

CHAPTER THREE

They returned from their week's honeymoon in Weymouth and went straight to live in the house in Hayes Close. It seemed to Eileen that it rained every day that they were in Dorset and when it was not raining a penetrating wet mist crept in from the sea obliterating the town and the surrounding countryside. She was not certain that the landlady knew they were newly-weds. Certainly, neither did anything to draw attention to the fact and Eileen even congratulated her new husband on the confident manner in which he signed the register. "You clearly have done all this before," she declared when they reached the comparative privacy of their room. That was probably the lightest moment of the week and by its middle the landlady was going out of her way to apologise for the weather which was, she maintained, the most unseasonable she had known.

Eileen was not over-concerned. She knew she had to cope with going back to face the prospect of their sparsely furnished house and in this respect she would have been pleased had the honeymoon never ended, no matter how inclement the weather. In her book a wet day in Weymouth was worth at least a year in Hayes Close. But it was not the best of places to be when faced with the prospect of everlasting drizzle. She did take Owen to see Chesil Beach but had great difficulty in convincing him that it had not been built by French prisoners during the Napoleonic Wars.

Her views on the comparative merits of damp days in Weymouth were vindicated when little more than seven days after she had been married, Eileen found herself at the front door of their house and greeted by its own distinctive smell. She immediately saw herself cast as a Maupassant heroine, only she was not locked away in a dark, draughty, northern-European castle whilst her Lord went hunting wild boar. She was condemned to the deprivations of a neglected, un-heated, un-modernised, house in suburbia. She could go out, it was true, but to do what apart from sit in the park? Some days when she sat there, near the bandstand, she would reminisce, then think of the opportunities she had foregone. She might have gone to University. She might have been with her parents in Australia. Nothing could have been as bad as things had turned out.

Owen maintained that she should give up her post at the library, it being contrary to his view that married women should not work. That his mother did was somehow different. He did relax his position and allow her to take a part-time job with his employer, that was before he set up in business for himself. Eileen was never sure that this was a prudent move or another plain example of her husband's folly, but she pushed all criticism and reproach to the back of her mind. It was in her interest as well as his that he should succeed. And there was always so much to do at home!

"There's an awful lot of work to be done," she complained. "Stephanie agreed."

"I know," said Owen, looking around the room. "I can work on it in the evenings and at weekends when I'm not otherwise working. What we have to do is decide where we start."

"That's easy. There's no question but that we start in the kitchen," she said firmly. "And with the hot water. And you can get rid of that horrible geyser in the bathroom. It scares the life out of me!"

"It's no different to a gas cooker," he said, laughing.

"It doesn't look anything like a gas cooker!"

"It is the same principle," he said. "You light the gas and it heats the water. Just like the kettle on the stove."

"Well, I am not going to light it. I don't think I want to even be in the house when it is lit. I am sure it is going to explode."

"All right," he said, waving his hands. "We will start with the kitchen and the bathroom. Which means I must sort out a new gas boiler and the electrics to it. We will have a lot of planning to do. You'll enjoy it."

"I'll enjoy it when it is all over," Eileen said flatly. She waited patiently whilst Owen replaced the old sink with a new one of stainless steel which looked strangely out of place at

first. Over the months that followed he fitted new units, a water heater, and a new floor having discovered that a section was rotten. His mother gave them a large Welsh dresser which Eileen rubbed down and re-varnished. "I have never done any thing like this before," she told him.

"You are doing a great job," he replied. "Are you enjoying it?"

"No," she said. But she was pleased when it was finished and standing against the newly decorated wall. When she complained of the sparseness of china to place on it, Owen excused this on the shortage of funds. In practice this was the usual excuse he used when she commented about their slow rate of progress. "I don't know where all the money goes to," she complained one evening as he was trying to adjust one of the doors on the kitchen cabinets.

"You keep the books," he said. "You see what our income is and what the outgoings are. We really need as much money as we can for the business."

"I know," Eileen said, pulling a face. "But there's all this expenditure on tools and small items of equipment. I've looked back over several months and we seem to be buying the same things over and over again. Why is that? What on earth is happening to all the things we keep buying? I would have thought that we wouldn't need all that much in the way of tools anyway."

