

CHAPTER ONE

1904

It was time to get ready for church, and Mrs Munday was bustling around the children, glancing frequently at the clock on the mantelpiece.

‘Ernest! Do stop mooning around and do up Grace’s buttons for her – and keep still for your brother, Grace. Aren’t you wearing your hat with the brown silk bow, Isabel? It matches your frock better than the straw one with the daisies – oh, all right then, as it’s a nice sunny morning.’

She called up the stairs to her husband, ‘Tom? Don’t forget to put a clean white handkerchief in your top pocket.’

Thomas Munday shouted back, ‘Yes, Vi – soon as I’ve got my trousers on!’

‘What? D’you mean to say you haven’t... Oh, go away with you, Tom, and stop your nonsense,’

she scolded as he came downstairs grinning. 'It's bad enough trying to get the children looking decent for church – you're the worst of the lot!' But her voice softened as she spoke, for the couple understood each other well after thirteen years of marriage. Tom knew how much she liked to impress their neighbours in Pretoria Road when the five of them walked to St Peter's on Sunday mornings. She stabbed a long pin through her wide-brimmed hat, pinning it deftly to the knot of hair on the top of her head and they left the house, a typically happy family picture, or so Violet Munday liked to think they appeared.

St Peter's was the ancient parish church of North Camp, named for a Roman settlement which had once occupied the site on the Hampshire-Surrey border and pre-dated the nearby town of Everham. Once within its thick stone walls, Mrs Munday took note of who else was there. Silver-haired Canon Harrington would be in the vestry preparing to take the service, and there was Lady Neville of Hassett Manor, with her younger son, Cedric, and her unmarried daughter, Miss Neville, sitting in their usual front pew. Sir Arnold Neville and the elder son were in the diplomatic service, currently attached to the Viceroy of India. Looking around, Mrs Munday noted the Birds with their younger son, Ted, the same age as Ernest, and the daughter, Phyllis, one of Isabel's friends. The elder boy, Tim, must have gone out with his cycling club, she thought, but

Ted still had to obey his parents. Mr Bird was a tailor, though called himself a gentlemen's outfitter, and was also a churchwarden. Then there were the Lansdownes who owned and ran a dairy with a shop attached; they collected milk from local farmers and distributed it either in bottles or straight from the churn into the customer's jug. Their daughter Rosie was another of Isabel's classmates at Miss Daniell's school. And over there were the Goddards who ran Thomas and Gibson's haberdashery for old Miss Gibson, with their daughter Betty and son Sidney. There was no sign of the Coopers, which was hardly surprising, considering that woman's notoriety as a drunkard, though Mrs Munday told herself not to be uncharitable, but to bask in the satisfaction of being the only family here, apart from the professionals, who were not shopkeepers. Her Thomas was a self-employed carpenter, always in demand for the high quality of his workmanship; he had even been called in by the churchwardens to inspect and advise about the woodworm in one of the choir stalls at St Peter's, with the result that he had been entrusted with removing all the infected wood and replacing it with sound, seasoned oak. That meant of course that he had had to copy the decorative carving of the other choir stalls so that it matched them. Canon Harrington had given him high praise, and said it was impossible to tell the new from the medieval.

That's what distinguishes Tom from any jobbing

carpenter, thought his wife, for he had served his seven years' apprenticeship and was a master of his craft; even so, he was still looked upon as a tradesman, socially inferior to the clergy and the doctor. Violet Munday wondered if ten-year-old Ernest would follow his father's craft or go in for something of a more official nature, a junior clerk in a bank or solicitors' office; both would offer him the prospect of eventually passing the relevant examinations to become at least an assistant bank manager or junior partner in a legal firm. He was a quiet, thoughtful boy who needed to put himself forward more, thought his mother fondly; in September he would start as a pupil at Everham Council School, four miles away from North Camp, and five-year-old Grace would begin her schooling at Miss Daniells' Infants attached to St Peter's Church, where Isabel was now in the third form, a pretty girl with her father's blue eyes and straight brown hair hanging in a single plait down her back. It was Violet's dream that Isabel would one day become a teacher; meanwhile she frowned and shook her head at dark-eyed little Grace who was trying to attract her father's attention. Grace would do well at school, her mother was sure of it, and perhaps Miss Daniells would be able to curb that temper of hers; Grace could be very naughty when she failed to get her own way.

