nonsense, and merely perpetuate the patriarchy and our thrall to the swarthier sex. But then she would, as she is twenty-three and has still to kiss a single soul, instead spending her entire time disappearing down darkened corridors with Daphne Balfour or playing the cello with an air of contrived melancholy that verges on the terminal. Whereas I may be merely sixteen, but I have at least held hands with a man. Admittedly, it was Freddy Spencer, whom I have known since I was seven, and it was almost certainly accidental, as he grabbed me as I was about to fall off the stile at Badger's Copse, but still, it is something.

I feel sad for Mama that all that sort of thing is in the past for her, being so very old, and widowed to boot. Though she probably hasn't the time, what with us three, another on the way at this very moment, and Grandma in the Dower House to worry about as well. Perhaps that is the way with love, and torrid kisses must be replaced with napkin changes, and

bottles, and colic. (I am referring to babies here, not Grandma, though she once threatened to become incontinent just to spite Mabel, her housemaid, when she allegedly wronged her with an underdone crumpet.) And yet, Mama and Daddy did seem blissfully committed, and visibly kissed at least twice a year: once on their anniversary and once under the mistletoe in the long hall at Yule.

This Christmas was spent in somewhat less celebratory circumstances, with one of Marigold's hens on the table because we couldn't afford a goose, and a bent thimble in the pudding because no one could muster a sixpence. It was all terribly Dickensian. And of course all anyone could think about was the empty chair at one end of the table, and Mama's swelling belly at the other. A belly that is currently so distended as to be barrel-shaped, and yet is stubbornly refusing to relinquish its guest, despite poor Mama being in labour for four hours now.

It is rather like waiting for an omnibus to arrive. Only in this case, the omnibus is penis-shaped, and will dictate the rest of our very existence.

3 P.M.

Our fate is still unsealed, Mama is still sweating and restless, and Doctor Spencer has been sent for to speed things up.

Meanwhile, Aster and Marigold have been finding new and evermore depressing ways to pass the time.

'That howl,' said Marigold, upon hearing an awful mooing noise escape from upstairs, 'is caused by the agony of the cervix opening so that the baby can make its way down the vaginal canal.'

Aster went positively pale, as well she might. On the only previous occasion on which we have caught glimpse of a canal, it was a dubious sort of brown and there was a dead dog floating in it.

'Once the cervix is fully dilated, then she can start to push,' Marigold went on. 'Though that can take hours, days perhaps, and even then forceps—'

'Shall we play a game?' I said quickly, for fear more vivid description might put me off babies for life. Which, while I am not hugely keen on the prospect, is my 'only purpose on earth', according to Grandma.

'Would you rather be dead or pregnant?' said Aster. 'I know which I'd prefer and it doesn't involve being shackled to a wailing baby.'

Even Marigold pulled a face at that.

'How cruel,' I said. 'What if Mama were to perish right now?'

We all went silent then, and prayed for Dr Spencer to hurry up, though he has to come all the way from the other side of the village and the roads are perilous at the best of times, and positive death traps in January.

'Would you rather have one leg or one eye?' I questioned instead.

'One eye, said Marigold. 'I'd wear a patch and carry a parrot and make anyone who was beastly walk the plank.'

'And what would Siegfried do?' I asked. 'You can't keep a sheep on a ship.' (Which is horribly tricky to say. I bid you: try it.)

'Why not?' demanded Marigold.

'No grass,' snapped Aster.

'He eats biscuits,' Marigold snapped back.

Which we had to concede was true, as he had cleaned us out of the last batch of fairings. Not that any of us complained particularly; they were desperately leaden things, as are most of Cook's conjurings these days. Cook says it is the diminished means with what (she means 'which') she has to shop. Aster says it is diminished ability, or possibly no ability in the first place. I say at least we *have* a cook. I suppose we may have to fend for ourselves kitchen-wise if this baby doesn't come out right. Heaven knows where, however, for how can we possibly pay rent, and who would be fool enough to take five of us in?

