Wakenhyrst

1966

THE MYSTERY OF EDMUND STEARNE

by PATRICK RIPPON

Only in The Sunday Explorer Magazine

Like a witch's lair in a fairytale the ancient manor house crouches in its tangled garden. I can't take my eyes off the ivy-choked window above the front door. It was from that window in 1913 that 16-year-old Maud Stearne watched her father set off down the steps with an ice-pick, a geological hammer – and murder in his heart.

We've all heard of Edmund Stearne. We've marvelled at his works and shuddered at his crime. Why did he do it? Did he confide his secrets to a notebook? *Why won't his daughter reveal the truth?*

For more than 50 years Maud Stearne has lived the life of a recluse. I'm the first stranger who's met her and been inside Wake's End. What I've learned blows her father's case wide open.

Maud was the only witness

Strange to think that until last year Edmund Stearne was unknown except in the sleepy Suffolk hamlet of Wakenhyrst. Locals remember him as a rich landowner and respected historian, a man of spotless reputation – until one summer's

day when he slaughtered the first person he came across in the most bizarre and horrible way.

Maud was the only witness. She spoke briefly at his trial, then never again. Maud, Maud. It always comes back to Maud.

Her father spent the rest of his life in an asylum, where he spent decades creating three astonishing paintings which have taken the world by storm. These days they're everywhere. Athena sells more of his posters than all the Impressionists put together. Yet on his death they were sold for a song to the Stanhope Institute of Psychiatric History.

For decades they languished in obscurity until last year a lady academic stumbled on a dusty tea chest in a storeroom. "My hair stood on end," shrills Dr Robin Hunter, 36, a mini-skirted redhead in white vinyl boots. "I knew I was onto something big."

The rest is history. The paintings went on show and they caused a sensation. Edmund Stearne was an Edwardian gentleman but his work is strangely modern: it fits our era of beatniks, hippies and LSD. But what really caught the public's imagination is the *mystery*.

That's what I went to Wake's End to solve.

Rendezvous in the Fen

"Wake's End bain't on the road to nowhere," warned the barmaid at The Eel Grigg in Wakenhyrst. "You only goes there if you're going there."

I was. I'd been invited by Maud Stearne herself.

From the village I drove across the Common and past the church. Wake's End is less than a mile from St Guthlaf's but it stands alone. Nestling in a bend of a willow-fringed stream, it's cut off at the front by a ten-foot hedge which bristles with

hand-painted signs: PRIVATE PROPERTY! NO SHOOTING, EEL-BABBING OR TRESPASSING! KEEP OUT!

But it's not just the hedge that makes Wake's End a place out of time. It's Guthlaf's Fen.

These days what we call "the fens" are windswept fields criss-crossed by drainage dykes. But the watery wilderness that guards Wake's End is the real fen: the last stretch of the ancient marshes that once drowned the whole of East Anglia. It's said to be the oldest, deepest, rottenest fen ever. Here lived the dreaded "fen tigers": savage folk who doctored their "ague" with home-brewed opium and feared nothing but the spirits that haunt the meres.

On a previous recce I'd ventured in. In 10 paces I was lost. The reeds stood tall and dead: I had the oddest feeling they wanted me gone. The light was failing. I caught a swampy smell of decay. Behind me something rustled and I saw the reeds part for some unseen creature. I thought: No wonder Maud's mad. All her life in a place like this?

But is she mad? Everyone describes a different Maud.

"Typical spinster, unhealthily devoted to her father," opines her sister-in-law Tabitha Stearne, 66.

"Miss Maud hated her dad," mutters a yokel in the pub.

"She walks the fen by night," says another. "Thass summat we *nivver* does."

Tabby Stearne again: "I'm afraid the poor old dear's quite batty. I gather that small dead animals have been found hanging from trees."

So who is the real Maud Stearne?

A historic meeting

Maud Stearne is 69 and spare, with a tall woman's stoop.

Dressed in shabby jersey and slacks, ancient gumboots and mac, she has her father's strong bones but not his staggering good looks. As she stands in the doorway of Wake's End her eyes avoid mine, moving restlessly as if she's watching something only she can see.

She won't shake hands, I'm just a grubby little hack who should have used the tradesman's entrance. "I'm orff," she barks in a cut-glass accent. "Cook will show you raynd." Before I know it she's striding round the back of the house, over a rickety foot-bridge and into the fen.

"What do the paintings mean?" I shout after her.

"Never seen 'em!"

She's never seen the paintings? If my theory's right, she's at the heart of them.

