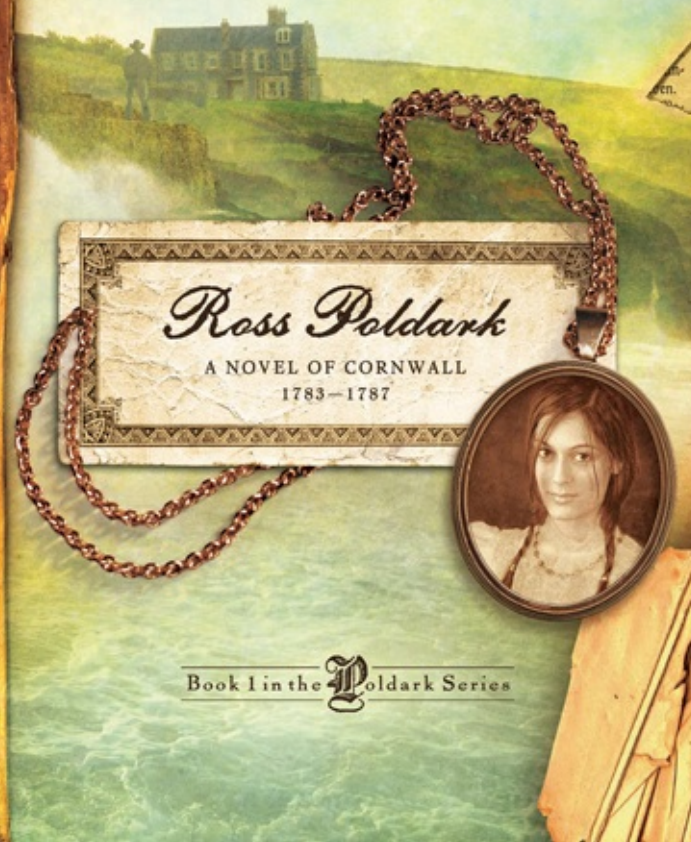


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W I N S T O N
G R A H A M

Ross Poldark
A NOVEL OF CORNWALL
1783-1787



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Published by Sourcebooks Landmark, an imprint of Sourcebooks, Inc.

P.O. Box 4410, Naperville, Illinois 60567-4410

(630) 961-3900

Fax: (630) 961-2168

www.sourcebooks.com

Originally published in London by Werner Laurie Ltd., 1945

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Graham, Winston.

Ross Poldark : a novel of Cornwall, 1783 1787 / Winston Graham.

p. cm.

1. Poldark, Ross (Fictitious character) Fiction. 2. Cornwall (England : County) Fiction. I. Title.

PR6013.R24R67 2009

823'.914 dc22

2009029763

Printed and bound in the United States of America

VP 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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PROLOGUE

1

JOSHUA POLDARK DIED IN MARCH 1783. IN FEBRUARY OF THAT YEAR, FEELING that his tenure was becoming short, he sent for his brother from Trenwith.

Charles came lolloping over on his great roan horse one cold grey afternoon, and Prudie Paynter, plump-haired and dark-faced and fat, showed him straight into the bedroom where Joshua lay passed out with pillows and cushions in the big box bed. Charles looked askance round the room with his small, watery blue eyes at the disorder and the dirt, then lifted his coat-tails and subsided upon a wicker chair, which creaked under his weight.

“Well, Joshua.”

“Well, Charles.”

“This is a bad business.”

“Bad indeed.”

“When will you be about again, d’you think?”

“There's no telling. I fancy the churchyard will have a strong pull.”

Charles thrust out his bottom lip. He would have discounted the remark if he had not had words to the contrary. He hiccupped a little—riding always gave him the wind these days—and was heartily reassuring.

“Nonsense, man. The gout in the legs never killed nobody. It is when it gets up to the head that it is dangerous.”

“Choake tells me different, that there is other cause for the swelling. For once I misdoubt if the old fool is not right. Though in God's truth, by all appearance it is you that should be lying here, since you am but half your size.”

Charles glanced down at the landscape of black embroidered waistcoat spreading away from under his chin.

“Mine is healthy flesh. Every man puts on weight in his middle years. I would not wish to be a yard of pump water like Cousin William-Alfred.”

Joshua lifted an ironical eyebrow but said no more, and there was silence. The brothers had had little to say to each other for many years, and at this, their last meeting, small talk was not easy to find. Charles, the elder and more prosperous, who had come in for the family house and lands and most of the mining interests, head of the family and a respected figure in the county, had never quite been able to get away from a suspicion that his younger brother despised him. Joshua had always been a thorn in his flesh. Joshua had never been content to do the things expected of him: enter the Church or the Army or marry properly and leave Charles to run the district himself.

Not that Charles minded a few lapses, but there were limits and Joshua had overstepped them. The fact that he had been behaving himself for the last few years did not score out old grievances.

As for Joshua, a man with a cynical mind and few illusions, he had no complaint against life or against his brother. He had lived one to the limit and ignored the other. There was some truth in his

reply to Charles's next comment of, "Why man, you're young enough yet. Two years junior to me, and I'm fit and well. Aarf!"

Joshua said: "Two years in age, maybe, but you've only lived half as fast."

Charles sucked the ebony tip of his cane and looked sidelong about the room from under heavy lids. "This damned war not settled yet. Prices soaring. Wheat seven and eight shillings a bushel. Butter ninepence a pound. Wish the copper price was the same. We're thinking of cutting a new level of the Grambler. Eighty fathom. Maybe it will defray the initial outlay, though I doubt it. Been doing much with your fields this year?"

"It was about the war that I wanted to see you," said Joshua, struggling a little farther up the pillows and gasping for breath. "It must be only a matter of months now before the provisional peace is confirmed. Then Ross will be home and maybe I shall not be here to greet him. You're my brother though we've never hit it off so well. I want to tell you how things are and to leave you to look after things till he gets back."

Charles took the cane from his mouth and smiled defensively. He looked as if he had been asked for a loan.

"I've not much time, y' know."

"It won't take much of your time. I've little or nothing to leave. There's a copy of my will on the table beside you. Read it at your leisure. Pearce has the original."

