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# **The Last Broomsquire**

Written by Martin Hesp

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**MARTIN HESP**



**THE LAST  
BROOMSQUIRE**



**FLAGON PRESS**

SOMERSET  
2010

# AUTHOR'S PREFACE

## HOW THE BROOMSQUIRE CAME TO BE



If you grow up in the shadow of an exceedingly beautiful upland like the Quantock Hills there is a strong likelihood that the great eminence will in some way affect your development. Such a large physical feature in the landscape maintains a constant presence simply because of its size and scale, but there's more to it than that: the mere curvature of the hills seems to echo thoughts and memories, and the distant winding coombes that disappear into the red sandstone bowels of those hills never fail to inspire thoughts of mystery and excitement.

For the imaginative child growing up in the vale nearby, the hills become that "other place". They are a realm of the subconscious. They are a constant, and yet their secrets remain aloof and unknown. They are with you always – but, for the most part, only as an idea or whim.

Over time, this idea evolves and grows. As a tiny child you might be taken up to the ridge by your parents to see the views, later you will explore their forests with boyhood friends after long wearying walks up from the vale. Then the legends and tales of the hills begin to have their role. But strongest and most formative of all, there's the influence real stories have, because they've been told to you by real people.

My first Quantock memories are, somewhat inevitably, linked with food. My grandmother would serve delicious whortleberry pie and tell of how she and her sisters would, as children, pick the tiny fruit up on the heaths above Crowcombe. If the unique flavour and colour of that pie live long with me, more powerful still is her tale of the broomsquire. He had come stalking up to where the sisters were kneeling at their labours in his long blue cloak and caused such fright that they took to their heels and didn't stop running until they passed the Carew Arms way down in the village. My grandmother's fear of this strange, almost supernatural person called a broomsquire has haunted me ever since, just as it haunted her. I shall forever hold in my mind an image of those sisters

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running down that white dusty road outside the pub, where the old men laughed and jeered with delight as the panicking girls passed in a blur of skirts and screams.

Years after she told me the story my old editor, Jack Hurley, at the West Somerset Free Press, would tell me more about broomsquires. He said very little was known about them, but that his predecessor – a man called Herbert Kille – had done some investigations in the early 1900s. Jack's favourite story concerning them was that one of their number had achieved a notoriety unusual for a broomsquire by killing his wife.

I can still see old Jack, with his 60-a-day rasp of a voice describing the scene when Johnny Walford is taken into The George for a final meal, with the great press of now silent villagers peering through the windows. I imagined that dark room and that hush as Jack sat there wreathed in cigarette smoke in his own dark room, with a single beam of light coming through the window to illuminate the blue billows emanating from his "gasper". Never before had I heard a real story about a real person that was so filled with the terror of the inevitable – a yarn so incredibly pregnant with the sense of unavoidable doom.

And never before had I heard a story that seemed to provoke so much visual imagery. The tale of Johnny Walford's last journey being halted at Nether Stowey by a wild and angry throng seemed to me to be an English version of something you'd see in some exotic Italian or French movie. As a young reporter, I knew that village, I knew that pub, and I knew the place which to this day is called Walford's Oak.

Then there were the tales of the Romantic Poets, told to me by my own journalist father who loved nothing better than to explore the hills and write about their crop of famous poets. Since he told me about them I've loved the idea of these extraordinary men who, as far as I can make out, invented the concept of walking in untamed countryside simply for pleasure and inspiration. How strange was it that Coleridge and Wordsworth should have lived in the very same parish as the doomed broomsquire?

It was my father who took me to Fyne Court and showed me the lightning rods erected in the trees by the Wizard of the Quantocks – copper rods that still remain aloft there to this day.

You can imagine how powerful the story became when my father told me it was thought that Andrew Crosse had been the main inspiration for Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* story. Later I took a television camera down the pot-hole near Fyne Court where The Thunder and Lightning Man collected the pure water for his experiments and saw his rusting implements lying amid the stalagmites. As far as I know, I am one of the few living people to have gone down there, and so spooky and cramped was it I'd never dream of returning again.

As a newspaper journalist I have spent years writing features about the mud-horse fishermen of Bridgwater Bay and their strange sledge contraptions. I've waxed lyrical about the smugglers of Kilve who had a revenue-dodging horse who was trained to bolt when told to stop, and stop when told to run...

And so I suppose it is hardly surprising that, since I was a child on my grandmother's knee hearing about the broomsquire, the rich seam of yarns and anecdotes have been building in me. Over half a century those hills of my youth – those near-yet-far, beautiful, mystical eminences – became in some ways more tangible, in others more ethereal.

For me the tale of the Quantocks has become a romantic web and weave – a mental tapestry draped across a very real backdrop. Which is what this book is. A series of fairly real pictures based on authentic situations and occurrences, weaved together to form a whole that I am the first to admit is far from being historically correct. If you are a stickler for accuracy, best read no further. If you demand hard-and-fast dates to run in a genuine chronological order, then this will be a yarn you can shoot down in flames.

But if you are fascinated by the idea that just a small handful of parishes huddled around some scenic hills could play host to so much that was amazingly romantic, thrilling and intriguing – then read on...

MARTIN HESP

## DEDICATION

For Chris Flewitt - a Quantock boy  
whose early death  
helped inspire this book

# THE LAST BROOMSQUIRE

WITH A FRONTISPIECE PURPORTED TO HAVE  
BEEN WRITTEN BY THOMAS POOLE

It is with a heavy heart that I write these words. I do so because I have become the recipient of the following narrative in which my friend Johnny Walford has written down the story of his life: a life which, as the result of the murder of his wife, is to be concluded at the end of a rope tomorrow.

I have visited Johnny one last time today and it was his final request to me that I should keep these writings safe and, after one year and a day, hand them to the woman that he loved. This I shall do, just as I fully intend fulfilling his other request: that I describe the events that surround his final hours in order to provide the postscript that he cannot write himself.

I do not know whether any person other than his beloved Anne Rice shall ever read the manuscript, but if it is to be seen by people who did not know the man then I feel it is my duty to furnish some details as to what sort of person he was.

Johnny Walford had more vitality, more spirit and life flowing through his veins than any person I have known. He was generally cheerful and always generous. Added to these qualities, he was handsome – so much so that there were times when one found oneself querying if he was indeed of this world. I have heard others mention this unearthly quality, but perhaps they, and I, have it wrong; he was more earthly, more as Mother Nature intended man to be, than anything else I have seen in the general run of human-kind. This beauty was not only related to his physical appearance; it was also produced by a gentle radiance that seemed to emanate from him.

His good humour, his cheerfulness and intelligence made him by far the most popular denizen of these hills. Morally speaking he was not a saint and, latterly, he succumbed to all manner of temptation that came his way. With his yellow-tinged chestnut locks and his brown, handsome face; his laughing eyes and the smile that was never far from his lips – it would be an understatement to say

that the opposite sex were drawn to him. Indeed, his charm went further than that; for men too, found it easy to fall under his spell.

I first knew him when he was but a small boy. His late father was a man for whom I held a high regard and he too enjoyed elements of this natural charm which seemed to be a thing handed down from generation to generation among their clan. It is an interesting story, the account of those people collectively known as Broomsquires, for it is said that they represent the last vestiges of an ancient race whose territory has declined over many centuries. The few remaining members of this old Westcountry tribe are now to be found living in just one place, and that is on the ridge and in the coombes of the Quantock Hills.

In some ways Johnny became the son I never had. Consequently, I have been a close witness to much that he recalls in his narrative and can vouch for almost every word of it. It is my hope that his writings will convey some of the happiness and joy that was inherent in his life. If I know him as I believe I do, Johnny Walford will die with the same sense of courage and grace that has, throughout, been such a central part of his character. I have wondered long and hard these past few weeks how different his lot may have been if certain things had, or had not, occurred. But there is no point in us gnawing at the unchangeable. Johnny Walford knows he must die, and God in His Mercy will deal with my young friend as He sees fit.

# THE LIFE AND TIMES OF JOHNNY WALFORD

## PART 1

### EARLY DAYS

My name is John Walford and that is all I have left in this world. A name. And even that is illusory, for rarely have I been hailed as either John or Walford. Johnny is what people have called me since the days when I first crawled and stumbled in the coombes and cups of the hills. My Quantock Hills. The soft curving mountain that runs south from the Bristol Channel, betwixt the flatness of The Levels and the remote sea-borne vastness of Exmoor.

