

The May Queen

Helen Irene Young

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First Red Line Edition, Crooked Cat Publishing 2017

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For Frances

Acknowledgments

Thank you Antonia, Fiona, Jess and Joe. Cheers Karen, Laura, Maggie and Mia. You too Phil, Roger, Rohan and Rose. Life will never be the same again, Richard.

Dad, you encouraged me first and David, you after. Gerald, we made it.

Carolina, Clare and Jo, thanks for distracting. Laura, my creative better.

Lastly, Laurence, Miriam and Stephanie at Crooked Cat. Miaow.

About the Author

Helen is a digital editor. In a former life, she worked as a bookseller for Waterstones and an admissions assistant for an acting school, before signing up to a £12-a-day internship at a glossy magazine (when it was the norm). For the next six years (and on a better grade) she went on to write and edit for Harper's Bazaar and Good Housekeeping. She is currently the website editor for Bloomsbury Publishing.

Helen attended the Faber Novel Writing Programme. She splits her time between London, Wiltshire and Colombia, when she can get there. *The May Queen* is her debut novel.

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The May Queen

PART ONE

1934
JULY

It was the first thing to come between May and the carnival. That crack, wallop of flesh against flesh, crying out into the night like two beasts in the barn. Only it wasn't two in the dirt, like the boys dared her look at, but Ma and Sophie in the kitchen, thrashing out in other ways.

"Who did it? Tell me, girl, and tell me now." Ma's question came sounding like a threat.

Inside the room, Sophie stayed silent, one hand raised to the spreading sting.

Outside, May knew there was safety in keeping shut when Ma got up in one of her fits – cast often when the sisters came home past curfew or had been out robbing eggs – precious small blues and greens. "They're nature's, not yours," Ma would say, tossing them into the garden so they fell open and feast-like for the coots.

May drank up the scene in front like one looking on at a picture – through the solid square lens of the window.

"Wait till Pa hears."

"Ma, you wouldn't!"

"He'll know soon enough without me telling; look at you."

May took the invitation not given and looked, her mouth opening to form the soft O that Sophie's hands went down around like a ripe apple. Where'd she been to get that, May puzzled, calling up the hours spent planning costumes day after day. Costumes not needed for a year but deliberately mapped, in case just maybe, first prize favoured the long-travelled approach.

May shivered, her cotton dress caught between dry and not. She leant against the wall in front, finding comfort in its heat. The day had blistered to make the stone glow now, long after the light had left it. A day most spent dripping in their skin, while May writhed cool through the currents of the mill pond. Out of sight, just.

"What have I done?" Ma asked of the low ceiling, raising both arms up high but finding no answer there.

Sophie didn't look up, seeming returned to saying nothing, except now she whimpered. Whimpered like that otter May had come upon the year previous beneath the bridge. It was hiding when she crept close, a finger raised to closed lips to say she wouldn't tell. It had a wide tear in its side where a film of liquid puddled. Crouching nearby, she waited, while downstream, past the back of The Bull and a distance gone, the water bailiffs worked on with their otterhounds, sniffing out new fur. Then she was alone again, listening to the water babble and the hounds call off they'd found another. "No matter how deep you dive, they'll find you," Sophie had whispered, so serious that May never slept a wink the whole time of year they came looking.

"You've done it, the shame you have," brought Ma's fists down punching on the wood table that divided her from Sophie.

"Ma!"

"You ain't no girl of mine."

"Who knows, hey? Who, who?" came sounding new from Ma, who given up on the table and the ceiling before, sent echoing over to the big white sink. Sophie looked like she waited for some answer back and May, outside, did too but only a menace, pest fox call tightened her shoulder tops. It was far off in a field and she didn't turn, but took to gripping at the window ledge, playing with the shadow that found half her fingers, pushing the tips to glow like they had crept into the room and she had not.

What about when Pa returns? May thought.

“When Pa’s home you’ll get it,” spoke Ma now, like she’d reached inside May’s head for that one, sensing her youngest child close, drawing reserves like some great trunk from a sapling.

“I’ll leave,” shrieked Sophie and it was the most solid thing she’d done, seeming like trickled water till then, that both May and Ma stepped back and looked to see if she’d repeat the cry or go back to babbling.

