SUSAN MOORE

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Sensible Kate was the first to make any show of fortitude.... "I must find a position as a governess, or go away to teach somewhere in a school, or do whatever thousands of women in my circumstances generally do...."

Unlike her sister, Sophy had only ever known how to say the first thing that came into her mind. Confronted by the first misfortunes of her life, she could make no brave speeches; silence was her only hope of not shaming herself. Nonetheless her first impulse was to meet their new-found poverty with resolution rather than bitterness—to fight, not just endure....

From *Paths of Fortune*

ISBN 0-312-59799-1

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St. Martin's Press
New York

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Moore, Susan, 1944-
Paths of fortune.

I. Title.
PR6063.O644P3 1985 823'.914 85-11816
ISBN 0-312-59799-1

First published in Great Britain by William Collins Sons & Co. Ltd.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

Chapter One

That day, as it dawned, seemed more like a beginning than an end.

The village and the downs behind were caught within a web of light in which everything was still. Though the dawn chorus had dwindled, it was too early yet for the first breeze of the day. The dim masses of the elms in the fields were as motionless as the cattle asleep beneath them. Throughout the Vale only the shallow streams were moving, twinkling so gently that on their bed a moorhen's footprint might stay unchanged from night till noon. In Cannings Fitzpayne there was no smoke from any chimney, and the surface of the village pond lay unbroken by the swallows beginning to twitter in barns and outhouse roofs. Soon the first field labourers would be about – many of the women carrying babies, the men bow-legged from working since childhood knee-deep in mud. But now the rutted high road through the village was empty, and in nearby farms there was scarcely the sound of a dog growling in his sleep.

Down the Vale lay a different scene. Hitherto no one in Wiltshire had even imagined such a thing. Below the white horse carved on the down a thousand years before to mark King Alfred's victory against the Danes, a larger army now advanced. Water meadows and orchards were overlaid by a spill of dirty tents, turf shanties, and shelters made from canvas, branches, bales of straw, loose barrel-staves, piles of bricks or bits of wattle fencing. Along the line of the new canal, the earth was laid open to show layers of chalk, or clay, cobalt blue when sliced bare and later turning brown. A cottage, its outhouse smashed in half, stood above a cutting as though lifted by a wave of the sea. Farther on an unfinished embankment, its flanks streaming spoil, ran its head toward a rise, for all the world as if one hill were charging at another.

The place was a virtual city; and by daybreak every

inhabitant was out of doors. The sun struck brightness from a thousand surfaces – random pits of water; picks and shovels noisily at work; the wheels of wagons squealing along a wooden railway; the harness of the horses pulling them; and whiffs of steam from makeshift forges. A stream, diverted, had flooded around a temporary brickworks, whose smoke mingled with that of cooking fires and hung over half the plain. Whatever might stand in the way of the canal, its progress seemed irresistible.

Lawyer Byford's house stood in Cannings Fitzpayne, amid newly planted grounds beside the high road. In the attics and stables none of the servants were awake. But behind the windows where the Miss Byfords slept, someone was.

Sophy could wait no longer for the day to start. Though the world outside was damp and pale, already it was too warm to stay in bed. Everyone would have to get up early anyway, to see papa off on his journey. Not wanting to wait until the maid was due, she dressed by herself, leaving her heavy baby-blonde hair tumbled loose to her waist. At one of the windows to her room she turned back the shutter. Beyond the lawn and shrubberies was the garden wall and a lane; beyond that, the tussocks and hawthorn thickets of Cannings Fitzpayne Common. In the brightening air every shape was flat and faint. The most distant thing in sight was the church spire above the market square at Upstowe, two miles beyond the trees of Lord Fitzpayne's deerpark.

Now she was up, how could she pass the time? What time was it, anyway? Sophy had scurried out of bed two, maybe three hours early to taste the prospect of a new summer day. And now she had no idea what to do with it. Would anyone else in the house ever be awake again?

Wrapping herself in a shawl she paused as always before the marvellous creature, sweetly disarrayed, that looked at her from the mirror. She slipped out onto the landing and tiptoed past the rooms where her parents, brother and elder sister slept.

At the tall window in the stairwell she paused ...