I call it a mountain, knowing that it is but a tiny ridge in the greater scheme of God's geography, but to me Quantock is the stuff of eminence and elevation. From the great bare tops you can see half the world. You can see the country of Wales across the sea: you can see the Mendip Hills, unlovely and stark to the east and between them and you lies the wide flooded void of the flatlands. Sweeping west they rise to the landlocked, patchwork Vale of the Tone and beyond, to the south, stand the flat-topped Blackdown Hills. And so the great vista rolls on into the county of Devon and to the south and west there is a glimpse of distant Dartmoor while close by, in the direction of the setting sun, the Brendon Hills begin their march to Exmoor's lonely heights.

I tell you all this because I am setting out the story of my life and, if anyone is to understand it, then they must have some concept of the Elevated Sense of Being enjoyed by the folk of the hills. Few are born up there on Quantock's lofty ridge. Even fewer remain to eke a living there. And none but the Walfords stay to die.

My friend Sam Coleridge put it like this:

"Dim coasts, and cloud-like hills, and shoreless ocean -  
It seemed like omnipresence! God, me thought,  
Had built him there a temple: the whole world  
Seemed imaged in its vast circumference."

The Quantocks: with their bosomly cleft of combe, their sylvan,

shapely, contours and their high, heath-clad moors where the breeze sighs without end. Who, and what I am, is but clay formed in this crucible of sandstone and heather and my life-blood is naught but the clear cold water of a Quantock stream.

Johnny: that is how the people in the hill-side villages and farms have known me. From Porlock in the west and the Parrett in the east, Johnny the Broomsquire has enjoyed his own humble fame among the vales. It is strange, now that I come to think of it in my final days: the idea that all his life a man is attached to a thing as abstract and whimsical as a name. A sound, and that is him: Johnny the Broomsquire. That sound is me. But soon there will be no flesh to give substance to the name. It will have to survive by itself, as a memory, as a thought – as a little murmur of sadness passing the lips of an old Quantock friend. And then, when the people who knew me are gone, the name that was mine will be the stuff of hand-me-down whispers. That is why I have asked for pen and paper. In these few remaining days I will write the name Johnny Walford, and I will furnish it with the story of its companion in flesh.

This then, is my tale: an explanation of what I did and why. I had hoped to see more in my years, but at least I can rejoice that for quarter of a century I have sauntered as free as a buzzard across my beloved hills.

I may as well begin the story by telling you why I am about to die. I will not hide from you what I did – or at least am supposed to have done – in a single moment of madness. I took the life of the woman to whom it was my great misfortune to have been wed. As far as I can remember, it was a single blow lashed out in anger and frustration. But it seems some evil must have overtaken me in my sleep and urged me to finish the job. Having felled her by the side of the road, I cut her throat. Perhaps I did but, though I recall knocking her down, I swear I know nothing of the terrible, final act. That it occurred I have no doubt, for I awoke on the moor to find her lying next to me, cold and dead. The blood on my clasp-knife proved my undoing, though how the blood got there, I shall never know.

Poor, unhappy Jane: I cannot think that her judge, the Lord God Almighty, will have had much leniency on her when she came before him. He must surely have sent her to the dark domain that

is her rightful abode. Soon I too shall stand before Him and no doubt He will treat me much the same. All I can ask is that the two children that we leave on this Earth will not be tainted by the sorry debacle of their parents. I am beyond compassion, Lord Kenyon knew that when he sentenced me. He did what he had to do, though he did it in tears. Already, I am told, the people of the county are calling him the Weeping Judge.

There is an oak in a Quantock coombe that I love. In my mind I can see it now; a magnificent thing that's cast its mighty shadow over that secret glade for many a long century. Often have I sheltered under its boughs, yet soon its sighing majesty will be defiled by my corpse.

So how did I come to this brutal, untimely end? Temptation is the answer. The base enticement of man. It was the lust which lies in all our bosoms that had the beating of me.

To tell my story properly I must return to the sunlit days of my childhood, for I would wish you to know something of the way in which my character was wrought. You see, they say that we Walfords come from a different stock; that we are the last of an ancient race – a people that, long ago, lived in peace from the low moors of the Parrett to the granite hills of the west. Centuries and centuries ago, before even the Romans came, great tribes moved across the country and began to clear the forests and farm the valleys. Our people – my people – called the Dumnonii, were driven from the land, but a few survived in remote parts.

To be honest, I have no knowledge as to whether this is some fancy, or if it may be true – but I do know that the Walfords were always hill people through and through. My father, his father, and his father's father – Walfords way back beyond memory have only ever lived high on the moors. From Lydeard in the south, to the great headland at West Quantoxhead in the north – those uplands have been our domain.

My father did what his father did, and his before him. He made charcoal and he cut broom to make the brushes which he sold down in the villages of the vales. That is why, long ago, we came to be known as Broomsquires. Famous from hamlet to town were we, dressed in our great blue capes, carrying our bundles of brooms.

Famous but few. When I was born you could count the number

of broomsquires on one hand. Now, I believe, my passing will see the end of us. In my short lifetime this traditional existence of ours has been eroded by the promise of comfort. Life is hard up there on the hill and, one by one, my compatriots have taken the lure of cottages and paid work. The Quantock broomsquires are now, or soon will be, a race of the past.

My father was a great broomsquire. A man whose doings were renown from Bridgwater to Barnstaple. A man, it is said, who could knock down a stag with a single blow. A man who knew more country-lore by the time he was a dozen years of age than most wiseacres do in three-score years and ten.

Much of his time was spent in the woods at the shrouded and unseen job of charcoal burning, which is endless and wearisome work unless you are born to it and then, somehow, the slow rhythm of the moil marks time deep within your soul. Although we are known as broomsquires, it is the charcoal that brings us in a large part of our meagre income. Somehow it is easy to put down in words the basics of our existence, but it is more than a story of work; it is a way of life, and to do it, to understand it, you must live it. The charcoal burner must tend his kiln day and night for weeks at a time and often my father would not venture from the forest for a month. But he was never lonely, for we lived there with him in the woods. It is a world of green darkness smeared with smoke and steam. A world of ceaseless toil made bearable, at least it seems to me now, by the fragrance of the smoke mixed with the leafy, lush, verdant, fungal smell of the woods. There's many, I am sure, who would dislike that aroma, but for me it was the essence of home.

It is strange how, when you miss something, you think of its scents and smells. Sound too, is evocative and ours was a life eased by the gentleness of birdsong, yaffle-call, fox-bark, stag-bulving, axe-fall and the music of the lark.

Apart from the charcoal burning, there is the gathering of oak bark for the tanning works owned by a man we shall hear more of in my narrative. This is a springtime job when the bark is stripped as the sap is rising. The bark is levered off then stacked to dry before being taken down to the tannery.

But the work that gives us our name is the wild harvest of the broom out on the sunlit, windblown heath. That is a lonely and yet

invigorating time. A life of vista and clean air, followed by weeks of manufacture which would see the whole family sitting around the camp tying the brooms. Once they were made, my father – like all broomsquires – would be off on his travels to sell the brushes and we would not see him for weeks as he collected, and spent, his coins. When I say we, I mean mother, my three sisters Sylvestra and Avice and Petronilla, my brother William, and me – the youngest.

First memories. There's a thing to bring tears to a man consigned to die. Essences – dreamy, misty glimpses of babyhood – flood and choke a battered soul. The darkness of the hut. Sheepskin. The oily scent and touch of lamb's wool. First impressions of the warm void of the smoke filled hut. The soft, creamy, unforgettable smell of mother. My mother's perpetual presence, somehow indeterminate – she came and went with her gentle grace and I knew not why she should ever put me down. I craved her soft arms, her milky breast. Even now I can recall the longing.

Other details begin to crowd. Always the rank breath of dog and the friendly warm slipperiness of their tongues. My sisters falling out with each other and shouting, or laughing, or playing with me as if I were some kind of an inanimate doll. The sound of metal upon metal associated with the aroma of food – utensils stirring whatever was in the big pot. And music. There was always music in the Walford camp. The violin would haunt the place and somehow dictate its very mood.

William pinching me to make me cry. Flies, moths, lamps and then outside – birds, butterflies, the dogs chasing each other, my sisters' laughter, the muffled echoey sounds from the woods, ant-bites, ants, bees, flutterbies. The hot earth under my naked back while I gazed up at white drifting clouds. Clouds that stayed still while the earth shot past on its way to a world of childish reverie. The minutiae of intense fascination in the vast blank of eternity: that is the lot of the small, watchful child.

And then there was the great presence. The man. Strong, a little fearsome, and always somehow thrilling. The enormous blue cape of my father darkening the door. The first memories of being borne aloft in his strong arms. The feel of his beard upon my face. His soft crooning voice, sometimes whispering to me – often singing his strange meaningless songs as he played the violin. For him, selecting

notes on that instrument was something akin to breathing. It was as effortless as the southing of wind in the trees.