No one ever forgets the paintings of Edmund Stearne. Your first impression is an explosion of colour like shattered stained glass. Leaning closer, you become aware of tiny malevolent faces leering at you. You want to pull back but you can't. Against your will you're drawn deeper into the murderer's twisted world.

All three are untitled and share the same mysterious design. At the dark heart stands a woman in a long black dress. You only see her back and her rippling fair hair, while around her swarms a vortex of otherworldly creatures. They're the stuff of nightmares, painted in such obsessive detail they could be alive. Grotesque, bewitching, even evil... No wonder Stearne is compared to that medieval master of the macabre Heironymus Bosch.

But what *are* his creatures? Elves? Imps? Fairies? Do they hold the key to the murder? Who is the unknown woman?

Inside Wake's End

"Cook" is a mountainous woman in overalls who exudes power and violence like a jailor. She could be anything from 50 to 75 – marcelled hair, pinched scarlet mouth – and the look she gives me is arctic. In these parts if you weren't born in Suffolk you're from "up the Sheres". In other words, you're a Martian.

She's no talker but as she shows me round I gather that she and "Miss Maud" hate each other with the kind of loathing it takes decades to perfect. My "tour" feels oddly stage-managed: I'm being shown only what Maud wants me to see. I wonder if that will include the fabled notebook.

There's no money at Wake's End, that's for sure. Thick medieval walls are blistered with damp; mouldy furnishings are pre-World War I. Time stopped in 1913.

"The Master's study" feels weirdly as if Edmund only just left. On a washstand two silver-backed brushes are tangled with strands of fair hair. On his desk lies a stack of yellowed typescript: *The Book of Alice Pyett (1451–1517), Mystic. Translation & Exegesis by EAM Stearne, D Phil Cantab*. He was working on that before the murder.

But still no notebook.

Maud's desk is in the library across the hall. It overlooks a shaggy lawn with trees and what resembles a wishing-well: round stone wall, bucket on a rope. That's the well where they found Edmund after the murder. That's the orchard where he did it. This is what Maud looks at year after year.

On her desk lies a blue china wing (yes a wing) and a large red book stamped with gilt initials: *EAMS. Edmund Algernon Montague Stearne*. My mouth goes dry. That's it. That's his

notebook. For decades Maud has refused even to confirm its existence, yet now she's left it here for me to see. What's she playing at? More to the point, can I take a look?

"Five minutes," growls Cook. "Thass all you got."

I'm too excited to argue. His writing shouts at me from the page: "*Edmund Stearne – Private, 1906*". Seven years before the murder.

At first it's just jottings, then nothing for five years. From 1911 every page is crammed. His writing is small and illegible but here and there the odd phrase leaps out. And some are very odd indeed.

...a long narrow passage tiled in oxblood ceramics; hot to my touch, and repellently glossy...

... that fleshy mound on her upper lip...

There are angels, but not as many.

She was brought in horribly changed.

Deft little sketches appear: grotesque medieval faces, a bat, a toad, a magpie. Each is disturbingly life-like and oddly threatening.

I know what you did.

It is only a picture. It can't do me any harm. ...

...a high thin cry on the fen...

I shall find the answer in Pyett.

The last page is blank except for a single scrawled sentence underlined twice: *Dear God I hope I'm wrong.*

Murder in the orchard

Why didn't Maud give the notebook to the police? What is she hiding?

At the trial she said that on the day of the murder she was upstairs and when she glanced through the round window at

the end of the passage she saw her father heading down the front steps with an ice-pick and a hammer.

She shouted at the boot-boy: "Fetch help! The Master's gone mad!" Then she raced to the orchard. Too late. Edmund was already kneeling over a corpse.

The coroner said the first blow was lethal, the ice-pick piercing the eyeball and brain. Let's hope so because Edmund chiselled back the scalp, hacked out a chunk of skull and dug around in the grey matter as if he was looking for something. And Maud saw the whole thing.

What happened then is one of the great mysteries of the case. Somehow Edmund ended up down the well, screaming in terror as he fought off a squirming mass of live eels.

Maud *said* she didn't see it happen as she was staring at the corpse. Next thing she knew, the housemaid burst onto the scene. The maid didn't see the body in the long grass but she heard her master screaming and ran to help.

"Leave him!"' shouted Maud, damning herself in the eyes of the public. The Press dubbed her "callous and unfeminine". It didn't help that she was plain.

But her father's guilt was beyond doubt. When the police hauled him out he calmed down and confessed: "I did it. But I did nothing *wrong*."

He never said *why* he did it and there was no ill-will between him and the victim, he'd simply slaughtered the first person he met. In his pockets the police found shards of green glass matching the ones embedded in the victim's eyeballs, ears and tongue, as well as four leaves from a plant named Solomon's Seal. Three more were crammed down the victim's throat.