Three men were coming out of the trees on the common. The early light made them insubstantial, and only by looking hard did Sophy understand why they looked so strange. One of them, supported by the others, could hardly walk.

It was the wrong time of day to see a man dead drunk. With his feet half dragging on the ground, he looked like a drowned man carried upright by an underwater current. Sophy watched them pass out of sight into the lane. And reappear – through the side gate in the garden wall. Two of them, including the man being helped along, looked like navvies from the new waterway beyond Upstowe. Both were as muddy as plough horses. She stared again at the man, whose companions were half carrying him toward the house – then saw his clothes darkened with blood.

She ran – and, breathless, opened the scullery door as the other man with them was about to knock. Like the injured navvy, he was almost a boy. His thick fair hair and good clothes were plastered with filth. It took a moment for Sophy to recognize him.

'Mr Fraser!'

He looked at Sophy without acknowledging her. 'The doctor's been sent for. I need something to use as bandages until he arrives.' They made their way past her into the kitchen. 'Put him on the big table,' he told the other man.

'No one's out of bed,' said Sophy, meaning whoever of the servants should surely cope with this. Taking another look she added hurriedly, 'But I can help.' Close to, the injured youth appeared even worse. His dirty velvet waistcoat and torn breeches were heavy with blood. Though his eyes were tightly shut, she could see he was near to spilling tears of fright. Fraser undid the boy's shirt and turned it back. The wound was more ugly than menacing. It made a wet red hole, already brown about the rim, above his collarbone.

Sophy tugged the bell for the housekeeper's room and ran on next door to where she thought the laundry might be stored. She had almost no idea how things were

arranged in this part of the house. Throwing open every cupboard door, she pulled out their contents until the stone floor was deep in crumpled sheaves of fresh linen. What could she best tear up? Finding some of her brother's satin neckwear she thought of his hunting stocks. Hadn't George said – hinting at his bravado in the field – that they could always serve as a bandage or sling? She rummaged further, casting a heap of clean shirts into a corner of the floor, and found what she was looking for.

Fraser was sluicing his hands clean at the scullery pump. 'Is this what you need?' she asked. Taking it without a word, he started tearing up poor George's stock. Sophy watched as he set about making a bandage. She'd never met him before to speak to, and was surprised to guess he couldn't be more than two or three years older than herself. It seemed strange that at twenty or so he should have charge of several hundred navvies.

'Where's the other man who came with you?' she asked.

'Gone to see the doctor finds us.'

'How did this man suffer such a terrible accident? – Oh!' She gasped as he seized her by the arm and motioned her to silence.

'He's not so badly hurt,' he said, speaking partly for the injured man's benefit. '... And this,' he added in a contained voice, 'was not an accident.'

Sophy looked at him. She'd taken his manner to mean nothing more than urgency. But now she realized he was breathless with anger.

'It can't have been!' she exclaimed, round-eyed. 'Did you see who did it?'

'One of Lord Fitzpayne's men – No, I didn't. But we wouldn't have been surveying by night if we weren't on disputed land. It's my fault this happened – I should have taken more men. We'd have been a match for them then.'

Sophy was silent, turning over the thought of pitched battle beyond her papa's new shrubbery.

'Miss Sophia!'

It was Mrs Cudlipp, the housekeeper. She wore curl-papers and a look of injury: Apparently it was Sophy's

fault her scrubbed kitchen table bore a wounded man, dirty enough to have been dug out of a grave.

'Miss Sophy!' she exclaimed from beyond the doorway. Sophy hurried up to her. 'Who are those men?'

'Mrs Cudlipp, you know perfectly well who Mr Fraser is.'

'I don't mean you to tell me who they are. What I want to know is, why are they in my kitchen?'

'Surely you don't expect me to answer such a question!'

'But think of your father!'

'Whatever for?'

Fraser, tying the bandage, looked up in Sophy's direction. 'Do you want to go for your father,' he said, 'or shall I? One of us will have to ask him to settle all this,' motioning at the housekeeper.

Mrs Cudlipp turned purple and retreated. Sophy followed and found her in murmured conference on the stairs with Mrs Byford.

'Sophy! Sophy!' Her mother signalled from the landing in a stage whisper as Mrs Cudlipp made a conspicuous exit. 'Sophy! Your father's a lawyer! He can't have men bleeding here!'

