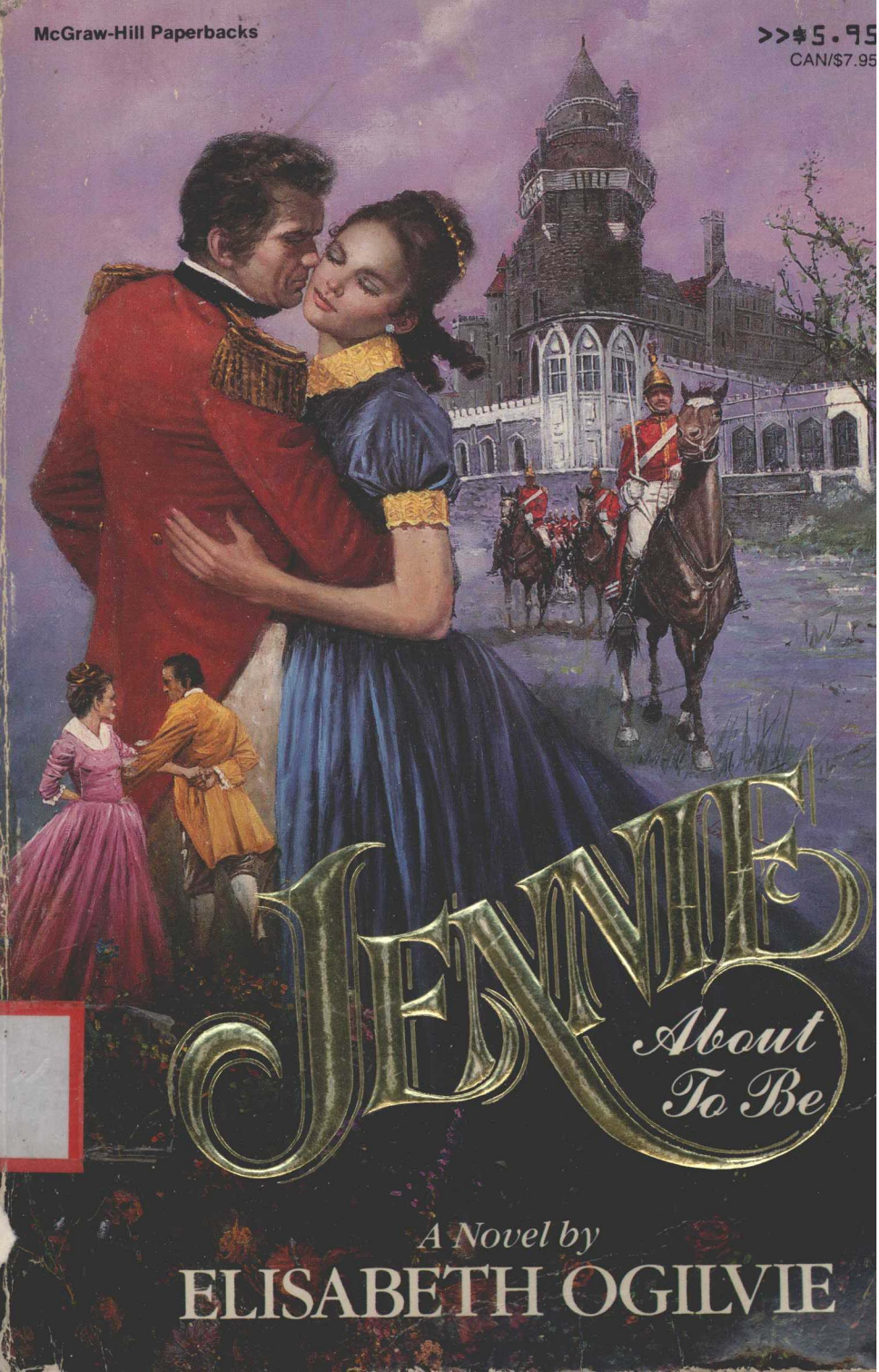


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CAN/\$7.95



JENNY

About To Be

A Novel by
ELISABETH OGILVIE

Jennie

About to Be

Handwritten signature

ELISABETH OGILVIE

McGraw-Hill Book Company

New York St. Louis San Francisco Bogotá Guatemala
Hamburg Lisbon Madrid Mexico Montreal Panama Paris
San Juan São Paulo Tokyo Toronto

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First McGraw-Hill Paperback edition, 1985.