All this proved his guilt – but to me it means far more. Because for centuries, Solomon's Seal has been used in witchcraft.

He didn't do it

What have witches got to do with Edmund Stearne? Everything. Because I think he was innocent.

He didn't scream down that well because he was mad. He'd had a horror of eels since he was a boy. His doctor in Broadmoor wrote: "*His behaviour is perfectly rational. His sole indication of mania is that he is terrified of the tiny beings he feels compelled to paint, and yet he seems quite unable to desist.*"

His *sole* indication of madness! Edmund wasn't mad on the day of the killing, he went mad *afterwards* in the asylum.

As for the murder, *we only have Maud's word that he did it!* And her evidence is full of holes.

Why did she shout "The master's gone mad" when all he'd done was leave the house with an ice-pick and a hammer?

Why send the boot-boy away? He was a strapping lad of 16, he could have stopped Edmund himself.

How did Edmund end up down the well? Did someone else push him – *before* the murder, to get him out of the way? Did someone else plant those items in his pockets, then toss in the weapons and eels?

But what's all this got to do with witches?

It's not just the Solomon's Seal, it's that glass. I found it in Wakenhyrst's tiny museum. Experts say it's medieval and bears traces of urine and deadly nightshade, both common ingredients in a "witch-bottle". That's an ancient charm against the evil eye.

And it can't be coincidence that one of Edmund's ancestors was a "witch-pricker", someone who inspects the accused for tell-tale warts. Or that John Stearne was in cahoots with

the notorious Witchfinder-General, who in 1645 hanged 40 people at Bury St Edmunds. (Another judge ended up in Salem Massachusetts, the most famous witch trial of them all. Film people call that "an American angle" and it's got Hollywood panting for Maud's story.)

Finally the clincher: *Wakenhyrst* sources claim that Maud Stearne thinks she's a witch.

I'm not saying she is, mind. But back in 1913, *believing* she was, did she commit the murder and frame her father – who, to protect her, nobly took the blame?

Why did she do it? All is revealed in my book. But everything fits and it solves the mystery of Edmund Stearne.

His paintings are coded messages pointing to Maud's guilt. The woman at the heart of each one is a witch. The creatures swarming around her are her evil familiars.

And the witch is Maud.

Murder in the Orchard by Patrick Rippon, published by Titan. For reader discount see p48.

Letter from Maud Stearne to Dr Robin Hunter, 14th November 1966

Dear Dr Hunter,

An anonymous "well-wisher" sent me Mr Rippon's preposterous article and since I decline further contact with that dreadful little man I am writing to you. Am I to be libelled as a madwoman and a murderess? Of course Mr Rippon knows that I can't afford to sue.

Cook is behind these lies about witches. She and my sister-in-law wish to put me in a "home" and sell the fen. When I was a girl it stretched beyond the church, but that part was common land and sold after the War. I may be poor, but I will *never* allow *my* fen to be drained and turned into fields for pigs.

Naïvely, I had supposed that by allowing one interloper into Wake's End I might be rid of the lot. I shan't repeat that mistake. *If you badger me again I shall burn the notebook*. Lest you dismiss that as an idle threat, I enclose a page ripped out at random. That is all you will ever see. I will never tell you or anyone else my "story". I must be left *alone*.

Maud Stearne

From Dr Robin Hunter to Miss Maud Stearne,
15th November 1966

Dear Miss Stearne,

Please forgive me for troubling you again and I beg you not to harm the notebook – but I've just been inside St Guthlaf's for the first time since it was renovated and what I found was so astonishing I had to write.

I'd heard of the medieval painting known as the Wakenhyrst Doom, discovered under remarkable circumstances in 1911 – but I'd never seen it until today. As you'll know it's a typical Last Judgement in that Hell is far more convincing than Heaven. What makes it extraordinary is the link with your father's paintings. I know you don't wish to hear about them but a detail in Painting No.2 is crucial. Three of its creatures have become justly celebrated. Dubbed "The Three Familiars", they are now known as "Earth", "Air" and "Water". It is the hideous "Earth" who sparked my epiphany in St Guthlaf's.

I had stood before the Doom for hours and it was only as the vicar was turning off the lights that I noticed a scaly little devil in one corner. He is naked, squatting with legs indecently splayed, and though he has hooked a female sinner with his spear, he isn't leering at her, but at us.

That was when I happened to glance at my working file, the cover of which bears a copy of "The Three Familiars". "Earth" met my gaze with his lecherous wink. I glanced back to the devil in the Doom. He too is winking, and his toad-like grin is very similar to that of Earth.