Morning worship proceeded and they stood, sat or knelt according to the liturgy. During the third

hymn a collection was taken and Canon Harrington, in his white surplice and embroidered stole, climbed with some difficulty into the pulpit. His sermon was largely addressed to the children in the congregation, and Mrs Munday's thoughts were soon interrupted by a tiresome whispering, rustling and fidgeting among those very children, most disrespectful to the good old canon, she thought, although admittedly he was inclined to ramble, and Mrs Munday herself had lost the thread of his discourse. This would not do, she told herself, and straightened her back in the pew with her hands in her lap, to concentrate on the sermon and encourage Isabel and Grace to do likewise. There were some parishioners who argued that it would be better if Sunday School was held concurrently with Morning Worship instead of at the Jubilee Institute on Sunday afternoons, for which Isabel and little Grace would have to get dressed up again after their midday roast dinner, while Ernest would join the boys at the Bible study group held at the home of Mr and Mrs Woodman who were very 'evangelical'.

Thomas Munday glanced at Ernest who, though sitting still, was clearly not listening to the canon. That boy's a dreamer, thought his father, and should have been sent to the council school a year ago; it was high time he left that dame school and walked the four miles each way to Everham. It had been Violet's idea to send the children to Miss Daniells

for the first five years because of its convenience and good reputation. Half a crown a week was not unreasonable and Tom Munday thought it ideal for the girls, but Ernest needed the discipline of rubbing along with older children. Tom had tried to teach him the basics of working with wood, but he doubted that the boy would follow the trade of his father and grandfather. Too booky!

He turned his attention to the sermon. Poor old Harrington was becoming as forgetful as he was deaf, and really wasn't fit to continue as priest-in-charge at St Peter's, but he had been the incumbent for as long as anybody in North Camp could remember, while curates had come and gone. Tom Munday had been doing some carpentry at the rectory, making two separate commodes disguised as ornamental cabinets for the canon and Mrs Harrington. She, poor old soul, had lapsed into senility, and in Tom's opinion the old man was going the same way. What on earth was he saying now?

'I'm sure that all you good children know how fortunate you are to be living in Great Britain,' boomed the canon. 'Our country stands at the head of the greatest empire the world has ever known, and our beloved king and queen, anointed by God to rule over it, have every right to expect our complete allegiance.'

Our beloved King Edward thinks more about horse racing and chasing pretty women by what I've

heard, thought Tom Munday with a faint grin as he listened.

'And just as we must show loyalty and obedience to those set in authority over us, so must you good children show the same respect to your parents,' went on the canon. 'For example, I'm sure that you always stand up when your father or mother come into a room where you are idly sitting.'

Isabel Munday caught her father's smile. '*We* don't, do we, Daddy?' she whispered, and was immediately shushed by her mother. Even so, a ripple of surprised amusement passed over the congregation, and Tom grinned back at his eight-year-old daughter. How sweet his little girls looked in their wide hats and white pinafores over their Sunday frocks; Grace was already a dark-eyed charmer, and Tom remembered with pride how they'd all gone to St Peter's for a special service on the day of Queen Victoria's funeral three years ago, just as her subjects all over the country had done. Everybody had been expected to wear black, but Grace had been less than two years old, and Violet had settled for pale mauve dresses for both girls. Tom thought they had stood out from the black-clad gloom and bitterly cold weather like a pair of pretty spring crocuses. What a time of national mourning that had been, and it had nearly been followed by another royal funeral, for the new king had almost died of appendicitis and his coronation had had to be postponed for two months.