Oh, I'm afraid I shall find poverty intolerable. I know there are people far worse off, but, really, Radley is all any of us have ever known. And though it is held together largely by wallpaper paste and faith; though frigid winter has slid into the brickwork and will cling still in July; though it is hardly Balfour Manor, let alone Buckingham Palace, we are, all of us, so very

fond of it.

'Would you rather eat Siegfried or Grandma?' asked Aster eventually, ever the pessimist.

'Grandma,' Marigold and I agreed in unison. 'Though she'd be stringy, and tough as mutton,' I added.

'Hush!' said Marigold. 'Or Siegfried will hear you!'

'He's not in the drawing room again, is he?' asked Aster.

'Scullery,' said Marigold.

'Marigold!'

'What?' she protested. 'It's ghastly outside. I'd like to see you try to get a wink of sleep in the wretched elements.'

'I'm not wearing the equivalent of forty Fair Isle sweaters,' said Aster.

'Even so.'

'Would you rather be Marianne Dashwood or Elizabeth Bennet?' I changed the subject, rather cleverly I thought.

'Neither,' replied Aster. 'I'd rather be Darcy, or Willoughby. Though Willoughby is a swaggering cad, and Darcy a prig.'

She is right, of course. I thought of the sheikh then, who is so very dashing (if brutal), and evidently accomplished, love-wise, but unlikely to pass any of Aster's vigorous tests of mettle and manners. But I put it out of my mind quickly, realising that I'm not sure any man would.

'Perhaps we can call the baby Darcy,' suggested Marigold. 'If it's a boy.'

'Don't be absurd,' said Aster. 'Darcy isn't a first name.'

'Nor is Aster,' retorted Marigold. 'It's a flower. Just like Marigold and Ag—'

'What *will* we call it?' I asked quickly.

'Calendula, I expect,' said Aster grimly. 'Or Primrose. Or Pansy, perhaps.'

'What if it's a boy?'

'Lupin,' she said, so decisively that neither of us dared argue. 'But it won't be.'

'We could just call it Baby,' said Marigold, clearly still enamoured of her master disguise plan of turning any potential girl into the requisite gender.

'Baby is a ridiculous name,' I said.

'And Panther isn't?' Aster raised an eyebrow.

'Well, that's your fault,' I snapped, smarting somewhat. 'You couldn't pronounce the real one.'

Trust Aster to saddle me with something so absurd and, worse, ill-fitting. Panthers are long and sleek and elegant – like Aster – whereas I am short and curved in decidedly irritating places while my eyebrows are unruly and my hair untameable. Mama insists the latter is my crowning glory, but she is only being kind because I am the one who inherited Daddy's tendency to curls and redness, plus she is not the one who has to untangle the mess in the morning.

'More importantly,' I carried on, 'if it *is* a girl, then what will become of us? Will we be destitute?'

Aster snorted. 'Hardly.'

'We shall have to turn to vice,' said Marigold decisively. 'Or rockhopper penguins.'

'Not more animals,' I pleaded.

'Not animals; penguins – rockhopper ones. And they're all the rage,' she insisted. 'I read it in *The Tatler*. Thingummy Sassoon – that poet – has a whole flock. We could breed them and sell them to the rich.'

'To fools,' corrected Aster. 'And you shouldn't be reading *The Tatler*, it only encourages things.'

'What things?' I demanded, as well I might, given that *The Tatler* is my and Margot's bible. (Margot doesn't know about *Hansard*, or she would accuse me of being a bluestocking (i.e. literary and tedious), which would mean no hope of romance – look at Aster.)

I could see Aster grasping for something. 'Frippery,' she said finally. 'Pointless pursuits.'

She meant champagne, and fast cars and short dresses, all of which Margot and I worship, of course. Or the idea of, as I have only seen champagne at a distance, Grandma's motorcar is so slow as to be glacial, and my dresses are defiantly ankle-length, all of which is thoroughly gloom-making. As was the ridiculousness of Marigold's plan.

'Where would we even get a penguin to breed?' I said. 'There must be something else.'

'Ambergris,' said Marigold, trumping herself quite spectacularly, given that ambergris is, effectively, whale vomit.