'Why ever not, mama?'

'Now you're not to ask things like that. Besides, you ought to have sent for your father or I, since he's the man in this establishment. And letting navvies in! Don't you know they're all heathens who sleep with their boots on?'

Thomas Byford appeared, half dressed. 'What's this, then?' He was a robust, handsome man who bore himself, among womenfolk, with authority.

His wife, after her fashion, explained.

'But Dr Brown should be sent for!'

'He has, papa.'

Byford was irked that he had not been there to show mastery of the situation from the start. 'Are you sure? Who told you he had?'

'Mr Fraser has sent a man.'

'Fraser the engine-wright is here,' Mrs Byford broke in, 'and by all accounts he looks as if he's just walked right through Bassett Brook.'

'Is he now? – the girl had better be right about the doctor – Young Fraser, is it? Well, good God – I'm a shareholder in his company, am I not? Can't you show him some kind of acknowledgement? With what I've got invested, I'm damn nearly his main employer.'

'You mean have him offered something to eat in the kitchen?'

'In the parlour, woman!'

'Thomas, do you think we should? If he's waited on with us, the servants could find it very confusing.'

'Nonsense! He's a rising man. He goes astride better horseflesh than I do.'

'I know he's been away. But people here still remember. From when he couldn't even read, you know.'

The doctor's arrival put an end to this dilemma. The injured navvy was pronounced not too badly hurt to be conveyed back to his lodging in Upstowe; and Thomas was able to show he was in charge after all, by insisting that the lad was taken there in the Byfords' own carriage.

Fraser stayed only long enough to discuss the doctor's fee. It was Thomas, however, who insisted on paying. He was not acting entirely from self-importance – behind his bluster there really did dwell a generous spirit. 'The poor fellow got his injury – not a dangerous wound, I grant you – I agree, not dangerous, but an injury for all that – he got his hurt pursuing my own interest as a major shareholder.'

In the breakfast room with his family, Thomas continued to savour his good deed. 'And I can tell you,' looking from under his brows as he paused in carving, 'if it was one of Lord Fitzpayne's keepers that winged him, he can't look to the law for recompense.' As usual he addressed young George, as the other man of the house. 'Fair or not,' for emphasis pointing at George with the knife, 'that's a sound piece of legal information I'm giving you.' Thomas liked an audience, and his voice rang out all the more confidently for the room being full – even though the butler, the manservant and the two parlourmaids were supposed to act as though they weren't there.

They were at table early, on account of his departure. He was to go post into Gloucestershire, to the seat of a wealthy client, before returning to do business together with his cousin in a neighbouring town. It was something of an occasion for him to be travelling to another county; and the prospect had Mrs Byford a little downcast. She was distressed, too, that her husband had yet another scheme for investment. In recent years he had speculated in roadmaking, in the wagon trade, in tin, in spirits, in corndealing and – with particular enthusiasm, and less success than ever – in horseflesh. Now, with the approach of the canal and cheap transport, he planned to borrow from his cousin and augment his income by trading in timber imported from Virginia. Mrs Byford frowned across the new inlaid mahogany table, on which every shining piece of ware looked both heavy and fragile. 'I cannot understand why your cousin won't conduct your joint affairs for you.' Even at this hour she looked neat, in the way very busy people mostly do. Few might have guessed, though, that she was once as pretty – no, as striking – as her daughters, both of whom – dark Kate as well as Sophy – had a grace and slenderness that suggested formidable strength. By comparison her husband was almost youthful; but then the disappointments of their marriage had nearly all been suffered by her. His most recent adultery ... the girl had died a few months later. Of a fever of the brain, so the lie had been given out ... And worse than that, she had been of respectable family: the daughter of a corn-factor from Upstowe. For days after the scandal of that death, few people had dared address Thomas to his face. Had his abominable rage been from guilt, or grief; a grudge against the girl for getting with child and then showing him up – or from mere embarrassment at the rumours surrounding the hussy's last disgusting hours of life?

'Uncle Norton isn't free, mama,' Sophy replied. 'He has to do committee work and help save the new canal.'

'Look you here, miss,' Thomas said. 'There'll be no talk of saving anything. We can't afford uncertainty among the other investors.'