Canon Harrington was now leaning over the side of the pulpit and shaking a forefinger at the front pews, which included Lady Neville and her son and daughter.

‘I call upon you all – all you subjects of our king and emperor, all of you in our overseas dominions and colonies – I call upon you all – call you one and all – all of you, all, all— ’

And with this incoherent exhortation, the canon slumped over the side of the pulpit, his face contorted, his eyes staring, mouth gaping.

A gasp rose from the congregation and many rose to their feet.

‘A doctor! Is there a doctor here?’ called churchwarden Mr Bird. ‘Dr Stringer – is he here?’

The local general practitioner came forward hastily, and with the help of some adult choristers lifted the inert, unwieldy body and set it down on the carpeted chancel floor.

Mrs Munday prodded her husband’s side. ‘You’d better go up and see if there’s anything you can do,’ she said, thoroughly shaken by the canon’s dramatic collapse in front of his parishioners.

‘I reckon there’s enough o’ them up there,’ he replied quickly. ‘No, you take the children home and I’ll follow when they’ve decided what to do with him. They could use Lady Neville’s carriage to take him over to the rectory, it’s only across the way.’

‘Ought we all to join together in a prayer for

the poor canon?' she asked rather helplessly.

'That depends on whether anybody's willing to stand up and lead the rest, and I can't see Bird doing that, can you? Oh look, there's old Woodman, he'll take charge of any praying to be done, but they'd better get the poor old chap out o' the church first. Go on, Violet, take the children home, there's nothing here for them to see.'

Tom Munday rarely gave an order, but when he did, his wife and children invariably obeyed.

The year was passing and it had been a beautiful summer. September came in with continued warm sunshine, and Mrs Munday said it was a continuation of August except for the days getting shorter. Walking to school along country lanes with berried hedgerows on each side and by footpaths through the fields, Ernest Munday thought September's mellow glow quite different from the blaze of high summer. Whatever the season, it was always Ernest's favourite until the next one followed, but this September was different, for it marked a great change in his life. He had reluctantly said goodbye to Miss Daniells and must now make his way to Everham and back each day, to join his class of ten- and eleven-year-old boys and girls. Most of them had come up from Everham Infants, a separate but adjoining building, to the Big School, as it was known, where the minimum leaving age was fourteen, though the headmaster

Mr Chisman encouraged the brighter pupils to stay another year if they were not needed to start earning to augment their families' incomes. Here Ernest mixed with a variety of children who lived in and around Everham, villages like North and South Camp and Hassett. Everham boasted two churches, Anglican and Methodist, and a whole high street of shops. It also had a hospital with twenty beds where local general practitioners carried out minor operations and delivered a few babies from mothers who had been sent in with complications. A handful of medical cases, mostly elderly, with failing hearts or inoperable growths, languished in the rest of the beds, though if nothing more could be done for them their relatives were expected to care for them at home, to make room for new admissions.

The stark brick walls of Everham Council School loomed above Ernest as he joined the others going through the boys' entrance and down the corridor to their cloakroom. He had at first expected to walk to school with Tim and Ted Bird, but they had spent only two years at Miss Daniells' before joining the infants' school at Everham. Ted, the younger and the same age as Ernest, was now also a beginner at the Big School, but was one of a group of boys he had already got to know, and Ernest preferred to walk alone than to be constantly teased by Ted's mates. Likewise Sidney Goddard avoided Ernest in case he got ridiculed by association, though Betty Goddard

and Isabel were friends, and in another two years would follow their brothers to the council school.

'Hey, look who's here, it's our friend Fuzzy!' shouted a boy, for Ernest's curly hair had earned him the nickname.

'Yeah,' grinned another. 'Ol' clever clogs Munday goes to pray on Sunday – oh, haven't you *met* Miss Daniells' *pet*?'