"I don't know. You would be surprised. And there's breakages, occasional losses and theft," he said casually.

"Theft? Surely not? You are not telling me that workmen steal from each other?"

"All the time," he said, looking up at her. "It is rife and you have to guard your tools with your life. I'm fairly lucky. Imagine the problems that carpenters face. You can't put anything down without fear of it walking. It's not the craftsmen, mark you. I reckon it's the Paddies who are the light-fingered ones. They'll walk off with anything they can lay their hands on if it'll fetch the price of a Guinness. That's one reason why employers stopped providing tools and went over to allowances."

"Well, you don't get an allowance and your light-fingered work-mates are trying to bankrupt us. It is my cutlery and tea and dinner services they are walking off with!"

"We have always got your mother's"

"I don't want to have to use that. Apart from the piano, that's the only thing of hers I've got. I would never forgive myself if it was broken."

"Well, if we are that short of money how about not paying a few bills?"

"Oh, no!" she said emphatically. "That's the last thing we want to do, to get in debt to our suppliers. We must pay them promptly because once they cut off our credit we will be finished."

"We will have to make do with what we have got, then," he said nonchalantly.

"Which isn't very much," she said, unable to hide the bitterness and disappointment that crept into her voice. "We are really making very little progress, Owen."

"I don't know," he said. "We have just about finished the kitchen and I'm working on the central heating. Once that's in and the re-wiring is complete we should be able to get on with the decorating. I think I'll finish the downstairs first."

"I wasn't talking about that," she complained. "I want to have some nice things about the house. You know, vases with flowers in, house plants, paintings and wall plaques, and I'd like a garden that doesn't look like an Amazonian jungle. I'd like to be able to invite people around to dinner."

"What people? We don't know any people."

"Of course we do! There's your mother for a start. And we could ask Mr & Mrs Howard. They've been perfect saints, putting up with all we've been doing. And we mustn't forget Stephanie."

"I don't want to invite Stephanie around to dinner," he said, cautiously.

"Why ever not? I am sure she would like to see how you are getting on with the house. I know she's your friend, really, but I would count her as a friend. And you have always been going on about reforming her and getting her back on the straight and narrow, not that from what I've heard she has ever been there. She could at least see how a normal

married couple live.”

“I still don’t think it would be a good idea. Any way, she is busy in the evenings.”

“I see,” Eileen said flatly. She did not, of course.

Eileen had to admit that Mrs Howard, who lived in the adjoining semi-detached property, had been most supportive and a great help. “If there is anything you need, ducks, anything at all,” she said, “you just pop ‘round. My ‘arry and me, we knows what it must be like for you after the Pearsons. They were an odd couple, the Pearsons. They came and lived ‘ere when the ‘ouses were built and they would never ‘ave any alteration or improvement done. Goodness, they’d still ‘ave gas lighting ‘ad my ‘arry not kicked up such a stink about it after the ‘ouse at number forty-two caught fire. Or was it forty-four? ‘Ed remember, my ‘arry. You should ‘ave seen it. Fire engines, ‘oses, lights flashing; it was just like being in the blitz again! But they’d never do nothing, they wouldn’t.”

“We plan to modernise it,” said Eileen.

“That’s no more than it needs, as my old mother use to say. Not that there’s much wrong with these ‘ouses ‘part from their foundations. They’re sound though ‘arry says they spread a bit in their roofs. Well, we all get like that in middle age, begging your pardon. Very sound, ‘arry says.”

“We’ve got something wrong with the kitchen floor,” confessed Eileen.

“That’ll be the rot. Most of them ‘ave ‘ad it from time to time. Not enough ventilation under the floor. My ‘arry, he knocked in a couple of air bricks. Reckon you should get your ‘ubby to do the same, ‘e’s in the building trade, aint he?”

“Yes,” said Eileen brightly. “He’s a roofer but he can turn his hand to most things. And I am going to have a crack at decorating.”

“Are you, ducks? That’s a good idea. Never did anything like it myself. Never fancied it. I leave it all up to ‘arry. I bet there’s an awful lot to do.”

“There is!” Eileen declared, and returned home to survey that which had to be done.

“We must tackle it step by step,” Owen said. “You remember I said one room at a time except I think it would be sensible to leave the hall to last.”

