Lovereading.co.uk

Storm Over Burracombe

Lilian Harry

Published by Orion

Extract

All text is copyright of the author

This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

Chapter One

Burracombe, South Devon, August 1952

The storm began at about midday and raged all afternoon, and throughout the night. In the Dartmoor village of Burracombe, the Burra Brook rose higher than anyone could ever remember seeing it; first it covered the stepping-stones and then it broke over its banks to flood down the village street, swirling through gardens, right up to front doors, and threatening to find a way through any and every crack into the cottages themselves.

'Sandbags!' Jacob Prout exclaimed when he walked down to the bridge and saw the waters hurling themselves in a brown wave, swift and sinuous as an otter, over rocks that normally broke the current into a foam of white but were now hidden from view. 'Us'll need sandbags.' He hurried back to the school store-shed and began to drag out the supply that had been kept there since the war, and from there he lugged them to the church. On the way, he shouted through the doorway of the blacksmith's forge and hammered on the doors of the bakery and butcher's shop, and by the time he had started to pile the sandbags on the church path, Alf Coker, George Sweet and Bert Foster were there to help.

Together, they carried the bags to every cottage they thought might be at risk, and dropped them on the doorsteps, pushing them against the doors to keep the water out. They were only just in time; within twenty minutes, the flood had arrived and the gardens on the lower side of the street were awash, while people indoors peered through their windows in shock and dismay.

'The school!' shouted Mrs Purdy, the cleaner, throwing up her sash window and leaning out. 'That water'll be all through the lobby and

into the classrooms – they'll be mired with filth. It'll take me a month of Sundays to get that lot cleared up.'

''Tis all right, Mabel, I've put bags all round the doors,' Jacob said. 'You won't have no extra cleaning to do.'

'Tidden that,' she retorted indignantly, ''tis the damage it can do. There's nothing worse than floodwater for ruining—'

'I knows that, and I done something about it,' he interrupted, jamming his sou'wester more firmly on his head. 'And I hope you'll forgive me if I don't stand here in this downpour chewing the fat about it. Coming down like stair-rods, it be, and I'm the one who'll be doing the clearing up after, when all the ditches and culverts is blocked. And if I don't get back to me own place soon, I won't be able to open the ruddy door!'

He stamped away through the water which was eddying around his feet, and pushed open his own front door. As he'd expected, the flood was already lapping at the sandbags he'd piled there and he stepped over them to get inside and slammed the door shut. The cat and dog were already in, Flossie on the windowsill staring out wide-eyed at the river that had appeared outside her home, and Scruff, who hated thunder and lightning, hiding under Jacob's armchair. Jacob gave him a scornful glance as he trod off his Wellingtons.

'Fine one you are. 'Tis only a drop of rain.' All the same, he knew that this was no ordinary storm. This, coming after a fortnight of almost continuous rain, was something very much out of the ordinary and, as he joined Flossie to gaze out of the window at the waters racing past along the village street, he told himself that he wouldn't be surprised if there weren't a lot of damage done in some places.

Inside the cottages of Burracombe that evening, it was more like winter than the middle of August. Wind raged around the roofs, howling down the chimneys, and rain hammered on the window-panes. Darkness came early and the power went off, leaving people to search for candles or just go to bed early, where they lay listening and wondering, like Jacob, what the damage would be.

At some point during the small hours, the storm abated and they woke to a calmer, brighter day. To their relief, there was not too much damage, after all – Jacob's sandbags had held fast and there were only a few slates off the roofs that weren't thatched. A big elm was down across the lane that led out of the village towards the main road, Joyce Warren was bemoaning the loss of one of her apple trees and there were plenty of branches scattered about, but nothing more

serious than that. Even the brook had receded and was running more or less normally along its usual channel, as if ashamed of its reckless behaviour the day before.

'Us has been lucky,' Jacob said, surveying the big elm. Ted Tozer and a few of the other men had gathered there too, to decide how best to remove it. 'Wireless says there's been a terrible lot of damage up North Devon. Lynton and Lynmouth got it real bad, so I heard.'

Basil Harvey, the vicar, had come out too, to make sure his parishioners were all right. He nodded gravely. 'It's a real disaster. The storm was even fiercer over Exmoor than it was here, apparently, and Lynmouth has been almost washed away. It seems that the two rivers Lyn piled up against each other above the town and surged down the hillside, tearing up huge trees from their roots and sweeping up boulders, and even wrenching houses from their foundations. They think nearly a hundred buildings have been destroyed, and goodness knows how many people killed or made homeless. All the boats in the harbour were washed out to sea, along with a lot of cars, and the main road bridges have been washed away. It's complete devastation.'