My father would come and go, seemingly without reason, at any time of the day or night. But when he returned it was always me that he caressed with his beaming affection. From those early days until the moment he died, there was no-one on earth I looked up to more. And until much later there was no-one I loved more, but that was to change, as you shall hear. Of course I loved my mother dearly too, but I was a boy, living far out in the depths of the hills, a father is an all-powerful thing. What knowledge, what strength and courage he must have, to come and go as if there was nothing to it. To step beyond the forest.

One of earliest memories is of him coming into the clearing carrying a dead stag on his shoulders. I must have been about three or four years of age and I recall mother fretting because my father had taken a terrible risk in killing the beast. Within minutes the noble, stinking animal was being butchered; its once powerful limbs, cut asunder. The fartings and stench of its guts. The dogs going mad, ripping the foul innards apart in a frenzy. Father's hands would carry the sharp acrid smell of deer-meat for days. But the venison kept us in food for a midwinter month and even now in this dank cell I can smell the savoury roasting of its flesh. Other times it would be a sheep or a lamb, more often there were rabbits, hares or wild birds. My father made sure that his family had flesh to eat and in later years he taught me to steal, quietly, stealthily, for the pot.

We cooked over an open fire, outside if it was fine weather, inside if there was rain or snow. Then the hut would fill with smoke even though there was a flap in the roof. We had one enormous pot and so most of our meals would be served as stew or broth, though sometimes good meat was spit-roasted over the fire. Both mother and father knew of herbs and mushrooms that would add a luxuriance and interest to the meals. That same old pot still hangs above my fire. Or maybe it doesn't anymore. Anyway, by the age of six I had learned many of these culinary tricks and I have used them to help me enjoy my food ever since.

Indeed the hunt for food afforded me my first adventure away from the camp. I was taken by father to a fish-weir down on the coast while my mother and sisters prepared for our annual move.

Every year we moved from one small coombe to another so that father could begin coppicing fresh woodland. These were always fraught periods and as a small boy I disliked the disruption of it all. Our meagre family belongings had to be packed in groundsheets and tarpaulins which my father told me were sails of ships that had wrecked along the coast. He liked the sea and its shore, and was forever going down there for fish, prawns, shrimps, limpets, cockles, mussels, laver and the like. As I grew older I discovered that he did more besides collect the harvest of the sea, but on this day mother had made up her mind that he should take me with him. They fell into a dispute, but I had noticed that she often got the best of the great man when it came to the domestic side of things. I was plucked from a corner and hoisted to the lofty ramparts of father's wide shoulders, and so began my first journey beyond the woods.

Within a dozen minutes we had gone farther than I'd ever ventured before. We were climbing out of the coombe through the low, thick hoar oak that covers so much of the Quantocks' eastern flanks. Suddenly we were out on the high heath and I had never seen such space before. I did not know the sky could be so big. The great hill seemed to curve away forever.

"Look around you Johnny, for this is your home," said my father as we topped the ridge. "This is the kingdom of the Walfords. It was the kingdom of the ancient people from whom our seed has sprung. Look at it son, and remember."

I do remember. There, across the valley from which we had just emerged, was the circular rampart of Dowsborough with its ancient fort, now just an earthy bank. Father told me our people had once fought great battles there. Below us, on the same ridge, was Lower Hare Knap and beyond were fields stretching across smaller hills to the sea.

The sea. Blue and grey and vast. Beyond it you could see the black hills of Wales. My father pointed to the villages far below and said we'd be passing through them on our way to the shore. I could see why we'd come to the ridge which cut down through the maze of coombes and by following it we could make good ground. So began my education in the little known art of travelling fast in hill country. No-one can cross moors and heaths, valleys and coombes quicker than a broomsquire. We know the secret ways – how to use

each dip and tuck to advance us on our way. On foot, I have beaten a horseman crossing the length of the Quantocks. Only a broomsquire could cover such ground in such time, and I did it barely breaking into a sweat.

At Kilve we saw buildings and I was taken aback to learn that people dwelt in such places. To me they looked like upright caves. Windows, glass, chimneys, thatch, the smells of cooking, the chatter of men together, men on horseback, oxen ploughing, donkeys braying, the screech of the pump, the ring of the blacksmith's hammer - all were new to the little boy from the hills. Father spoke to various people, who all seemed to know him and there was a good deal of banter and laughter. It wasn't long before we entered one of the buildings. Inside I recognised the beery, cidery smells because they had often come home on father's breath. The people in the room made a great fuss of me and I was given an apple and a hunk of cheese.

Then we were on the beach. The great, grey, endless, rocky beach that reveals itself at Kilve Pill when the tide goes out. There was the smell of salt and mud, seaweed and ooze. My father was talking to an old man dressed in rags - to this day I have never seen anyone adorned more filthily than Montague Chidgey. The word unkempt does not do justice to his wild appearance. Nor have I ever seen the face of a man more creased and pitted with lines and grooves. This visage was black-brown in colour and it had the texture of a rock that has been scraped by barnacles for a thousand years. Montague was a mud-horse fisherman and a glatsman -and it seemed father had some sort of understanding with him over the fishing. My presence though, seemed to be causing Monty some concern.

"Leave 'un up 'ere on the grass," the old fisherman was saying. "There'll be a good haul of pilchard and herring if I know ort about it and us'll 'ave our 'and's full enuff as tis."

But my father was having none of it. And I was placed on the top of Montague's 'horse'. This was a wooden sledge with a trestle that carried the big basket in which the fish would be thrown. It was all a mystery to me that first day, but the basis of the business was that the fisherman employed the services of the tide to help him catch his haul, rather than set to sea in a boat.

"You'll never catch I in one o' they boats," he once told me. "They'm dangerous things. What do ee wan' 'em fur when the sea will bring the fish to thee?"

He had two ways of trapping fish. The first we came across that day was an enormous 'V' shaped wall made from loose stones. The point of the 'V' was nearest the sea so, as the tide went out, fish would be caught in the narrowest end where a wattle gate let out the water, but not the catch.

Then, even further down the beach, there were the long, sock-like nets hung between poles. The mud-horse gave Monty an easy way out to these and I soon saw the beauty of the thing as he pushed it effortlessly across the sea of ooze. The two men busied themselves at the nets while great flocks of birds wheeled about hoping for a morsel. Indeed, a use was soon found for me and I spent a happy hour chasing the crows and gulls.

Later, in Monty's dark, aromatic home I had my second memorable meal that day. He boiled shrimps in a cauldron and put still flapping flat fish into a huge spitting skillet.

The old man's bright eyes seemed to gleam from the darkness and I had the feeling some distant thought had stirred a wave far out on the salty horizon of his life.

"Mind the bones boy," he sighed, and the three of us sat there in darkness of the hut and ate in a silence that was broken only by cracks from the fire and the sound of the two men swigging from their flasks. Eventually they talked of the glat-hunt where men go out with small dogs to hunt conger eels that lie in crevices in the tide pools, it is the favourite sport of the poor men of the coast. And the herring. They talked of the herring season when vast shoals of fish would be caught and put in barrels to be sent across to what they called plantations somewhere across the ocean.

After that first outing father would often take me along on his travels. We liked each other's company and somehow I knew when to be silent and when to chat and laugh. We often returned to the beach and I do believe old Monty grew fond of me. Indeed I know he did because, when he died years later, he bequeathed me his mudhorse, glatting hooks and nets.

But I recall other characters from those early days. There was

mad Marmaduke who crossed and recrossed the hills driving a herd of imaginary cattle. He spent his entire days ranting and raving at the cows that never were – but, so real were his words and actions that my father swore he could see the flies around the heads of the phantom beasts.

Then there were the Greenslades whose peculiar abode we'd often visit on our travels. Mr Greenslade had been a broomsquire until the rheumatics made life on the hill unbearable for him. After that the Parish wanted to put the old couple in the Poor-House, but no broomsquire could survive that, so Fenwick and Mercy Greenslade had finally settled under the buttress of a disused church tower. The main body of the church had been ruined in some violent storm of old so only the tower remained, but it was in a quiet dell out of the wind and rain, and few people ever passed that way. The old couple were quite content with their eccentric home. We'd call in occasionally and take them a rabbit, or whatever, and father and I would listen as they talked of the old ways of the broomsquires before the numbers died away.

When the Parson tried to evict them from their home, my father went to see a wonderful man – a great man – who, I am proud to say, was to become a true friend of mine. Mr Thomas Poole was the finest kind of friend a man could ever have and father knew him because he was the gentleman who owned the tannery that bought in the bark we stripped. We had walked down off the hill to the village of Stowey to see if there was anything he could do to help the Greenslades keep their home. Knocking at the door of the largest house, father gave his name and we were shown to the back where we found ourselves in an area the likes of which I'd never seen before. "Tis a garden Johnny," said father in a whisper. Even he seemed daunted by the intricate, domesticated arrangement of the place. Any amount of flowers and shrubs grew in rows and we walked down a path made up of thousands of beach pebbles laid on end. This entered a kind of tunnel that was ablaze with roses and, after a few yards, there was a bend that gave out upon a wonderful spot which the servant had called Mr Poole's lime tree bower.