“But that’s the first thing anyone visiting the house sees!” exclaimed Eileen. “In fact, it’s the only room that some people see.”

“I still think it is sensible to leave it until last. Now we have more or less finished the kitchen, which room should we do next?”

“Our bedroom!” she said firmly.

“What a good idea!” said Owen. “It may not really be the best time of year, but we can get stuck into it in the evenings and weekends. It shouldn’t take all that long. We can move the furniture into the rear bedroom.”

It was a mistake, to do the bedroom next. When it was completed she was so pleased that in a moment of weakness they consecrated it. She went two months without a trace before going to see her doctor. “Yes, Mrs Cross,” he announced. “There is no doubt of it. You are pregnant. Do you know when you conceived?”

She knew exactly when it had happened. It was the first night back in the bedroom. It had been a cold, wintry, February night as they huddled together and Owen was not prepared to get out and go to the place in the chest-o-drawers where certain things were kept. And she was too reckless to make him. Oh, she knew exactly when it had happened!

For a short while she did not respond but sat, pale and agitated, staring at a green pen-holder on the doctor’s leather-topped desk. “You are clearly not pleased, Mrs Cross,” he said.

“It was only once,” she whispered. “Only one occasion.”

“That’s all it takes sometimes,” he said. “There’s no problem is there? About the father?”

“Oh no,” she said forcibly. “None at all. It’s just that my mother told me that she had problems when I was born. It was something to do with the size and angle of her pelvis, I think. Her mother had a similar problem and she thought it might run in the family. She couldn’t have another child, or wouldn’t. I was the only one.”

“These things happen,” said the doctor, showing no reaction. “I don’t think you need worry about such an eventuality yet. When you are a little nearer your time we’ll arrange for you to see a gynaecologist. For the present, I would like to see you in a month’s time. Do you smoke?”

Eileen said that she did not, but then failed to listen to what the doctor was saying to her. She could barely recall leaving the surgery or making her way back to Hayes Close. It was as if a heavy gate, a massive, wide, tall portcullis, had descended in front of her, blocking all vision of the future. Her worst fears had been confirmed and now she had to find the words to tell Owen. She said nothing when he came in that evening. He was tired and wanted to wash so he disappeared up to the bathroom armed with a saucepan of hot water from the kitchen tap whilst she set the table and prodded away at some recalcitrant potatoes. Then almost as soon as he had sat down and she had placed the plate before him, uncontrollably, she blurted it out. “I’m pregnant!” she declared.

“You’re what?” he cried, looking up. “Why, that’s wonderful!” Eileen stared at him as if she could not believe her ears. How could he be so casual, so blasé about something she considered to be the biggest disaster that could befall them? “How do you know?”

“I went to the doctor’s,” she said, uncertain. “But, you are not cross?”

“I? Cross? Not in the least. I am positively delighted. It is the most wonderful news!”

“Well, I think it is the worst possible news. How can we think of bringing up a child in a place like this? And think of all the financial implications. We can barely make ends meet now. What will it be like when there’s another mouth to feed?”

“Oh, come now, Eileen. This is like a palace compared to the place where my mother lived when I was born, and I’m here, sure enough. And we can do quite a lot before it is due. The first thing is to get the central heating and hot water finished upstairs.”

“That would be something,” said Eileen tersely.

“And we can decorate the small bedroom as a nursery. I can leave the re-wiring upstairs until later which will save time and cost.”

“That’s the bit that worries me most,” said Eileen, “the cost.”

“Don’t worry about that. I’ll find the money even if I have to borrow.”

“Oh no, Owen! Not more debt, please.”

“Well. We’ll get by, I can tell you. Perhaps we’ll have to buy a few things second hand. We should start looking in the local paper to see what’s going. If we start now, we could have everything by the time it arrives.”

“I am not sure that I want to start buying things now, whether they are new or second hand,” said Eileen darkly. “I think that would be tempting fate.”

“Tempting fate?” cried Owen. “What ever do you mean? I think this calls for a celebration of some sort. Would that be tempting fate? Just imagine, I am going to be a father! Wait ‘til I tell my mother that she is going to be a granny!”