“Yes, I reckon you shall,” came Ma more quiet, moving round the plank. “And if you won’t tell me his name, I’ll get it from one does know,” she said still going, right past like she’d missed her target: “May! No use hiding if you can’t keep hidden.” Ma pulled her through the open door and into the room.

“She don’t know, so don’t ask her,” said Sophie, seeking out May’s sewn-shut lips.

“You’re wet through, girl,” brought Ma’s hand down semi-circular to come stinging against her calves.

May wrestled free and stood backed into a corner, like she didn’t take to being infected with either of their nonsense.

“What I say about swimming in that pond?”

“Not to.”

“You ain’t no girl now you’ve got woman’s ways. You want to end like her?” A shaky finger lined up Sophie in its sights.

May thought on how the answer weren’t the one Ma wanted.

“Do you?” grabbed Ma at her sleeves, wringing her out like washday suds.

Next thing she knew, Sophie lay on the floor at both their feet, where she’d come running and met Ma’s anger at the end of the line.

AUGUST

May lay in the garden beneath the sheets, not yet fixed on whether to watch them come dry completely. Every time the wind ploughed through the line of milky white, the sun flashed bright across her face. She yawned like a cat and stretched out, uncurling tightened limbs, tanned by days beneath the scorch. A strip of golden skin ran round her neck, exposing the flesh there like precious metal. When Ma went into the village, it was possible still to slip into the mill pond and find relief. Anchoring her feet between the cold crevices on the slimy bottom, she kept her mouth below, because she liked the tingly coolness of the water there.

“May, you come in and help finish what you started,” Ma called, standing in the frame.

May rolled onto her stomach and pushed up off the grass. Inside, the chaos of washday slopped in puddles on the floor.

“You push the mangle back, and mind that bucket, girl,” Ma said.

May watched the liquid dance at her feet before searching up high for the water jug.

“Oh, get comfortable, why don’t you?” said Ma as May poured and then drank beneath her dried-out stare.

“Where’s this go?” May asked, lifting the leaky bucket.

“If I’ve said once, I’ve said thousand times, outside in the pond.”

But the ducks don’t want it, May thought, remaining there. Ma went to leave off clattering at the fireside to direct her better, but May made sharp her exit. She opened the side gate and swung bucket-in-hand towards the still surface of the mill pond. Water submerged the sluice gate, connecting the bricks below the surface with the outlying pool. The gate was clotted stiff by centuries of algae, shipwreck-like. She knew better than them in the village to go diving there for buried treasure, keeping secret what Pa had given years back, a pirate’s knife rusted down like an old nail. So she had no need to make a further friend of curiosity, he’d said.

It was here she poured the pail, the sweat from their lives falling muddy between the gratings, not spread slick-like over the moorhen nests and bullfinches as before. That’s one thing done different now it’s me, she thought somewhat guiltily. She’d often seen Sophie visit the same spot months back, labouring over another sort of liquid, washed quickly from sight by a bucket full of fresh from the pond. Ma must have guessed it weren’t her cooking done it.

She looked up. There weren’t many out, not on the road across the bridge with its steady iron railings, linking Fairford to the world beyond their grasp. But it was still early, maybe tipping at midday if the sun said right.

Like most times, May’s thoughts turned to the other river, upstream beyond the wall. There, it was called the Serpentine and curved through the landscape like stretched toffee. Big House claimed it, and it was off limits to all folk but them and Pa and Pa’s lot who worked there. There weren’t nothing to look at, even standing on the upturned bucket. May could see more from her bedroom window. On moonlit nights, it was clearer still, and she’d open her eyes wide so their pools would drink deep, feeding her dreams with firefly flickers of a life she weren’t likely to touch this year, next, or the ones to creep in after.

When she got back to the kitchen, Ma had already stowed away the last of the cast-iron tubs and brought down the flames, so the water in the pot, like an old man’s belly, simmered less angrily. Right now, Ma was caught busy twisting unused line around her arm and it was all May could do to move aside before being hit by a bundle.

“To be worked on, that one,” said Ma.

May picked it up and the two wound in silence, the younger watching how the elder held it taut on the journey between elbow and palm.

“When she coming back?” May asked.

“Didn’t say, last she wrote.”

“She wrote?”

“Course, think I don’t know what my own daughter’s doing?”

May let the rope go slack.

“Easy girl, making more work for yourself that way of thinking.”

“I weren’t thinking much.”

