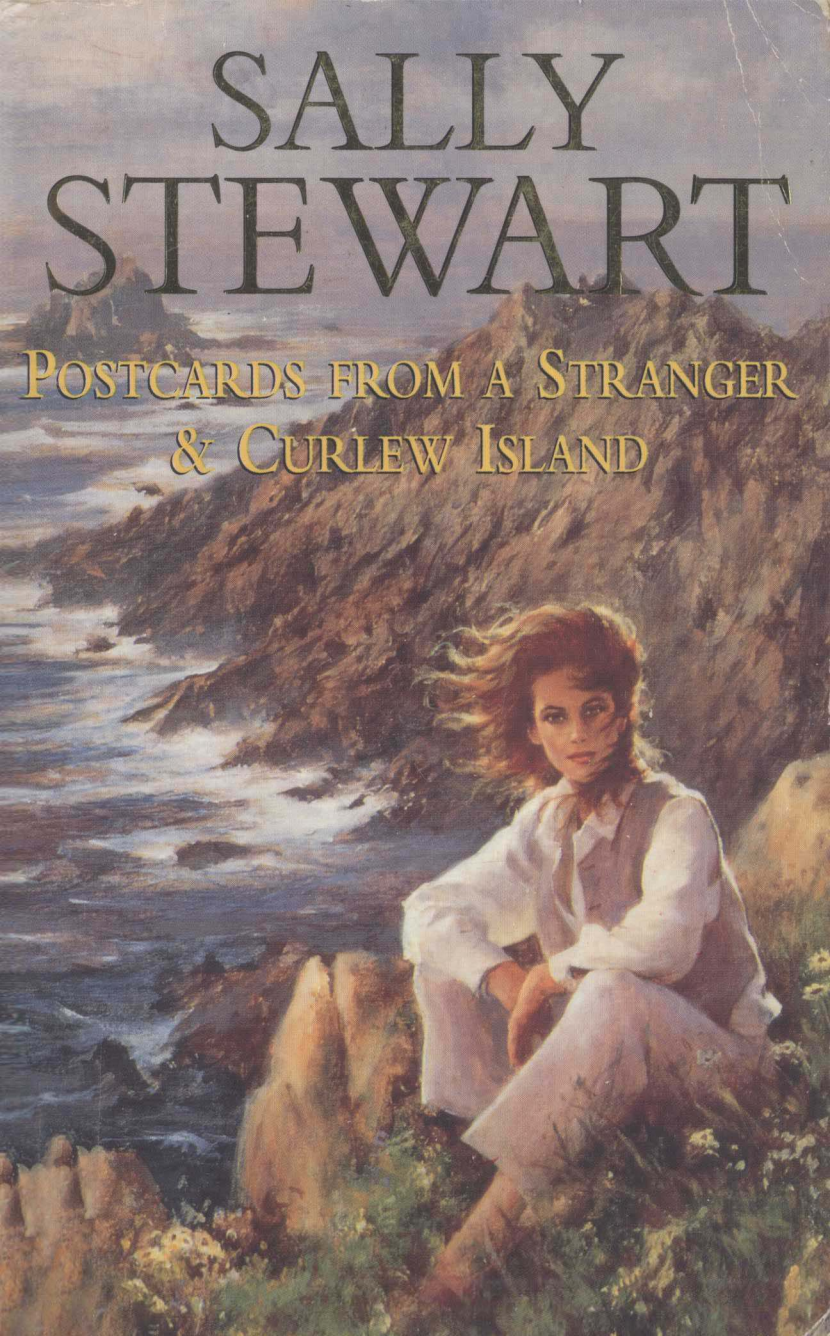
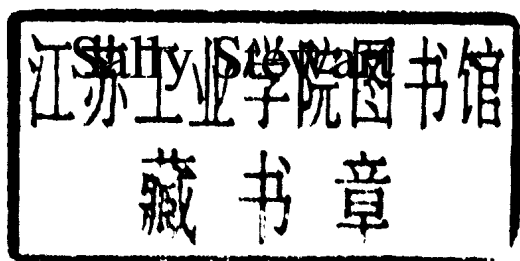