“There’s more,” said Eileen, shaking her head. “There’s something I have not told you that I ought to tell you before you start celebrating.”

“What, Eileen?” he said sharply. She could see the puzzlement on his face change to suspicion.

“Nothing like that,” she said sharply.

“Like what?”

“What you may be thinking. The truth of the matter is that there could be problems with the delivery. It is something that can affect the women in my family, something to do with the shape of the pelvis or the direction of the uterus. I don’t really know. I just recall my mother telling me that she was seriously ill when I was born and that her mother had problems having her.”

“Did you mention this to the doctor?”

“Yes,” she said flatly.

“And what did he say?”

“He said I was not to worry about it at present but that I am to see a gynaecologist when we are nearer the time. I have to go back and see him in a month’s time.”

“You never told me that there might be problems in you having children,” he said

anxiously.

“I know. I didn’t think it was important. It’s not the sort of thing you talk about. Any way it is not a problem with carrying. It has more to do with delivery and I suppose they could use a caesarean if necessary.” Owen’s face fell. “I don’t think it’s really anything to worry about,” she added, trying to soften the position. “Not yet at least.” He did not answer, but she sensed he was brooding on it whilst she was washing up.

“Are you really serious?” he said suddenly. “About not starting to get things together? I mean, I wouldn’t want to leave it all until the last minute. We would be forced to buy new things then.”

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I have put a real damper on it, haven’t I? Here I am telling you something that should be the best news a wife could normally give her husband and I’m acting like the end of the World is coming. Of course we can start looking now, if you think that’s the most sensible thing to do.”

“And it won’t worry you?”

“No. I suppose it was just the shock when the doctor confirmed it. I have been irregular for years so I wasn’t certain that I was in a condition. I’ll be all right tomorrow after a good night’s sleep.”

“That wasn’t exactly what I had in mind,” he said, smiling. “And the other thing? The complications?”

“We will have to wait and see what the specialist says.”

“Yes,” he said. “Let’s cross that bridge when we come to it.”

It was a summer of open floors, pipes and leaks, accompanied by the sounds of floorboards being lifted and replaced, and Owen’s expressions of displeasure when matters did not progress in the manner he hoped they should. Eileen had gone down on her hands and knees in the late Spring, not to plead with her husband but, armed with a pair of garden shears, to clear a small patch in what had once been the lawn. It was a little way from the house and just large enough for her to house a chair and a small table. She religiously kept it clear but it was not long before the grass, thistles and errant buddleia grew so high that she could barely see the house when she was there, sitting in the sun. There were times, when the traffic noise subsided or Owen was not working on the house when she might have imagined herself in the middle of the countryside had it not been for Mrs Howard calling over the fence and asking after her welfare.

There was one thing she did not talk about. She did tell Owen about her visits to the doctor, but she told no-one about the black periods of depression that, without warning, engulfed her like a crushing mist, trying to smother her. They seemed to grow more frequent as the Summer went on. She told herself it was due to having less to do and far more to worry about than before. She was certain that these sudden changes in mood had increased in frequency since she had taken to resting more, but that was what the doctor had instructed.

“It needs a man,” said Mrs Howard from the superiority of her neat, colourful, garden. “That’s what it does. But they didn’t do nothing, the Pearsons, you see. Wot with ‘im with ‘is rheumatics and ‘er with ‘er ‘eart condition. I’d ask my ‘arry to do somethink but for ‘is back. Are you all right, then, ducks? Can you feel him, yet?”

“I am fine,” Eileen said, thinking if she heard about the Pearsons just one more time she would not be, at least not in Mrs Howard’s presence. But she meant well. “The doctor says I must get as much rest as possible, and it’s beginning to show. And, yes, I can feel it moving. I can’t get use to the idea that there’s something there.”

“You will ducks. There’s nothing to it. I’ve ‘ad four and I should know. All of them grown up and gone off. But there’s nothing to it. As easy as turning on a tap.”