'Sophy means, papa, he has to help advance its progress,' said Kate. By contrast with her sister, she was a patient, subtle creature whose mild manner and serene disposition made everything she said or did carry authority. Even as a little girl she had humoured her elders – and now that she was nineteen not even Thomas – did he but know it – cared to contradict her. It was in Sophy that one sensed motion and change – though toward what, who might tell at this stage of her life, any more than one can guess the strength of a current by the lights shooting from its surface?

'Papa, will a timber yard help to make us so very rich?' Sophy asked.

'Shush, dear, and don't harass your father,' said Mrs Byford.

Sophy frowned – in someone with her infant softness of feature and diamond-bright health even this was delightful – but she couldn't have said whether her mother protested from feminine delicacy at talk of business, or from distrust of her husband's commercial judgement. Privately none of Thomas's family shared his high opinion of himself: not bookish Kate; nor Sophy, heedlessly clever; not even George, as yet hardly grown enough to promise good looks. As for Mrs Byford, from various signs, as a dog can tell his owners are about to go away, she had guessed what even the servants knew for certain. Thomas's legal practice had almost no clients among the local gentry. And among the professional men and tradespeople of Upstowe it was solid enough only for the present.

'But if the canal is halted?' Sophy continued, impatient of her mother. 'Could you still trade by road, papa? And what about the money from Mr Fraser's contractors? Wouldn't it take a lot of timber, just to help build his part of the waterway?'

George, wolfing boiled ham with motions of his entire body, paused and looked up. 'Old Fitzpayne would never let the canal company into his park. And no wonder he won't do business with Fraser anyway, when the fellow's grandson to his own housekeeper!'

'And even if Lord Fitzpayne died,' Sophy broke in, 'I

know for certain that that land would never be inherited by anyone who'd sell it.'

'And don't we all wonder how you know that?' leered George. To no one in particular, 'Sophy's been talking with swell Rawley Fitzpayne again,' he confided.

Sophy turned pink. She knew she should have said nothing; but the temptation to make *some* reference to his lordship's heir – to hear the subject spoken of by somebody, if only herself – was too great.

'Sophy, you haven't, have you now?' Mrs Byford tried to avoid her husband's look as she spoke.

'Of course I have, mama.' Sophy's tone rose all the steadier for the sight of Thomas's swelling rage. Of them all, only she was unafraid of him. 'But you must not think –'

'Yes?' shouted her father, in a voice that could be heard all the way to the kitchens.

'– that either Mr Fitzpayne or I have been mixing –'

'*Yes?*'

'– with someone of unsuitable rank!' Sophy's eyes glinted as she spoke, elated with anger. She felt a yard taller than anyone else in the room.

Thomas drew back his hand, as if about to send a ringing blow against the side of his daughter's head. One of the maids, changing plates, hesitated rather than step too close.

'Thomas, you're going away today!' pleaded Mrs Byford.

He turned to glower at his luckless wife, but heeded her nonetheless.

Sophy, though, would not be put down. 'Not everyone in Cannings Fitzpayne,' in a lower voice, 'is too obscure or tedious for him to know.'

'Harriet!' bawled Thomas. Having missed his cue to assert himself as a parent, he rounded on his wife. 'By God, you will see these damned children behave themselves while I'm away or – by God, I don't know what I'll do! You, miss – and you too – you, yes – Harriet, if ever I hear that one of these wretched girls is making eyes at

anyone above her place – or if I find that one of them is flirting with that damned young fornicator –'

'Oh, now Thomas!' protested Mrs Byford, at his language rather than his hypocrisy.

'Yes, goddammit, with that fornicating young dog – they can count themselves damned fortunate if I allow them out across the way to church.'

'I think, sir,' said Kate, 'Sophy only meant to mention George's acquaintance with Mr Fitzpayne.'

'Yes, yes, of course,' exclaimed their mother, avoiding Sophy's eyes. 'That's what she meant. And she knows as well as anyone that hunting together doesn't make George his intimate. That's what she really meant to say.'

Rather than show disdain for his wife, Thomas was silent. He knew that regardless of everything his family was fond of him; and he wanted to part with them on cheerful terms.