There the great man sat. It was the first time I'd seen anyone wearing spectacles and, for that matter, it was the first time I'd seen paper or writing. For that was what he was doing – writing with a

quill pen. He looked up and asked if we would mind if he continued for just a moment and so I was able to study this person – his hair was close-cropped on the sides, but the top of his head shone bald. He had a large nose that stretched down between two squinting eyes and a ruddy face that looked as if it had been out in all weathers. I must say he frightened me a bit, for he had about him a rough, tough air that spoke of indefatigable determination.

At last Mr Poole looked up and nodded to my father, then gazed down through the small half-lenses at me: "So you are Johnny," he said, "I have been looking forward to the honour of meeting you."

He continued: "If I cognise anything about it, I should say that you, young man, could become the last of the broomsquires. And the world will be a sadder place."

Father ran his fingers through my hair and said: "You are right Mr Poole. He is my joy and yet he stands for the sadness of my ancient race."

I had never heard my father talk in that way before. The gravity with which he addressed the gentleman was not his usual patter – as a rule he swore a lot and joked even more – but now he chose his words carefully and there was a thoughtful softness in his voice.

My father told Mr Poole about the plight of the old couple and the great man listened with his chin buried in his hand. It seemed he held some sway in church matters and he promised he'd see to it that Fenwick and Mercy would be left undisturbed.

"I am sure that God in His charitable wisdom would make the redundant temple open to them – for fresh air is the only other occupant the place shall ever have, save for a bat or two."

When it came time for us to leave he saw me gazing at his books and said: "Writing Johnny. Writing and reading. Tis a thing that you shall learn one day by the look of you."

"Not with the name Walford he won't," replied my father. "Not one of us ever has."

"Then I shall wager that Johnny here will be the first," laughed Mr Poole.

There were many other folk who, I am proud to say, I came to know during those early years, but there were no children save for the three sisters and my strange older brother William. It is with great regret that I have to write of the rift that has always existed

between we two brothers. I do not know what started it or why it grew from bad to worse, but his dislike of me certainly became more obvious as the years went by. He showed no desire to be in father's company, and yet William hated me for being our parent's son and friend.

As I say, for the first part of my life there were no other children I could play with up there in the hills, but the day did come when I found a companion. She was called Anne Rice.

Anne Rice. I repeat the name because thoughts of Anne lie heavy upon me. And because of such thoughts, I shall go to my grave laden with regret.

I must have been six or seven years of age and we had finished making one of our seasonal moves and were now situated in Ladies Combe, high above the village of Holford. One fine spring morning my father seemed to be in a frame of mind that matched the weather – there came a moment when he caught my eye and jerked his head in the direction of the woods. Within a minute we were halfway down the coombe and father was telling me that we were off to visit a place he was certain I'd like to see.

It wasn't a long journey. Just ten minutes later were entering the orchards and gardens that surrounded the huge clanking, groaning darkness of Harold Rice's mill. As we walked down the side of the leat father was explaining the basic workings of the place and he showed me where the runnel spilt over a wooden shute to turn the gigantic wheel.

Gaze at a water wheel – watch its continuous motion – and you can experience a kind of mesmerising trance. That's what happened to me that morning as we stood there surrounded by barking dogs and scratching fowl. So entranced was I by the hypnotic motion of the wheel, that I started to fall.

Father had me hold in a trice and he laughed and said that the same had happened to him when he was a boy. I was shocked by the effect, and it was a second or two before I realised that we were not alone. There, above the roar of the water and clank of the wheel, was a tiny bell-like laugh, and I looked around to see a small girl sitting on a wall. She was dressed in white and never before had I seen anyone so perfect and clean and untarnished by the general muck of the countryside. It was like looking at a creature from a

different world. My mother often spoke about the folk she called 'gentry' and I could only think that this creature was a small example of that race. It was her hair that struck me most. Where my sisters had wild locks that flew this way and that, this child's golden mane was groomed to perfection. It gleamed and shone in the sunlight. So amazed was I by the look of her, that I forgot to consider my own pride. I'd certainly have given her short shrift had I realised she was laughing at me.

"Morning ma'am," said my father taking off his hat and bowing towards the girl in what I could only think was a gesture of mock grandeur. "I have brought my son Johnny here to look at the splendour of your father's mill."

The girl stopped laughing and suddenly she was gone – over the other side of the wall she disappeared from view, but after a moment I could see her running up across the big orchard towards some barns.

We went into the mill and father spoke to a couple of white dusty men. Soon they were showing us how the corn was ground to make flour when another man entered – a big man with a rolling chin and a large moustache – and he grunted at the men to get back to their work. From that moment, I took a dislike to Harold Rice. He had a sneering, aloof way about him. Perhaps I'd become over-accustomed to being made a fuss of and was unused to people who paid me no heed, for wherever I went people seemed to take to me – I don't know why. But Rice took no notice of me. I caught his eye for a fleeting second and then I was dismissed from his mind and father told me to go outside and play as he had business to attend to.

I dared not go back to study the wheel. There was something about its suppressed power that frightened me. Instead I found a gate that led through the wall into the orchard. I probably had some idea of seeing the girl again, for she certainly fascinated me, but the orchard seemed empty save for half a dozen sheep and some swine that were snorting in a pen. I leaned on the fence and the pigs made such a fuss of my arrival that I was glad there was a barrier between us. For some minutes I stood there, fascinated by the antics of the porkers, and suppose I must have been some kind of reverie because I didn't hear the girl come up beside me.

"Did your father tell you about the Sprite of the Wheel?" she asked.

"What d'you mean?" I stammered, startled by her sudden appearance.

"Did he tell you? He must have," she insisted. "That's why you were gazing into the wheel."

"Sorry Miss," I stuttered. "But I really don't know what you're sayin'."

"Well, your knees gave way didn't they?" she laughed. "I saw you falling and your father had to catch you. Why did that happen? You must have asked your father - he must have explained what made you fall."

"He didn't. Father only said the same 'appened to him."

"Then what do you think it was that started to pull you down?" she asked. "It would have done, you know, had your father not been there to catch you."

I could only shrug.

"It was the sprite of course," she laughed. "The sprite of the wheel is the most powerful thing in this valley. He doesn't have to say anything, he doesn't have to reach out to pull you in. Down there, in that great wheel, all he has to do is think hard and in you'll go."

My face may have shown fear because the girl seemed delighted by the effect her tale was having. I'd heard my parents talking of the elfin folk, and they told stories about the gribbins who'd steal children away at night. But in those moments in the orchard, this sprite of the wheel was far more awesome, if only because I'd felt his power.

"Never mind about him now," she smiled the girl. "The sprite's only dangerous when you stare at the wheel. He doesn't like it."

With that she span away to march off through the fruit trees and, without turning, she beckoned me to follow. When I caught up with her and asked where we were going she whispered something about knowing where the apples were stored. Through another gate we came to a yard where we climbed a flight of outdoor stone steps to a huge dusty loft. In the darkest corner, wooden racks were stacked one on top of another, and each was filled with a single layer of apples. The girl grabbed a fruit in each hand, and we were off

again, through a door and into another loft which was stuffed to the eaves with hay. Crawling through the hot dusty stooks I followed her to the front end of the barn where an open door gave out upon the yard. In the warm gloom just inside this vantage point, the girl and I disposed of our stolen fruit. From somewhere she produced a small, pearl-handled knife and peeled the soft wrinkled skin of the apples and handed bits to me.

"These are last year's," she said. "They look horrible with those old skins but bite and see - they're sweet and juicy as if they were new."

They were, and I swear I can taste the fragrant tang of those fruit now.

We talked of our lives and I painted a proud picture of life on the hill. She spoke of the many people who visited the mill and how she attended them at tea. It seemed that I was supposed to be impressed by the high standing of these people, but I'd never heard of any of them, until she mentioned Mr Thomas Poole and I told her I knew him, and that he was my father's friend.

That hour, lying there in the hay looking down upon the sunlit yard with was one of the happiest of my life. I was intoxicated by Anne Rice, and I think she liked me well enough. At any rate, she told me a good deal about herself - how her mother had died giving birth to her and that ever since her father said she was an angel sent from God.

"Will you come to see me again Johnny?" she asked when we heard my father shouting my name and were scurrying back through the hay.

"I hope so," I replied. And she smiled and turned to pull some of the hay off my clothes as we walked out into the sunshine.

"Don't tell anyone where we've been," she grinned. "I'd be in terrible trouble with father if he knew about the apples, and the hayloft is my secret place."