“You was enough; now concentrate, Pa needs his lunch.”

“Think you might let me take it?”

“I might,” Ma said, resting down the neat ball like a newly formed planet. “Got to be firm, May, otherwise it gets the better of you,” she said, going over and correcting the sagging loops.

Like washday, going up to see Pa fell to Sophie’s lot. Sophie had the trust of it, like being older made her less a child. She, grown ahead, always had the best from Ma’s endless list of doings, May scratched over, with small mean thoughts she shouldn’t have owned – “growth stunters”, Ma called them. Then Sophie was gone and in the dust cloud that followed, choking Ma late at night when her shadow sat quiet, May came through with stature. Since then she courted duty, like one raised up, honeymoon-new.

It was with this encouragement, May left Ma torturing slices from the ham and, kicking off her gumboots, flung upstairs for better shoes. There she found brown lace-ups with something like a shine to them after spit.

She bounded down and had to be held firm whilst Ma put instructions into her head for how to behave beyond the wall where the Serpentine waited. For one long-practised underwater, the thought of it made her eyes sting. May cocked her head to hope at hearing it hiss and stretch, but instead, caught Ma’s drowning clatter.

“Them folk don’t want you running around a pest and falling in,” Ma said, cooling May’s cheeks with the rough side of a damp cloth, all the time making her fears talk. May bore it; being licked clean by Ma’s rough words, wondering what became of that pirate’s knife. If true danger waited on the serpent side, Sophie didn’t tell of it. Besides, at the snake’s mouth was Big House, and she’d been there on carnival days before. There’d been a crowd, though. Ma let go and a cloth bag of perishables followed soon after.

“Any message, then?” May turned on the threshold, swinging Pa’s lunch to test the weight of it.

“I’m not sure,” Ma said, squinting like the wind had changed, before the answer rumbled true: “Potatoes. Bring back a prize couple if he can.”

The kitchen gardens were nestled at the back of Big House. But where nestling implied cosiness – a tiny bird snug in a roost – they were not. A vast complex of glass and wrought iron spread across the landscape. Lines of lean stalks propped up the bean house, while in the root veg hall, dusty beds squatted low. Beside these, weird fruits and plants vied for space in the hot houses. Athletic leaves and stems pumped full of water spread their mass far and wide, brash in comparison to the genteel roses braving the native soil outside. In the open, the formal gardens gave way to vegetable plots and then fields, which stretched so far into the distance, May long ago concluded that Big House didn’t know where it ended and the rest of the world began.

May released the catch on the back gate and swung out past the mill pond towards the door to the park. She passed the pond; the water was quiet today, the ducks and swans splashing about downstream beyond the bridge. She fought the thumping need to dive, shoes and all. May got to the gate and pushed on into the park. It banged shut heavy behind. On this side, everything seemed slowed. The land had that sleepy feeling found after cocoa. The grass along the bank was clipped short – even the ducks had a certain elegance, dancing across the surface of the water, where the ones near the mill only flapped and shrilled. May slowed right down, too. The Serpentine widened when she turned a bend in the path and she caught her breath at the beauty of it, seeing willows lining the bank, dipping their leaves in its coolness. She passed opposite a miniature pavilion on the far bank, as good a house she'd ever seen. The crafts inside bobbed against their berths as though trying to get somewhere. Their movement reminded May to do the same, and she picked up her pace.

Big House came into view. It startled May how different it looked to the uninvited, as she was then, blinking at her glazed through a hundred eyes. She kept hers upon it as she crossed the stone bridge, the last outpost between her world and that ahead. This was the route Pa took, and the others who lived in the mill buildings. May cast a last look down river to home, unable to believe the mill existed at all from here. Even the mill pond had gone, as it dipped below the level of the wider Serpentine.

Big House was really called Park House, but Big House is what everyone on the outside called it. May caught up the names on her tongue, "Colonel Barker and Lady Gloria." Singing them as Ma's Cousin Peg Norris did when she came to tea on days off from being a housemaid. Sundays in the front parlour, with lots to report. May thought on how it was the only time Ma sat quiet, her mouth curling at the tips for the best bits, while her fingers worked the cake on her plate into a pyramid of crumbs.

May reached up to feel the bristly edge of her new bob.

"They're all doing it; come on Margaret," Cousin Peg had said one such Sunday.