'My stars,' Jacob said, listening in awe, and he bent to rub Scruff's ears. 'Those poor souls. You were right, boy. 'Twas more than a bit of rain. There'll be a sight of clearing up to do after that lot.' He thought about it for a few minutes, remembering a church outing they'd once had to Lynton and Lynmouth, when he and Sarah had gone up on the little rack railway to the top of the cliff and walked along to the Valley of Rocks. It had been a pretty place, but what did it look like now?

He shook his head and turned his mind to matters closer to home. 'There'll be a master clearing-up to do there, and no mistake, and I reckon us had better get on with our own. Look at this road, thick with mud. What a summer it's been, eh? What a summer it's been …'

The whole village was shocked to hear of the disaster in North Devon, and there was talk of little else that morning. But for Hilary Napier and her father, Gilbert, once they had listened to the news and then turned off the radio, a storm of a different kind was about to break.

'Post's a bit late this morning,' Gilbert said, sorting through the pile of letters beside his breakfast plate. 'It didn't arrive until almost eight. Hello, here's a letter from Oliver Tutton. Haven't heard from him for quite a while. Wonder what he's got to say?' He picked up his silver paper-knife to slit open the envelope.

Hilary was pouring cornflakes into her bowl. 'Maybe there's going to be a regimental reunion or something.'

'Ollie would hardly be the one to write to me about that – it would come officially.' He scanned the sheet of thick, cream paper. 'Hm. Seems Arthur Kellaway's died.'

'And who's Arthur Kellaway?' She added milk and sugar and began to eat. 'Another Army friend? I don't think I've ever heard you mention him, though the name does seem a bit familiar.'

'He was Ollie's head gamekeeper. Just dropped dead in the yard one day, apparently – fit as a fiddle until then. Heart-attack. Hm …' He read on, tapping the back of his thumb against his chin. 'Arthur Kellaway … That's Travis Kellaway's father. Seems the boy's been living with his parents and working as under-manager on Ollie's estate, and now the old man's dead he's losing his home – his mother's decided to go and live with her sister. Oliver says he's decided to make a break now and look for something more responsible.' He narrowed his eyes thoughtfully. 'Might be an idea to invite the lad over for a day or two. See what he's planning to do now.'

Hilary stared at him, bemused. 'Father, I don't know what you're talking about. Why should you invite him over here? And why should we be interested in his plans?'

'Because he's Travis Kellaway,' Gilbert explained, with an edge of impatience. 'Baden's friend – Baden's *closest* friend. Why shouldn't I invite him to stay? I'll be pleased to make him welcome.'

Hilary glanced involuntarily at the portrait of her brother, which hung above the fireplace. Although she had never met Travis Kellaway, she knew the story of how he and Baden had gone through the war together, how close they had been, how he had been with Baden when he died. She had seen the letter that Travis had written to her parents then – the letter that was now kept in a drawer of her father's desk, together with those written by Baden's officers, and all the other mementoes of his short life. She knew that Travis had visited Burracombe after the war, but for the past few years contact had been no more than a Christmas card.

'I still don't understand,' she said. 'We've hardly heard anything of him for years. Why do you want to invite him to stay now, after all this time?'

Gilbert Napier looked straight at his daughter. 'I've already told you. His father's just died. His mother's decided to go and live with her sister. And he thinks now would be a good time to better himself.'

He put the letter back into its envelope and filled his own cereal bowl. 'I'd like to have a look at him. As I remember from when he came here before, he seemed a well-set-up sort of fellow, and he's got a few years' experience under his belt now.'

Hilary put down her spoon. Her stomach felt suddenly tight and her hand shook a little. 'And what's that got to do with us?'

Her father shrugged. 'Well, it's time we started to think what we're going to do with the estate. Who's going to take over the job of managing it, and so on. It's obvious young Stephen's never going to take a proper interest, even when he leaves the RAF, and there's no one else—

'*No one*? Father, how can you say that? Ever since you had your heart-attack I've—'

'Oh yes, I know,' he said, waving a hand. 'You've thrown yourself into the breech and made a damn good job of it. I'm proud of you. But that was never intended to be permanent. You surely never thought I'd just sit back and let you throw your life away on this place.'

'I'm not throwing my life away! The estate *is* my life!'