ISBN 0-07-047782-5

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 F G R F G R 8 7 6 5

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING IN PUBLICATION DATA

Ogilvie, Elisabeth, 1917-

Jennie about to be.

I. Title.

PS3529.G39J4 1984 813'.52 83-22204

ISBN 0-07-047782-5 (pbk)

Book design by Roberta Rezk.

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Whether we be young or old,
Our destiny, our being's heart and home,
Is with infinitude, and only there;
With hope it is, hope that can never die,
Effort, and expectation, and desire,
And something evermore about to be.

William Wordsworth

One

EARLY on a March morning, a blackbird was singing from one of Uncle Higham's chimney pots in Brunswick Square. Officially it was spring. Thousands had died in the usual London winter, like the victims of some ritual sacrifice to ensure the return of spring, if not of the sun. Tamsin had died, a thirteen-year-old slavey with no meat on her bones, too small to lug heavy coal scuttles upstairs or earthen slop jars down. If God had marked this particular sparrow's fall, He had done nothing either to stop it or to break it.

Jennie Hawthorne, who woke every morning thinking of Tamsin, did not rage against God for His refusal to take responsibility for His own acts. Her father had reared four daughters to believe that God had created the world but not the rules. Once the terrestrial globe was set spinning in space, as they could spin the globe in his study, it created the immutable laws of nature; once mankind began, it designed its own system by some quite dreadful trials, horrifying errors, and some happy surprises. The combination of natural and human laws would never reach perfection, Papa had stated, but it could certainly be improved upon. In the meantime he considered himself fortunate to be raising his daughters in the world of Pippin Grange and its surrounds, enclosed as safely by the gentle Kyloe Hills and the North Sea as the orchard was enclosed by its high wall of gold-lichened rosy brick. The fruit ripened sweetly here in spite of the sea winds blowing across the Fenwick Flats. So did the Hawthorne girls.

Carolus Hawthorne had expected that before he died they would all be women grown, safely established, armored by his somewhat cynical

philosophy against Life's more brutal shocks. He had almost succeeded by that late summer afternoon when his heart suddenly stopped and toppled him from his saddle in Ember Lane as he was riding home from Belford.

Sylvia was already married to her hunting parson; Ianthe had procured on her own a situation as companion and governess in the household of a wealthy young widow, who had come to Beal to recuperate in the sea air after her husband's death. But Jennie and Sophie were still at home. Sophie, fifteen, and in torrents of grief, had been kindly assimilated into the family of the distant cousin to whom the comfortable old Elizabethan house had passed by entail.

Jennie (Eugenia), twenty-one, had been taken off to London by her mother's sister. "We'll make you a good marriage," said Aunt Higham with steel in her voice and her eye. After years in London she was still a north country woman and always rose with a ferocious relish to the toughest challenge.

London had been endurable.

"The true gift of God," Papa had said, "is the courage to endure. He doesn't dispense the blessings and the blows. He plays no favorites. He gives us strength to deal with the worst that can be done to us."

"But I would die of grief if anything happened to you, Papa," Jennie had once passionately told him when she was about fourteen.

"That would be mere self-indulgence," he had replied, "if not the supreme vanity. You would be saying, in effect, that your suffering was so great that God couldn't give you enough fortitude to bear it. You would be saying you were greater than God."

Jennie sighed over the wreck of an enjoyably emotional and dramatic gesture. Papa laughed and reached up a long arm and picked an apple from over his head. It had gleamed among the thick dark leaves like a golden apple of the Hesperides; he gave it a polish on his blue sleeve and handed it to her.

"One of Eve's finer accomplishments was introducing us to the apple," he said. He took one for himself, and they walked slowly in the dense orchard grass, in the cidery heat of September.

That was one of her happiest memories in a collection of happy ones; in the London September seven years later, less than two weeks after the funeral—William's surplice blowing in the summer wind that sang

in the churchyard yews—it had been a talisman, a touchstone. *Endure*, she said grimly to herself all during the first endless days and in the hours when she lay awake. *Otherwise you are guilty of self-indulgence and vanity.* “Oh, Papa!” she gulped, and wept. God didn’t forbid tears, any more than He had ordained that she should have to suffer the agony of homesickness along with the pain of losing Papa. There was no one, nothing she could blame, and that was infuriating. No. *He* sat up there, armored in regal indifference, showering strength like rain, and you could take it or leave it. *He* didn’t care. Weeping in rage, she took.