Charles groped with his clumsy swollen hand and picked up a piece of parchment from the rickety three-legged table behind him.

"When did you last hear from him?" he asked. "What's to be done if he doesn't come back?"

"The estate will go to Verity. Sell if there are any purchasers; it will fetch little. That's down in the will. Verity will have my share in Grambler too, since she is the only one of your family who has been over since Ross left."

Joshua wiped his nose on the soiled sheet. "But Ross will come back. I've heard from him since the fighting ceased."

"There's many hazards yet."

"I've a feeling," said Joshua. "A conviction. Care to take a wager? Settle when we meet. There'll be some sort of currency in the next world."

Charles stared again at the sallow lined face which had once been so handsome. He was a little relieved that Joshua's request was no more than this, but slow to relax his caution. And irreverence of a deathbed struck him as reckless and uncalled for.

"Cousin William-Alfred was visiting us the other day. He enquired for you."

Joshua pulled a face.

"I told him how ill you was," Charles went on. "He suggested that though you might not wish to call in the Revd. Mr. Odgers, maybe you would like a spiritual consolation from one of your own family."

"Meaning him."

"Well, he's the only one in orders now Betty's husband's gone."

"I want none of them," said Joshua. "Though no doubt it was kindly meant. But if he thought it would do me good to confess my sins, did he think I should rather tell secrets to one of my own blood? No, I'd rather talk to Odgers, half-starved little hornywink though he is. But I want none of them."

“If you change your mind,” said Charles, “send Jud over with a message. Aarf!”

Joshua grunted. “I shall know soon enough. But even if there was something in it with all the pomp and praying, should I ask ’em in at this hour? I’ve lived my life, and by God I’ve enjoyed it. There’s no merit to go snivelling now.

“I’m not sorry for myself and I don’t want anyone else to be. What’s coming I’ll take. That’s all.”

There was silence in the room. Outside the wind thrust and stirred about the slate and stone.

“Time I was off,” said Charles. “These Paynters are letting your place get into a rare mess. Why don’t you get someone reliable?”

“I’m too old to swap donkeys. Leave that to Ross. He’ll soon put things to rights.”

Charles belched disbelievingly. He had no high opinion of Ross’s abilities.

“He’s in New York now,” said Joshua. “Tart of the garrison. He’s quite recovered from his wound. It was lucky he escaped the Yorktown siege. A captain now, you know. Still in the 62nd Foot. I’ve mislaid his letter, else I’d show it you.”

“Francis is a great help to me these days,” said Charles. “So would Ross have been to you if he was home instead of coosing around after Frenchmen and Colonials.”

“There was one other thing,” said Joshua. “D’you see or hear anything of Elizabeth Chynoweth these days?”

After a heavy meal questions took time to transmit themselves to Charles’s brain, and where his brother was concerned they needed an examination for hidden motives. “Who is that?” he said clumsily.

“Jonathan Chynoweth’s daughter. You know her. A thin, fair child.”

“Well, what of it?” said Charles.

“I was asking if you’d seen her. Ross always mentions her. A pretty little thing. He’s counting on her being here when he comes back, and I think it a suitable arrangement. An early marriage will steady him down, and she couldn’t find a decenter man, though I say it as shouldn’t, being his sister. Two good old families. If I’d been on my feet I should have gone over to see Jonathan at Christmas and fix it up. We did talk of it before, but he said wait till Ross came back.”

“Time I was going,” said Charles, creaking to his feet. “I hope the boy will settle down when he returns, whether he marries or no. He was keeping bad company that he should never have got into.”

“D’you see the Chynoweths now?” Joshua refused to be side-tracked by references to his own shortcomings. “I’m cut off from the world here, and Prudie has no ear for anything but scandal. Sawle.”

“Oh, we catch sight of ’em from time to time. Verity and Francis saw them at a party in Truro the summer—” Charles peered though the window. “Rot me if it isn’t Choake. Well, now you’ll have more company, and I thought you said no one ever came to see you. I must be on my way.”

“He’s only come quizzing to see how much faster his pills are finishing me off. That or his politics. As if I care whether Fox is in his earth or hunting Tory chickens.”

“Have it as you please.” For one of his bulk Charles moved quickly, picking up hat and gauntlet gloves and making ready to be gone. At the last he stood awkwardly by the bed, wondering how best to take his leave, while the clip-clop of a horse’s hoofs went past the window.

“Tell him I don’t want to see him,” said Joshua irritably. “Tell him to give his potions to his silly wife.”

“Calm yourself,” said Charles. “Aunt Agatha sent her love, mustn't forget that; and she said you was to take hot beer and sugar and eggs. She says that will cure you.”

Joshua's irritation lifted.

“Aunt Agatha's a wise old turnip. Tell her I'll do as she says. And—and tell her I'll save her place beside me.” He began to cough.

“God b' w' ye,” said Charles hurriedly, and sidled out of the room.

Joshua was left alone.

He had spent many hours alone since Ross went, but they had not seemed to matter until he took his bed a month ago. Now they were beginning to depress him and fill his mind with fancies. An out-of-doors man to whom impulse all his days had meant action, this painful, gloomy, bedridden life was no life at all. He had nothing to do with his time except think over the past, and the past was now always the most elegant subject matter.

He kept thinking of Grace, his long-dead wife. She had been his mascot. While she lived all had gone well. The mine he opened and called after her brought rich results; this house, begun in pride and hope, had been built; two strong sons. His own indiscretions behind him, he had settled down promising to rival Charles in more ways than one; he had built this house with the idea that his own branch of the family of Poldark should become rooted no less securely than the main Trenwith tree.

With Grace had gone all his luck. The house half built, the mine had petered out, and with Grace's death, his incentive to expend money and labour on either. The building had been finished off anyhow though much remained unrealized. Then Wheal Vanity had closed down also and little Claud Anthony had died.

