Fixing Shadows

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Book One



1873

A Portentous Birth to The House of Fainhope

The billow of curtains brings Stevens over to the window. She looks out into the increasing night, silhouetted against the lighted room beyond, the very tip of her nose and a slice of her forehead pressed pale against the pane. She brings down the lower sash and cuts in two the cool ribbon of evening air, which has been insinuating its way over the sill and swelling the curtains.

As the window is closed, the bedroom door opens, causing her to turn away from the night into the lit, warm room. Dr Oliver nods to her, puts down his medical bag and removes his coat. 'How often have the pains been coming, Stevens?'

The lady's maid replies, in a guarded whisper, 'Oh, my goodness, sir, they just seem to run one into another. I've never known it so bad before. I'd swear this one is a boy – it's making such a business of coming into the world.'

'Hush, woman. I don't want to hear idle speculation upon the sex of this child!' While he is talking, he moves to the bed in the middle of the room where a woman is panting and wild. Heels dug in, knees braced, grasping for a sure handhold, she fights and resists, as though an inexorable weight will drag her down towards the foot of the bed and extinction. Pain is sucking at her. Pain

wants her to let go and fall; it wants her to bite hard on the abscessed tooth, to dance on broken ankles and plunge burnt hands into flames. Pain demands that she surrender and do the very thing that will hurt most: push.

Dr Oliver moves to the bed and assesses his patient. 'Your Grace, I think the time is near. May I?' With that, he unceremoniously flings back the bedclothes and inserts his fingers between the straining thighs. This abrupt invasion is met by animalistic bellows from the woman on the bed. 'Pray calm yourself, Your Grace, we don't want to dissipate your generative energies in noise instead of effort.'

'Get off me, you fucking man! I will scream if I want!' The woman glares at him and opens her mouth to roar and roar again.

Up in the night nursery, a little girl who is having her hair brushed loses her place in counting out the hundred strokes. Her sister's unauthorised head pops into view above her high-sided cot.

In the library, Lord John Harpur clamps his son Harry to his side and looks at the pale, tired boy.

Mrs Beam, in her subterranean kitchen, sighs and clips the scullery-maid round the ear as she knuckles bright a copper pan, with silver sand, salt and vinegar.

The new nursery-maid, eleven-year-old Lucy, her face shiny with steam from her can of hot water, pauses at the governess's door. Timidly she knocks and enters. Here is another woman upon a bed, like a pathetic inmate of Bedlam, with a knot of linen clamped between her teeth and her nightdress pulled, unheeded, to the waist. A cautionary illustration of 'the deranged female lunatic in the full spate of her insanity', wanting only straw and chains. The madwoman turns her eyes away from the dark-red, skinned thing that has spilled out upon the sheet and looks on Lucy. And with

that, innocent Lucy runs from the room, an iron taste of blood in her nostrils, unsure of quite what she has witnessed in that dreadful chamber.

By the time Lucy reaches Dr Oliver, he is fastening his cuffs and wiping clean his hands upon his coat tails. He the professional servant; the Duchess of Fainhope his gracious patroness. On looking into the wheezing, folded face of the wrapped infant that has been handed to her by her maid, Stevens, Her Grace quizzes it languidly, 'A boy? So you are a boy. A poor enough sprig, but you will do.'

Lucy is unsure whom to approach. She shouldn't really be here, but that there is a doctor in the house at the very moment when one is needed is surely licence. At last she decides upon Stevens, as the nearest in rank to her own.

Stevens conveys, with genteel embellishments, the request to Dr Oliver. 'If you please, sir, Miss Mantilla, the governess here, is taken ill. She begs pardon to ask for your assistance.'

Dr Oliver follows Lucy down corridors unaccustomed to the confident tread of male feet. Into this domestic female domain, only Tom Kitten may stray. Dr Oliver is not insensitive to the deliciousness of penetrating these forbidden realms. Tongue-tied Lucy shows him to Miss Mantilla's door and stands back for him to enter. He is a gentleman and a doctor: all his science and his masculinity will see off the shameful, womanish mess within.