So the winter had been gotten through, and this was the morning of the day when Jennie Hawthorne was going to run away. She had chosen the fifteenth of March as appropriate. “Beware the Ides of March,” she and her sisters used to croak at each other on the fourteenth. “Julius Caesar”, done in sheets, with the most beautiful pieced coverlet from the cedarwood chest for Julius’s imperial raiment, was their favorite drama. They could all quote from anywhere in it, and did at length with hardly any provocation, so often that Papa finally refused to attend another performance of the Pippin Grange Players unless they changed the play. “Romeo and Juliet” then became the favorite.

Remembering, Jennie found herself sliding backward into the sweet and enervating melancholy that could immobilize her. She bounded out of the bed in a room only marginally warmer than it had been all winter before Tamsin started the morning fires. At first Jennie had offered to do her own fire—she was used to it in Pippin Grange—but Uncle Higham had explosively cleared his throat, and Aunt Higham shook her head at her.

Today was the Ides of March, and she was going to run away, or make plans in that direction; she qualified it, being a realist. A fine sunrise would have been a good omen, but at least it wasn’t raining.

Her nightgown of thin cambric muslin, with lace insertion threaded with ribbons, was part of the new wardrobe the Highams had provided for her. So was the wrapper of fine creamy wool. But she bundled herself into her old dressing gown, woven in a coarse brindle-colored wool from sheep on the home farm of Pippin Grange. It was roomy and warm, meant to be worn for comfort, not for style, in the old house at the edge of the North Sea, so when she wrapped herself in it, she was in one sense home. She slid her feet into the shapeless slippers Martyn, the shepherd, had sewn out of Ebony’s hide, fleece side in, when the wether

died of old age. Ebony had been born and orphaned the same spring when Jennie was born. He had been mothered by Sylvia and Ianthe, and his baby cries had blended with Jennie's; when she crept on the lawn, he was as playful and interested as the dogs. Six years later he had officiously attended the baby Sophie, stamping a hoof imperiously at the dogs.

Martyn had made slippers for both her and Sophie, and the girls fondled them, blind with tears because the fleece should have been on the broad back they'd scratched or the rump they'd slapped.

"Old lad'll warm thy toes for many a year yet," Martyn said. Ebony's fleece had held off the winter drafts scudding along the tilted floors of Pippin Grange, where lucky Sophie still wore hers. They and the robe didn't belong in this London room with its delicate satinwood furniture and hangings of pastel-flowered cotton. The contrast amused Jennie, and if the maids were scandalized, they didn't show it, and her aunt didn't know what lived by day in the depths of the wardrobe, behind those panels painted with classical garlands.

Jennie took her little marquetry keepsake chest from on top of the armoire. The key was in her workbox, and she rummaged through it, compounding the usual tangles. As always, she thought her untidiness had finally lost her the key, and panic brought out a fine sweat on her body, but then, as always, she found it. This time it was in her needle case.

She got back onto the narrow bed and, sitting cross-legged like an Arab in a tent among the four slender posts and under the deep ruffle of the flowered tester, opened her box. She handled the contents, one article at a time. There were a seal from Papa's watch chain and her share of her mother's few jewels; she'd gotten the topazes because of her eyes. There were her father's copy of Milton from his student days, her silver christening mug and porringer, and one of young Sophie's sketch-books. Her head drooping, her long, tangled brown hair falling forward past her ears and curtaining her face, she turned the pages. There was Papa, talking to the dogs. Sylvia's Carolus Jerome on a blanket in the orchard. (Papa's watch was being saved for him.) There was herself with Nelson, the old pony. She sniffled and slapped the book shut.

Last was a little drawstring bag of claret velvet. She unknotted the ties and poured out among the blanket folds thirty gold sovereigns. Each of the girls had received, through William, such a gift from their father,

who had nothing else much that was tangible to leave them. There had been a note with each gift, every note different from the others, but the message was the same. The sovereigns were not to be frittered away on foolish luxuries, but were to be used for some great and urgent need of either the flesh or the spirit, and this need was to be soberly considered before money was spent on it.

Young Sophie's note had admonished her to wait until she was twenty-one, which gave her six years for turning over great and urgent needs and discarding them. Jennie had no idea what Sylvia would consider suitable; William was not badly off, or he'd never have been able to keep hunters. Whatever Ianthe did with her hoard, Jennie wasn't likely to know unless she used some of it to come home. She had gone to London with the respectable young widow, who then went mad over a great but immoral (and married) pianist, and now she had run off to Switzerland with him to bear his child. They had taken Ianthe and the other children along.