"All right then, but don't you come crying to me when it don't grow back tomorrow," Ma had turned to May to warn while Cousin Peg helped herself to another slice. Sophie had been there too. Sophie; hiding a smile across the parlour, like she was keeping a secret all to herself.

Big House reared up in front. It had, over time, relaxed down into its foundations like Ma's own ma had done, sitting in her best chair. The lower windows looked half submerged, so that one might easily step up and enter the house through one of these, instead of turning to the door. To the right of the house was Stable Court, and the greenhouses and gardens beyond.

May headed there now, leaving the house behind to pass through the brick archway into the court. It was a large sandy space, surrounded on three sides by stable blocks and deserted just then. Pa's lunch hit out gently against her shoulder as she made her way across to the door in the far wall, admitting entrance to the kitchen gardens.

Inside, all was still. In front of May, the first row of greenhouses cut sharply into view. Through the sloping roofs, May saw tall stalks of green misbehaving, pushing against the glass to be free. She kept on, stepping into the nearest greenhouse. The heat inside was almost unbearable. Rows of gangly broad beans grew skyward, while a few plump marrows fell over their boxes onto the floor. May saw something luminous moving and crouched down beside the leaf. A fat caterpillar made slow progress across its surface. She watched its little body pulse.

"Hello."

May shot up, as one in the grip of some taboo.

"Whatever were you up to down there?" the young man asked.

"I'm looking for Pa."

"In the rhubarb?" He smiled wide, showing a natural space between two front teeth.

Something about it pushed her off-balance.

“I best go,” May said, steadyng her thoughts.

“Hold on,” he said, coming closer. “Who is your father? Perhaps I can help?”

He kept up smiling, revealing more of the gap up close. May thought of the deepest part of the river she hadn’t dared yet dive.

“I know you, don’t I?” he said, looking at her intently.

“I don’t see how.” May blushed.

“Yes, you’re the little girl from the mill who fell in.”

“No, I can swim.”

“Yes, but you were younger then and so was I. Don’t you remember?”

May looked away, feeling her face grow hot a second time against something she couldn’t quite get to surface. She sensed him waiting there, expectant for some sudden coming on of memory, but to be called out as girl and little, when she was grown beyond that now, made her forget the very reason for coming up to Big House, stuck standing there with him who had a memory of her she didn’t own herself.

“It was at the bridge,” he tried again.

“Yes,” May said, tracing some outline of recollection now. “But more the river beyond it. I went in for tadpoles.”

“And I went in for you.”

“I thought it was Pa, but it wasn’t. It was a boy.” She laughed.

“I must have been about ten. I remember it almost pulled us both under.”

“I’d forgotten.”

“Your mother made very good cocoa afterwards.”

“You met Ma?”

“I came a few times after, before I was stopped.”

He smiled, and May did too, bringing it full up to surface now. The black-knowing, of how deep the water sank beyond the calmer mill pond, where it surged and spat to be free of the village. It had almost taken her with it, but then another, stronger than her, had told it no.

“I’m Christopher,” he said, holding out a hand.

May took it, wondering if her own felt as smooth.

“Oh, Pa’s lunch!” she said, freeing it and looking down for the sack. He found it first, holding it out like it was the first he’d seen.

“Here,” he said, giving it over. “For your father, I suspect?”

She nodded and reached to take the bag from his outstretched hand. But she didn’t take it, she snatched, thief-like, and pushed out through the rear door to the plot beyond.

Mr Berry, the head gardener, stood to one side while Pa and Uncle Richard dug at the ground in front. Her uncle spotted her first and nudged Pa at his side. It was always Pa put in a good word for Uncle Richard when others wouldn’t.

“Come to see your old man, have you?” said Pa, looking pleased she had.

May took a good look at his labour. Small earthy lumps lay at his feet, babes on their backs; dried haulm turned skyward like little limbs. Pa was dusty to look at; he always was when working. He had on a pair of wool trousers, turned up at the ankles to show soil-soaked boots. His shirt was rolled up at the sleeves and his tie tucked into this, kept clean there. Pa flicked the tip of his straw hat upwards to reveal the ruddy complexion of a life spent outdoors.

"Well?" he asked May, leaning on the fork, sending it deeper.

"Ma said to bring you lunch over." May tiptoed carefully around the potatoes and gave the bag over. He, in turn, looked to Mr Berry to ask if he might, which May looked from. Pa staked the fork deep, as sentry.