In fact it's identical. That was when I knew. The creatures in your father's paintings aren't fairies or elves, and certainly *not* familiars. *They are devils*.

Forgive my incoherence, it's 3am – but *please* don't ignore this letter. I'm desperate to know what you think.

Yours very sincerely, Robin Hunter PhD

EASTERN DAILY PRESS
20th November 1966

Storm Damages Historic Home

The storm that battered Suffolk yesterday night caused considerable damage in the parish of Wakenhyrst. Worst hit was historic Wake's End, erstwhile home of famous artist Edmund Stearne. The roof is said to be close to collapse, and experts estimate the cost of repairs at many thousands of pounds.

From Maud Stearne to Dr Robin Hunter,
24th November 1966

Dear Dr Hunter,

Come to Wake's End tomorrow at two o'clock and we will discuss the sale of my "story".

Yours &c, Maud Stearne

60 years earlier

Those who can make you believe absurdities can make you commit atrocities.
Voltaire

I

Maud started awake with the cry ringing in her ears. She lay in the dark, listening to her brother turn over in the other bed and Nurse's snores rumbling through the wall. She didn't know if the cry had been real or in a dream.

There it was again. Her stomach clenched. It was coming from downstairs: from Maman. It meant the groaning had begun. *Please please* don't let her die.

Every year Maman got the same illness and it often ended in a baby. Her middle swelled so that she couldn't wear stays, and Dr Grayson made her to take constant nips of brandy, which she loathed. Then came the terrible time the servants called the groaning, when Maman's middle would burst and Maud would huddle in the nursery and stop her ears.

The best way for a groaning to end was with a bloody chamberpot, as that was soonest over. Second-best was a dead baby and worst was a live one, because Maman cried when it died – which it always did. Maman was careful never to cry in front of Father, as he didn't like it.

Now that Maud was nearly nine, she knew it was her task to save her mother. She had to do something to keep the babies away. She'd tried praying but it didn't work, probably because it was God who sent the babies.

Her gaze drifted to the windows giving on to the fen. The fen had power. Maybe it could help.

Father hated the fen. He forbade Richard and Maud to cross the foot-bridge and venture in, and all the windows overlooking it – which meant almost all of them – had to be kept shut always. Cook was under strict orders never to serve fish or fowl from the fen, especially eels. Father said eels were unclean as they fed on dead things.

Nurse didn't like the fen either. 'Don't you nivver go near un,' she'd say, thrusting her spongy face close. 'If'n you do, the ferishes and hobby lanterns ull hook you in to a miry death.' Strangely, though, Cole the gardener disagreed. He often went in to catch a tench for his dinner. He said if you watched what you was about, the fen couldn't do you no harm.

Secretly, Maud sided with Cole. To her the fen was a forbidden realm of magical creatures and she longed for it with a hopeless passion. In summer the scent of meadowsweet drifted across the Lode and the reeds rang with the *eep-eep* of frogs. In winter Maud could hear the ice cracking on the Mere and the skies were alive with vast skeins of geese. One afternoon they'd flown right over the garden, and the beat of their wings had lifted Maud as if she were flying. It was the grief of her life that she couldn't open the windows and listen to the wings.

For her seventh birthday, Cole had brought her a present from the fen: a viper's sloughed-off skin. Maud kept it behind the loose piece of wainscot behind her bed. It was her most precious thing.

Now as she listened to her mother's moans, she knew that the time had come to use it. If she climbed on the chair by the window, she could see the fen. She could pray to it on the viper skin to keep Maman safe.

Scrambling out of bed and keeping one eye on horrid

Richard, she prised the wainscot loose and extracted her treasure. Her brother went on sleeping, so she crept to the chair, hitched up her nightgown and climbed on, ducking under the curtains and peering round the edge of the blind.

She stopped breathing. There was an owl on the windowsill.

At first all she saw was its wings folded over its back. Then it swivelled its head right round and she saw its moon-white face and deep black eyes.

Nurse said that a bird tapping on your window means death. But the owl wasn't tapping the pane, it was staring at Maud.

Please keep Maman safe, she begged it silently. *Please keep the babies away.*

The owl turned and glided off into the night. The fen was flooded with blue moonlight. Along the Lode the willows stood motionless, the reeds as still as planted spears.

Nurse said owls bring bad luck, but Cole said that's only if you shoot one. Maud knew that this owl was a messenger from the fen. It had perched on the windowsill opposite *her* bed, not Richard's – and it had looked at *her*.

Did this mean that her prayer had been heard, and Maman was safe?