Two new taps had appeared in the bathroom, each curiously marked with a red “H”, although nothing came out when Eileen wishfully turned them. These were promising omens and one day something might. In the fullness of time, on the day she, exhausted and sore, left hospital clutching a tiny small bundle which seemed to consist of little more than a wriggling blanket, a large open mouth, and which possessed many of the qualities of a leech, Owen finally commissioned the heating and the upstairs hot water. Eileen had read Trollope at

school and recalled how well-behaved, sanitised, and adorable the babies were. Hers was a world apart, but at least they would all be warm that Winter.

“We will have to watch the costs of running the full system,” Owen declared a few days later. For a start I am going to turn off the radiators in the back bedroom and the front room.”

“But the airing cupboard is in the back bedroom,” Eileen protested, her mind full of little clothes.

“The hot water cylinder will keep that warm,” he said and went away to adjust valves and look for further leaks. At least she had completed the decoration of the front bedroom before the burden of carrying Jonathan became too much for her. The room was just as she wished but, along with the kitchen and the small front bedroom, it remained the only room in the house to be re-decorated for several years.

“How is the decorating coming along?” Mrs Howard would ask at discrete intervals. She perhaps grew used to hearing Eileen’s non-committal reply. “And I see you’ve done a bit more to the garden,” her neighbour would add. “It’s a never ending job, that’s what I says!” The “bit more” was a result of her sending Owen out with a borrowed fork to turn over the ground in the hope that she could ease pressures on the family budget by growing some of their own vegetables. “And baby Jonathan?” Mrs Howard would ask despite it being only a day at the most since her previous question addressed to the subject.

“Oh, he’s fine. Would you like to see him? He’s indoors, asleep in his pram. Except he’s got a little cough.” Yes, even then he had a cough.

“And ‘is father? I suppose he thinks the world of the little fellow?”

“Owen? Oh, yes. He thinks the world of him.” Eileen would say this yet she harboured the growing doubt that Owen any more thought the world of her. She was becoming increasingly convinced that something had changed. It was not something he said, or any specific thing he did. Had she been asked, she could not have pointed to any one thing and said that was what was worrying her. Yet she instinctively felt he was cooling towards her. It was not hard for her to find reasons why this might be so. There was the pressure of his business coupled with the pressure on their finances. There was the pressure at home with so many things around the house and garden crying out to be done, but she was increasingly careful not to remind him of these. And she wondered if it was Jonathan’s presence in that Owen had still to learn how to divide his love between the two of them. It was not surprising she found herself looking upon this baby with increasing suspicion as now past his early period of colic, he had adopted a Trollopean attitude and was, apart from his cough, so little a nuisance and would contrive to look so sweet and adorable in his blue rompers!

Or perhaps it had really started that night, not many weeks after she had brought this little competitor home, when Owen’s arm reached out to her as she curled up in bed. “Owen,” she said softly. “We need to talk about this. I don’t want to have any more. Not yet, if at all. You can do the thing you want to, but I can’t go through with all that again. Not yet, possibly never.”

“I don’t understand,” he said. She turned her back to him and looked up at the dark patterns barely illuminated by the street lamp on the curtains she had chosen and run up with such great care.

“I don’t want to be pregnant again,” she hissed. “I don’t want to have any more children.”

“Not ever?” he asked with dismay.

“I don’t know about that. I only know about now.”

“Are you kidding?” he asked.

“Owen,” she said, turning back to face him. “If you make me pregnant again now, I will kill myself.”

“I won’t touch you then,” he said sullenly.

“If that’s what it takes,” Eileen said, turning again. That might have been an end of it, but she felt guilty. “Owen,” she said into the darkness. “I don’t want to make you unhappy or deprive you or drive you away from me. We have to find a way which ensures you will not make me pregnant again. I mean what I say. I just couldn’t face it.” He was silent and

withdrew his hand. "Owen," she said. "Say something to me!"

"There's nothing to say. You have said all that there is to be said."

"I haven't really," she whispered.

"I think you have," he said gruffly.

"Do you want me to do something?" she said lowly.

"No!" he said quite sharply.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes," he said. "I'm quite sure. I feel tired and I've rather lost interest now."

"Another night, then?"

"May be," he grunted and turned away. Eileen did not fall asleep, but found herself worrying about Jonathan's Christening, and whether Stephanie should be invited. What should have put the question into her head was a mystery. And when she asked her husband out loud what he thought, she received no reply and she assumed he had fallen asleep.

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