Ernest ignored the jeers, for to answer back would lead to further confrontation, and to cry would be a disaster; he hung his cap on its hook and went to join the whole school in the assembly hall. Mr Chisman led them in Our Father, then read a few prayers for the school, the nation and the British Empire; they sang a hymn, accompanied on the piano by a lady teacher, and then were dismissed to their various classes where boys and girls studied arithmetic, English grammar, history and geography together in the mornings, and after their packed lunches they separated, the girls to cookery and needlework lessons, the boys to do woodwork, at which Ernest was expected to excel, but regularly failed to do so; then there was what Mr Chisman called 'sport', which meant cricket in the summer and football in the winter, both played on the same uneven field of flattened grass which was inclined to develop potholes in bad weather. Singing, drawing and play-reading, usually an expurgated work of Shakespeare, each had one weekly hour in the timetable, and at

four o'clock the bell rang to signal the end of lessons for the day.

Ernest's steps on his homeward journey were more eager than in the morning, and his heart correspondingly lighter at having left Everham Council School behind for sixteen hours.

For he loathed it.

North Camp Church of England Infants' School had been opened in the mid-1880s by Canon Harrington who felt that the younger children of the area should have an alternative to the free education available at Everham Council School. He and interested residents petitioned the bishop and the church commissioners for a school to be attached to St Peter's with the canon as governor; the request was granted, the building was completed, and a suitable lady teacher was installed. It was said that Miss Daniells had been engaged to a young man who'd died of a fever in the West Indies, but this was never confirmed; she was a local farmer's daughter with the responsibility of elderly parents who would need looking after at some future time, and she had set about her duties with single-minded enthusiasm, and over the past decade she had built up a good reputation for 'Miss Daniells' School', as it was generally known by the parents who willingly paid the weekly half-crown.

September brought a new influx of pupils whose fifth birthday fell in the present year, and they

included little Grace Munday, trotting in with her sister Isabel, her wide eyes taking in the big room with its raised platform at one end, on which Miss Daniells sat at a wide desk. An upright piano stood at one side of the platform, and a tall cupboard on the other; in the centre of the hall stood a coke-burning stove with a black flue that went up through the ceiling, and a circular fireguard around it.

There were four rows of desks, large or small according to the size of the occupant, with the little ones at the front and the older ones behind them. At the back the nine- to twelve-year-olds sat at two trestle tables, girls at one and boys at the other.

Isabel took her seat halfway back, and Grace stood up in front with two other new ones, a weeping boy and a scared-looking girl; even at five Grace knew the value of contrast, and smiled sweetly at the curious eyes fixed upon her.

'And this little girl is Grace Munday,' announced Miss Daniells, 'the sister of Isabel and their brother Ernest who has now left us for the council school, so we lose one Munday and gain another. Welcome, Grace! You may take a seat in the front row just there.'

Grace marched to her very own desk with satisfaction, soon to be joined on either side by the other two newcomers, somewhat emboldened by her example. Her education was about to begin, and she was eager to show what she could do.

Miss Daniells sat down at the piano to play the opening hymn.

Jesus loves me, this I know,

For the Bible tells me so –

Little ones to Him belong,

They are weak, but He is strong!

Yes, Jesus loves me! Yes, Jesus loves me! Yes, Jesus loves me!

The Bible tells me so!’ chorused the children for three more verses. Miss Daniells then said a prayer for all the children at the school, and those who had left; she prayed also for their families, asking that they might always follow Jesus and put their trust in Him at all times.

‘And now, Lord, we pray for dear Canon Harrington, founder of our school, laid low by a stroke and unable to rise from his bed. We pray also for his wife Mrs Harrington, that they both may find comfort in knowing that Thou carest for them in their affliction, O Thou who didst heal the sick who came to Thee. And Lord, we ask Thy blessing on the Reverend Mr Saville who has come to care for the parish of St Peter’s. Grant unto him wisdom and strength, and always to put his trust in Thee.’

