



AILEEN
ARMITAGE

Annabella
&
Chambermere

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and
CAMBERMERE



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ANNABELLA
and
CAMBERMERE

Aileen Armitage is half-Irish, half-Yorkshire by birth. She began writing when failing sight forced her to give up work in the outside world and in 1998 she was the winner of the Woman of the Year Award. Aileen is married to the writer Deric Longden.

ANNABELLA

Chapter One

It was a few days after Laura Sutcliffe arrived at Aspley Hall that cousin Anna announced that she was dying. The discovery, one sun-soaked June morning, filled Laura with shock and horror. It was cruel, so bitterly unfair. To be seventeen and abruptly wrenched from life was unutterably saddening.

"Are you sure?" Laura asked her cousin in disbelief.

"There is no doubt of my condition," Anna replied as she lay curled on the chaise longue. "It is beyond cure, a canker eating away deep inside me. I feel so sorry for Papa. My death will grieve him deeply, only child as I am. He will be alone in the world, with only Nanny to care for him." A tear welled unbidden.

"How long have you known?" Laura asked, kneeling beside her.

"I've only just learned. Even Papa does not know yet."

"And Miss Oliphant? Does she know?"

Anna shook her head weakly. "Nor do I intend to tell her yet. You know how she fusses over me as it is. Time enough for her to learn, and Papa too."

Of course Uncle Reginald could not know, Laura thought; otherwise he would not have sent for her to come here to Aspley Hall to be Anna's companion. Only last week he had received her, open-armed and genial, and bade her to behave discreetly and in a ladylike manner so as not to unsettle his delicate daughter. Laura remembered with remorse how she had privately scoffed at the notion of Anna being delicate. Overpampered,

certainly, but no invalid as Uncle Reginald seemed to believe. But that was a week ago.

Laura was still shaking at Anna's revelation when one of the underhousemaids came into the drawing room to poke up the fire and add fresh coal. Despite the heat of the day, fires were always lit in Aspley Hall, for Uncle Reginald had left instructions that Anna was always to be kept warm. For some reason he always believed her delicate and in need of nurturing like some rare bloom.

The maid came to stand before Anna, small and neat and aglow with life, and Laura admired the aura of liveliness about her, regretful of Anna's inevitable decline. The girl cocked her dark head to one side.

"Miss Oliphant's looking for thee, Miss Anna. She said she wants to take thee for a walk on t'moor since it's so fine and sunny."

The corners of Anna's lips quivered. Laura pitied her. It must be difficult for her to fight down the terror of approaching death.

"Please tell Miss Oliphant I shall not walk out today, Dora. I prefer to rest here awhile."

The girl bobbed a curtsy and left. As her footsteps died away along the corridor, Laura counted the seconds until the housekeeper's agitated footsteps would replace the silence. She would inevitably come hurrying, anxious and a little perturbed that Anna should decline to go out, for nursery habits of obedience to her commands died hard.

Laura looked at the mantelshelf to watch by the glass-domed clock there how long it took Miss Oliphant to come. Above the clock a gilt-framed mirror tilted at an angle where she could see Anna's reflection, small and vulnerable as she lay curled on the chaise longue. Laura saw her stretch cautiously and raise her weight gingerly on her elbows. With extreme care she lowered her legs to the carpet, then hesitated.

"Do you think that if I stand I might test fate too

far?" Anna asked. "Perhaps I will find I am weaker than I realize."

It really was a pity, for Anna's hollow-eyed face really was quite attractive, oval and pale and framed by a cloud of fair curls that fell past her shoulders. Her eyes were almost as blue as her father's though not so penetrating, calm almost despite her dread. At all costs, Laura resolved, she must be brave and maintain a placid acceptance of fate for Anna's sake. It was not going to be easy, for every inch of her still quivered with shock.

Still there was no sign of Miss Oliphant. Cautiously Anna levered her weight off the chaise longue and stood up, closing her eyes. After a few seconds she opened her eyes.

"I feel no nausea or faintness, Laura. I feel quite steady, except for the fluttering of my heart. Perhaps death is not quite so close as I had thought. I only hope that it will not be too lingering and painful when it comes."

The figure in the mirror was slim and graceful, the cream day gown fitting closely enough to reveal the small breasts and diminutive waist.

Pity stabbed Laura. What did it matter how beautiful Anna might have been if the grave was soon to enfold her charms? She gazed sadly at the pathetic little figure and reflected how deceitful it was that no sign betrayed the canker gnawing away within.