'Repulsive,' said Aster.

'Agreed,' I seconded.

'It's not!' said Marigold. 'It's ever so precious.' She then went on to explain how its benevolent discovery would secure not only our fortune, but our fame. Though, as I pointed out, this in itself is highly unlikely, given that we live a hundred miles or more from the sea, and, on the few visits we have made, I am yet to see a whale bask off Great Yarmouth, let alone vomit there.

'Perhaps,' I said, keen to assert my usefulness, 'my chronicle will prove to be of financial benefit.'

Marigold actually laughed, and Aster said that unless I write the dictionary, the Bible or a best-selling romance then I shan't make a shilling. And as two are already done and the other I may have read about but have never actually experienced, then the whole plan is as pie in the sky as whale vomit and vice, and I am more likely to marry the Prince of Wales.

'Perhaps I *shall* marry the Prince of Wales,' I snapped then. 'Or a duke, at the very least. Then you shall both have to come begging to me to be spared the workhouse. Or Grandma's, which is possibly worse.'

'Don't be absurd,' said Aster. 'I shall never beg for anything from you. Besides, how will you find someone to have you? You're not even "out" as a deb.'

'And whose fault is that?' I snapped.

'Hardly mine,' said Aster.

Which is, strictly speaking, correct, though I did not give

Aster the satisfaction of admitting it. The truth is, it all comes back to Daddy dying in an untimely fashion, and before that being too poor to present me as a debutante. There wasn't even enough money to run to a new dress, let alone hire a flat for the London season. Mama said I could let out Aster's old gown but I said I would rather die in penury, which isn't absolutely true, but the dress was woefully outmoded even a year ago. Besides, it had hardly worked for Aster. As Grandma says, there is a fine line between exuberant youth and bitter spinsterhood, and my sister crossed it and left it for dust several years ago.

I don't suppose there's much chance of me becoming a deb at all now unless we do find whale vomit or I write a bestseller, so the Prince of Wales is off the list before he was even on it properly and it is back to more realistic prospects, i.e. men who actually dare venture to Ickthorpe and its environs.

'You could marry Reg Nesbitt,' added Marigold at that point, as if she could read my thinking, at least partially.

This is because she and her friend Harriet Ponsonby, otherwise known as Bad Harry (following an incident with some table fireworks, the less said about which, the better), have taken to mooning around after Reg, the farrier's boy, who is short and gormless and spits in the forge, which makes an irritating hissing sound. Marigold says this is manly behaviour and to be admired. Neither Aster nor I agree. Though I have suspicions that Margot might approve. In any case, Grandma has forbidden any more lurking near the blacksmith's, for fear

of burns or, more probably, learning to spit, or speak with a glottal stop.

Aster then declared she would rather die than marry Reg Nesbitt. I said that was a lie and a bad one, and Marigold expanded into the precise manner of death, with Aster eventually agreeing she would happily be shot or garrotted, but if it were a matter of laudanum poisoning, dysentery, or being chewed to pieces by rats over a matter of weeks, she might reconsider nuptials.

It strikes me that taste is strange. I wonder what man I shall fall for? Margot and I made a list of requisites in a suitor once. We decided they must:

- be terribly good-looking (obviously)
- have a good head of hair, with no signs of receding (check the father for likelihood of this happening at a future date)
- be preferably five foot eleven or above (or at least three inches taller than us if all other requirements fulfilled)
- be able to recite at least two verses of *Kubla Khan* (or another poem of their choice approved by us)
- have appeared in *The Tatler,* only preferably not with Evangeline Balfour, because neither of us want her cast-offs (of which there are many)

It would be too, too shaming

- not 'smell of trade' (this is actually Grandma's criterion, but we have adopted it, because trade surely discounts marriage).

So far I am yet to meet anyone who fits all of these, and the likelihood grows less by the day. Daddy always said there is someone out there for everyone, even Aster. Though it is hard to imagine who in her case.

Oh! That is the door. I must go and let the doctor in. I feel quite sick with anticipation. By the time I return to these pages the Mannerings may be utterly destitute and my life irrevocably altered.