Some months later Mr Poole came to our camp and had words with my father. The two men went off to the edge of the clearing to talk and I was surprised to see father become agitated. But Mr Poole kept pressing his point and eventually father was reduced to shrugging his massive shoulders and shaking his head. I thought it must be some fuss over Mr and Mrs Greenslade's sacred home, but

the talk, it transpired, was about me.

Eventually they both came over to where I was sitting carving a stick near the fire. Father said: "There's to be a new school down in the village and Mr Poole has offered, very kindly, to pay for you to attend. It's a handsome offer indeed Johnny, and you must thank him with all your heart. The learning will provide you with great opportunities."

I could hardly understand the words my father had said. A school? What was a school? When the gentleman had gone and my sisters had exploded from their unaccustomed hush, father started to explain the thing to mother. But I said: "If it is such a good thing, this school, why were you so cross when you were talking about it with Mr Poole?"

He picked me up just like he used to do when I was younger (I was about eight by now and he hadn't done it for a time) and he whispered: "Because, my lad, you are your father's dear friend, and I shall miss our journeyings and adventures together."

I was unhappy for days. Never did a son love his father more than I. The life of the hill was all I knew and I was none too keen on the idea of this thing called a school. But the day came and father took me down to the house on the edge of the village which had been opened as an establishment for elementary education, and I went in biting my lip.

There are several things I wish to say about my experiences there. The first is that I never felt entirely comfortable being pent-up inside the classroom and there were times when my old carefree life on the hills came back to haunt me. Added to that I initially had problems with the village boys, who thought it fine sport to bait an outcast like me. For that is what I realised I was, perhaps it is what I have always been. They had already sorted themselves into some sort of pecking order and Johnny Walford entered at the bottom of the pile. Perhaps there was something different about me – they knew it, and I knew it – I was not of their kind and at first they were determined to make me pay dearly for entering their preserve. I was bullied, but that didn't last long. Although I was younger than many of the lads and not as large as some, I beat each and every one of them soundly until they thought better of picking on a young broomsquire. It wasn't long before their dislike of me turned to

grudging respect, and one or two of the boys began to regard me as a friend.

I have always been of a cheerful frame of mind and I have noticed over the years that people never dislike a spirited person for long. It is not a thing I have worked at, I was simply born of a cheerful disposition and the few large clouds that have darkened my horizons have rarely managed to wipe away my smile. Which is ironic in a way, because the complete reverse of this rule could be applied to my brother William. By the time I started attending the school he, being a few years older, had moved to the village of East Quantoxhead to work for a blacksmith, for he had never taken to the ways of the broomsquires. When I occasionally saw him he would only scowl, and never speak. William was never happy. Not once did I ever see him laugh.

After a month or two I'd either won round my enemies or clubbed them sufficiently so they wouldn't bother me any more. As for the school work I took to it with all the ease of a young stag taking to the woods. I learned reading and writing at a gallop and I could twist or turn this way or that without so much as a slip or stumble as we changed from one subject to another. I never really knew if the Master, Mr Barker, liked me or not, to begin with he seemed to regard me with suspicion and I was often caned for scrapping with the village lads, but as time went on he began to soften in his regards for me. After a year or so he'd get me to help the others with their learning.

There was another reason why I took to school: Anne Rice joined at much the same time as me and she, of course, was my special friend. We would walk to and from school together, which was a natural thing to do as I had to pass her father's mill on my way from the hill. We would have been inseparable had Anne not insisted that her father should never see us together. So we would meet in a glade of trees just down from the mill. I recall one occasion when my father came with me on some errand of his own – and when I said I had to wait in the trees it seemed to irk him in some way and he asked me if I thought I wasn't good enough for the miller's daughter. Even in those early days father probably saw the writing on the wall, but he left well alone and not a word more did he say on the matter. Anne arrived and he swept off his hat and bowed in

the same mock fashion that he'd done months before by the water wheel, and then the three of us walked to the village and father made us laugh telling us some tall story or other.

There was something which drew me to Anne. It was inexplicable. Magnetic. Like the sprite that bided in her father's water wheel. Having lost her mother, and as daughter to the second wealthiest man in the parish, she could easily have been a haughty, unbearable child, spoilt beyond redemption. But she was not. Anne was the warmest, most loving human being I have ever known, and loved. For that was what was to become of it. So close was this childhood friendship between us, that I suppose it was bound to blossom into something greater and more perilous one fateful day.

But that day was not yet. We were still children and we were happy as the day was long. Throughout that autumn and long cold winter, those school-bound journeys gladdened my heart. Just seeing Anne was enough to put a smile upon my face and I believe I had the same affect her. A shared joke would have us helpless with mirth and more than once we fell into a hedge weakened by great gusts of mutual laughter. But in those early days Anne was the wise leader of our little pack of two. I did what she bid, it was as simple as that. Her imagination left mine standing and sometimes she'd scold me for being a dullard. Once, and once only, she made a fool of me. It was one autumn evening when we had arranged to meet after school. I was supposed to have gone straight off home to help mother with the chores, but was easily persuaded to forget this promise and soon we were climbing the steep wooded bank above the mill to where Anne had another of her little dens. After a while she must have noticed some look of concern shadowing my face because she asked what was troubling me. I told her how my mother had been unwell for some days and how I ought to be on my way home to help her with the fire.

"I'll come," said Anne. "I'll come and help. It's only ten minutes up the coombe you say, and I would like to see this camp of yours."

I was hesitant to say the least, but soon we were being licked by the dogs as we entered our camp. The visit, as I had feared, was not a success. Mother was overcome by what I can only describe as panic - I had never seen her in such a state. The appearance of Anne seemed to alarm her and she kept repeating: "Oh Miss Rice, you

never should have come. What will your father say? He won't want you visiting a broomsquire's camp, I know that for sure."

Anne was upset: "Don't you want me to be here Mrs Walford?"

"That's not it my dear," said mother wiping her long hair from her smoked smeared face. "That's not it at all. It's a great honour to have you here, but I'm afraid that Mr Rice would think our camp beneath you. We don't want to get you into any trouble. You better take Miss Rice home Johnny and, if her visit's not mentioned, no harm can come of it."

I asked who would do my chores, but she shewed us away - past my sisters (at least the two who were left at home, Sylvestra was married to Jeremia Luck by then) who had been standing with their mouths agape at the site of Anne.

"I'm sorry Anne," I said perplexed, "I have never seen mother like that before and I can't think what she means by it."

"Your mother is probably right. My father can get angry sometimes." Then she added: "But tell me. Do you really all live and sleep in that awful little hut?"

Her question stung me and, after I had said goodbye to her, I walked home feeling very much out of sorts. That night I heard mother and father quarrelling about what had happened. But worst of all for me was the aftermath which was to occur the next day.

In the yard at school a group of girls took delight in ridiculing me so that tears began to sting my eyes. I wasn't used to this and couldn't remember the last time I'd cried, and I ran home without going to the afternoon lessons. They taunted me as I ran: "Johnny lives in the wo-ods, A gypsy, a gypsy, a gypsy."

Anne had obviously told them about our camp and the next morning I was still so angry I didn't wait for her in the glade below the mill but marched on to school alone. I heard Anne calling for me to stop, but I didn't. I tramped on so that she had to run to catch me up.

Only when she manoeuvred herself in front to bar my way did I stop. "Johnny I am sorry. So, so sorry. I have been crying all night and father said he wasn't going to let me come to school because he thought I was ill. You are my very, very best friend Johnny Walford and I shouldn't have told those stupid girls about the place where you live. I will never, ever, do anything to hurt you again."

With that she lifted her hand and passed it through my long curly brown hair and smiled her beautiful sad smile. "Are we friends?" she asked, and I smiled back and said we were, but had to try very hard to keep back yet more of my unaccustomed tears.

Anne Rice was good to her word. She never did me a disservice again, although her loveliness, her very being, has inspired the main strata of grief that has run through the bedrock of my life.

A year or more went by and we moved once or twice from one copse to another, but always in the same system of valleys so the mill remained on my route to school. Consequently I was happy to set out in the mornings no matter what the weather. Not even the winter snows prevented me from making that journey down the coombe. I was growing bigger and stronger, which was just as well because there was a week just before Christmas-tide when the drifts were waist deep and took some striding through. But each morning I'd be waiting for Anne in the glade where there was one mighty old beech that was so voluminous its tangled roots made a small cave. In the worse weather I'd huddle up in there where it was always dry and comparatively warm out of the wind. I used to enjoy that cosy nook where you could listen in comfort to the sougling of the great trees above. Anne would often bring some morsel in her bag and she seemed to enjoy feeding me with the wonders of her father's pantry. I'd never had food like it. A piece of pie, or wedge of cake, a bit of pudding wrapped in muslin, fresh bread with jam, strong cheese tucked into a small, nutty roll. All these made a handsome change for a broomsquire's boy.