SALLY STEWART

POSTCARDS FROM A STRANGER
& CURLEW ISLAND



POSTCARDS FROM A STRANGER



PAN BOOKS

**This edition published 1999 by Pan Books
an imprint of Macmillan Publishers Ltd
25 Eccleston Place, London SW1W 9NF
Basingstoke and Oxford
Associated companies throughout the world
www.macmillan.co.uk**

**This first world edition published in Great Britain 1999 by
SEVERN HOUSE PUBLISHERS LTD of
9-15 High Street, Sutton, Surrey SM1 1DF
This first world edition published in the U.S.A. 1999 by
SEVERN HOUSE PUBLISHERS INC of
595 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10022.**

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

**Stewart, Sally
Postcards from a stranger
1. Love stories
1. Title
823.9'14 [F]**

ISBN 0 330 39656 0

**All situations in this publication are fictitious and
any resemblance to living persons is purely coincidental.**

**Typeset by Palimpsest Book Production Ltd
Polmont, Stirlingshire, Scotland.
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Mackays of Chatham plc, Chatham, Kent.**

One

She peered at herself in the mirror, hoping that something might have changed. Not so! Twenty-five she might be since midnight, but for Jane Kingsley, spinster of the parish of Little Fairford, everything else seemed just as usual – dark, fly-away hair, and straight black brows that refused to make the seductive curve she'd always yearned for; nose, contrariwise, tip-tilted when it ought to have been elegantly straight. Add in a stubborn chin, and nothing special in the way of mouths and the sum total was a face that made no claim to beauty. Uncle Edwin must have given up hope by now of any noticeable improvement in the small, lost creature he'd rescued fifteen years ago. She hadn't even grown a great deal since then and had remained somewhat thin, but at least she was no longer lost. Four years spent teaching in the village school had been an object lesson, exhausting but hilarious, in how to survive. Unlikely as it had once seemed, Jane reckoned that she was now definitely a survivor. A lot had been crammed into her first quarter of a century . . . more love and laughter, sadness and loss than some people experienced in a lifetime – but the rest of her days looked like being more ordinary. Other people might even consider them dull, but the poor things didn't know that village life and the village school rarely came within hailing distance of dullness.

She smiled as usual at the pictured faces of her parents hanging over the dressing-table, then went downstairs to get breakfast for her uncle and receive his birthday present. She knew already what it would be – one more perfect pearl to add to the fourteen she'd been given since coming to live with him at the age of ten. She'd have preferred something with colour in it – turquoise, jade or coral – but Uncle Edwin belonged in spirit to a past age, when pearls were what a lady wore in the way of daytime jewellery.

She put coffee and toast on the table precisely at eight o'clock and just as precisely he walked in, blinking in the bright sunshine that poured into the room. He sat down with a little sigh of relief, and she noticed sadly that the strong light made him look more gaunt than ever. There were times when she feared that he might not live long enough to see her necklace completed.

'Good morning, my dear . . . happy birthday.'

She took the little parcel he held out to her, grateful for the fact that they'd long ago agreed to give up pretending she didn't know what her birthday present would be.

'Number fifteen, Uncle . . . lovely,' she said, and was surprised to see him smile.

She opened the package and sat transfixed – not one pearl but a whole handful of them, beautifully matched and graded.

'I hope they'll make up the whole string now,' he explained gently. 'It occurred to me that the rate of progress needed to be speeded up a little.'

It was the closest he'd ever got to admitting that the heart attack that had cut short his university career had lessened more than that. She bit back an enquiry he wouldn't want and got up from the table instead to deposit a kiss on his thin white hair.

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'Thank you, they're beautiful. I'll take them to the jeweller's this morning to be strung. Prepare yourself for the grand moment when I dazzle you by dressing up properly!'

He surprised her for the second time that morning. 'You're not obliged to wear them, my dear. They're meant to be an untaxable investment! Something you can always dispose of at a good price if you should ever be in need of ready cash.'

The kindness of it touched her to the point of tears, but he waved the subject aside. 'Judging by the pile of envelopes in front of you, every child in Little Fairford has remembered your birthday.'

'I can hear them all daring one another to send "Miss" a card!' First of all, though, she picked up an envelope with a French stamp on it. 'I think I recognise *Oncle Marcel*'s spidery handwriting.'