5 P.M.

Life is not quite yet irrevocably altered, and the Mannerings not quite yet destitute. Rather, the hideous limbo continues upstairs, still loudly, but now with the added audience of Dr Spencer *and* Freddy, who has apparently come to gain practical experience, now that he is studying medicine.

I have to say I am most uncomfortable knowing that not one man but two are party to Mama's most private moment, not to mention anatomical parts. It is a great pity that the greatest qualification for a medical career, far greater than any

amount of scholarship or 'practical experience', seems to be, yet again, a penis.

It is also a pity the state of Radley. I suppose we have become used to its faults and fissures (literal and otherwise), but neither the doctor nor Freddy have stepped foot inside for nearly a year, and suddenly I am forced to see it through their surely disapproving eyes. Oh, it is imposing – ten bedrooms, two bathrooms, a stone staircase just made for grand entrances – and larger by far than their own Bridge House, which is Arts and Crafts, and a dear thing. But I would wager Bridge House doesn't have mildew in the kitchen and up the walls of the long hall, or a patina of pin mould on several Persian rugs (luckily, it is easily camouflaged, or trodden in), or more rodents than human residents.

But I cannot concern myself with that right now as, firstly, there is nothing we can do about the state of anything, given our finances and abilities – or lack thereof – and secondly, the noises from Mama are becoming far louder and far more frequent, which Marigold says sounds promising, vaginal canal-wise. I do not think it sounds promising at all. It sounds quite miserable. In fact, I am suddenly minded that our family motto, 'Fortiter gerit crucem', or, 'He bears the cross bravely', is not at all apt. For, there is no 'he' bearing much at all round here; it is always a 'she'. First there is all the frantic plaiting and pulling of hair to endure, then the indignity of monthlies, then, to cap it all, childbirth. Not to mention accommodating

the you-know-what in order to get to the childbirth stage in the first place.

Men just cannot possibly understand the trials women must go through. To hear them talk in Parliament (not that I have heard them, but thanks to Daddy's *Hansard* I have read it all written-up word for word) you'd think we barely even existed.

Perhaps they wish we didn't.

'You could marry Freddy,' suggested Marigold, finally tiring of *Goats Today*.

I felt my cheeks flame, which was strange. But I told her I was more likely to marry the Prince of Wales or the spitting farrier's boy. 'He's not *bad* looking,' is all I would admit.

Which is true. He's tallish (almost five foot eleven, I would say) and blondish and in a certain light one might even say he had a kind of nobility, which is ironic as he's not at all *Debrett's* material (though *we* are only just in said guide to the British aristocracy, and possibly not for long). Anyway, he's away at Cambridge most of the time so even if I did have an urge to marry him, or just moon over him, which I do not, he wouldn't be around for said mooning. And besides, his current first-hand experience is probably putting him off marriage and all it entails for life. It certainly is me.

At which point, as if to confirm my very thought, Freddy descended the stairs, red-faced and sweating, with his shirt sleeves rolled up and a disconcerting blood stain on his right

forearm.

'What's happening?' Aster demanded. 'Is Mama all right?'

'Is it born yet? Is it a boy?' asked Marigold. 'I wish it were a rabbit.'

'You have ten rabbits,' I pointed out. 'At least.'

'I'd like another.'

For someone who has an anatomical knowledge of reproduction both human and animal, she can be terrifically whimsical at times.

'It's neither,' replied Freddy, thankfully immune to Marigold's whims. 'That is to say, it's not quite out yet.'

'Oh, for heaven's sake,' Aster complained. 'How much longer?'

'She's thinking of Mama,' I said quickly. 'She does sound in terrible pain.'

Freddy reddened further, so as to be verging on beetroot. 'Birth can be frightfully tricky at times, and the baby is breech.'

'That means backwards,' said Marigold. 'Bum first.'

'Marigold!' snapped Aster.

'Oh, heavens,' I said.

'It's quite all right,' said Freddy. 'I'm not easily shocked.'

'Poor Mama,' I said quickly, before Marigold could prove him wrong. Then, 'Why *aren't* there women doctors? I believe it would be so much less distressing.'