There were other delights in this new life of mine. Once a month I had to report to Mr Poole who'd quiz me over what I'd learned at school. And here too I'd enjoy the bounties of that mysterious domestic treasure house called the pantry. Mr Poole would instruct his cook to "give Johnny a dainty or two" if, and when, I provided him with enough satisfactory answers to convince him my schooling was progressing at an acceptable rate. It always was. My Saturday afternoon visits to the great man's house grew longer as time went by.

"You are a bright lad, Johnny," he used to say. "Undoubtedly a shade or two above the rest. I always knew it would be so, from that first moment I set eyes upon you. Your father is an intelligent fellow,

though he'd never admit to such a charge – and I believe that your mother is too. I am not sure why they insist upon banishing themselves to the discomforts of the hill, but I suppose your father has some notion of ancestral leanings and feels it is his place."

On that occasion I answered him thus: "But it is a wonderful life Mr Poole. There is no life better and cleaner than that of the broomsquire. That is what my father says, and I believe him."

"You surely cannot think that," he replied, waving his hand at the vast, dark, oak panelled room that we were in. "Not now you have tasted learning and wisdom and seen the life that it can bring."

"I believe that I shall always be proud to be a broomsquire, Sir. I am glad of the learning you have given me, but father has taught me to love the hill and I'd find it difficult to live down in a village like my brother William."

Mr Poole then said something that caused a shadow to pass across my cloudless horizon. He said: "I wonder Johnny, how long you will feel like that. Times are changing. People and their expectations are changing. Take your friend Anne Rice for example. Can you imagine what she would think of a man who lived in a simple hut with a face black from charcoal smoke?"

My face wasn't black, but it must have turned bright red, because dear Mr Poole suddenly seemed to regret what he'd said. "Never mind Johnny," he laughed. "You have some growing up to do yet and things and ideas will change for you, just as they do for everybody else."

He rang a bell and when the cook materialised, asked to her to supply me with a handkerchief full of morsels. But I was bothered to the extent that I couldn't look at the food. I suppose, now that I think of it, I'd never had occasion to look into the future before that moment – and, without knowing it, Mr Poole had installed in me a conundrum that I'd puzzle over for the rest of my life. It boiled down to what Andrew Crosse would later call the juxtaposition within me. My education and my love of Anne Rice, both lured me away from the hills. But my own nature, my sweet shadow-free upbringing, the way father nurtured my wild soul up on those great empty moors... All these things pulled me back to the high places.

Midwinter came with a vengeance that year. Great snows fell and settled for months turning Quantocks' coombes crisp and

white. Not that the cold ever put me off going to school which, by that time, was teaching me a lot more than letters and numbers. For example: I'd never been to church and so services, hymns and prayers were all foreign to me. We'd never paid much heed to religion, so the great fuss and excitement that seemed to overtake the school at Christmastide took me by surprise. The enigma of it started on the morning of December 21st when Mr Baker told us we could take the afternoon off so that we could enjoy what he called "the usual nonsensities". When I asked the other boys what he meant by this they told me it was Mumping Day. Mumping meant going around the village and banging on the doors of wealthier folk to demand a small gift of some sort. It was the one day of the year when the poorer children were given free licence to beg. And so my classroom compatriots were in a frenzy of excitement as the afternoon drew closer and Mr Baker had his work cut out keeping the school in check.

Anne though, who was usually in the midst of such revelries, remained gloomily aloof. Later, as the children exploded from the schoolroom in a frenzy of excitement, she gathered her things and, looking up at me, said: "Go on Johnny - you must go with them. I shall walk home by myself."

"Why? Why aren't you joining the others in the mumping?"

"It is for the poorer children Johnny," she replied. "And father has forbidden me to go. But you must join in. You might enjoy it - who knows what treats you might collect."

I didn't go, but walked home with Anne, crunching the frozen puddles in the lane and wondering what I was to do with the rest of this unexpected free afternoon. For her part Anne was filled with guilt, although I tried to assure her that I had not really been taken the idea of mumping anyway. She was determined to make it up to me and soon devised a plan that saw us sneaking up to the hay loft that was the venue for our first meeting. This time though, we had with us an entire feast of excellent foodstuffs that she'd managed to glean from the cook. We lay close to each other for warmth in the hay and talked in whispers and watched our plumes of breath rise into the darkness of the barn. It was dark because now the big end door was closed except for a crack where we could watch to see if anyone might be coming our way.

"This is better than mumping," whispered Anne. "I'm so glad you didn't go Johnny. I hate to be alone when I know that everyone else is having a time of it. And I'd forgotten that father is away for the day, and so we should be quite safe up here for the afternoon."

We lay there in the warm hay and I could feel the electric closeness of her as we whispered and laughed and talked of this and that. We were not yet twelve years of age, so we were quite innocent, but for me it was pleasant and soothing to feel Anne's fingers slowly passing through my hair.

"I love your hair Johnny," she whispered at one point. "It's so thick and yet fine. You are by far the most handsome boy in the whole of Somersetshire."

There was a thing that made me smile for many a long cold winter day. No mumping gift could beat that. Anne though, never stayed on a subject for long and soon she was hatching another scheme. This one was aimed at the night of Christmas Eve when, she'd heard, all the animals in a farmer's manger would bow in honour of the Lord. We had to see it for ourselves, she said, and it would be easy as there was going to be a midnight service in the church and we could sneak out to her uncle's farm next door to witness this holy mystery. I, of course, was none too sure. The Walford family, I knew, would not be making plans to attend a midnight mass.

I have just one other memory of that Mumping Day and that is my meeting with Anne's father shortly after I had left the mill. It was in the gloaming and new snow had just started to fall. I was making my way back to the hill with only the slight hiss that snow makes when it falls for company, and I realised it was just as well I'd taken my leave when I had because here was old man Rice coming up the lane, swaying precariously on his big cob horse.

"Whoa - who goes there!" he shouted like some old soldier on patrol. "Come on boy, show me your face."

"Tis Johnny Walford Sir," said I, trembling in my boots.

"Ah Walford. Bin out a-mumpin I suppose. Seein' what you can scrounge from the hard workin' folk have you?"

I didn't answer, and to my surprise he reached in his pocked and threw down a silver sixpence which I managed to catch.

"There. That'll round off what I take has been a profitable day.

And now away with you back to your hill. You've no need to come to my house a-mumpin' now. I don't want my daughter embarrassed by such things."

There was something within me that wanted to fling the coin straight back in his fat unpleasant face, but I bowed my head and mumbled some sort of thanks.

I knew little of my mother's history, for it was never discussed. My father could be a domineering man in many respects and, when it came to the past and ancestry, all we heard was the tale of the broomsquires. But it began to dawn upon me, around about that time, that my mother was not of the ancient stock and that there seemed to be a blanket of silence laid over her past.

"You are a true broomsquire Johnny," father used to say. "A man of the hills. We are different from the valley folk, never forget that. We come from a prouder, older people."

Perhaps it was this aloof pride of his that made him angry when I mentioned I was planning to go to the Midnight Mass. But things soon got worse – he was rendered almost speechless with rage when mother announced that she would like to join me. The battle lasted two whole days but, for once, father's will faltered and we found ourselves preparing for our first ever family outing to the church. When I say family, I mean mother, myself, Avice and Petronilla. When the night of Christmas Eve grew dark, father was nowhere to be found. We learned later that he was entrenched with a half a dozen unholy ne'er-do-wells in the Castle of Comfort Inn.

Mother never looked more splendid. For hours she and the girls had banished me to a corner of the hut while they prepared themselves for the great outing. Where mother found the clothes I had no idea, normally she wore layer upon layer of rags, but here she was in a proper dress and coat along with something that she rather majestically described as a hat. I had never seen an object like it in our home or anywhere else for that matter, and begged her not to wear the thing for fear that my classmates might see. But she insisted that it was a very good hat and that she had owned it for years.

"You are the man of the house tonight," she said as she handed me the lantern. Then we were off down the coombe, crunching the brittle, frosted grass beneath our feet; my hands stinging with cold

as I held the lamp aloft. A cosy sight we must have made, making our way along in our pool of yellow light, through the trees with everything else glinting silver under the great full moon. We didn't need the lantern, you could have read a book in the moonlight, but mother insisted on keeping it lit and soon we were passing Anne's home and the great, dark, silent mill. A few minutes later we heard the clatter of hooves and the grinding of metal wheels and had to press ourselves into the hedge as Mr Rice, his daughter and their housekeeper clattered by in a governess cart.

"Make way," shouted the miller, although we already had. As they flew past I caught Anne's eye in the light of my lantern and glimpsed the flash of her smile.