*

Maud wasn't allowed to leave the nursery during a groaning, but she *had* to find out if Maman was all right.

The passage on the top floor wasn't too frightening because apart from Richard and Maud, only the servants slept up here. The stairs down to the first floor were scarier. Maud avoided the creaky step, eased open the door at the bottom and peered round.

At the other end of the passage, the doors to her parents' bedroom were open, and Father stood in the yellow lamplight, a column of crimson in his dressing-gown of Chinese brocade.

Fortunately his back was turned, and he was speaking to someone Maud couldn't see; she guessed it was old Dr Grayson. She couldn't make out what Father was saying, but he sounded calm. Surely he wouldn't be so composed if something were wrong? Seeing no servants, she assumed that Daisy and Valerie were with Maman in the dressing-room, where the groanings took place. Greatly daring, Maud crept along the passage.

It was indeed Dr Grayson talking to Father. 'I'm beginning to think it's an inherited flaw...' he said in a low voice.

'Inherited?' Father said sharply. 'There's never been anything like that in our family.'

'My dear fellow, I mean that of Mrs Stearne.'

'Ah. But she can have other children?'

'To be sure. Although perhaps... a spell of rest?'

Maud could tell by Father's silence that he was displeased. So could the doctor, but just then he spotted Maud. 'See there, we have an audience.'

Father turned his head and Maud nearly fainted. 'What are you doing downstairs?' he said brusquely. 'Where's your nurse?' Now he was looming over her. His face was as severely beautiful as the alabaster knight in church, and the pupils of his eyes were black holes in icy pale blue.

When Maud still didn't move, he put his hand on her shoulder and gave her a little push. 'Off you go, you'll catch cold.' It was the first time he'd ever touched her, and although it didn't hurt, she was awed by the strength in his fingers.

But not even Father could stop her from finding out about Maman, so instead of climbing back upstairs, she hid on the bottom step.

Presently she heard a rustle of skirts, and saw Daisy emerge from the dressing-room. The old housemaid was frowning and carrying a covered chamberpot.

Ducking out of sight, Maud heard Daisy rustle into the bathroom. Then came the gurgling roar of the water closet, and Maud caught a sweet, coppery smell, like on the day they killed the pig.

She sagged with relief. The fen had heard her prayer. Maman's illness had ended in the best possible way: with a bloody chamberpot.

*

Next morning before breakfast, Father sent for Nurse. Nurse returned to the nursery with a face like thunder and gave Maud a thrashing with the stiff-bristled brush. Her eyes were red when she went down to the breakfast-room for morning prayers.

As Father began the reading, her thoughts drifted to the owl. If she stole a mouse from the traps in the pantry, maybe she could lure it back.

'*Thy will be done*,' intoned Father. To her relief, his gaze passed over her and settled on the servants' bench. 'Steers,' he said to the butler. 'Ada is improperly dressed.'

There was a gasp behind Maud, and Ada began to cry. With the distant curiosity of the saved for the doomed, Maud saw that a lock of the kitchen-maid's hair had escaped her cap. It was a pity. Maud had liked Ada. But Ada knew the rules: no loose female hair at Wake's End. That was why Nurse plaited Maud's so tight that it hurt. Her plaits hung to her waist and horrid Richard liked to pull them. Maud wished she could chop them off but that was also against the rules.

The rules governed every moment of Maud's day and there were two different kinds. One sort belonged to the lower orders: it was called superstition and Father detested it, which meant that the servants observed their rules behind his back. Thus Daisy left a dish of bread-and-milk for witches outside the boot-room door, and Cook avoided bad luck by hanging a hagstone from her bedpost. (Even Father did that, although his stone was merely a childhood memento.)

The other rules were Father's – and much stronger, as he had God on his side. They included never running about in the garden and always being silent downstairs. The rule Maud hated most was the one against animals. Father tolerated Blossom and Bluebell as they were needed for the carriage, but dogs were banned from Wake's End and Jessop had orders to drown any cat that strayed into the grounds.

What made these two sets of rules so dangerous was that you got punished if you mixed them up, but you couldn't always tell what kind of rule it was. If you spilt salt, you had to toss a pinch over your left shoulder; but was that to blind the Devil, as Nurse said – or was it because Judas Iscariot spilled salt at the Last Supper?

Maud pictured the two sets of rules as a pair of gigantic thorny walls leaning over her. She knew exactly what St Matthew meant when he said: "*Narrow is the way, and few there be that find it.*"

2

Like the house at Wake's End, St Guthlaf's church was part friend and part foe.