‘Amen,’ answered the children, and then recited the Lord’s Prayer; thus began the day’s lessons, with only Miss Daniells to teach them all. She was pleasantly surprised to discover that little Grace Munday knew her alphabet and could string a few three-letter words together, as well as write her own

name clearly. As the youngest of three she had been able to learn from her brother and sister, especially Isabel who loved playing at being a teacher, with Grace and two reluctant cats as her pupils.

At playtime Isabel came to her sister's side with a paper packet containing two cheese sandwiches and two apples. She introduced Grace to other third-year girls and to her friend Mary Cooper, a pale girl whose hair hung loose instead of being tied back, and whose pinafore had an egg stain on it. Isabel took out a comb and a length of blue ribbon from her pocket to smooth Mary's hair back into a single plait hanging down her back.

A grinning boy approached them as they sat on a bench seat in the playground.

'Allo, you little girls! Wonder 'ow ol' Ernie's gettin' on at the council school, eh? If 'e's tellin' 'em 'ow 'e's been saved by ol' Mr Woodman, they won't 'alf give 'im a thrashin'!

Isabel stuck her nose in the air and went on talking to Mary, refusing to be drawn; Grace, however, stared hard at the boy.

'I know who *you* are, you're the boy my daddy caught stealing apples from our tree. You're a *thief*, and ought to go to prison!

The boy stared back at her and was about to deny the charge indignantly, but several children had gathered round and were laughing at the accusation. He knew he would be in trouble if he raised a hand

against any girl, let alone this little new one, so he contented himself by sticking out his tongue as far as it would go, and sauntering away, making derogatory remarks about 'them daft Munday's'.

At half past three Miss Daniells ended the day's lessons with another hymn and the Lord's Prayer; she smiled upon them as they trooped out, but then sat down wearily and laid her head upon the desk. More and more she wondered how long she would be able to continue to teach these dear children without any help; at present she knew of no local girl of school-leaving age with the necessary requirements to be an assistant teacher, but trusted that the Lord would send one in His own due time.

A knot of girls stood at the gate of the Munday's garden, still full of summer flowers. Phyllis Bird and Betty Goddard could hardly part from little Grace who bestowed her winsome smiles on them both, while Isabel stood waiting to go indoors. Then they saw Mary Cooper running up Pretoria Road towards them.

'I can't find my mum anywhere,' she said anxiously. 'And Dad must be out on a job somewhere. Can I come in with you, Isabel, just until Dad comes home? Your mum won't mind, will she?'

This was difficult. Isabel knew that her mother disapproved of the Coopers, for some mysterious reason that was only whispered about. When she

hesitated she saw Mary's eyes fill with tears, and she looked at the other two girls. Betty shook her head, but Phyllis rolled her eyes and shrugged.

'You can come home with me, Mary. Just until your mum and dad turn up,' she said. 'Come on, my mother'll be wondering where I've got to!'

Isabel gave her a grateful nod, and led Grace round through the side gate to the back garden; but before they reached the kitchen door, they saw a sight that stopped them in their tracks.

A red-faced woman with loose, untidy hair was groping at the door of Tom Munday's tool shed, called by his wife the holy of holies, and always kept locked.

'They've shut the door,' muttered the woman, turning round and catching sight of the two girls. She lurched against the tool shed, and put out a hand to steady herself, almost falling over. She gave a loud hiccup.

'Whoops! Sorry, little girls, but your lav's locked up, an' I can't hold it in – I'll have to go here among the cabbages,' she said in a slurred voice that filled Isabel with a nameless revulsion, and to their horror she began to pull her skirt up, fumbling with her petticoat.

'Whoops, can't get me drawers down, an' it won't wait – whoops!' she giggled, squatting down and urinating copiously. 'Tha's better – can't get me drawers down, gotta wet 'em!'

When she'd finished and tried to rise to her feet she toppled over backwards and lay full-length in the cabbage patch, her skirts pulled up and showing her soaked underwear. She closed her eyes and passed into semi-consciousness.

Isabel tugged at her sister's hand. 'Come on, Grace, let's go in and find Mum – quick!'

In through the back door they went, and Isabel called through the house.