Inside, with a rich man's usual thriftiness in small things, Marcel Colbert had enclosed another envelope addressed to her uncle.

'He has a suggestion to make,' Edwin Kingsley announced a minute or two later, looking at her over his half-moon spectacles. 'He wants his godson to spend three months here, learning Arabic and studying the Collection.'

'Here in this house, you mean, or here in England?'

Edwin consulted his letter again. 'Here with us . . . Marcel says quite specifically "*chez vous*". The godson is not French, by the way, but a French-Canadian called Jules Legrand. What do you feel about that?'

Jane didn't answer the question, being concerned with one of her own.

'Have you heard of Monsieur Legrand before? Did you even know that *Oncle Marcel* had a godson?'

'He's the son of someone Marcel met at the end of the war,

when Paris was liberated. I suspect that, having no child of his own, my old friend is grooming the young man to run the gallery for him eventually. Marcel has hopes of making a good scholar out of him.'

She couldn't help grinning at the comment, aware that if the French-Canadian had this merit her uncle would happily accept him. Even so, there was an anxiety to be registered. 'It's a lot to ask of you - a stranger here for three months, and teaching him into the bargain.'

A gleam of humour flitted across her uncle's thin face. 'Trust a Frenchman to be practical - Marcel wants me to pass on what I know before I pass on myself! I think we shall have to let the young man come.'

Jane nodded, still doubtful about the idea but taking comfort from the thought that no average young man would put up with even one month in the Kingsley household. Her uncle would see to it that any student of his learned what he was there to learn. By way of light relief, there would be health-giving walks along the river, and General Wolfe's battles refought over the backgammon board each evening. She gave Monsieur Legrand a week or two at most of this rather spartan régime. But clearing away the breakfast dishes, she realised that for once her birthday wasn't running true to form. Two surprises so far made her think superstitiously that there must be a third to come. There was, and it was even now standing on the doorstep.

The shock when she answered the ring at the door was heart-stopping. She hadn't seen the large man who stood there for more than six years. He looked older than she knew him to be, but she would always recognise him, however much time and experience had changed the youthful contours of his face. Her teenage years had been spent in hopeless hero-worship of

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him, and through every painful one of them she'd known that he saw her only as the lonely orphan who'd had to be inserted into Edwin Kingsley's bachelor existence.

'Remember me?' he enquired calmly now. 'Oliver Hatton, and not the ghost of times past, as you obviously seem to think.'

She made a tremendous effort, released her clutch on the door, and held out her hand. 'I'm taken aback,' she explained hoarsely. 'You're supposed to be in America. Why didn't Mary say you were about to honour us with a visit?'

'She didn't know. As far as my dear mama's concerned, her black sheep has sown his wild oats at last and come back to browse in the calm pastures of home.'

'Sheep graze,' she pointed out faintly, determined somehow to be true to her calling. 'Do I gather that a surfeit of wild oats isn't really what has brought you back to Little Fairford?'

'The real reason's not for public consumption. Father wrote to me a little while ago to say he'd been given an ultimatum by the doctor: a quieter life, or a shorter one. You know Richard almost as well as I do . . . he was so damned casual about it that I properly got the wind up. All in all, it seemed the moment to pack in my American adventure and come home.'

He looked from Jane's face to the posy of tightly massed jonquils clutched in his hand, and remembered why he'd been sent there.

'Special delivery – happy birthday from the Hattons!'

She stared at the exquisite handful of spring, then at the man who stood indolently propped against the door-post. He'd changed, but not in this deceptive habit he'd always had of ambling about the world as if he was on the verge of falling asleep. He must have succeeded in New York by misleading his competitors. It would have taken time to discover that

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toughness and self-controlled strength lay beneath lazy surface charm and affability. Jane dragged her eyes away from his face and considered the flowers instead.

'Richard's choicest blooms, I bet, and arranged by Mary's loving hands.'

'True, but who was it that crawled about the undergrowth, looking for them? I don't see why I shouldn't get some of the credit.'

He was solemn as a judge, and that was something else that hadn't changed. Oliver, when deadpan and serious, was always laughing inside.

'All that effort . . . it's quite worn you out, I expect. Will you come in and sit down before you tackle the walk home?'