The breakfast parlour was left to be cleared; and soon afterward the wheels of Thomas's hired chaise were heard in the drive. While Kate took it on herself to direct the menservants with the luggage, the rest of the family loitered in the big drawing room. Against the sunlight on the wet lawns and tidy gravel walks outside, this side of the house was still cool and dim. Above one of the three tall windows, sparrows were chattering and a wood pigeon could be heard. Across the common, and in the fields and park beyond, fainter, and then fainter still with distance, sounded the day's new birdsong.

It felt strange to be confronted with anything so unfamiliar as a leavetaking.

'Poor mama,' said Sophy, seeing her mother so much less brisk than usual. 'We shall have to make a great fuss of you now, you know.'

Mrs Byford submitted with a blush of gratitude to her daughter's embrace. Kate, with her quiet ways and sly sense of humour, had the more sense. But ever since Sophy had reached her fourteenth year or so, it was her younger daughter to whom she had begun to defer.

All was made ready, and the family gathered round Thomas Byford, flustered and sad, to say goodbye.

'Now, young George, you're to be kind to your mother and sisters.'

George turned red and moved his feet around and felt melancholy at the thought of spending time in a house full of women.

'Goodbye, my two lovely girls,' Thomas said, embracing them with mingled vanity and affection.

Mrs Byford clung to her husband, past resentments dulled by regret at his going. 'You silly lady, don't cry,' he said, and kissed her on the head before hurrying – for the sun would soon be well up – under the portico and into the high draughty privacy of the yellow post-chaise. The door slammed; the post-boy, astride the nearside horse, whipped up his nags; and they heaved into motion. For a moment longer his family were all visible, Sophy with an arm about her mother. Then the chaise turned through the gates onto the high road, and Thomas was borne away, toward fresh schemes, and new prospects for his family.

It was not the only departure from Lawyer Byford's house that day. In the evening, his family had an engagement. The Byford girls were apt to grumble at how few people they knew; and certainly since they'd come home from boarding school in the county town their lives had been dreary rather than tranquil. In the Vale, where they lived, for days on end the nearest thing to violent motion might be the sailing of clouds in a summer sky. In Cannings Fitzpayne itself, apart from their father, only the parson and his curate read a newspaper, shared between the three of them, to follow the course of the war with Bonaparte. And throughout the village, every day mothers put out babies and young children to play in the dirt of the high road, confident that nothing more terrible or astonishing than a dung cart was likely to pass that way.

But the family did live in enough style to dine with a few others of the same rank throughout the district. So, before the heat of that day had quite gone, Mrs Byford and her children could be seen stepping up into the carriage in evening clothes: George not looking old

enough for what he wore, and the girls slight and gauzy with jewels in their hair.

They were bound for a select party in an establishment a short way beyond Upstowe. Their road took them through the village, a scatter of overcrowded thatched cottages built from timber frames and brick nogging. Across a scrubby green where geese grazed were the almshouses, the gift of a former Lord Fitzpayne. In a niche on their low brick front stood the statues of two Quakerish charity children, and a plaque declaring that they had been built to sustain eight old men of the parish, eight old women and six orphans. Mrs Byford looked the other way as they were driven past. What mightn't her unfaithful husband have done to help fill that place?

The village ended with a tithe barn the size of a cathedral. Next to it stood the church, a solid Norman building with a short square tower and a massive semi-circular south door whose carvings were ancient enough to look almost pagan. And one fierce, tiny female figure was notorious throughout several parishes for being very obscene indeed. The churchyard lay within the park of Cannings Fitzpayne Hall, so that the little church stood overtopped in a landscape of oaks and English elms. Beneath the boughs of the great trees, where the deer had reached up and browsed to the height of a man's head, the foliage appeared perfectly horizontal; and at one point under this upside-down leafy horizon, the Hall itself could be glimpsed.

It represented well the fortunes of its successive owners. Over six centuries, by bloodshed or guile, the Fitzpaynes had risen in the world. As they did so the land within the moat had been built on by stages, until by Jacobean times the walls rose sheer from the water on every side. The Great Hall, the even loftier kitchens, and the little barrel-roofed chapel dated from an era of the Middle Ages when London was a village. The east front, where the drawbridge stood, was Elizabethan, a fantastical terracotta whim under a skyline of monstrous chimneys in sculptured brick. It was climaxed by a deliberately old-fashioned gatehouse with pepperpot towers.