"Off we go then, girl. Care to join me?"

She smiled up at him and everything was right once more. They walked together back towards the greenhouse, leaving Uncle Richard to sup in the shade of the greenhouse wall.

"Why so fast, May?" Pa asked.

"No reason, Pa," May said, keeping pace for both. Inside, the young man was gone, and the caterpillar too.

They reached the courtyard door and went through. The doors of the north stable block were thrown open. A shiny silver automobile poked out, the sun bouncing off its body. The polished funnels and tubing like the organ in church.

"A dangerous thing, May," said Pa, looking. "A man shouldn't ever travel faster than he can walk." He looked down at her. "And a girl neither."

"Yes, Pa."

He tilted his hat back again from where it had fallen, sending a hand across his forehead. The sun seemed intent on frying everything, May thought, watching a swift free itself from the hot rafters above the car.

A man in overalls appeared from the stable shadows, his face smeared black.

"How goes it, John?" Pa called to him.

John looked up, raising an oily arm to his forehead to shield his stare from the sun.

"Can't get her running, Bob, tried everything."

May followed Pa over to the car.

"I'm thinking of going down to the Croft to ask at the workshop," John told them both, like she had rights to the knowledge too.

"Yeah, I reckon Briggs and Rickards will know. Might be a modern engine but it'll have the same needs as a Marshall, here's betting," Pa offered.

They both straightened up when a young man in a grey suit came towards them from Big House.

"Hello again," he called to her through the gap.

May smiled, wondering afterwards if she'd spoken too.

"Good day to you, Master Christopher." Pa pulled off his hat, polite.

"Yes, hello there," Christopher said, his staying on. "So, you found him?" he asked, addressing May instead.

Pa looked down at her but she lost his expression beneath the brim of his dipped hat.

"Well, Boxton, what do we think? Can we get her up and running?" Christopher asked.

"I'm sure we can, sir, but it might take a little longer."

"Oh well, can't be helped, I'm sure. Georgie will just have to save her picnic for another day," Christopher said, as though they had, the four of them, planned this together.

But, Pa was already pulling her away, back towards the bridge before the outcome was known. They passed the house in silence. Pa dropped her hand and now kept pace. Halfway across the bridge, he paused. He leant against its side and placed both hands face down on top of the flat.

"Have you met the Colonel's son before?" Pa cleared his throat to make the asking easier.

"Just today, Pa," May said, thinking too late of what Christopher had revealed. Wondering why Pa would ask. Hadn't Ma told him about before?

Pa looked downstream, like he was also seeking out the mill, as she had earlier.

“You’re a good girl, aren’t you, May?”

The question weighed heavy between them, like if it fell off the bridge it would sink to the bottom. May looked up at him and nodded her head in such violent agreement that he laughed, and picking her up, although she felt too old for it, spun her on the spot. When is Sophie coming home? May thought.

They sat down on the other side, finding a large shady sycamore they both approved of. Pa took off his hat and wiped his brow. He had a tan line around the top of his head where it often covered it; like someone had drawn it there using one of Ma’s mixing bowls as a guide. He unwrapped the sandwich and gave one half to May. Pa sat back against the trunk and stretched his long legs towards the river. May copied, feeling the springy grass beneath her bare ones.

“How’s Ma?” Pa asked.

“Says to bring a couple of prize ones back.” She swallowed a large lump of bread half-chewed. “If you can.”

He chuckled. “Sounds about right.”

Pa unwrapped the now-flattened sweet pie. Cooked blackberry jam spilled out as he broke off the triangular tip, the juice staining his hands, and handed it to May. His fingernails were dirty beneath but it was the clean sort of dirt May loved. He always smelled of it. Like nature loved him, too. She thought of Christopher’s clean outstretched hand holding their lunch. For a moment dumbstruck, as though she’d never seen a hand before, or touched one either. Didn’t matter, he was the Colonel’s son and had ignored Pa.

May swallowed the sweet pie tip. Delicious.

He did have a very nice car though.

SEPTEMBER

“Ma says I’m growing faster than them chicken we raised last Christmas.”

“Jan,” May giggled, “are you worried you might not make it past the 25th?”

“It’s not funny, May.” Jan sat up. “Look at me!”