Her face expressed nothing but gentle concern for an ageing visitor. He looked at her, thinking that of all the changes he'd noticed since coming back to England, the change in Jane Kingsley was the most astonishing of all. He'd left behind a gauche, dazzled adolescent who frequently embarrassed herself and him. There was nothing gauche about the young woman whose huge dark eyes now had the impertinence to laugh at him. Hero-worship seemed to have been outgrown as well.

'A rest would be welcome,' he agreed with a wistful air that made her grin, 'but there's work to be done. I must soldier on unless I've managed to lose my shopping list already . . .' he broke off to rummage in the pockets of his jacket, '. . . no, here it is; a house seems to be the first item.'

'A house?' she enquired faintly.

'Somewhere to live,' he explained with gentle patience. 'I'm too old to fly back to the parental nest, wouldn't you say?'

'Much too old, and Mary would be worn out in no time,

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putting up with you. Anyway, surely you want to carve out a niche for yourself in London?’

‘There’s a hopeful note on your voice, little one. You’re supposed to welcome the returning prodigal with open arms, not push him out of the door again.’ She left the suggestion alone, and he had to go on. ‘You’ve also missed the point. I’ve come home to add another Hatton to the Hatton & Meredith partnership. I’ll be living in the vicinity . . . Oxford, probably.’

She supposed it was something to be thankful for that he didn’t propose to settle in the village, but Oxford was a bare eight miles away. Oliver’s sleepy gaze registered the flicker of dismay in her eyes; this coolly grown-up Jane hadn’t, at least, entirely lost the habit of giving her feelings away. But he looked away at his now empty hands, brow wrinkled in a frown. ‘There was something else I was supposed to remember. I know! Mary wants you and Edwin to come to dinner this evening – combined celebration: your birthday and my homecoming. Are you free by any chance?’

‘Provided an assignation over the backgammon board can be postponed until tomorrow, I believe we are,’ she agreed sedately.

Oliver stared at her for a moment, then smiled. It was a smile he’d been careful never to offer an adolescent already far gone in love, and Jane was grateful for the fact. With that sort of encouragement at the time she might have disintegrated altogether. She could manage it very well now.

‘It’s unexpectedly nice to be home,’ he said gently. ‘See you, little one.’

She watched him amble down the path, thinking that her birthday’s third surprise had rather outdone the other two; the temptation was strong to sit down and contemplate nothing

except the extraordinary fact that Oliver was back among them, but she forced herself to go in search of her uncle instead, confident that she'd find him in the room that housed the Kingsley Collection.

Her great-grandfather, Edwin's grandfather, had sunk his wealth in acquiring the rare instruments that made up the Collection – astrolabes made in Muslim Spain, of brass so richly engraved and decorated that it gleamed like gold against hangings of blue velvet; armillary spheres whose intricately intertwining circles depicted all that medieval minds had been able to comprehend of the Universe; and treatises on astronomy and medicine penned in the exquisite, flowing lines of Arabic calligraphy.

Jane stood in the doorway, watching Edwin's absorbed face, and wishing yet again that she could feel some real interest in the Collection. The instruments were beautiful, and fascinating to historians like Uncle Edwin and Marcel Colbert, but for her they went too far back in time, and the civilisation that had created them was tainted by what had happened since. For Edwin the past still lived in these beautiful artefacts. For her the past was what she remembered of her laughing, loving parents, annihilated by a Middle Eastern bomb thrown in some futile fundamentalist vendetta. Ten years old at the time, Jane never saw either of them again. She'd never managed to look at the Collection since without seeing in her mind's eye a wreckage-strewn hillside outside Jerusalem.

'Are you trying to visualise all this with Jules Legrand's eyes?' she asked now.

'I suppose I'm hoping that a young man destined to go into a famous auction house won't just see the instruments with a price-tag on them.'

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'Uncle Marcel doesn't, and it's his auction house,' she pointed out consolingly.

'I know, my dear. But he is a scholar, as well as a businessman.'

It explained the unlikely friendship between a retired and retiring don and a rich, urbane, pleasure-loving Frenchman. After her uncle's heart attack, it was Marcel Colbert who always did the travelling. He was a generous guest, arriving with out-of-season delicacies, expensive perfume for Jane, and books for Edwin that a retired scholar coveted but wouldn't dream of buying for himself. She doubted whether her uncle should have been asked to take on three months' intensive work, but there was no denying that the prospect of teaching someone again had brought a sparkle to his face.