'Mum, where are you? Come quickly, Mary's mum's in our back garden!'

Violet Munday came hurrying from the front parlour.

'Heavens above, Isabel, what are you shouting about?'

Grace spoke up excitedly. 'There's a lady been weeing in our garden and it went all over her clothes – and now she's gone to sleep with her head on a cabbage!'

'Good gracious! Merciful heavens!' cried Mrs Munday. 'You stay indoors, you two, and I'll see what's going on.'

When she found Mrs Cooper lying dead-drunk in the cabbage patch, snoring heavily, she gave a horrified exclamation and hurried back indoors, her face pale with shock.

'Go and fetch your father, Isabel, he's working at the rectory. Tell him to come home at once – *at once*, do you hear?'

Off went Isabel, and Mrs Munday told Grace to stop asking questions, while muttering under her breath, 'Of all the...what a disgrace...never seen anything like it...oh, my God!'

When Tom appeared, out of breath and alarmed, his wife told him firmly that he must find Cooper at once, and tell him to remove his drunken wife from their garden.

'She was trying to get into your tool shed, Tom, must've thought it was a lavatory – oh, what a degrading sight for our two little girls to see!'

Tom Munday went out to investigate, and came back looking grave.

'Thank heaven it's nothing worse, Vi, I thought one o' the children had been hurt. Can you give me a hand with her?'

'What? Certainly not, I couldn't touch the creature,' his wife replied with a shudder, leaving Tom to rack his brains as to what he should do without causing a public fuss. Eddie Cooper was a house painter, and Tom had no idea where he was working that day. Could he ask Bird to help him move the woman? No, Bird wouldn't want to leave his shop, and was likely to be shocked, churchwarden or not. Goddard? He could leave his wife in charge of the haberdashery, but she was such a tittle-tattler. Lansdowne? Yes, he'd ask old Bert Lansdowne who'd be finished in the dairy, and could bring his milk cart round.

‘Isabel, go and ask Rosie Lansdowne’s dad to come round here, will you? And don’t say anything to anybody else, d’you hear me?’

Off went Isabel again, and Mrs Munday locked the front and back doors to keep Grace in the house and to prevent that dreadful creature from reeling round trying to get in.

As soon as Bert Lansdowne heard the message he got out his horse and cart and came round to the Mundays’. When he saw the state of Eddie Cooper’s wife, he whistled, nodded and buckled down to the job.

‘You take her head an’ shoulders, Tom, an’ I’ll take the bottom half,’ he said, and together they lifted her up and carried her through the side gate to the front. ‘She’s shit an’ all,’ he remarked. ‘Nobody about, come on, let’s get the sleeping beauty on to the cart.’

When this was done, Bert asked about Mary Cooper. ‘We mustn’t let the poor kid see her like this, Tom. Is she with your missus?’

Tom had gathered from Isabel that Mary had gone home with Phyllis Bird.

‘Good, we’ll tell Mrs Bird to keep her until poor old Eddie can call for her.’ Bert glanced at the lifeless form in his cart, and shook his head.

‘You hear about drunken husbands, but it’s the other way round here, ain’t it?’

The two of them got on the cart, took Mrs

Cooper home and carried her round to the unlocked back door, where they laid her on the kitchen floor.

'Thanks a lot, Bert. You get on home now, and tell the Birds that Eddie'll call for Mary later. I'll wait for him here,' said Tom, who was in fact quite shaken by the situation, feeling embarrassed on Eddie Cooper's behalf when the man came home and found an almost apologetic Tom Munday waiting for him. Tom heated some water in a large pan while Eddie undressed his wife, washed her and put a clean nightgown on her. Together the two men carried her upstairs and laid her in the matrimonial bed.

Tom then went to fetch Mary from the Birds' home in Rectory Road, telling them there had been a slight accident, nothing to worry about; and when he eventually got home he forestalled his wife's righteous indignation.

'Just let's be thankful we're not in that tragic case, Vi. If I was Eddie I don't know how I'd cope. The poor devil blames himself.'