Laura was so deeply engrossed in this reflection that she was startled when Miss Oliphant suddenly erupted into the drawing room. Keen blue eyes looked up into Anna's, searching her face, and her reddish hair bristled under her cap.

"Now what is all this, Anna? Dora says you will not go out. Are you not well?"

Anna lowered herself onto the chaise longue. "Nothing to worry about, Nanny. I simply prefer to sit and read."

Miss Oliphant's short figure straightened, the thin hands smoothing her dark skirts as if she still wore a

starched apron. When she spoke, impatience edged her voice, emphasizing the faintly Scottish accent she had long ago overlaid with more standard English.

"Now listen to me, Anna. I am not Nanny but Miss Oliphant, if you please. It is now five years since your papa decided I was no longer your nanny and high time you remembered it. And second, you must recall that your papa left clear instructions when he went to London that I was to exercise my discretion as to your daily routine. Warmth and rest were essential, he said, and also moderate amounts of exercise. I was to take advantage of fine weather to ensure that you and Miss Laura obtained good lungfuls of fresh moorland air. Your daily regime is my responsibility, Miss Anna. I am accountable to your father. Just because Miss Laura is here is no reason to defy him."

"I know his instructions," Anna replied quietly.

"Then why do you defy me?" The tone of authority in her voice was daunting. Seeing Anna made no move to rise, Miss Oliphant returned to the attack, more coaxingly this time.

"Now come along, Anna, we can't have you sitting about moping on a lovely day like this. Miss Laura will come with us. I'll ring for the maid to fetch your coats and outdoor shoes. Now be a good girl and get ready, or it will be time for lunch before we reach the moor."

She was crossing to ring the bell beside the fireplace. Anna raised one languid arm to stop her.

"No, Nanny. I have made up my mind. I shall stay here."

Miss Oliphant crossed the room with quick, neat steps and laid a hand on Anna's brow. "You *are* ill, Anna, aren't you? Your forehead is quite hot. I thought it was unlike you to cross me," she said vexatiously. She hated illness, regarding it as a presumptuous invader that dared to disturb her ordered regime.

"Is it one of your sick headaches, Anna? You haven't suffered an attack for so long now that I hoped that old

trouble was gone," she inquired, the concern evident in her lowered tone.

"No, Nanny. I have no headache."

Miss Oliphant lifted Anna's hair to inspect her neck. "You have no spots, have you?"

Anna shook her head feebly.

"Have you any pain? A stomachache, perhaps?"

"Not a pain, exactly, but an uncomfortable feeling as though I have cramp."

Laura started. The canker was at work. Anna could not have long now.

Miss Oliphant was quick to make a diagnosis. "That's it, a stomachache. The plums we had for dinner last night, I'll be bound. I remarked at the time that you should not have had a second helping." She stood back, satisfied. "Then you rest here, Miss Anna, and I'll go and make an infusion of senna pods for you. We'll soon have you right again."

She bustled away, relieved at having discovered a course of action with which to resolve the problem. Miss Oliphant was always thus, Laura noted, momentarily nonplussed and only happy when she could take positive steps to deal with a problem. No wonder Uncle Reginald was so highly satisfied with such a capable housekeeper. Anna was barely nine years old when her mother died, and Uncle Reginald was so often away in London in the Houses of Parliament, helping the queen to govern the country, Miss Oliphant said.

It took Miss Oliphant a full half-hour to reappear with a cup of hot senna tea. When she had gone, Anna sighed.

"If my days are numbered, then there are matters to be attended to. The new gowns for which I have been measured last week must be canceled; my pretty cat, James, must be accustomed to a bed other than mine at night, and my few belongings must be disposed of."

Laura was helping Anna in the phrasing of her last

will and testament when Miss Oliphant came back. She looked at Anna critically.

"You do look rather pale and that's a fact, Anna," the housekeeper murmured thoughtfully. "I hesitate to worry your father when he is so occupied with important matters, but I think he would consider it remiss of me not to call in the doctor. I'll send the coachman to fetch Dr. Sheard."

Anna cast a stricken look at Laura. "There is no need, Miss Oliphant, truly."

"Perhaps not," Miss Oliphant reflected, "but we'd best be on the safe side. Your papa would wish it."

When she had gone, Anna turned to Laura.

"I debated whether to tell her of the dreadful symptom, but I knew it was no use. I cannot avoid the doctor's examination and she would send for him all the more quickly if she knew."

"What symptom?" Laura inquired.