'We're invited to dinner with the Hattons this evening - Oliver's home,' she explained briefly. 'Do you feel like going?'

'Of course. What a pleasure to have him back again!'

She was saved from answering by the *ping* of the telephone. Her uncle's side of the conversation, conducted in French, told her that he was speaking to his friend in Paris. The half she could hear seemed to suggest that their visitor was going to arrive a good deal sooner than she'd bargained for.

'That was Marcel, ringing from London,' said Edwin, putting down the telephone. 'He and his godson flew over unexpectedly to attend a sale at Sotheby's. I got the impression that the young man had come prepared to stay, in the hope that I would suggest it. When I did, Marcel jumped at the idea, so they'll both come down this afternoon, and he will go back alone tomorrow.'

Jane swallowed the comment that they were being hustled unfairly. It would only distress her uncle and waste

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time better spent on making up beds and restocking the larder.

'What about Mary's dinner party this evening?' she remembered suddenly. 'Do we not go, after all?'

'Oh . . . well, why not ring her, my dear? She and Richard know Marcel already. I dare say she won't mind an extra couple for dinner.'

'It's high-handed . . . I hope she says no!' Jane was stung to tartness on Mary's account even while she knew that half a dozen unexpected guests would be made welcome by Mrs Hatton and greeted with relief by her family, who would otherwise be eating for days afterwards the surplus food she always prepared.

The Owl House was ready for guests and so, just, was Jane by the time an elegant cream-coloured car slid to a halt outside the front door midway through the afternoon. It was perfectly timed and typical of Marcel Colbert's smooth ordering of his affairs. He roamed the world in search of exotic works of art for his Parisian galleries, but bore a charmed life as a traveller. She'd never known him beset by the trials that other people experienced. They could be airsick, strike-bound, or bereft of luggage, but never *Oncle Marcel*. He climbed out of the car now, a little ponderously because he was beginning to put on weight, and surged forward in a waft of *Givenchy pour l'Homme* to kiss her on both cheeks.

'*Ma chère, Jane . . . aujourd'hui plus belle que jamais,*' he pronounced gallantly.

She smiled and accepted the compliment calmly, aware that he would have felt obliged to offer it however she happened to be looking. She greeted him in the French they always spoke together, and waited for his companion to put in an appearance.

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With a sense of timing obviously caught from travelling with his godfather, a stranger emerged from the driving seat of the car and sauntered deliberately towards them.

'Act one, scene one,' Jane said to herself. 'Enter Monsieur Jules Legrand.'

He bowed over her hand, then straightened up to make a thorough examination of a girl who was going to figure prominently in his comfort and entertainment for the next three months. A smile appeared, seeming to suggest that the prospect looked rather better than he'd had much hope of. The smile was also slightly rueful – apologetic, she thought, about the effect he couldn't help making on a sex-starved village maiden. Still, she acknowledged privately that, although not altogether young, he was a stunning vision of manhood . . . sun-bronzed skin acquired on some ski-slope or other, and the throw-away elegance that few Englishmen aspired to. If he looked a little too pleased with himself, she must put up with that. He was heaven-sent – just what she needed to convince a large, sleepy gentleman that it made no difference to her on which side of the Atlantic he now lived.

Beyond explaining the rambling layout of the Owl House to their new guest, and supplying Marcel with the China tea he always insisted was his real reason for visiting England, Jane left them alone with her uncle until it was time to shepherd them to the other end of the village for dinner. The Hattons' home had once been Little Fairford's vicarage and it was her favourite house among the architectural hotch-potch that made the village odd but beautiful. Two hundred years of weathering had mellowed its brick to a soft glowing red, and miraculously it had escaped the fell hand of the developer; the rooms and windows were as perfect as their Georgian builder had made them.