The outside was mostly foe. The tower had slitty eyes and there were monsters snarling from the gutters. Worst was the stone crow near the porch. It perched on the head of a howling man with its talons sunk in his eyeballs.

Inside, what Maud feared most were the devils. They were carved on the font, the columns, even the ceiling. Father said that in olden times they would also have been painted on the walls, but they'd been whitewashed by the Puritans. Maud thought the stone devils were quite bad enough.

The Sunday after the groaning, she felt horribly at risk without Maman. As she followed Father up the aisle, she nodded a particularly polite greeting to the bench-ends: the unicorn, the mermaid, the wodewose, the Seven Deadly Sins. She was counting on them to keep her safe.

Things improved when she reached the family pew. The kindly old chest against the wall had stumpy little legs in case of floods and was made of bog oak from the fen. Its carvings helped Maud stay awake during Mr Broadstairs' sermon. She

didn't care for St George but she adored the dragon. She *knew* that the very next moment it was going to bite that spear in two and fly away.

She also loved the frogs carved along the bottom. Cole called frogs "fen nightingales", but Cook said a frog in the house is a witch in disguise. Last week she'd found one in the scullery and flung it on the fire. Nurse said it had gone all blistered and twitched for ages.

Maud began to feel sick. She wished she'd been allowed to see Maman, but she never was after a groaning, not for weeks. Maman made church bearable. She protected Maud from the devils, while Maud helped her mother past the family vault and the effigy.

The vault was in the churchyard near the path. It had a granite monument on top and slimy stairs leading down to a cobwebby darkness beneath; Nurse said you could see the coffins through the grille. Maman always averted her eyes when she walked past.

Maud rather liked Sir Adam de Braunche, the alabaster knight who slept in the aisle with his alabaster skeleton on a plinth underneath. But for some reason the skeleton *horrified* Maman. Maud would take her hand and thrill with pride when her mother murmured, 'How brave you are, *ma petite Mode*".

At last the sermon was over and they stood up to sing. As the organ began, Maud swayed. Suddenly she knew why Maman was frightened of Sir Adam and the family vault. It was because she thought she was going to die.

Black spots swam before Maud's eyes. She pictured the bloody chamberpot and the frog twitching in the flames.

Nurse pinched her arm.

Father turned his head and stared.

As Maud pitched forwards, the dragon lifted off the chest and flew towards her.

*

Nurse wanted to thrash her for making a fuss in church, but Father summoned her to his study to explain herself.

Maud had only been there three times before. It lay behind not one but *two* pairs of double doors, so that Father could work undisturbed. When you opened the first pair, you were trapped in a nasty shadowy gap where you had to wait, dreading what was to come.

As Maud waited in the gap, she tried to think up something to tell Father. She couldn't say that she'd fainted because of Maman and the bloody chamberpot, then he would know that she'd disobeyed him on the night of the groaning.

At last his voice said, "Enter" and she opened the inner doors.

He was seated at his desk, writing. The scratch of his pen was loud in the silence. 'Tell me,' he said without raising his head. 'Why do you think you are here?'

Maud swallowed. 'Because I fainted in church.'

'Because you interrupted the prayers of others and neglected your own.'

'Yes, Father.'

She watched him clean his pen with the pen-wiper Maman had embroidered for him last Christmas, then align his notebook with his green Morocco blotter. The notebook was bound in scarlet and stamped in gilt with his initials. Maud longed to know what he'd written.

'Why did you faint?' he said quietly.

Her mind went blank. 'Um. I was looking at a frog.'

He frowned. 'You're not telling the truth.'

'I was looking at a frog, Father, it's carved on the chest and it reminded me of...' she broke off. If she told about the burned frog, that would get Cook in trouble and then she would pinch Maud under her chest protector, where it didn't show. 'It reminded me of a dead toad I saw in the garden,' she lied.

'You ought to have been praying.'

'Yes, Father.'

He adjusted the notebook a fraction. 'Do you enjoy looking at the carvings?'

Maud was startled. Father rarely spoke to her and he never asked what she enjoyed. 'Yes, Father,' she mumbled doubtfully.

'And why do you imagine they are on that chest?'

'Um – because frogs are God's creatures and will go to Heaven?'

'What on earth makes you say that?'

She took a breath. 'Because Miss Broadstairs says animals can't go to Heaven as they don't have souls but I know for a *fact* that she's wrong, I found proof.'

'Indeed. And where did you find this proof?'

'In the Bible. Where Isaiah says about creating new heavens and the wolf and the lamb feeding together and not hurting each other on the holy mountain.'

Father wasn't frowning any more. Two lines had appeared on either side of his moustache. He was *smiling*. 'But Isaiah only meant that figuratively. Do you know what that means?'