Anna shook her head.

Laura was puzzled. "Anna, how do you know you are dying? Hasn't the doctor already been to see you?"

Anna shook her head again.

"But you were well yesterday, talking of your new gowns and the collar you proposed to buy for your little cat. How is it that today you know you are dying but no one else knows?"

"I know, and that's all," Anna said quietly. "There can be no doubt. And now everyone else will learn of it too. It is so humiliating, so degrading. I wonder if all those who suffer from a nauseating final illness feel the same sense of being besmirched. I feel utterly degraded, putrefying under the attack of a hideous thing within me. I shall become an object of disgust and loathing. Death will indeed come as a merciful release from such degradation. Poor Papa! He'll be so shocked when he learns of it, and he will be so desolate once I am gone, for I have neither brothers nor sisters to console him in his grief."

The shadows of the elm trees in the grounds of Aspley Hall lengthened across the floor of the drawing room before Miss Oliphant ushered in Dr. Sheard. The old man smiled and drew Miss Oliphant to the window. Murmured words floated across to Laura, and the mention of stomach pain and possible appendicitis as she was leaving.

Appendicitis, she had not thought of that. She remembered Anna telling her of a child in the village, the daughter of a hand in one of the Braithwaite mills, whose appendicitis had flared suddenly into peritonitis and whose death had followed swiftly. Perhaps that was Anna's illness too. In a few more moments Dr. Sheard would confirm it.

He came out of the room, rubbing his thick-fingered hands together across his ample stomach and smiles spreading across his plump face. His was an intriguing face, one chin falling below another, three in all, till the final one rested quivering on his stock.

"No need for alarm . . . a glass of sherry as a tonic . . . no bathing or riding . . ." Laura heard the deep voice of the doctor intone.

Miss Oliphant's voice whispered something in reply that Laura could not hear, but she did catch the doctor's murmur of "rather late." So they had realized that Anna was in the last stages of illness. It was confirmed. She was dying.

The doctor turned to Miss Oliphant. "I shall prescribe a sleeping draft for her and you may pour her a dose should she feel at all uncomfortable. But do not fret. In a day or two she will feel quite well again."

Comforting words to ease the doomed victim's mind, Laura reflected as Miss Oliphant ushered him out. An opiate to alleviate the agony that must come. She had noted his hesitation, his obvious embarrassment at referring to the pain Anna must endure. Feeling uncomfortable, he had said, as if choosing milder words could lessen its intensity. There was no hope for Anna now.

Sorrow flooded her. She went back into the drawing room.

The maid, Dora, brought more coal. When she had done she came to Anna.

"Will there be anything else, miss? Shall I bring tea up?"

"When Miss Oliphant comes," Anna replied, making a stern effort to control the tremor in her voice. "And bring me the writing box from the desk, please."

When Dora had gone, Anna dipped her pen in the inkstand and wrote carefully, in neat copperplate script.

"The last will and testament of Anna Braithwaite," she wrote. Laura reminded her to add the date. Anna chewed the tip of her pen. "All my clothes and my jewels I leave to Laura Sutcliffe, my cousin. Dear Laura, I'm glad I have you in whom to confide. You are so buoyant and optimistic, so sure of yourself that you make me feel a dim little shadow by comparison. I dare say you will not care for my gowns overmuch for you consider my taste too subdued, but I know you will like my jewels. The seed pearl necklace I inherited from Mama and my Whitby jet brooch with its matching earrings I know you've always admired. You at least will have mellow memories of your little cousin whenever you wear them."

"Oh, Anna!" Laura protested.

"It will not take long to dispose of my few belongings. My gray mare I cannot bequeath to anyone, Papa having bought it for me. It would be best to leave him to do with her as he feels best." As Anna laid aside her pen and sealed the document, Dora returned with the tea tray laid for three.

"Where is Miss Oliphant?" Anna inquired.

"In t'library, miss, reading. She says she'll be along shortly."

Laura felt annoyed. The housekeeper should be here, ministering to her declining charge and not idly reading.

The evening sun glowed low between the elms, cast-

ing a glorious golden radiance across the parquet floor, and outside all was peace save for the song of the birds. Laura listened sadly, wondering how much longer Anna would hear their song and at the same time bitterly resenting that nature continued to pour her blessings on the earth, unaware of Anna's tragedy. At last she heard footsteps, and Miss Oliphant came in.