At church a great crowd had congregated outside the door. People were in a festive mood and most of them, I imagine, had been at the punch. As soon as we entered the churchyard I handed the lantern to one of my sisters and was off among the graves to the far wall where I was to meet Anne under the yews. She was already there and the moment she saw me she turned to open a gate that led through to a farmyard. It belonged to her uncle and she obviously knew her way well. Without saying a word, she led me across to the byre where the stock was kept, and we could hear the deep huffing and snorting of the cattle. Anne lit a candle and we stood in silence looking at a scene. It could have been the manger where Jesus was born.

"What's meant to happen next?" I whispered.

"When the clock strikes midnight the master bullock – probably that one there," said Anne pointing at a particularly large beast, "will low three times. At least, that's what the legend says – and he should kneel with his front legs bowed towards the manger."

We waited and after a while the clock chimed the midnight hour. Anne held her breath and so did I. The big bullock slowly took another mouthful of hay and continued his slow methodical chewing as if this second was like any other in his life. But we heard a lowing. And then another and another. Three times some animal bellowed into the night, but it was not any beast in our stall, so we never did get to see if the master bullock knelt to Christ. It was enough for the fanciful Anne though.

"Did you hear it Johnny?" she cried as we ran back across the

yard. "It's true, it's true. Even the cattle know that there is a Lord."

I was less convinced, but happy to enter into the spirit of it for her sake. We were nearly caught on our return, as most people had entered the church where the old Parson was beginning the Mass. The clergyman, according to my father, was an old rogue who would probably be nine-tenths-to-the-wind on the punch he had been drinking, which may have been why the service was starting late. There were one or two stragglers still lingering in the porch, so we parted and were able to melt into the throng. Anne knew exactly where she was going, while I didn't have a clue where to find my mother and sisters. It was the hat that came to my rescue. I was able to slip to mother's side unnoticed since she was close to the rear of the church. She scolded me in a whisper, but I was happy enough – I had accomplished yet another mission with my dearest friend.

An hour into the endless speeches and prayers I was beginning to wonder why anyone ever attended church at all and I was tired and keen to go. But, as the service ended, mother struck up a conversation with some old friend and, as she didn't see many people, was talking away ten to the dozen. Being at the back of the church meant that people had to pass us as they made their way out and I looked up to see Anne and her father just a few feet away in the company of Mr Thomas Poole. As they drew near Mr Poole called out to me and bade me good tidings of the season. What a splendid and magnanimous man was dear old Tom Poole: to speak to a broomsquire's urchin in such friendly tones in full view of all the village dignitaries. Anne was obviously surprised and impressed to see the great man speak so kindly to me and in an instant she did something that both she and I were to regret.

She smiled at me and said: "Happy Christmas Johnny."

It was like seeing old man Rice being shot not once, but twice. I could see the suspicious weaselish expression cross his ugly face. It probably seemed bad enough to him that Mr Poole should go out of his way to speak to me, but when the apple-of-his-eye did the same, it was too much. He grabbed Anne's arm and was about to pull her firmly away when something else happened. Harold Rice caught sight of my mother and stopped dead in his tracks. His angry expression was instantly replaced by another – he made as if

to speak, but his mouth opened and no sound came from it. For her part, my mother did not speak a word all the way home.

The next day, Christmas Day, my father took me poaching. "It is a good day to hunt," he explained. "It is the one day when you can be sure the lowland folk are safely tucked up by their firesides."

With the help of our dogs we took a small hind and that night, after a day out on the freezing hills, the family enjoyed our stolen Christmas dinner which I'll wager was better fare than many were having. The haunch of venison sizzled above the fire and my father performed an endless stream of songs from his vast repertoire, and all should have been jolly in our little camp. Except that a small shadow lurked within my heart. I knew that those enigmatic few seconds in front of the miller at the midnight mass would bode badly for the broomsquire's boy.

My notions proved correct. A few days later when we returned to school Anne was absent. For a while I tried to convince myself that she was perhaps unwell with a winter cold and that she'd be back before the week's end, but that is not how things turned out.

So desperate and lonely was I that one evening on my way home I decided to enter the beech wood – just in case. Just in case of what, I wasn't sure, but I knew Anne would never simply drop me without some good reason. She would make an effort to contact me, no matter what the problem was. And I was right. I found her missive among the roots of the beech. A stinging sleet was falling and so, forlorn and melancholy on my lonely way home, I thought I'd sit for a while among the dry leaves in the hopes of meeting my friend. No sooner had I entered the little arbour than I found the note. You wouldn't have seen it unless you had entered the cave and sat down among the leaves. Just above the entrance a tortured root made a sort of shelf and on this was propped the note.

This is the message she had written:

"To my dearest friend, Johnny Walford,

I will put this letter in our trysting place in the hopes that you might find it there. It is my only chance, the only way I can think of. I have to tell you what has happened since Christmas Eve. It was my own stupid fault and I have no-one to blame but myself, I always knew if father found out we were friends he would stop it. Outside the church he turned to Mr Poole and I heard him

mention your name. "Yes" says Mr Poole, "he's a bright lad and I have made it my business to help him through his schooling." "You mean," says my father, "that my daughter is sharing a schoolroom with a broomsquire's boy?" "That is the way of it," says Mr Poole, "and there is nought wrong with that if the boy is right-headed, and I most certainly can vouch that he is."

My father says no more of it, although he has been in an ill temper all through Christmastide. And then, three days after Boxing Day, he calls me to his private room and tells me the thing which has upset me so deeply, dear Johnny. He told me that our school is no longer good enough for me and that now I must attend a special establishment for young ladies over Bagborough way. And, Johnny, I fear to say that the news gets worse still. It is the sort of school attended by girls from the more well-to-do families, and it is run so that each pupil must stay there throughout the week and sleep in a thing called a dormitory. I begged. I wept. I pleaded and pleaded, but father would not be moved. The day you start school I shall already be gone to Bagborough. I cannot imagine how we shall see each other again. I am thinking and thinking about how it can be done and I WILL find a way. Of that you can be sure. All I can think in the meantime is for you to call at this trysting place of ours as often as you can and I will endeavour to leave notes here or you.

You are my best friend Johnny Walford. My only friend. I love you like a brother and pledge that I will not, for a single moment, forget you. I hope that you will also think of me and maybe, if we try hard enough, we can meet one another in our dreams.

Your dear friend,

Anne Rice."

These were her exact words. I still have that note tucked away in a special place and have read it until it has nearly worn away. So there it was. One brief greeting in the church had split us asunder, cast my own happiness into a pit. I sat there until it grew dark, brooding on all these thoughts. It was the first time I'd ever felt truly sorry for myself. Not the most fitting emotion for a man or a boy. One gleam of light came through the whole sad cloud, though, and that was Anne's note. I read, and reread, that last paragraph a thousand times.

I didn't see, or hear, from her until the Spring and then one day

there was another note placed upon the shelf among the roots. It was brief and to the point. It told me that she would be waiting for me in our old den in the wood high above the mill on Saturday afternoon.

It was Monday when I found the note. Anne had obviously been home, just as she had been every Saturday and Sunday since she'd been going to her new school. I knew this and had become increasingly vexed by her silence. I couldn't understand why she had let it go on for so long. Surely, I'd thought time and again, she could flit down to the glade to leave me a note?

I had seen her once, but in a rather odd circumstance and at a distance. It was just two weeks before I found the second note and a sort of desperation had developed within me. To catch a glimpse of her I went all the way to Bagborough. It was father's doing - he had some business or other over there, and I begged him to let me go along. We were there sooner than I'd thought after a brisk walk and I was enjoying myself. It was a fine day and I had never been so far south along the hills. I say it was a fine day, and that was true of the morning, but beyond noon it came on to rain. We called in at the Rest and Be Thankful to wait for the weather to clear, which father said it would. Of course, he took the opportunity to sustain himself with a glass or two of cider and soon he was talking to the people in the bar as if it had only been a few hours since he'd seen them last.

Sitting by the fire drying off as best I could, I wasn't paying much heed to the general banter until I heard a name mentioned that brought me instantly from my reverie.

"Old Rice can afford it right enough," were the words that grasped my attention.

An old man was holding forth. "Ee's been short changing and cheating with 'is weights ever since I can remember. I'll tell you 'ow rich the beggar is - ee sends that daughter of 'is to the school over yer - and that ain't cheap, that I can tell thee..."

My father looked across at me and later, back out in the rain, he said: "We'll walk past that school shall we?" I didn't say a word, but within a minute or two were passing a grand house set back across a wide open lawn bordered by trees, when he stopped and pointed: "Your friend Anne attends the school in there. I suppose that father

of hers thought she was too good to go to be in a class with the likes of you."