...He could hear Dr. Choake and his brother talking at the front door: his brother's dusky thickened tenor. Choake's voice, deep and slow and pompous. Anger and impotence welled up in Joshua. What the devil did they mean droning away on his doorstep, no doubt discussing him and nodding their heads together and saying, well, after all, what else could one expect. He tugged at the bell beside his bed and waited, fuming, for the flip-flop of Prudie's slippers.

She came at last, ungainly and indistinct in the door way. Joshua peered at her shortsightedly in the fading light.

“Bring candles, woman. D'you want me to die in the dark? And tell those two old men to be gone.”

Prudie hunched herself like a bird of ill omen. “Dr. Choake and Mister Charles, you're meaning to say an?”

“Who else?”

She went out, and Joshua fumed again, while there was the sound of a muttered conversation now far from his door. He looked around for his stick, determined to make one more effort to get up and walk out to them. But then the voices were raised again in farewells, and a horse could be heard moving away across the cobbles and towards the stream.

That was Charles. Now for Choake...

There was a loud rap of a riding crop on his door and the surgeon came in.

Thomas Choake was a Bodmin man who had practised in London, had married a brewer's daughter, and returned to his native county to buy a small estate near Sawle. He was a tall clumsy man with a booming voice, thatch-grey eyebrows, and an impatient mouth. Among the smaller gentry his London experience stood him in good stead; they felt he was abreast of up-to-date physical ideas. He was surgeon to several of the mines in the district, and with the knife had the same neck-or-nothing

approach that he had on the hunting field.

Joshua thought him a humbug and had several times considered calling in Dr. Pryce from Redruth. Only the fact that he had no more faith in Dr. Pryce prevented him.

“Well, well,” said Dr. Choake. “So we’ve been having visitors, eh? We’ll feel better, no doubt, for our brother's visit.”

“I’ve got some business off my hands,” said Joshua. “That was the purpose of inviting him.”

Dr. Choake felt for the invalid's pulse with heavy fingers. “Cough,” he said.

Joshua grudgingly obeyed.

“Our condition is much the same,” said the surgeon. “The distemper has not increased. Have you been taking the pills?”

“Charles is twice my size. Why don’t you doctor him?”

“You are ill, Mr. Poldark. Your brother is not. I do not prescribe unless called upon to do so.” Choake lifted back the bedclothes and began to prod his patient's swollen leg.

“Great mountain of a fellow,” grumbled Joshua. “*He’ll* never see his feet again.”

“Oh, come; your brother is not out of the common. I well remember when I was in London—”

“Uff!”

“Did that hurt?”

“No,” said Joshua.

Choake prodded again to make sure. “There is a distinct abatement in the condition of our left leg. There is still too much water in both. If we could get the heart to pump it away. I well remember when I was in London being called in to the victim of a tavern brawl in Westminster. He had quarrelled with an Italian Jew, who drew a dagger and thrust it up to the hilt into my patient's belly. But so thick was the protective fat that I found the knife point had not even pierced the bowel. A sizeable fellow. Let me see, did I bleed you when I was last here?”

“You did.”

“I think we might leave it this time. Our heart is inclined to be excitable. Control the choler, Mr. Poldark. An even temper helps the body to secrete the proper juices.”

“Tell me,” said Joshua. “Do you see anything of the Chynoweths? The Chynoweths of Cusgarnny you know. I asked my brother, but he returned an evasive answer.”

“The Chynoweths? I see them from time to time. I think they are in health. I am not, of course, their physician and we do not call on each other socially.”

No, thought Joshua. Mrs. Chynoweth will have a care for that. “I smell something shifty about Charles,” he said shrewdly. “Do you see Elizabeth?”

“The daughter? She is about.”

“There was an understanding as to her between myself and her father.”

“Indeed. I had not heard of it.”

Joshua pushed himself up the pillows. His conscience had begun to prick him. It was late in the day for the growth of this long-dormant faculty, but he was fond of Ross, and in the long hours of his illness he had begun to wonder whether he should not have done more to keep his son's interests warm.

“I think maybe I’ll send Jud over tomorrow,” he muttered. “I’ll ask Jonathan to come and see me.”

“I doubt if Mr. Chynoweth will be free; it's the Quarter Sessions this week. Ah, that's a welcome”

sight!”

Prudie Paynter came lumbering in with two candles. The yellow light showed up her sweaty face with its draping of black hair.

“Ad your physic, ’ave you?” she asked in a throaty whisper.

Joshua turned irritably on the doctor. “I’ve told you before, Choake; pills I’ll swallow, God help me, but draughts and potions I’ll not face.”

“I well remember,” Choake said ponderously, “when I was practising in Bodmin as a young man one of my patients, an elderly gentleman who suffered much from strangury and stone—”

“Don’t stand there, Prudie,” snapped Joshua to his servant. “Get out.”

Prudie stopped scratching and reluctantly left the room.

“So you think I’m on the mend, eh?” Joshua said before the physician could go on. “How long before I’m up and about?”

“Hm, hm. A slight abatement, I said. Great care yet awhile. We’ll have you on your feet before Ross returns. Take my prescriptions regular and you will find they will set you up—”

“How’s your wife?” Joshua asked maliciously.

Again interrupted, Choake frowned. “Well enough, thank you.” The fact that the fluffy lispin Polly, though only half his age, had added no family to the dowry she brought was a standing grievance against her. So long as she was unfruitful he had no influence to dissuade women from buying motherwort and other less respectable brews from travelling gypsies.

2

The doctor had gone and Joshua was once more alone—alone this time until morning. He might, by pulling persistently on the bell cord, call a reluctant Jud or Prudie until such time as they went to bed, but after that there was no one, and before that they were showing signs of deafness as his illness became more clear. He knew they spent most of each evening drinking, and once they reached a certain stage, nothing at all would move them. But he hadn’t the energy to round on them as in the old days.

It would have been different if Ross had been here. For once Charles was right but only partly right. It was he, Joshua, who had encouraged Ross to go away. He had no belief in keeping boys at home as additional lackeys. Let them find their own stirrups. Besides, it would have been undignified to have his son brought up in court for being party to an assault upon excise men, with its associated charges of brandy running and the rest. Not that Cornish magistrates would have convicted, but the question of gaming debts might have been raised.