She nodded, although she didn't, not really. She couldn't believe she was having a conversation with Father. She wanted it to go on for ever.

'In the same way,' he continued, 'those carvings aren't

intended merely to portray God's creatures. The frogs are symbols of wickedness. Do you know what a symbol is?'

'Yes, Father,' she said eagerly. 'Like in the Book of Revelations: "*I saw three unclean spirits like frogs*"?'

His eyebrows rose. 'How old are you, Maud?'

'Eight and three-quarters. I shall be nine on the twenty-sixth of May.'

'And do you enjoy reading your Bible?'

She nearly told the truth and said that she only read the Bible because she had nothing else and please *please* could she be allowed in the library? Out of caution, she merely nodded.

'Your knowledge of Scripture is impressive, but you mustn't show off. Intellectual conceit is unattractive, particularly in females.'

'Yes, Father,' she said happily. *Impressive*. He'd called her impressive.

Taking up his pen, he opened the red notebook. 'You may go. You will write out one hundred times that it is wrong to look about you in church instead of attending to your prayers.'

'Thank you, Father.'

She left the study floating on air. She'd escaped a thrashing and impressed Father. And another thing: it looked as if he'd written today's date in his notebook. Was he keeping a diary, like Miss Broadstairs, whose journal had a beautiful little gilt lock?

Maud was desperate to know if he'd written anything about her.

3

Maud once heard Lady Clevedon remark that as Maman's people were Belgian and in trade, poor Dr Stearne had had to work miracles to teach her good taste. Maud had hated Lady Clevedon ever since.

Strangely, though, Maman seemed to agree. 'Your father did a wonderful thing in marrying me,' she told Maud. 'I owe him everything. It's my duty to make him proud.'

This meant looking beautiful all the time. When Maman's middle was so swollen that she couldn't wear stays, she wore the most gorgeous tea-gowns. When she was well again, she spent her days changing her clothes: breakfast gown, walking dress, afternoon gown, evening gown.

She was ideally suited to the fashions of the time. Her bust never needed enhancing with hidden flounces, and her swan neck was perfect for boned collars reaching to her ears. Years later, Maud realised that Maman could only have achieved her hourglass figure by savage tight-lacing. She must have lived in almost constant pain.

Sometimes Maman came to the night nursery to kiss them when they were in bed. Maud would hear the rustle of her skirts and breathe the milky scent of her skin and the smell of the little sachets of violet powder sewn into the underarms of

her gowns. "*Dors bien, ma petite Mode*," she would whisper, and they would exchange butterfly kisses with their eyelashes. Plain as Maud was, Maman really did seem to love her back.

Another part of making Father proud was obeying his every word. Thus Maman never disturbed him by playing the piano, and she never kept any mementoes of the dead babies because he didn't approve. He said it was right and proper to pray for them and engrave their names on the family monument, but mementoes were for Catholics, and it was better not to dwell on one's loss.

It didn't occur to Maud that her mother might disagree with him until one afternoon in April when he was away in London doing research.

Valerie was downstairs pressing a bodice for the evening and Maman was in the dressing-room, while Maud was in the bedroom, playing with her mother's jewellery casket for a treat. In one of the little rosewood drawers, she found a small oval box that she hadn't seen before. It was dark-blue enamel inlaid with silver roses, and inside were seven tiny locks of fine fair hair. Each one was tied with a yellow ribbon minutely embroidered with tiny letters. Maud recognised the names of the dead brothers and sisters for whom she had to pray every night.

'Promise you won't tell Father,' Maman said calmly from the doorway.

'I promise,' said Maud. 'Or Richard or Nurse or anyone.'

'There's my good girl. Now put it back where you found it.' Maud did as she was told. 'But how did you *get* them?' she breathed. Maman was never allowed to see the dead babies. Dr Grayson always had them taken away before her sleeping draught wore off.

'That was easy,' her mother said drily. 'I bribed the

monthly-nurse, of course.'

'But – doesn't it make you sad? Being reminded, I mean.'

Maman made a little gesture of impatience. 'Of course it does. But this isn't something one can simply put out of one's mind. Nor do I want to.'

Maud looked at her with new respect. She had disobeyed Father not once, but *seven times*.

A few days later, Maud and Maman were taking a drive on the Common when the carriage came to a halt and Maud was surprised to see Biddy Thrussel approach Maman's window. Biddy was the village wisewoman, a large moon-faced cottager who kept one fingernail filed to a point to "break the waters", whatever that meant. Maud watched her bob a curtsey, then hand Maman a small bottle of greenish liquid. Slipping it into her reticule, Maman pressed a shilling in Biddy's palm and told Jessop to drive on.