Sylvia had lamented, but William was pragmatic. "Ianthe, incorruptible herself, will exert a positive moral influence over those children, my dear. So she is necessary there, and besides, she'll be seeing a good bit of beautiful country. If anything should go very wrong, she now has money of her own; she won't be stranded in a penniless condition."

Neither will I be, Jennie thought now. *I am going to run away, and if that, dear Papa, isn't a great and urgent need, what is?*

She put the sovereigns back in the claret velvet bag, locked it in the keepsake chest, and put that away on top of the armoire. She tucked the key in the needle case and promised herself that whenever she arrived at her destination, she would untangle all the cottons and silks and keep her workbox incredibly neat for the rest of her life.

Then she went to her window and opened it to the damp, mild morning. The air was reasonably fresh because not too many fires had been lighted yet. She had to lean out a good way to see into the square; her room was on the side of a corner house, facing across a narrow street to a row of tall windows kept primly curtained at all times except when the maids did the rooms. All she knew of the people there was that the cook kept a cat. This large tabby now sat on the wall by the high gate that opened into the mews, and watched the sparrows that chattered and picked in the street. The blackbird went on singing overhead.

The square was empty in the misty sunrise until the baker's boy came

to it as if to a stage that had been waiting for him; the blackbird provided the overture, and now the boy's whistle joined the bird's. Alone in the world as far as he was concerned, for this moment he was a free and happy soul.

Between him and the blackbird Jennie was jolted from composure, born of decision, into agony. Now she was frantic to escape; she suffered physically, her throat constricting, her lips parching. Her heart missed beats. She hadn't known that anything could be worse than her first homesickness last autumn and through the London winter, when the city seemed to crouch palpitating and helpless in an everlasting rank-smelling fog.

But to see that boy *free* out there, to hear the blackbird and know how the north looked on such a morning! It wouldn't be spring there yet; there could still be savage gales off the North Sea, and late snows, and the worry over the early lambs. But if it should be fair up there today, the sea would be cornflower blue to the horizon, the wet sands would be all a dazzle, and the sun laying a bloom of gold on the ancient bricks. You'd be looking for the first snowdrops in the orchard with old Nelson nudging you between the shoulder blades and trying to get his nose into your pockets. You'd be expecting the day when the swallows came and the hills first showed a green as transparently fine as silk gauze. The gulls sounded different these mornings, too. There was always at least one somewhere on the Grange rooftop.

That's where she was going when she found out where in London one took the stagecoach to the north. She and Aunt Higham had been delivered directly to Brunswick Square by the post chaise hired for the journey. Her ignorance about travel was the only obstacle. Once she knew where to go, she would have to decide how to get there and how to leave the house when everyone was otherwise engaged. She considered simply telling her aunt that she was going, and at the prospect a disturbance in her stomach compounded her other discomforts. She concentrated on the sight of Lindisfarne, the Holy Island, in the morning light; lying across the water like a part of Atlantis risen radiant from the sea, with the gulls crying welcome.

She wouldn't go to the Grange, of course, except later to visit, if she could bear that. William and Sylvia would welcome her. Her sovereigns would pay her way, and she could make herself useful to everyone until she could find a situation.

When it came to that, William might agree to helping her get to Switzerland, perhaps convoyed by some earnest young embryo clergyman escorting his mother to Geneva. Ianthe wrote that other musicians, poets, and artists occasionally came to stay, some with their wives and children, some with their mistresses and children. English or Scottish governesses were much desired, but they were inclined to depart without notice when improper approaches were made to them or—more commonly—their wages weren't paid for months. Ianthe's employer was conscientious about pay, her lover was faithful, and Ianthe was having the time of her life.

"If I could just be on the spot when one of those governesses left!" Jennie said. "Oh, Lord!"

Two

SHE COULDN'T fault her aunt and uncle; they were doing what they considered their duty. Her young cousins liked her, and to lessen her sense of dependency she was teaching them, by her father's methods. Between lessons, and sometimes during, she entertained them with exhilarating tales of her growing up, which both nourished and alleviated her homesickness.

On the surface there was no reason why this state of affairs couldn't remain in balance for a time, her aunt taking her about in society while the children profited from her tutoring. But the tacit understanding was that she would be married, or at least betrothed, as soon as possible. If the Highams were doing their duty, her duty was also clear. Charlotte, for whom this room had been especially furnished, had no doubt whatever that she'd be in it by her seventeenth birthday, though she was a gentle child and didn't complain about being kept in the nursery now.