No, it was Grace who should have been here, Grace who had been snatched from him thirteen years back.

Well, now he was alone and would soon be joining his wife. It did not occur to him to feel surprised that the other women in his life scarcely touched his thoughts. They had been creatures of a pleasant and exciting game, the more mettlesome the better, but no sooner broken in than forgotten.

The candles were guttering in the draught from under the door. The wind was rising. Jud had said there was a ground swell this morning; after a quiet cold spell they were returning to rain and storm.

He felt he would like one more look at the sea, which even now was licking at the rocks behind the house. He had no sentimental notions about the sea; he had no regard for its dangers or its beauties;

him it was a close acquaintance whose every virtue and failing, every smile and tantrum he had come to understand.

The land too. Was the Long Field ploughed? Whether Ross married or not there would be little enough to live on without the land.

With a decent wife to manage things... Elizabeth was an only child; a rare virtue worth bearing in mind. The Chynoweths were a bit poverty-stricken, but there would be something. Must go and see Jonathan and fix things up. "Look here, Jonathan," he would say. "Ross won't have much money, but there's the land, and that always counts in the long run—"

Joshua dozed. He thought he was out walking round the edge of the Long Field with the sea on his right and a strong wind pressing against his shoulder. A bright sun warmed his back and the air tasted like wine from a cold cellar. The tide was out on Hendrawna Beach, and the sun drew streaked reflections in the wet sand. The Long Field had not only been ploughed but was already sown and sprouting.

He skirted the field until he reached the furthest tip of Damsel Point where the low cliff climbed over ledges and boulders down to the sea. The water surged and eddied, changing colour on the shelves of dripping rocks.

With some special purpose in mind he climbed down the rocks until the cold sea suddenly surged about his knees, sending pain through his legs unpleasantly like the pain he had felt from the swelling of these last few months. But it did not stop him, and he let himself slip into the water until it was up to his neck. Then he struck out from the shore. He was full of joy at being in the sea again after a lapse of two years. He breathed out his pleasure in long, cool gasps, allowed the water to lap close against his eyes. Lethargy crept up his limbs. With the sound of the waves in his ears and heart he allowed himself to drift and sink into cool, feathery darkness.

Joshua slept. Outside, the last trailing patterns of day light moved quietly out of the sky and left the house and the trees and the stream and the cliffs in darkness. The wind freshened, blowing steadily and strongly from the west, searching among the ruined mine sheds on the hill, rustling the tops of the sheltered apple trees, lifting a corner of loose thatch on one of the barns, blowing a spatter of cold rain in through a broken shutter of the library where two rats nosed with cautious jerky scurrying movements among the lumber and the dust. The stream hissed and bubbled in the darkness, and above it a long-unmended gate swung whee-tap on its hangings. In the kitchen, Jud Paynter unstopped the second jar of gin and Prudie threw a fresh log on the fire.

"Wind's rising, blast it," said Jud. "Always there's wind. Always when you don't want it there's wind."

"We'll need more wood 'fore morning," said Prudie.

"Use this stool," said Jud. "The wood's 'ard, twill smoulder."

"Give me a drink, you black worm," said Prudie.

"Wait on yourself," said Jud.

Joshua slept.

BOOK ONE



OCTOBER 1783—APRIL 1785

CHAPTER ONE

1

IT WAS WINDY. THE PALE AFTERNOON SKY WAS SHREDDED WITH CLOUDS, THE road grown dustier and more uneven in the last hour, was scattered with blown and rustling leaves.

There were five people in the coach; a thin clerky man with a pinched face and a shiny suit, and his wife, fat as her husband was thin, and holding to her breast a con fused bundle of pink and white draperies from one end of which pouted the creased and overheated features of a young baby. The other travellers were men, both young, one a clergyman of about thirty-five, the other some years his junior.

Almost since the coach left St. Austell there had been silence inside it. The child slept soundly despite the jolting of the vehicle and the rattle of the windows and the clank of the swingle bars; neither had the stops wakened it. From time to time the elderly couple exchanged remarks in undertones, but the thin husband was unwilling to talk, a little overawed by the superior class in which he found himself. The younger of the two men had been reading a book throughout the journey, the elder had watched the passing countryside, one hand holding back the faded dusty brown velvet curtain.

This was a small spare man, severe in clerical black, wearing his own hair scraped back and curled above and behind the ears. The cloth he wore was of fine quality and his stockings were of silk. He had a long, keen, humourless, thin-lipped face, vital and hard. The little clerk knew the face but could not name it.

The clergyman was in much the same position over the other occupant of the coach. A half-dozen times his glance had rested on the thick unpowdered hair opposite, and on the face of his fellow traveller.

When they were not more than fifteen minutes out of Truro and the horses had slowed to a walking pace up the stiff hill, the other man looked up from his book and their eyes met.

“You’ll pardon me, sir,” said the clergyman in a sharp, vigorous voice. “Your features are familiar, but I find it hard to recall where we have met. Was it in Oxford?”

The young man was tall and thin and big-boned, with a scar on his cheek. He wore a double-breasted riding coat cut away short in front to show the waistcoat and the stout breeches, both of a lighter brown. His hair, which had a hint of copper in its darkness, was brushed back and tied at the back with brown ribbon.

“You’re the Revd. Dr. Halse, aren’t you?” he said.

The little clerk, who had been following this exchange, made an expressive face at his wife. Rector of Towerdreth, Curate of St. Erme, Headmaster of Truro Grammar School, high burgess of the town and late mayor, Dr. Halse was a personage. It explained his bearing.

“You know me, then,” said Dr. Halse with a gracious air. “I usually have a memory for faces.”

“You have had many pupils.”

“Ah, that explains it. Maturity changes a face. And—hm. Let me see... is it Hawkey?”

“Poldark.”

The clergyman's eyes narrowed in an effort of remembrance. "Francis, is it? I thought—"

"Ross. You will remember my cousin more clearly. He stayed on. I felt, quite wrongly, that at thirteen my education had gone far enough."