Maud asked what was in the bottle.

Maman hesitated. 'A herbal tonic.'

'What's a tonic?'

'It keeps me well.'

'Does it taste nice?'

'I don't know, I've never tried it. But I thought I would.'

When they were nearly home, Maman said, 'Your Father wouldn't like me accepting things from Biddy, so we'll say no more about it. *Entendu, ma petite*?'

'*Entendu, Maman*.'

'There's my good girl.'

Maud forgot about the herbal tonic until after Easter, when Maman was ill again. This time it wasn't a proper groaning, merely an indisposition that lasted a few days, and it ended in a bloody chamberpot.

But Maud didn't begin to suspect that the question of babies

might be more complicated than she'd been led to believe until she finally had a chance to read Father's notebook.

*

It was early May and the damp weather was making washing week a trial. Lady Clevedon said Maman ought to ask Father for money to pay an outside laundress, but she never did. This meant that every six weeks the servants were bad-tempered and the house stank of bleach.

The smell had given Father a headache, and he'd gone to Ely to buy books. Dr Grayson was upstairs with Maman, and Nurse was with Richard, who had whooping-cough.

Maud was downstairs in the passage. Father's study doors were open, as Sarah had just sprinkled the rug with damp tea-leaves and was sweeping them up. Maud was hanging about by the side-table. This was covered in an Indian shawl on which stood a glass dome full of stuffed bats. Her grandfather had caught them before she was born, and they'd lived on the side-table ever since. Maud liked them because they were the only animals allowed in the house.

At the end of the passage the green baize door opened and Daisy called Sarah to come and help with the mangle. When she'd gone, Maud peeped into the study. Father's notebook was lying on his desk.

No no, she *couldn't*.

Could she?

He'd only written a few paragraphs and his writing was so tiny she couldn't make out much: "*... the chancel arch is a disgrace, we <u>must</u> have it re-plastered... old Clevedon's so damnably mean...*" Maud blinked. Father had written a rude word.

A few paragraphs down, she spotted her name. "*Maud is much more intelligent than Richard. What a pity she isn't a boy.*" She flushed with pleasure. She'd often thought the same thing.

Over the page the writing was slightly easier to read: "*Grayson has been badgering me about steps to prevent conception. I told him such measures are revolting, unnatural and wrong. I doubt he'll raise the matter again.*"

At that moment, Maud heard a carriage in the drive. Her mind darted in panic. Father was back.

Slamming the notebook shut, she sped to the doorway. Already she could hear him climbing the steps.

Steers hurried past her on his way to the front door. The instant before he opened it, Maud lifted the Indian shawl and shot under the side-table.

She heard Steers take Father's hat, cane and gloves and help him off with his ulster. 'No thank you, Steers, I'll unwrap the books myself.' The Indian shawl didn't quite reach the floor: Maud could see the glossy tips of Father's boots. Silently, she begged the bats to protect her.

Steers told Father that Dr Grayson was with Mrs Stearne, and Father headed for the stairs, while Steers returned to the back offices. Maud was about to flee when Sarah rustled past to set the study to rights.

Voices upstairs. Dr Grayson was leaving and Father was walking him to the door. In an agony of suspense, Maud heard them come downstairs and halt at her hiding place.

Dr Grayson was so close that she could hear him breathing through his whiskers. 'Mrs Stearne needs rest,' he said in an undertone. 'Rest, that's the ticket. So perhaps – not *every* night? Eh?'

'Whatever can you mean,' Father said coldly.

Maud could tell from Dr Grayson's flustered apology that he'd made the most awful mistake.

Soon afterwards, she escaped to the day nursery. Dr Grayson was not seen at Wake's End for several weeks.

*

The wet weather continued for weeks. In the churchyard the sexton had to remove pails of water when he dug a grave, and at Wake's End the Lode began to creep across the lawn.

In the day nursery, Maud puzzled over what she'd read in Father's notebook. Conception was when God gave a lady a baby, she'd read that in Isaiah: "*Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son*". Was that why Father was angry with Dr Grayson for suggesting how to prevent it?

Maud remembered a conversation she'd overheard between Nurse and Cook.

'If he so much as *sees* Master Richard or Miss Maud I gets a warning,' grumbled Nurse. 'How's it my fault if he don't like his own childer?'

Cook sniggered. 'He likes making 'en, though, don't ee?'

Nurse snorted one of her rare laughs. 'Gah! You terror!' Maud felt uneasy and confused. Surely it was God who sent the babies. What did Father have to do with it?