'Blames *himself*? Why on earth should he think that?' asked Mrs Munday, none too pleased by the suggestion that Tom could be Eddie, which was like comparing herself with Eddie's wife.

'Yes, he blames himself, though it was more the fault o' that fool of a doctor when she had Mary,' said Tom, deeply saddened by what Eddie had told

him. 'You remember how she had a very bad time, and was in bed for weeks afterwards, couldn't feed the baby and her mother had to come over to look after them – it was a rotten time, after looking forward to the baby.'

'Yes, I remember, but she got over it, didn't she? She's not the only woman to have a bad time birthing, and at least she didn't lose her life, like that poor girl over at Hassett last year,' replied Violet. 'And when I had Ernest, you may recall that—'

'But you got over it, an' had two more children, an' she couldn't have any more, that's why there's only Mary. Eddie says she went into a melancholy state, couldn't do anything at all, so Eddie called that doctor back to her. He advised her to take a glass of brandy each night, to make her sleep and cheer her up. So Eddie did what he said, an' it got to be a habit. She couldn't break out of it, no matter how hard she tried. He says she does her best to keep it under control, but sometimes it gets the better of her, an' she takes to the bottle again. Sleeps it off indoors, mostly, but today was bad.' Tom shook his head and repeated, 'Yeah, today was pretty bad.'

'Well, you've certainly done everything a friend and neighbour could do,' said Mrs Munday.

'Yeah – but he could've done with a bit o' help from a woman, Vi. It was pretty embarrassing, to say

the least, 'cause *I* couldn't very well help him clean the poor woman up.'

There was a short silence, then Mrs Munday said in a somewhat subdued tone, 'Well, if ever Mary needs somewhere to go, I'd be willing to have her round here.'

'That's good o' you, Vi,' he replied gravely. 'None of us know when we might be in need of a friend – and that woman needs a friend now, if anybody does.'

Violet did not attempt to answer, feeling herself rebuked.

Up in the bedroom shared by the girls, Isabel was becoming irritated by Grace's persistent questions about the strange and very rude lady in their garden. Why was she trying to get into Daddy's shed? And why did she wee in the cabbage patch? And why was Mummy so angry about her?

'Oh, go to sleep, Grace, I'm tired,' snapped Isabel. Their mother had told them not to talk about what had happened, and to forget all about it. Yet Isabel sensed that she would never forget the sight of Mary Cooper's mother who, Isabel now realised, had been drunk – which was something that only happened with men, or so Isabel had thought until now. Something of her mother's shock and disgust had been passed on to her, and she knew that she would be haunted

by Mary's mother, like a grotesque picture in her memory that would never quite go away. And what she would remember above all was the lost, bewildered look in the woman's eyes.

On returning from school Ernest at once realised that something bad had happened, something that the girls had been ordered not to talk about. If he knew his little sister Grace, she would find an opportunity to whisper it to him sooner or later, whether he wanted to know it or not. There were many other matters on Ernest's mind, and lying in his bed that night he recalled the unthinking cruelty of his classmates, and how he was learning to endure their sometimes obscene taunts by keeping quiet; he was getting better at meeting ridicule with a bland silence that hid his inward distaste.

But not on Sunday afternoons. Ah, not at Mr Woodman's Bible study group for boys. Though one of its youngest members, Ernest's opinion was often invited, and he could freely share his thoughts on the matters under discussion: the dictates of conscience and the path of duty; God's judgement, and also His mercy, His constant love and forgiveness – all the things Ernest had to keep to himself at school. He was especially devoted to Paul Woodman, the elder son, aged about eighteen and intending to train for ordination. Paul's

conversation was precious to Ernest, for he could tell him almost anything without being made to look foolish; the jeers and taunts of the boys at Everham Council School were mere pinpricks when placed against the thoughtful, courteous words of Paul Woodman.

With his mentor's face in mind, Ernest smiled and drifted peacefully to sleep.