He frowned, causing his hair to flop over one eye, which, I have to admit, was a little dashing. 'Oh, but there are,' he said,

pushing it back. 'Just very few. Why? You're not thinking of studying medicine, are you?'

I myself reddened. 'Don't sound so mortified. But no, I wasn't particularly thinking of studying at all.' I did not add that this was because we couldn't afford it.

Aster smirked. 'She's already wasting the education she does have. She doesn't need more to squander.'

'Shut up, Aster. It's not as if you're using yours much either. What do you even do all day, you and Daphne?'

Well, that set Aster into a terrifically Dark Mood. Though that is nothing unusual. She is always in Dark Moods these days and either skulking off on solitary walks to heaven knows where or sulking in the morning room with the wretched cello, which, given the inclement weather, is what she immediately took up at that very point.

Freddy's face became pained, to add to the puce.

'Tea?' I said hopefully.

'Thank goodness,' he said. 'Yes. That's what I came to fetch, actually. I think everyone could do with one.'

This was surely an understatement. Brandy or a hot toddy sounded more in order, but perhaps that would come later.

'You *could* study, you know,' he said, as we made our way to the kitchen. 'Find a . . . a purpose.'

I felt a prick of something then. The sudden hot shame of being tested and coming up wanting. I turned my head away.

'A purpose?' I scoffed. 'Am I allowed one? Isn't my purpose

to be in Mama's position?'

'Well, I suppose. If you want that. But there's more to life than babies.'

For you, I thought. I am no more likely to be able to choose my purpose than I am my name. Perhaps if I were a Pankhurst I might stand a chance, but she has the luxury of university behind her, and money, *and* a husband willing to back her. I have none of these.

'Not in Ickthorpe,' I said.

'In Cambridge then,' he said. 'Or Oxford,' he added, 'if Cambridge is too close.'

My insides billowed, a brief burst of hope blowing them out like pillows in the wind. Though this, now, was torment. Cambridge may well be only twenty miles, which *is* quite close, I suppose, if one has a car. But he might as well have suggested Timbuctoo for all my chances of seeing it. I may not be a fool, however I am hardly scholarship material like he. I snapped to.

'Chance would be a fine thing,' I said. 'Anyway, why would I want to suffer endless lessons?' Thus putting what I hoped was a firm end to the discussion, I stomped the rest of the way down the long corridor and down the stone stairs in the east wing, Freddy trotting awkwardly behind like a dog.

Assembling tea was a more arduous task than I had imagined. Partly because Cook was upstairs acting as nursemaid, as we cannot afford both (or a housekeeper, or stable man, or any other servants bar Rapsey, who is actually officially Grandma's

Odd Man, but does for us as well when he has to, despite being heaven knows how old); partly because finding sufficient china, let alone matching, is daily more difficult since Marigold and Bad Harry borrowed it all for a menagerie tea party; and partly because Siegfried had butted open the scullery door and was on the kitchen table eating the ham sandwiches Cook had set aside for our supper.

'I'm so sorry,' I said, hotly embarrassed. 'Marigold lets him in and he makes a beeline for biscuits and things the minute her back is turned.'

Freddy laughed. 'Don't blame her,' he said. 'It's bitter outside. I'd want to be in here too. Though I'm not sure sheep are supposed to eat meat,' he added.

'He ate a stair once, so I don't suppose it will hurt him,' I replied, shooing the disappointed Siegfried swiftly on to the flagstones and back into the scullery, firmly latching the door this time. I heaved a sigh of relief. But it was to be short-lived.

'What *will* you do?' asked Freddy.

'If it's a girl, you mean?'

'What? No. I mean with your future.'

I found myself faltering again, oddly awkward in front of my oldest friend. 'I hadn't thought,' I admitted eventually. 'I've just been waiting on the baby. All of us have been.'

'A baby shouldn't stop you doing things,' he said, pouring milk from one shamefully cracked jug to another, smaller one.

If only that were the case, I thought bitterly, and said so, or

attempted to.