'Don't be ridiculous, Hilary. Of course it isn't. You're a woman – a healthy young woman. You want a home of your own, a family of youngsters around your feet.'

'You're forgetting the essential requirement for those,' Hilary said grimly. 'A husband.'

'Well, of course you want a husband,' he said testily. 'That goes without saying.'

'Oh, does it, indeed?' Hilary's heart was thudding and she half-rose from her chair. 'Well, for your information, Father, a husband is the last thing I want! I'm perfectly happy as I am, thank you very much. I have a good life here – a lovely home in a village I've grown up in, where I have lots of friends. And I enjoy running the estate. I don't want any more than that. So invite this Travis Kellaway here if you want to, help him find a job if you feel you must, but leave it at that. We don't need to look for a new estate manager. *I'm* doing that job.'

'And isn't that rather up to me?' he asked in a dangerously quiet voice. 'Burracombe Barton and all that entails is still in my name, or so I understand.'

'Of course it is,' she said, sinking back again. 'But I thought you were happy to have things go on as they are. You say yourself I've done a good job. You said you were proud of me.'

'And so I am.' Gilbert leaned forward. 'Look, Hilary, all I want

to do is have a look at this young fellow. See what he's made of. You never know—'

'I think I do know!' Hilary clenched her fist and thumped it on the table. 'I think I know exactly. You're going to go over my head – invite him here, see what you think of him and then offer him the job of estate manager. You're going to offer him *my* job!' Again, her voice quivered. 'How could you? How could you do this to me?'

'There's no need to get yourself into a state . . .'

'I'm not getting into a state! I'm just plain angry.' She rose again, so that she was looking down on the big man with his mane of silver hair, and wished that she could stop her body trembling. 'So would anyone be if they'd just been informed that they were being sacked.'

'Hilary, you're not being sacked! For heaven's sake, girl, don't be so dramatic. I've only just found out that the boy might be free.'

'What do you call it, then? You wouldn't do this if I weren't your daughter, you know. You wouldn't do it to a son – bring someone in over his head without warning.' Her voice broke. 'I thought you were happy with the way I've been working. We're working *together*. Why bring in someone else?'

'Together!' he exclaimed. 'Well, if we are, it's not without a lot of argument. You'd have kept me out of it altogether if you could – all these projects you've been coming up with, village archives, a book about the Barton, anything to keep me occupied. You don't want me to have anything to do with the estate. You want to run it yourself, your own way.'

'Father, that's not true. It's only because of your heart-attack. You know the doctors said you mustn't work so hard. Charles Latimer—'

'Charles is an old woman! I'm as fit now as I ever was.'

'You're not,' she said quietly, sitting down again. 'And we shouldn't be arguing like this. It's one of the things you need to avoid.'

They were silent for a few moments. Then she said, 'I admit it hasn't been easy to work out a sensible compromise, but I really thought we'd managed it in the last month or two. You've been coming round the farms with me, talking to the tenants, all that sort of thing. And I know you've been enjoying working on the book. Aren't you satisfied with the way I'm doing things? Is that what it is?'

Her father shook his head. 'It's not that, Hilary. You've done a very good job. But it isn't *right* – a young woman like you, spending her life tramping around the fields, thinking about rents and tenancies and future management. You should be enjoying life.'

'I *am* enjoying my life!'

'You should be looking after a husband and family,' he went on, ignoring her. 'Bringing up the next generation.'

'Father, we've already been through all this. We're going round in circles.'

'And we'll keep on going through it,' he drove on. 'Because that's the proper life for a woman. And don't tell me you had "responsibilities" during the war, as if that somehow makes you too good for a domestic life now. Don't tell me how capable you are – I know all that. You'll need all your capabilities once you're a wife and mother.'

'I can't just go out and find a husband under a hedge,' Hilary said impatiently. 'I can't buy one in the village shop.'

'And there's no need to be sarcastic,' he retorted. 'It doesn't become you. All I'm saying is, you'd have a far better chance of finding one if you weren't so tied up with estate work. Get out a bit more – go up to London, go to a few balls and dances, meet people again. The right *sort* of people.'

'Oh, for goodness sake, Dad! The world isn't *like* that any more. People are too busy getting the country back on its feet to bother about dances and balls and parties. Anyway, I'm too old now. If anyone does the Season at all, they're just young girls of eighteen or twenty. I'm thirty – from their point of view, I'm an old woman.' She picked up the coffee-pot and refilled both their cups, trying to calm herself, and softened her voice. 'You're not really serious about offering Travis Kellaway the estate manager's job, are you?'