May found it hard to see any change. Jan was Jan, although she had grown increasingly more at odds with herself each time May saw her. May pushed her back down and the two girls laughed, Jan rather painfully, May thought, as though it hurt her to do so. Together, they almost came clean of the wall. May knew something of it too; it was as though their fourteenth year had added an extra season. She pulled self-consciously at her own shirt where the space now lacked, as though to give the new flesh beneath a chance at freedom.

“Perhaps you need work.”

“Yes, like you!” Jan said, jumping off the wall. “Can you speak to him then? To Watchet?”

“I’ll try.” May came off too and cast a glance at the back of the greengrocers. “Got to get back, Jan.”

“Me too. Ma wants me to traipse up to Park Farm for eggs.”

“Why not send Jimmy?”

“No, I don’t mind really,” said Jan, straightening her skirt.

May went towards the shop back.

“May!” Jan called after. “If there are any of those broken sweets, like you had last time, I don’t mind.”

May smiled by way of answer and went inside.

In a slip of generosity, it was Ma who had freed her up twice a week to help the grocer with deliveries. There was a bike thrown in too, which May kept secret, lest Ma think it too much joy and not serious enough work.

After that first week of turning circles in the saddle at the back of the grocers, May had the hang of it. Out at delivery, she discovered different ways to dream. She peddled at a romantic pace down familiar lanes and byways, which, in her new lover’s eyes were rendered changed by darling motion. On the back of the bike, May carried a full box of groceries when out on delivery, bound into her charge with thick string the colour of ink. Ever careful of her new responsibility, May experienced the joy of punching out alone, kept in labour by Watchet long enough to outrun Ma’s shadow and the very flesh of her, safely packed in by the mill cottage walls.

Inside the store room, May found Watchet’s other assistant, Antony, a gloomy boy some two years older than May. She went over to the crate he packed and peered in. It was a game of sorts, to guess at the destination by the produce. An early blow came when she discovered Ma’s order both predictable and mean, while it remained startling just how much sugar disappeared inside Jan’s house.

“Not for you, this one.” Antony sulked, pushing her back from the crate as though she might rot the veg by looking. He brought down a striped box from a high shelf. It was the colour of sugared mice. “This goes to the house.”

May took it, wrapping her arms about its many corners. It was light, despite its size. She read Taylor’s Milliners on its top and then a second time, tracing the gold type to enjoy the letters, not caring for the words whole.

“What is it?” she asked.

“I tell you what, wait right there and I’ll ask Watchet,” he said, leaping over sincerity.

“Alright, don’t worry, I’m off.” May turned. “Big House, you said?”

“You know another?”

May glanced behind at the box, relieved it held firm after the sharp turn out of Market Place that joined Park Street. This connected her to the road that ran parallel to the grounds of the park and it was a good fifteen minutes of flat peddling before Big House drive began. She hadn't sought out Watchet to ask about Jan, knowing the answer before then, really: that there was only one bike. May sped clear of the thought, that she might not want to share, knowing Jan, still lost in childish games, would expect it. Somehow, in a fortnight, this new responsibility had become hers. She clung to this independent idea of herself like to the last piece of drift at sea. Her friend deserved better, May thought. But how she loved it, alone, peddling faster now to make it come stronger, to bring the trees to blur like some painter's spent palette until she'd forgotten what guilt was, and in this forgetfulness, almost overshot the gatehouse that met the top of the park.

Inside the parkland, it was the distance again to the house itself. As it came into view from the drive, Big House could have been a mirage, its tall windows reflecting the jagged afternoon sun, as though it hid coyly behind the suggestion of movement in heat. It was irresistibly unattainable, and May reached out towards it, knowing that inside the box behind her, she carried a little piece that would soon belong to the magnificent whole. Eventually, she brought the machine to stop at the end of the drive and climbed off, resting the bicycle against her hip. May caught her breath and with it the oily fresh scent of crushed pine needles that had been present along the fir-lined drive too. She walked with the bike around to the side of the house until she came to the trade entrance. She rang the bell, flicking a glance towards the box as though it might have leapt ahead excited and taken the front door. No one came. She rang again and reached a hand down to try the door. It was locked. She leant the bicycle against the wall and walked backwards, her hands on her sides to press back and glance up at the windows above. This side of the house was more familiar to her, yet cast in shadow now. On the ground floor and away from the service end, a single light stole outwards from a room, illuminating the terrace stones. The gravel crunched as she moved closer.