"I owe it to Lottie to go away," said Jennie virtuously. She rose from her knees and shut the casement on both the boy's and the bird's whistling. "Uncle and Aunt Higham needn't reproach themselves with anything. They will have done their best. One cannot ask for more."

She put away the old robe and slippers and got back into bed. Her body strained so hard to be gone that her heart raced as if she were running. She picked up her volume of Mr. Wordsworth's poems and began to read his "Ode on Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood." The eloquently simple lines gave dignity to her sadness.

From Aunt Higham's viewpoint the scheme should have been working well by now. The girl was educated, a disadvantage which might have

been transcended if she'd had even a modest fortune, but she had only a pittance from her mother, just enough to keep her in hairpins and ribbons. However, she had good country manners, nothing artificial or simpering. She had fine, clean-cut features, she was naturally graceful without having attended deportment classes, and she liked to dance. She was thin but healthy. She had no monthly pains and vapors, a benefit which would cancel out the financial drawbacks if a man was looking for a strong young woman of good stock to give him heirs.

"You'll make a fine wife if you know enough when to hold your tongue," her aunt told her. "You'll get nowhere with that saucy way of yours! You frighten a man, asking him what he thinks of this poet or that philosopher. George Vinton stares as if he can't believe his ears. 'Does God exist?' I thought he'd strangle!"

"I asked him theological questions, suitable for a curate," said Jennie. "He must have studied Emmanuel Kant at Cambridge."

"Fiddlesticks!" said her aunt. "Anyone would think you were trying to drive him and the rest off. Save that bluestocking talk until you've married the man and the first one's on the way. Then he'll run from you only as far as Almack's or Newmarket, and he'll always come home again."

"What sort of curate would go to Almack's or Newmarket?" Jennie pondered aloud.

"George Vinton will have some money when his mother goes, and he has the reversion of a very fine living when his uncle dies. You'd be the mistress of a bigger rectory than William's, and close to a cathedral town, too, with great chances of preferment for George." It tasted good to Aunt Higham. "I will thank God if Charlotte has such a chance offered her."

"I think George would be willing to wait for her," Jennie suggested.

"Fustian!" her aunt snapped. "You're the one to be married off first. A woman like you could make George Vinton go far. He needs a strong hand. But you'll have to keep your heretical thoughts to yourself and not go questioning the existence of God in ecclesiastical circles."

"I was only trying to stir George up," Jennie explained. "He was sitting there looking quite torpid."

"More like a bird hypnotized by a snake," her aunt said dryly.

"Anyway, I don't question God's existence. Only His motives."

"Oh, Lord!" Her aunt rolled her eyes toward the plaster wreaths on the ceiling. She shook her head. But her mouth twitched at one corner.

"You're a good lass, Jennie, and you were always my favorite, for you look the most like my sister. You're an Everden far more than any of my children are. You have her way of holding yourself, the long neck and the tilt of the head. And of laughing. When I see you dancing, if it weren't for the difference in fashion I'd think it was Isabel."

It was an astonishing speech to come from Aunt Higham, and she stood up quickly, as if she repented instantly this gush of emotion. Jennie stood, too, and her aunt gave her a hard pat on the shoulder: "There's more than George, you know, my girl, and the choice has to be yours. But don't be like the poor soul who went all the way through the woods looking for the right stick and had to pick up a crooked one at last."

"And remember to keep my tongue behind my teeth."

"Aye, remember that," her aunt said. "I had to."

Keeping one's mouth shut was not a Hawthorne trait. Free speech had been one of the few luxuries possible for the Hawthorne girls. Raising his daughters in an old house entailed on him without any money to go with it, their widowed and scholarly father had decided that about all he could do for his girls was to give them the best education possible and allow them to run what some called wild.

The elderly, unorthodox scholar had also found it cheap and practical to let them ride, roam the sands and marshes, and climb the hills in nankeen pantaloons, short jackets, and boys' boots until they were thirteen or so, saving their frocks and slippers for special occasions.

Thus they had had exceptional freedom. It was his gift to those whom society would cage soon enough. He thought it was a dreadful world which penalized a human being for being born a female, and his girls' condition as adults would not be bettered by their having been reared in ignorance and trained to a false and hobbling docility.