A horrible sob of suppressed pain and fear is released as he enters. Lucy, outside the door, crosses herself at the exorcism.

Inside, Miss Mantilla modestly pulls down her nightdress and says, in a most shockingly ordinary voice, 'I'm so sorry. I appear to have had an accident.' She begins to sob plaintively, and Lucy knows that Dr Oliver has made the world straight and sane again.

On the short return journey to the Duchess's bedroom, Dr Oliver has time to consider what he has been privy to this interesting half-hour. Without knowing exactly what hand his opponent holds, he must play these fortunate cards to maximum

advantage. It looks so like a flush that he suspects he is being bluffed. These reflections mean his leave-taking is somewhat preoccupied.

'Your Grace, a happy outcome and my hearty congratulations on it. So I bid you farewell.'

When she detains him to enquire about the domestic commotion that called him away to the servants' quarters, he is taken aback that she refers to it. Does she know, or does she not? He must play his trump with care indeed. For now, let the nursery-maid be the one unambiguously to name what happened there.

So, with unusual alacrity in leaving his noble patient, Dr Oliver is graciously nodded from the room and the mistress of Fainhope Hall can address herself to the brother-in-law and nephew who attend her downstairs. She turns to her maid, who is arranging the baby's linen before the fire to warm: 'Stevens! Pay attention, woman! You must carry news to Lord John. Tell him only that our uncertainty is over: the future is secured. It is enough. He will understand.'

With the compressed lips and cautious tread of one bearing an overfilled jug, Stevens sets off down the principal staircase, careful not to slop any particle of this coded communication. At the instant she makes the library, anxious to decant, a shriek is heard from behind the door left ajar by her exit.

After hours spent straining to apprehend any sound coming from that particular chamber, his ears have been sharpened to so painful a degree that the suddenness of Stevens' arrival, and the cry, cause Lord John Harpur to start from his chair as though scalded. 'It's come at last! Which is it, boy or girl?' This he amends, regaining some sense of decorum, and indeed of the sequence of events, to the more civil proposal that Stevens should 'hurry away upstairs and bring back reports of a safe delivery, please God'.

Stevens, discovering that the vessel brimming with great tidings has been upset by all this palaver and that she and it are equally dry of sense, hesitates to reconsider what the Duchess's exact formula might have been. Having arrived at the conclusion that

she no longer has the slightest notion of what her mistress told her to say, she heads off further confusion by simply delivering the facts of the matter, as they appear to her. 'Oh, sir, the child is delivered already, this twenty minutes and more past. Her Grace sends that a son is born to her.'

After hours of suspense, this sudden, unequivocal thrust deflates Lord John's expectant smile and hopeful heart on the instant. To hide his fallen face from the servant he turns it upon Harry, whose hair he ruffles. But the ruffle becomes a cuff and is rather more than the sleepy boy can endure without giving way to wails.

'Come, Harry, you must be a brave boy. My compliments to your lady, Stevens. Now I shall deliver this young man home after his long wait upon his cousin, the heir, eh, Harry?' says Lord John, with grim levity, as he buffets the boy out of the library before him. Stevens has left the room, so does not hear Lord John Harpur's parting comment, addressed it would seem to howling Harry, and spoken straight from that deflated heart: 'So this is your destiny. A destiny that came out of my brother's grave, God help us all.'

Lucy is panting, a livid red slap on her cheek. She had put into words what she saw, but she seems to have been tainted by the telling and has made Her Grace very angry. And Her Grace is more than usually angry. Though she should be confined to bed she has picked up the loosely bundled baby and is walking about her room distractedly. Lucy is tempted to fold the baby's little dangling leg safe under his shawl, but she is frightened to come near so bobs a curtsy and runs away to cry in private.