Inside the room, a man sat at his desk. It was Colonel Barker. He had his head down and was letter writing, the script falling slowly from the pen onto the page in front. May stood transfixed, watching its laboured progress through the corner of the glass until the Colonel hurriedly scooped the papers up and away into a drawer at his side. The door opened and Christopher walked in. May drew closer, feeling how a moth must, watching them talk, knowing she shouldn't. Then Christopher, as though he sensed her close, looked out at May and seeing her see him, waved an arm.

May rushed back to the bike and dragged it away from the wall, leaving bald patches in the gravel.

"Hello again," he called behind, outside now and running to catch up.

"I'm quite sorry," May began, flushing at the fresh thought of it. "I've a box," she pointed backwards, almost dropping the bicycle.

"I've got it," he said, reaching for the frame as it lurched.

May moved apart, so that the bike looked his, and her the one on foot. Remembering the delivery she went back in, reaching down to untie the knotted string.

"I'm just bringing this," May said, trying to make it sound less delivered. "It's addressed to Colonel Barker."

"Yes, it's got his name here," he pointed, smiling at her in that strange way again. "Let's take it in." He walked the bike over to the wall before she'd had time to free the box. May followed behind. Christopher finished off the knots and lifted the package free. "Come on," he said, nodding his head in the direction of the open terrace door.

Inside, the room was losing to the shadows. And while stacked shelves and low chairs gradually became unseen things, there was a visible richness to the air that spoke of lustre and sparkle.

"It'll be for mother," said Christopher, suddenly there beside the switch, blinding her with light. The room was more homely than her imagination had allowed. Christopher dropped down onto one of the low settees and put the box beside him. He looked up at her and smiled.

"Let's open it."

"I won't," May said, grounded by the opposite.

He lifted the lid and went in, carefully bringing out a wide-brimmed hat. It had a pale silk flower sewn to its side and looked lavished upon, as though confident in its simplicity.

"It's not really her thing," he said, turning it in his hands before rising and going over to May.

"It is yours, though," he said, standing back to look.

May froze, lost beneath the brim.

"Good God," he said, turning to reach down into the box again. "Matching gloves!"

"What's this?"

They both looked up. Colonel Barker stood part inside the room, not yet committing to the space where his voice forced ahead. To May, it was as though he caught sight of her before the hat, recognising the former before the latter. She took it off. The Colonel entered the room, closing the door behind him. He went over to Christopher, coming at first embrace-like, to match him in height and more, but ended by holding him roughly by the arm.

"Give those to me," he said, uncurling a ready hand. Christopher placed the gloves into his father's. Colonel Barker released his son and turned to May. "The hat, too," he said.

May went over, offering it outstretched. He looked it over, as Christopher had done, and placed it carefully back into the box.

"I won't tell mother," said Christopher, sounding unsure in it.

"No, don't tell her," mumbled the Colonel, replacing the lid.

May was as close as could be to the terrace opening without being through it.

"You're Thomas's girl," stopped her more as a statement than a question and she nodded in response.

"There'll be trouble if I'm late, Sir," she said, making the Colonel nod this time. She slipped out of the door and back onto the terrace, to fumble for the bicycle and head off, recklessly, into the fast approaching night.

"Big House, you say?"

"Yes, Ma," May replied, keeping to the hall shadows, not committing more person to the room than necessary.

Ma sat eying her beneath the glow of a single lamp. It had been a fast ride back, May had made sure of that. Still, she'd have to return the bike in the morning.

"It's not usual, Watchet sending you there late," came Ma, her needles puncturing the wool in front, driving it up from the ball on her lap. "I'll have words."

"Ma, there's no need," May said, feeling something slip from reach. "There's no danger found about the place and no harm done, is there?"

"I'll have words," Ma repeated, stopping this time. "You been gone longer than most nights and no doubt because you been in mischief of some kind."

"I swear I haven't."

"Ah, don't say a word, I know it, even if you don't yet."

May retreated further into the half-light, as though there were some shame in being seen.

Ma didn't usually chide where work was concerned. She reached a hand to her crown, wondering if Ma saw something there, something that had been, but wasn't now.

"Go up now," Ma said, returned to clicking.

"But Ma, Big House isn't any different to the rest."

"Didn't you hear? To bed with you, girl."