But Freddy could not be dampened. 'You could do anything,' he continued.

His zeal flickered bright as a struck match, its flame catching that kindling in me I had tried to deny was there. Heat thrilled through me for a brief, brilliant second.

'You could—'

But I never found out exactly what he thought I could do, because at that point came the most ear-shattering caterwaul yet, and tea seemed suddenly so pointless, like using a flannel to mop Noah's flood, or a sticking plaster on a broken leg. Instead, Freddy fled upstairs, and I back to the morning room where we sit, all three of us now, on tenterhooks, and the brink of misfortune.

8 P.M.

It was only minutes before Freddy came back downstairs, ashen this time, and trembling heavily, but hours before I could muster the courage to pick up my pen again.

I shall get straight to the fact of the matter, for this is no time for Pepysish description or Dickensian wit: the baby does not have a penis.

'It's a girl,' said Freddy. 'Quite alive and well.'

I must admit that this news was almost a relief given his

demeanour, which had suggested the morgue might be in order, not the baptismal font. But then I had another awful thought, as, clearly, did Aster.

'Mama?' she asked, quite pale herself.

'She's well,' he said. 'Or as well as expected after . . . that.'

It was suddenly and patently clear that Freddy's whey-face was the result of 'practical experience' and that perhaps he was better suited to textbooks after all, at least for now.

'She'll be in bed for days, I imagine. So . . .' He looked at me expectantly.

I got his point. We were to muster, and soon. 'I suppose one of us will have to telephone Grandma,' I said.

'Well, I shan't,' said Aster.

'I'll telephone Grandma, if you telephone Valentine,' I said.

Aster paused in thought. Then, 'Fine,' she said.

'And I will telephone Bad Harry,' said Marigold. 'Because she owes me a shilling for betting it would be web-footed.'

'Marigold!' scolded Aster and I, united, if briefly.

'You're to telephone no one,' continued Aster. 'It's far too dear. You can go round in the morning and collect on whatever terrible bet you've made.'

As such, the call to Grandma was brief and to the point.

'Well, that's that,' she said, as hard and final as a full stop.

'I suppose,' I replied.

'There's no "suppose" about it. I shall visit in seven days. Even your mother should have recovered by then.' Then she

hung up abruptly.

Seven days makes it sound like *she* lives in Timbuctoo, when in fact it is merely the end of the drive. But she does like to be dramatic. Which is where Valentine gets it from, not that anyone will tell her. She is convinced everything poor comes from this mother, who is admittedly prone to over-emoting. Grandma says she is a mesmerist, like all Italians, and it is best to avoid eye contact.

That said, Aster's exchange was no more verbose.

'Hullo, Valentine,' she said, when he finally answered.

'Who *is* this?' came the reply (for both Marigold and I were huddled at the receiver to hear every word).

Aster sighed. 'It's your cousin. Aster,' she added, lest he had muddled us, or even forgotten our names.

'Oh,' he said. Then a stretched echo: 'Ohhhhhh,' as the significance hit him. 'Is it . . . What is it?'

'It's a girl,' she replied haughtily, before her tone dropped to ominous. 'Radley is yours.'

And then, as mannered and angry as Grandma, she hung up and stalked from the room, leaving Freddy and me, and Marigold and Siegfried (quite the Houdini of creatures) in abject silence, bar the tinkling trickle of sheep's urine onto Persian rug.

*

The queerest thing is, I know I should be celebrating. I have a sister. Ten fingers and ten toes (none webbed). A dear little

creature, really. But instead, I feel desperately empty. Bereft, in fact. As if it's not just Daddy who has died, but something much larger, more profound and yet ephemeral. An era, perhaps. Hope, even.

Or a purpose. *My* purpose. Something I'd not even paid two seconds of attention to, not really. Not until today and Freddy's pressing. But how can I have one now? How can I think of anything other than our terrible fate?

So you see, I knew I was right to choose crimson ink. Though perhaps black is now more appropriate. For, though it may not be a funeral, we are all in mourning. No longer just for our poor dead Papa, but for the entire Mannering family.

And all for want of a P-E-N-I-S.