Usually Miss Oliphant walked with a positive tread, with an air of decisiveness about her. Now she stood uncertainly, pink and tight-lipped, by the small table in the window alcove, her fingers clenching and then relaxing their hold on the red-backed book she carried.

She laid the book on the table and came hesitantly toward Anna. For a moment she stood there, her fingers clasping and unclasping in the folds of her gown, and at last she spoke. Her voice was tight and hard, as though she was having to force it out.

"Anna, my dear, we must talk," she said jerkily. Pity for her filled Laura.

"Do sit down, Nanny, here by me."

She sat stiffly, her normally alert eyes clouded now with doubt and apprehension. "Not Nanny, Anna, I have told you. Miss Oliphant, or Emily even, if you prefer."

Laura wondered at her condescension, allowing Anna to make use of her Christian name. As it was, the thought occurred to her that the familiarity came a little late, a consoling gesture to make Anna's last days as happy as she could.

"Anna, I feel it incumbent upon me to talk to you of a matter which gives me cause for embarrassment," she said in a rush of words. "There are matters one avoids discussing in polite society, but I feel for once one must contravene the proprieties in order to save you from alarm."

Laura rose swiftly. "Then I'll leave you," she said, but she was puzzled. Whatever Miss Oliphant had to say could be no more alarming than what Anna had discovered this morning.

"Yes, that would be best," the housekeeper agreed.

"Miss Oliphant, I know already. I am dying," Laura heard Anna say before she closed the door.

There, she had said it, and in a tone of such quiet calm that even Laura was surprised. Her cousin undoubtedly had courage.

Despite her anxiety, Laura could not resist eavesdropping.

"Rubbish. You are, how shall I say, temporarily indisposed, that is all," she heard the housekeeper say firmly. "What is happening to you is perfectly normal. We all of us undergo it. It is a sign that we have reached maturity at last, and we should be proud of it." There was a pause, and then Miss Oliphant added softly, "Do you understand, Anna? You are a woman now."

"A woman, Nanny? A woman destined to die?" Anna's voice was shrill.

Miss Oliphant gave a short, brittle laugh. "Not yet, my dear. The doctors in all the medical books pronounce this indisposition as normal, the result of girls growing faster than boys. They call this phenomenon a cicatrization of an interior wound."

"A wound?" Anna leaped on the word.

"A wound of a woman's internal system, which is the whole basis of her womanhood. They say she is invalidated by a wound of love. I'm afraid I express myself badly, my dear. I feel it may be wiser for you to read for yourself for the details are complicated. My explanation might only confuse you. Here, I'll leave the book for you. Read it, and afterwards you may discuss it with me if you wish."

Laura backed away quickly. As Miss Oliphant laid her hand on the knob Anna stopped her.

"Is there a name for this malady, Miss Oliphant?"

The housekeeper hesitated. "There is a medical name for it, but in common parlance it is usually known as the flowers, or the curse." Quickly she stepped out and closed the door behind her.

The curse! Laura gasped. So Anna's fatal illness was no more than that! She wanted to laugh, to giggle uncontrollably with relief. What a ninny her cousin was, to think she was dying!

But then, Laura reflected more soberly, Anna must have been kept in ignorance all this time. At seventeen, only a year younger than herself, the shock must have been dreadful.

Dora came up to remove the tray as Laura rejoined her cousin. Dora had the country-fresh look that predicted a long and healthy life.

She stifled a yawn and then grinned apologetically at Anna. "Sorry, miss, I'm fair tired out, up at five and all." Anna seemed unaware that Laura had returned.

"Dora, have you heard of the curse?"

Dora almost dropped the tray as her eyes grew wide and her mouth dropped open, and then she began to giggle nervously.

"What on earth makes thee ask, miss?"

"I want to know. Have you?"

"Well, of course. I'm fifteen, tha knows."

"Have you . . . suffered from it?"

Her eyes rounded again in surprise. "Aye."

"And you recovered?" Anna sounded hopeful.

"Aye."

"Have any of the other maids suffered from it, do you know?"

The eyes narrowed now. "Aye, all of them I should reckon. All girls do, don't they, miss?" She addressed Laura, who nodded. "Will that be all, miss?"

"Yes, you may go. And thank you."

Anna turned her blue eyes on Laura. "Is it true, Laura? Dare I hope that I may live? It is difficult to shake off the belief I have had for a whole day now that death is inevitable. But Dora's words do seem to confirm Miss Oliphant's." She reached for the red book.

The Gentlewoman's Guide to the Upbringing of Children, it said on the cover, and inside a slip of paper