At that moment a group of girls came out of a side door and hurried around the front of the house in the rain, which was still falling despite my father's predictions. In their midst I spotted Anne and, at the same moment, she caught sight of us and stopped in her tracks. The poor girl looked confused. She told me later that she was thinking of running over to see us, but she knew she'd be in awful trouble if she did. She just stood there in the rain, staring across the lawn until two other girls came back for her and woman poked her head out of the big door and called out. Then Anne waved and was gone.

Not a word did my father say until we were up on the ridge and halfway home.

"So, you saw your friend today then Johnny - is that what you had in mind when you came to Bagborough?"

I shrugged and told him it wasn't, but he went on: "You worry me, boy, I can tell you that. You're young now but soon, in the next year or two, you'll be reaching the age when a young man's heart begins to rule his roost. It rides rough shod over everything. You fall in love and it is a terrible thing. A wonderful thing too, if all is right. But terrible and painful if things are wrong. Like, if you were to fall in love with young Miss Rice - that would be wrong and there would be pain in it for you. Of that I am quite sure. The miller is never going to let that precious daughter of his marry a broomsquire's boy. Not in a thousand years. Then there's the fact that young lady is used to a different life, not the rough way we live on the hills."

He put his hand on my shoulder as we marched along the old ridge track: "The world is an unfair place Johnny. If ever I manage to teach you anything - it must be that one cast-iron fact. It is an unfair world. You might like Anne Rice well enough, and she might like you - but I promise you this: it will be a case of the twain never being able to meet. You might as well get used to it now, for that is how it will be. Forget her, son. Forget her and you can be as free as that hawk hovering there above the ridge. Keep some idea of Anne locked up in that heart of yours, and you will never find true happiness."

My father was a wise man, but I was young. "It's not like that father," I said. "Anne is just a friend of mine, that is all."

I was right in a way. It wasn't like that then, for we could only have been twelve years of age at the time. But that is what became of it. The seed of my love for Anne Rice had been planted too deep within me for father, or anyone else, to pluck it out.

I knew that for a fact when I next saw her. It was several months later and through our note leaving we conspired to go for a long walk in the afternoon. Out over the loneliest of the hills towards West Quantoxhead, we went, where we knew we'd never meet a soul. She told me that at school she had been reading books and that her favourite ones described people like us. People who loved each other, but were forced apart by circumstances. She said that she had learned the real meaning of words like 'determination' and phrases like 'loyalty in adversity'. And she said if we could believe in - and learn to live by - those words, then we would win out in the end. One day we would be free to be together as often, and for as long, as we wished.

"Do you wish it so Johnny?" she asked. "Am I just a silly girl suffering some childish notion? Or do you think there's more between us?"

I told her that I didn't need to learn all those words or read those books. I told her I ached to see her when she was away, that it was like having a part of me wrenched asunder.

Such high and rosy thoughts... You must remember though, we were but children speaking our excited, muddled, minds. It seemed easy to do out there in the warm spring breeze that sighed fresh across that high purple heath.

That one golden afternoon bolstered me for many a month to come, and several other secret meetings between us allowed the year to pass easily enough. Autumn came and I suppose by then I would have been 13 years of age. Another cold winter closed in and I recall the darkening days bringing frosts so crisp that we had to break the stream to fetch water. As Christmas approached I was so busy helping mother and father keep up a supply of wood and food, as well as attending school, that thoughts of Anne dwindled as the days grew shorter. Never altogether though. Always Anne was at the back of my mind and I only had to walk past the mill, or look at the

desk that was once hers at school, or jump down the bank to the roots of big beech tree, to think of her again. Indeed the coming of Christmastide itself was enough to remind me that it had been almost a year since our happy days were so abruptly ended.

It was in December that something of profound importance occurred in my life, and again, it was Mr Poole who was the making of it. He came into the classroom one day and asked me to call upon him on my way home. By then I had become a sort of unpaid locum for Mr Baker, our teacher. A door linked the classroom and the schoolhouse, and through it he would disappear for increasingly long intervals.

"Walford," he would say, "See to the class will you? I have something to attend to. I'll just be a few minutes so take them through the six-times-table..."

Poor old Baker. I knew half of what he was up to, for I had often smelled the odour of alcohol upon my father's breath. The other half I didn't know, but I was to find out soon enough, thanks to Thomas Poole's visit to the school.

"Where is Mr Baker?" says he when he enters the class, and seemed quite annoyed when I told him the teacher was indisposed.

Later, when I called at his house, Mr Poole quizzed me about the teacher, but I covered for the man as best I could. You see, when he'd returned to the classroom I told him about Mr Poole's visit and he seemed most put out. Later he asked me to follow him through to his schoolhouse and a snug little place it was.

"What did you tell Mr Poole and why didn't you call me?" he asks as we enter his den, out of earshot of the other children.

When I told him I'd made some small excuse for his absence, he clapped his arm around me and thanked me warmly. I added that I felt Mr Poole would be sure to smell the alcohol on his breath and be cross about it: for a moment old Baker looked as though he would explode, and then I nodded to the bottle on his desk and told him I knew the meaning of it because of my father's liking for a drink. The old fellow seemed to relent. He said I was wise beyond my years and, because of it, he felt I deserved to see what was really keeping him out of class. There was indeed a half-filled bottle on his little desk, but his main occupation seemed to be involved with the massive ledger that lay next to it.

"Early Man, Walford," he said with glee. "That is what I study and what I write about when I take my little excursions out here. You might say that I am becoming obsessed by the subject. That wretched classroom will be the death of me, boy, can you understand that? There are far more important things to work on than helping a gang of village dolts through their three-times-three. It is a fact that you can run the class just as well as I. You are a good lad Walford, I will tell you that, for I have no fear that it will go to your head. You are not of that ilk. I will tell you another thing. I have studied the ancient peoples of these hills and I have interviewed your friends Mr and Mrs Greenslade up at the old church tower. Very interesting, Walford. Certainly as far as you are concerned. Have you any notion that you are from an ancient stock? The blood that runs through your veins, is far older than most. You and your father, and the Greenslades, are among the last of an antediluvian tribe that has been fading from existence for a long, long time. It is all here in this ledger, and if you maintain your good work at this school I will endeavour to present you with the story of your clan..."

He went on about Bronze Age and Iron Age peoples, and some folk he called the Dumnonii, and it took some insistence on my part to extricate myself from his enthusiastic grasp. Poor old Mr Baker. The conversation I was about to have with Thomas Poole would result in my not taking any further part in helping the alcoholic anthropologist in his studies.

For, as soon as I reached Mr Poole's house, he uttered this singular remark: "I hear you are 13 years of age Johnny Walford. That means you are no longer a child but a young man. A clever young man, to boot. A young man who must now take seriously the proposition of work."

I suppose I must have looked little nonplussed. Such a thought had never struck me before, I regarded myself as being nothing more than a boy who, slowly but surely, was taking up the work of a broomsquire.

"No Johnny, I watched you through the window today taking the class, and I listened as you spun some yarn for me about Mr Baker, knowing that you were quite aware that I should be cross if I were to discover that the man was in his cups. That showed a

maturity beyond your years. Now, young man, I believe it is time you took your next step in life. No good looking perplexed – for I have found you a position. A good job, with a fine employer. None could ask for better, in fact. If your father agrees then we shall go together tomorrow – indeed, tell him to come here this evening and we will have it out then. It is far too cold for me to shift my old bones this afternoon. Your father will have to come here if he has anything to say on the matter, is that clear? Otherwise you and I will be on our way to see Mr Andrew Crosse in the morning. Remember to bring your few belongings Johnny, for tomorrow night you will be installed at Broomfield."

I suppose I was so taken aback I forgot to ask Mr Poole what sort of work he'd found me, and my father boxed my ears for the oversight. He was furious about what he called "Tom Poole's meddling" and out he went into the cold night saying he was blowed if he was going to have anyone else taking over his son. I don't think I ever saw father more angry and we remained silent for some minutes after he left. Normally he was such a cheerful man.

He came back very late and very drunk and after a few minutes stumbled to my bed and smoothed my cheeks with his big rough hands. "Johnny," he whispered. "My dear, dear little broomsquire. You are the son I always dreamt of and now I am to lose you..."

I sat up and said: "Don't worry father, I'll not leave you. I'm not interested in the learning I've been doing, I'm happy to collect the broom and bark and make the charcoal. I will always be here with you and mother."

Deep inside, some part of me knew that this was not wholly true. But I loved my father and, if he had demanded I stay on the hill with him, then that is what I'd have done. Instead he muttered this one remarkable thing before going to his bed:

"You will not be staying here my laddie. I have agreed with Mr Poole that what he has suggested is for the best. You are going to work for the Thunder and Lightning Man..."