Therefore, Jenny had not the best training for being a demurely marriageable lass in her aunt's house. To her there was something degrading in being beautifully dressed and having one's hair done by a maid so that one could be paraded like a mare or a heifer at an auction.

Besides, she hadn't seen anyone yet with whom she could bear to think of sharing the marriage bed.

"It's rather wonderful with someone you love," Sylvia had told her after a month of William. "It makes you understand John Donne better, too. But I'd abhor doing it with someone I *didn't* love." She shuddered.

"One might just as well be a light woman, except that she'd be paid for it, and a wife isn't."

The parson adored Sylvia, and she was complacent in her own right. If you made a man fall in love with you, the advantage wasn't all to him. William said he had resented God's taking away his first wife but forgave Him when He sent Sylvia to him. Jennie forbore telling him that God had nothing to do with it; Sylvia had had her eye on him since she was fifteen, and even now Jennie couldn't be sure that when Sylvia had knelt beside her bed, looking as devout as Desdemona before Othello fell upon her with that pillow, she hadn't been praying for the parson's wife to be painlessly removed by the time Sylvia was old enough to marry him.

In spite of Papa's theories, Sylvia believed stubbornly in a gruff but benign Personage, someone like Papa, only more glorious, who inclined His ear unto her and heard her cry. This was a useful attribute for a parson's wife.

But if Sylvia knew what Jennie now knew, she would be hard put to make excuses for her God.

She knew now, for instance, that outside the pleasant crescents and squares, the parks where the Quality rode, the theaters and ballrooms, there lay the filthy warrens of a destitution and vice she hadn't believed could exist; she wouldn't have known now except for the little girl who used to light the fires and black the grates.

She'd hopelessly and helplessly wept at her chore one morning, blinded with the tears that wouldn't stop flowing from her swollen eyes, not able to keep her nose from running. Jennie caught her at it, dried the child's eyes, made her blow her nose on one of the new handkerchiefs, and heard in broad Cockney, made almost unintelligible by the hiccuping sobs, the story of the mother dying in childbirth after the father had beaten her, and of his attempts to violate his own daughter. Now she was terrified for fear she wouldn't give satisfaction here and would be sent back; one of the maids had spoken sharply to her this morning.

Jennie was sickened and appalled by the child's terror. She learned then what put girls on the streets or in the river. At home, when one heard of any sort of abuse, there was something to do at once; she could have gone to her father or to Sylvia's parson or to one of the eccentric old ladies who were part of the country's flora and fauna. *Someone* would have said, and enforced it, "That child shall never go back to that man again."

Even if there were no way of punishing the man, the girl would have grown up safe belowstairs in some country house, the father or uncle or brother forbidden the premises.

Jennie's homesickness was now compounded by bitter frustration. She didn't know Aunt and Uncle Higham well enough; they could very well put the girl out after hearing her story, as if she were a plague carrier. As for the London variety of eccentric old ladies, any of the bejeweled and beplumed specimens Jennie had met didn't look as if kindness toward the lower orders extended past being sure that the horses weren't chilled. The rector of the church which the Highams attended was so grand in the pulpit on Sundays and such a *bon vivant* on weekdays that one couldn't imagine approaching him. George Vinton was so green, for all his dandified airs, that he'd have strangled with horrified embarrassment if he hadn't burned to death with his blushes.

When she wasn't being homesick that winter in London, she was suffering for Tamsin and murderous toward the father. Tamsin never overflowed to her again; she was afraid of being caught at it. The fear of losing her place was contagious; it was a constant pain gnawing at Jennie's stomach. She lived a double life, as a grateful niece trying to live up to her obligations and as a prisoner of her passions. She could not even write it all out to Sylvia, who could have done nothing to help.

Tamsin died as quietly and humbly as she had lived, of a fever which was survived by the stronger, better-nourished girls. She died in a clean bed in her garret room at Brunswick Square, tended by the girls and women of whom she had been so unnecessarily afraid. She died unravished by her father, and she would never have to go on the streets, where she would have died a far different death after long miseries.

Uncle Higham had seen that she was decently buried. There was no more need to be anxious for her now, so one reason for the pain in Jennie's stomach was gone. But for the rest of her life she would remember Tamsin with the depressing ache of an old injury.

William and Sylvia were snug in the rectory, thinking God had made a gift of each to the other. They were good people; they acted swiftly when they saw distress. But she condescended wearily to their innocence. When she reached the north again, she would tell them what London was really like.

With thirty gold sovereigns, she thought on this morning of the duet