Recognition came. "Ross Poldark. Well, well. You've changed. I remember now," said Dr. Halse with a glint of cold humour. "You were insubordinate. I had to thrash you at frequent intervals, and then you ran away."

"Yes." Poldark turned the page of his book. "A bad business. And your ankles as sore as my buttocks."

Two small pink spots came to the clergyman's cheeks. He stared a moment at Ross and then turned to look out of the window.

The little clerk had heard of the Poldarks, had heard of Joshua, from whom, they said, in the fifties and sixties no pretty woman married or unmarried was safe. This must be his son. An unusual face with its strongly set cheekbones, wide mouth, and large, strong white teeth. The eyes were a very clear blue-grey under the heavy lids which gave a number of the Poldarks that deceptively sleepy look.

Dr. Halse was returning to the attack.

"Francis, I suppose, is well? Is he married?"

"Not when I last heard, sir. I've been in America some time."

"Dear me. A deplorable mistake, the fighting. I was against it throughout. Did you see much of the war?"

"I was in it."

They had reached the top of the hill at last and the driver was slackening his bearing reins at the descent before him.

Dr. Halse wrinkled his sharp nose. "You are a Tory?"

"A soldier."

"Well, it was not the fault of the soldiers that we lost. England's heart was not in it. We have a derelict old man on the throne. He'll not last much longer. The Prince has different views."

The road in the steepest part of the hill was deeply rutted, and the coach jolted and swayed dangerously. The baby began to cry. They reached the bottom and the man beside the driver blew a blast on his horn. They turned into St. Austell Street. It was a Tuesday afternoon and there were few people about the shops. Two half-naked urchins ran the length of the street begging for a copper, but gave up the chase as the coach swayed into the mud of St. Clement's Street. With much creaking and shouting they rounded the sharp corner, crossed the river by the narrow bridge, jolted over granite cobbles, turned and twisted again, and at last drew up before the Red Lion Inn.

In the bustle that followed, the Revd. Dr. Halse got out first with a stiff word of farewell and was gone, stepping briskly between the puddles of rainwater and horse urine to the other side of the narrow street. Poldark rose to follow, and the clerk saw for the first time that he was lame.

"Can I help you, sir?" he offered, putting down his belongings.

The young man refused with thanks and, handed out from the outside by a postboy, climbed down

When Ross left the coach rain was beginning to fall, a thin fine rain blowing before the wind, which was gusty and uncertain here in the hollow of the hills.

He gazed about him and sniffed. All this was so familiar, quite as truly a coming home as when he would reach his own house. ~~This narrow cobbled street with the streamlet of water bubbling down~~ the close-built squat houses with their bow windows and lace curtains, many of them partly screening faces which were watching the arrival of the coach, even the cries of the postboys seemed to have taken on a different and more familiar note.

Truro in the old days had been the centre of "life" for him and his family. A port and a coinage town, *the* shopping centre and a meeting place of fashion, the town had grown rapidly in the last few years, new and stately houses having sprung up among the disorderly huddle of old ones to mark its adoption as a winter and town residency by some of the oldest and most powerful families in Cornwall. The new aristocracy too were leaving their mark: the Lemons, the Treworthys, the Warleggans, families which had pushed their way up from humble beginnings on the crest of the new industries.

A strange town. He felt it more on his return. A secretive, important little town, clustering in the fold of the hills astride and about its many streams, almost surrounded by running water and linked to the rest of the world by fords, by bridges, and by stepping-stones. Miasma and the other fevers were always rife.

...There was no sign of Jud.

He limped into the inn.

"My man was to meet me," he said. "Paynter is his name. Jud Paynter of Nampara."

The landlord peered at him shortsightedly. "Oh, Jud Paynter. Yes, we know him well, sir. But we have not seen him today. You say he was to meet you here? Boy, go and ascertain if Paynter—you know him?—if Paynter is in the stables or has been here today."

Ross ordered a glass of brandy and by the time it came the boy was back to say that Mr. Paynter had not been seen that day.

"The arrangement was quite definite. It doesn't matter. You have a saddle horse I can hire?"

The landlord rubbed the end of his long nose. "Well, we have a mare that was left here three days gone. In fact, we held it in lieu of a debt. I don't think there could be any objection to loaning her to you could give me some reference."

"My name is Poldark. I am a nephew to Mr. Charles Poldark of Trenwith."

"Dear, dear, yes; I should have recognized you, Mr. Poldark. I'll have the mare saddled for you at once."

"No, wait. There's some daylight yet. Have her ready in an hour."

Out in the street again, Ross turned down the narrow slit of Church Lane. At the end he bore right and, after passing the school where his education had come to an ungracious end, he stopped before a door on which was printed: "Nat. G. Pearce. Notary and Commissioner of Oaths." He pulled at the bell for some time before a pimply woman admitted him.

"Mr. Pearce bean't well today," she said. "I'll see if he'll see you."

She climbed the wooden stairs, and after an interval called down an invitation over the worm-eaten banisters. He groped a way up and was shown into a parlour.

Mr. Nathaniel Pearce was sitting in an easy chair in front of a large fire with one leg tied in bandages propped upon another chair. He was a big man with a big face, coloured a light plum purple from overeating.

"Oh, now this is a surprise, I do exclaim, Mr. Poldark. How pleasant. You'll forgive me if I don't

rise; the old trouble; each attack seems worse than the last. Take a seat.”

Ross grasped a moist hand and chose a chair as far from the fire as was polite. Insufferably hot here and the air was old and stale.

“You’ll remember,” he said, “I wrote you I was returning this week.”

“Oh yes, Mr.—er—Captain Poldark; it had slipped my memory for the moment; how nice to call in on your way home.” Mr. Pearce adjusted his bob-wig which, in the way of his profession, had a high frontlet and a long bag at the back tied in the middle. “I am desolate here, Captain Poldark; my daughter offers me no company; she has become converted to some Methodist way of belief, and goes out almost every night at a prayer meeting. She talks so much of God that it quite embarrasses me. You must have a glass of canary.”