As they strolled towards the house she saw Marcel Colbert considering it with the approving eye of an expert. The inconveniently picturesque held no charms for him – elegance and proportional grace were what he asked for, in his surroundings as well as in the women he escorted. Aware of this, she'd done her best, knowing that her usual hasty preparations for a social occasion in the village wouldn't do. It had no connection whatsoever with Oliver Hatton; she was simply keeping England's flag aloft in front of two Parisian visitors! Her dress was far from new, but the yellow silk glowed against her dark eyes and hair, and perfectly matched a surprise birthday gift of antique topaz earrings brought her by *Oncle Marcel*. She thought with gratitude that they made her look unusually sophisticated.

'Tell me about our hosts,' he said as they walked slowly up the drive at a pace that suited Edwin Kingsley.

'You've met Richard and Mary Hatton here before, they're our dearest friends, and Richard's also my uncle's solicitor. It was he who found the Owl House for us when we needed to move out of Oxford. He's a fanatical gardener, while Mary collects every stray or damaged animal that crosses her path. There's an occasional clash of interest, but they're devoted to one another all the same.'

'They sound very English,' Marcel commented.

'The very *best* English,' she pointed out swiftly, hackles rising at the scent of condescension, 'they're staunch and kind.'

'Of course,' her companion agreed with haste, 'and their house is "very best English" too, by the way. I hate to admit it, but we never achieved this small-scale perfection in France. Cathedrals, grand palaces, yes . . . but not this lovely domestic architecture.'

Jane was mollified by the tribute, and uncomfortably aware

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that she'd snapped at him when her edginess was not his fault; it simply had to do with the prospect of meeting Oliver again. But inside the house her confusion was unnoticed in the flurry of introductions, and she could even ignore Oliver's long, slow stare – brought on by the new earrings, she supposed, because he'd never bothered to stare at her before. Richard Hatton, as tall as his son but much less broad, gave her a shy birthday kiss, and Mary enveloped her in a hug that threatened to dislodge several of the floating scarves and shawls with which she always 'dressed' for dinner.

'Jane, dear, isn't it a gorgeous surprise to have Oliver home? I always prayed he'd get tired of New York; in fact I usually found myself praying for that when I was supposed to be concentrating on something else – like famine relief in India. But it doesn't seem as if God could have minded!'

Mary's conversation took a little getting used to and Jane stifled a grin at the startled expression on Jules Legrand's face; then she was startled in her turn by a strange girl coming slowly down the stairs towards the group still standing in the hall. There was nothing shy about the slow descent – this was a stage entrance by someone who knew the effect it would have.

'Another unexpected visitor,' Mary Hatton explained in a hurried murmur. 'Cousin of Richard's, several times removed. Estelle's an actress, sent here to recuperate after an illness, poor girl. Blessing in disguise, because she'll have no difficulty in keeping Oliver amused.'

Jane could believe it, judging by the way his eyes were on the girl coming towards them. Her own candle-glow of pleasure in her appearance flickered and went out in the face of this flaming competition. A mane of carefully disordered red hair framed enormous green eyes made up to look larger

still, and a catsuit of some faintly iridescent material clung to her like a second skin; it added up to something more exotic than Little Fairford normally saw at close range.

‘Should I have heard of Estelle Harding?’ Jane whispered to Richard Hatton, while the newcomer was being introduced to Edwin and his French friends.

‘Doubt it – she’s budding rather than full-blown! Two walk-on parts in provincial rep so far. Still, we must say this for her – she walks down a staircase very beautifully!’

The smallest of grins touched his mouth for an instant, reminding Jane of Oliver, and she was suddenly resigned to her yellow silk again.

Back in the drawing-room after dinner, handing round Mary’s coffee, she was surprised to receive an inviting smile from Estelle.

‘Mary says you *live* here.’ The actress voice held a note of wonder that made Jane grin.

‘Quite a lot of people do – it’s a large village, not the Sahara desert!’

‘I know, but what can you find to do? There isn’t even anything that could be called a shop apart from that gruesome little emporium known as the General Stores.’

‘I keep house for my uncle, but my job is to help teach the next generation – all forty of them – in the village school.’

‘My God,’ Estelle murmured faintly. ‘I thought an actor’s lot was hard.’

She stared at Jane, looking for some visible mark of a fate that must certainly be worse than death, then smiled with the relief of finding the French-Canadian visitor at her elbow. At least he came from a world that she could understand. Jane was free to return to the coffee tray, but found Oliver there, waiting for her. It was an effort to pour coffee and cream