'I think you need help,' Gilbert said stubbornly. 'Remember, I know what the estate work entails. I did it long enough myself and, as you and Charles never stop telling me, it made me ill. I don't want the same to happen to you.' He shot her a look from under the bushy brows. 'I've lost too many of my family to want to see you go that way.'

Hilary bit her lip and looked down at her plate, tears pricking her eyes. 'I'm not going to have a heart-attack, Dad.'

'Maybe not. But there are other ways of getting ill. Your mother was never strong . . .'

'I'm not like Mother. I *am* strong – I always have been. And I enjoy the work, Dad. I don't want to give it up. Don't ask Travis Kellaway here. Or if you do, don't offer him a job. Please.'

Gilbert shook his head. 'I'm sorry, Hilary, but my mind's made up. I want you to have some help and I think he's worth considering.

In any case, we owe him this. He's just lost his father, he's losing his home. After all he did for Baden—'

'Yes, all right,' she said hastily. 'I can see that you feel you ought to do something for him. But it doesn't mean you have to give him my job. Sir Oliver's still employing him, isn't he? He could become manager there in time.'

'Oliver's man's got years ahead of him yet and you can't blame the boy for not wanting to wait for dead men's shoes.' He glanced at her again. 'I didn't say I'd give him your job, Hilary. I simply said I thought you needed help. Why not let him come, show him around a bit, see what you think? You don't have to decide anything straight away.'

She cast him a bitter look. 'I'm not going to decide anything at all, am I? You've already done the deciding. And he won't be coming here to "help" me. You've already said he wants to move up. He won't want to come here as my assistant. Anyway, it's not help you think I need, it's time – time to find a husband and have children. Which, in your opinion, I can only have by giving up the job I've worked at and enjoyed so much in the past year.' She stood up again, forgetting her freshly poured coffee. 'You've made up your mind already to give this Kellaway man my job, and there's nothing I can do about it.'

'Not at all. I'm reserving judgement until I see him—'

'There! You see? You *have* decided! If you like him, you'll make him estate manager – don't deny it.' She turned towards the door, but looked back as she laid her fingers on the handle. 'And you *will* like him. That's something else you've decided. What I think and want doesn't come into this at all.'

'Hilary, it's you I'm thinking of.'

'It's *not*! How can it be? You're not thinking of me at all.'

'I simply want you to have the proper sort of life for a young woman. Managing an estate – that's no way for a girl like you to live. You've done very well up till now, but what about when an emergency crops up? Something that needs a man's strength?'

'There are plenty of men to deal with anything heavy. Ken Warne, Crocker, Furzey – the rest of the tenant farmers and their stockmen. When did you ever have to tackle any major heavy work? I'm administrating the estate, not working with the animals. You know that perfectly well.'

To her annoyance, she heard her voice tremble and knew that she was close to tears. Her father knew it too and his eyes narrowed.

'It's not just physical strength. You have to be able to deal with people too. Make decisions that are unpopular – sack people if they're not working properly. Keep your end up in an argument. It's no use bursting into tears when things go wrong. That's where a woman will never be able to make her way in a man's world, I'm afraid.'

'Oh, for heaven's sake!' She saw the glimmer of triumph in his eyes and knew that he was just waiting for the first tear to fall. Taking in a deep breath, she waited for a moment to regain her composure, then said, 'You're determined to do this, aren't you? You're determined to ask him here and offer him my job.'

'I'm determined to ask him here, yes,' he said, meeting her eyes implacably. 'And when I've seen him and talked with him, I'll decide what to do next.'

'*You'll* decide,' she said in a low, bitter voice. 'You. Not "we". Just you.'

Gilbert said nothing. They stared at each other for a moment more, than Hilary turned away. She opened the door and walked out, exerting all her willpower not to slam it behind her. For a second or two, she leaned back against the panels, breathing hard, and then looked up as Jackie Tozer came from the direction of the kitchen, bearing a tray of bacon and eggs.

'Are you all right, Miss Hilary?' Jackie asked anxiously. 'You look as white as a sheet.'

'Yes, thank you, Jackie. I'm just a bit off-colour, that's all.' She glanced at the tray. 'I don't think I'll bother with breakfast this morning. My father's in there, though – no doubt he'll manage some extra.'

He might as well have my breakfast, she thought sourly as she went upstairs to her room. He's taking everything else that matters.