“My stay is to be short,” said Ross. It certainly must, he thought, or I shall swear away. “I am anxious to be home again but thought I’d see you on my way. Your letter did not reach me until a fortnight before we sailed from New York.”

“Dear, dear, such a delay; what a blow it would be; and you have been wounded; is it severe?”

Ross eased his leg. “I see from your letter that my father died in March. Who has administered the estate since then, my uncle or you?”

Mr. Pearce absently scratched the ruffles on his chest. “I know you would wish me to be frank with you.”

“Of course.”

“Well, when we came to go into his affairs, Mr.—er—Captain Poldark, it did not seem that he had left much for either of us to administer.”

A slow smile crept over Ross's mouth; it made him look younger, less intractable.

“Everything was naturally left to you. I’ll give you a copy of the will before you go; should you predecease him, then to his niece Verity. Aside from the actual property there is little to come in for you. Ouch, this thing is twinging most damnably!”

“I have never looked on my father as a wealthy man. I asked, though, and was anxious to know, for a special reason. He was buried at Sawle?”

The lawyer stopped scratching and eyed the other man shrewdly. “You’re thinking of settling at Nampara now, Captain Poldark?”

“I am.”

“Any time I can do any business for you, only too pleased. I should say,” Mr. Pearce hastened on as the young man rose. “I should say that you may find your property a little neglected.”

Ross turned.

“I have not ridden over myself,” said Mr. Pearce; “this leg, you know; most distressing, and now not yet two and fifty; but my clerk has been out. Your father was in failing health for some time and things are not kept just so neat and tidy as you’d like when the master's not about, are they? Nor's your uncle so young as he used to be. Is Paynter meeting you with a horse?”

“He was to have done so but has not turned up.”

“Then, my dear sir, why not stay the night with us? My daughter will be home from her praying time to cook me a bite of supper. We have pork; I know we have pork; and an excellent bed; yes, that would suit me well.”

Ross took out a handkerchief and mopped his face.

“It's very kind of you. I feel that, being so near my home today, I should prefer to reach it.”

Mr. Pearce sighed and struggled into a more upright position. “Then give me a hand, will you? I'll get you a copy of the will, so's you may take it home and read it at your leisure.”

CHAPTER TWO

1

DINNER WAS IN PROGRESS AT TRENWITH HOUSE.

It would normally have been over by this time; when Charles Poldark and his family dined alone, the meal seldom took more than two hours, but this was a special occasion. And because of the guests the meal was taking place in the hall in the centre of the house, a room too large and draughty when the family had only itself to victual.

There were ten people sitting at the long narrow oak table. At the head was Charles himself, with his daughter Verity on his left. On his right was Elizabeth Chynoweth and next to her Francis, his son. Beyond them were Mr. and Mrs. Chynoweth, Elizabeth's parents, and at the foot of the table Aunt Agatha crumbled soft food and munched it between her toothless jaws. Up the other side Cousin William-Alfred was in conversation with Dr. and Mrs. Choake.

The fish, the poultry, and the meat dishes were finished, and Charles had just called for the sweet. At all meals he was troubled with wind, which made female guests an embarrassment.

"Damme," he said, in a silence of repletion which had fallen on the company, "I don't know why you two doves don't get married tomorrow instead of waiting for a month for more. Aarf! What d'you lack? Are you afraid you'll change your minds?"

"For my part I would take your advice," said Francis. "But it is Elizabeth's day as well as mine."

"One short month is little enough," said Mrs. Chynoweth, fumbling at the locket on the handson encrusted lace of her dress. Her fine looks were marred by a long and acquisitive nose; on first seeing her one felt a sense of shock at so much beauty spoiled.

"How can one expect *me* to prepare, let alone the poor child? In one's daughter one lives one's own wedding day over afresh. I only wish that our preparations could be more extensive." She glanced at her husband.

"What did she say?" asked Aunt Agatha.

"Well, there it is," said Charles Poldark. "There it is. I suppose we must be patient since they are. Well, I give you a toast. To the happy pair!"

"You've toasted that three times already," objected Francis.

"No matter. Four is a luckier number."

"But I cannot drink with you."

"Hush, boy! That's unimportant."

Amid some laughter the toast was drunk. As the glasses clattered back upon the table, lights were brought. Then the housekeeper, Mrs. Tabb, arrived with the apple tarts, the plum cake, and the jellies.

"Now," said Charles, flourishing his knife and fork over the largest apple tart. "I hope this will prove as tasty as it looks. Where's the cream? Oh, there. Put it on for me, Verity, my dear."

"I'm sorry," said Elizabeth, breaking her silence. "But I'm quite unable to eat anything more."

Elizabeth Chynoweth was slighter than her mother had ever been, and there was in her face the

beauty which her mother had missed. As the yellow light from the candles pushed the darkness back and up towards the high-raftered ceiling, the fine clear whiteness of her took one's attention among the shadows of the room and against the sombre wood of the high-backed chair.

"Nonsense, child," said Charles. "You're thin as a wraith. Must get some blood into you."

"Indeed, I—"

"Dear Mr. Poldark," said Mrs. Chynoweth mincingly, "to look at her you would not credit how obstinate she can be. For twenty years I have been trying to make her eat, but she just turns away from the choicest food. Perhaps you'll be able to coax her, Francis."

"I am very satisfied with her as she is," said Francis.

"Yes yes," said his father. "But a little food... Damme, that does no one any harm. A wife needs to be strong and well."

"Oh, she is really very strong," Mrs. Chynoweth hastened on. "You would be surprised at that to it is the breed, nothing more than the breed. Was I not frail as a girl, Jonathan?"

"Yes, my pet," said Jonathan.

"Hark, how the wind's rising!" said Aunt Agatha, crumbling her cake.

"That is something I cannot understand," said Dr. Choake. "How your aunt, though deaf, Mr. Poldark, is always sensible to the sounds of nature."

"I believe she imagines it half the time."

"That I do not!" said Aunt Agatha. "How dare you, Charles!"

"Was that someone at the door?" Verity interposed.

Tabb was out of the room, but Mrs. Tabb had heard nothing. The candles flickered in the draught and the red damask curtains over the long windows moved as if a hand were stirring them.

"Expecting someone, my dear?" asked Mrs. Chynoweth.

Verity did not blush. She had little of her brother's good looks, being small and dark and salloy with the large mouth which came to some of the Poldarks.

"I expect it is the cowshed door," said Charles, taking a swill of port. "Tabb was to have looked to it yesterday but he rode with me into St. Ann's. I'll thrash young Bartle for not attending to his work."

"They do thay," lisped Mrs. Choake to Mrs. Chynoweth, "they do thay as how that the Prince is living at an outrageous wate. I was weading in the *Mercury* as how Mr. Fox had pwomised him an income of one hundred thousand pounds a year, and now that he is in power he is hard put to it to wedeem his pwomith."

"It would seem unlikely," said Mr. Chynoweth, "that that would worry Mr. Fox unduly." A smallish man with a silky white beard, his was a defensive pomposity, adopted to hide the fact that he had never in his life made up his mind about anything. His wife had married him when she was eighteen and he thirty-one. Both Jonathan and his income had lost ground since then.

"And what's wrong with Mr. Fox, I'm asking you?" Dr Choake said deeply from under his eyebrows.

Mr. Chynoweth pursed his lips. "I should have considered that plain."

"Opinions differ, sir. I may say, that if I—"

The surgeon broke off as his wife took the rare liberty of treading on his toe. Today was the first time the Choakes and the Chynoweths had met socially; to her it seemed folly to begin a political wrangle with these still influential gentlefolk.

Thomas Choake was turning ungratefully to squash Polly with a look, but she was saved the work of his spleen. This time there could be no mistake that someone was knocking on the outer door. Mrs. Tabb set down the tray of tarts and went to the door.

The wind made the curtains billow, and the candles dripped grease down their silver sconces.

“God help me!” said the housekeeper as if she had seen a ghost.

2

Ross came into a company quite unprepared for his arrival. When his figure showed in the doorway one after another of those at the table broke into words of surprise. Elizabeth and Francis and Verity and Dr. Choake were on their feet; Charles lay back grunting and inert from shock. Cousin William-Alfred polished his steel spectacles, while Aunt Agatha plucked at his sleeve mumbling, “What is it? What's to do? The meal isn't over.”

Ross screwed up his eyes until they grew used to the light. Trenwith House was almost on his way home, and he had not thought to intrude on a party.

First to greet him was Verity. She ran across and put her arms round his neck. “Why, Ross dear! Fancy now!” was all she could find to say.

“Verity!” He gave her a hug. And then he saw Elizabeth.

“Stap me,” said Charles. “So you're back at last, boy. You're late for dinner, but we've some apple-tart left.”

“Did they lame us, Ross?” said Dr. Choake. “A pox on the whole war. It was ill-starred. Thank God it's over.”

Francis, after a short hesitation, came quickly round the table and grasped the other man's hand. “It's good to see you back, Ross! We've missed you.”

“It's good to be back,” said Ross. “To see you all and—”

The colour of the eyes under the same heavy lids was the only mark of cousinship. Francis was compact, slim, and neat, with the fresh complexion and clear features of handsome youth. He looked what he was, carefree, easy going, self-confident, a young man who has never known what it was to be in danger or short of money, or to pit his strength against another man's except in games or horse play. Someone at school had christened them “the fair Poldark and the dark Poldark.” They had always been good friends, which was surprising, since their fathers had not.

“This is a solemn occasion,” said Cousin William-Alfred, his bony hands grasping the back of his chair. “A family reunion in more than name. I trust you're not seriously wounded, Ross. That scar is a considerable disfigurement.”

“Oh, that,” said Ross. “That would be of no moment if I didn't limp like Jago's donkey.”

He went round the table greeting the others. Mrs. Chynoweth welcomed him coldly, extending her hand from a distance.

“Do tell us,” lisped Polly Choake, “do tell us thome of your experwiences, Captain Poldark, how we lost the war, what these Amewicans are like, and —”

“Very like us, ma'am. That's why we lost it.” He had reached Elizabeth.

“Well, Ross,” she said softly.

His eyes feasted on her face. “This is most opportune. I couldn't have wished it different.”

“I could,” she said. “Oh, Ross, I could.”

“And what are you going to do now, my lad?” asked Charles. “It's high time you settled down. Property don't look after itself, and you can't trust hirelings. Your father could have done with you this last year and more—”

“I almost called to see you tonight,” Ross said to Elizabeth, “but left it for tomorrow. Self-restraint is rewarded.”

“I must explain. I wrote you, but—”

“Why,” said Aunt Agatha, “Lord damn me if it isn't Ross! Come here, boy! I thought you was gone to make one of the blest above.”

Reluctantly Ross walked down the table to greet his great-aunt. Elizabeth stayed where she was holding the back of her chair so that her knuckles were whiter even than her face.

Ross kissed Aunt Agatha's whiskery cheek. Into her ear he said: “I'm glad to see, Aunt, that you're still one of the blest below.”

She chuckled with delight, showing her pale brownish-pink gums. “Not so blest, maybe. But I wouldn't want to be changing just yet.”

The conversation became general, everyone questioning Ross as to when he had landed, what he had done and seen while away.

“Elizabeth,” said Mrs. Chynoweth, “fetch me my wrap from upstairs, will you? I am a little chilly.”

“Yes, Mother.” She turned and walked away, tall and virginal, groped with her hand for the oak banister.

“That fellow Paynter is a rogue,” said Charles, wiping his hands down the sides of his breeches. “If I was you I should throw him out and get a reliable man.”

Ross was watching Elizabeth going up the stairs. “He was my father's friend.”

Charles shrugged in some annoyance. “You won't find the house in a good state of repair.”

“It wasn't when I left.”

“Well, it's worse now. I haven't been over for some time. You know what your father used to say about coming in the other direction: ‘It is too far to walk and not far enough to ride.’”

“Eat this, Ross,” said Verity, bringing a piled plate to him. “And sit here.”

Ross thanked her and took the seat offered him between Aunt Agatha and Mr. Chynoweth. He would have preferred to be beside Elizabeth, but that would have to wait. He was surprised to find Elizabeth here. She and her mother and father had never once been to Nampara in the two years he had known her. Two or three times he glanced up as he ate to see if she was returning.

Verity was helping Mrs. Tabb to carry out some of the used dishes; Francis stood plucking at his lip by the front door; the others were back in their chairs. A silence had fallen on the company.

“It is no easy countryside to which you return,” said Mr. Chynoweth, pulling at his beard.

“Discontent is rife. Taxes are high, wages have fallen. The country is exhausted from its many wars; and now the Whigs are in. I can think of no worse a prospect.”

“Had the Whigs been in before,” said Dr. Choake, refusing to be tactful, “none of this need have happened.”

Ross looked across at Francis. “I've interrupted a party. Is it in celebration of the peace or in honour of the next war?”

Thus he forced the explanation they had hesitated to give.

“No,” said Francis. “I—er—The position is—”

“We are celebrating something far different,” said Charles, motioning for his glass to be filled again. “Francis is to be married. That is what we’re celebrating.”

“To be married,” said Ross, slicing his food. “Well, well; and who—”

“To Elizabeth,” said Mrs. Chynoweth.

There was silence.

Ross put down his knife. “To—”

“To my daughter.”

“Can I get you something to drink?” Verity whispered to Elizabeth, who had just reached the bottom of the stairs.

“No, no... Please no.”

“Oh,” said Ross. “To... Elizabeth.”

“We are very happy,” said Mrs. Chynoweth, “that our two ancient families are to be united. Very happy and very proud. I am sure, Ross, that you will join with us in wishing Francis and Elizabeth a happiness in their union.”

Walking very carefully, Elizabeth came over to Mrs. Chynoweth.

“Your wrap, Mama.”

“Thank you, my dear.”

Ross went on with his meal.

“I don’t know what your opinion is,” said Charles heartily after a pause, “but for myself I am attached to this port. It was run over from Cherbourg in the autumn of ’79. When I tasted a sample I said to meself, it is too good to be repeated; I’ll buy the lot. Nor has it been repeated; nor has it.” He put down his hands to ease his great paunch against the table.

“Is’pose you’ll be settling down now, Ross, eh?” said Aunt Agatha, a wrinkled hand on his sleeve. “How about a little wife for you, eh? That’s what we’ve to find next!”

Ross looked across at Dr. Choake.

“You attended my father?”

Dr. Choake nodded.

“Did he suffer much?”

“At the end. But the time was short.”

“It was strange that he should fail so quickly.”

“Nothing could be done. It was a dropsical condition that was beyond the power of man to allay.”

“I rode over,” said Cousin William-Alfred, “to see him twice. But I regret that he was not—hm—in the mood to make the most of such spiritual comfort as I could offer. It was to me a personal sorrow that I could be of so little help to one of my own blood.”

“You must have some of this apple tart, Ross,” said Verity in an undertone behind him, glancing at the veins in his neck. “I made it myself this afternoon.”

“I mustn’t stop. I called here only for a few minutes and to rest my horse, which is lame.”

“Oh, but there’s no need to go tonight. I have told Mrs. Tabb to prepare a room. Your horse may stumble in the dark and throw you.”

Ross looked up at Verity and smiled. In this company no private word could pass between them.

Now Francis, and to a lesser degree his father, joined in the argument. But Francis was constrained, his father half-hearted, and Ross determined.

Charles said: "Well, have it as you wish, boy. I would not fancy arriving at Nampara tonight. It will be cold and wet and perhaps no welcome. Pour some more spirit into you to keep out the chill."

Ross did as he was urged, drinking three glasses in succession. With the fourth he got to his feet.

"To Elizabeth," he said slowly, "and to Francis... May they find happiness together."

The toast was drunk more quietly than the others. Elizabeth was still standing behind her mother's chair; Francis had at last moved from the door to put a hand beneath her arm.

In the silence which followed, Mrs. Choake said:

"How nithe it must be to be home again. I never go away, even a little way, without feeling the gwatified to be back. What are the Amewican colonies like, Captain Poldark? They thay as how ever the thun does not wise and thet in the thame way in foreign parts."

Polly Choake's inanity seemed to relieve the tension, and talk broke out again while Ross finished his meal. There was more than one there conscious of relief that he had taken the news so quietly.

Ross, however, was not staying, and presently took his leave.

"You'll come over in a day or two, will you not?" said Francis, a rush of affection in his voice. "We've heard nothing so far, nothing but the barest details of your experiences or how you were wounded or of your journey home. Elizabeth will be returning home tomorrow. We plan to be married in a month. If you want my help at Nampara, send a message over; you know I shall be pleased to come. Why, it's like old times seeing you back again! We feared for your life, did we not, Elizabeth?"

"Yes," said Elizabeth.

Ross picked up his hat. They were standing together at the door, waiting for Tabb to bring round Ross's mare. He had refused the loan of a fresh horse for the last three miles.

"He'll be here now, that's if he can handle her. I warned him to be careful."

Francis opened the door. The wind blew in a few spots of rain. He went out tactfully to see if Tabb had come.

Ross said: "I hope my mistimed resurrection hasn't cast a cloud over your evening."

The light from indoors threw a shaft across her face, showed up the grey eyes. The shadows had spread to her face and she looked ill.

"I'm so happy that you're back, Ross. I had feared, we had all feared—What can you think of me?"

"Two years is a long time, isn't it? Too long perhaps."

"Elizabeth," said Mrs. Chynoweth. "Take care the night air does not catch you."

"No, Mama."

"Goodbye." He took her hand.

Francis came back. "He's here now. Did you buy the mare? She's a handsome creature but very temperamental."

"Ill usage makes the sweetest of us vicious," said Ross. "Has the rain stopped?"

"Not quite. You know your way?"

Ross showed his teeth. "Every stone. Has it changed?"

"Nothing to mislead you. Do not cross the Mellingley by the bridge: the middle plank is rotten."

"So it was when I left."

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