

The House of Lanyon

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PART ONE



FOUNDATIONS

1458

CHAPTER THREE

THE BUSINESS OF MARRIAGE

Nicholas and Margaret Weaver's home in the coastal village of Dunster had a characteristic smell, a mixture of oiliness and mustiness with a hint of the farmyard. It was the smell of sheep fleece, and it pervaded the whole house, even the bedchambers. Which was natural, for wool was their world.

Rents from sheep farmers accounted for much of the wealth of the Luttrell family, who lived in the castle overlooking the village. The spinning of yarn and the weaving of cloth were the main trades of the village, and the monks of Cleeve Abbey, a few miles to the east, close to a village called Washford, were industrious shepherds who brought their fleeces regularly to Dunster and did so much business there that they had a fulling mill at the western end of the village and a house of their own in North Street. The abbots of Cleeve spent nearly as much time in Dunster as they did in their monastery.

The Weaver family, who had taken their surname from their trade generations ago, were as prolific as the Lanyons were not. Nicholas, who had had some schooling and knew many well-travelled merchants, said that he had heard of people in far-off places who lived in communities known as tribes, which had usually grown from an original large family. His own cheerful, noisy, crowded family, he was wont to say, was almost a tribe.

It was a fair summing-up. They all knew how they were related to each other and they all, more or less, lived together, although sheer necessity had obliged them, eventually, to spread first of all into the house next door when the tenancy chanced to fall vacant, and later to rent the house opposite, as well.

By that time Nicholas's cousin Laurence and his richly fertile wife, Elena, had a family of formidable dimensions and it was their branch of the tribe that moved across the road, where they took to carding and yarn spinning as distinct from the actual weaving. At one time, like many other families, the Weavers had bought yarn from other cottagers, who made their living by spinning. Until it occurred to Laurence that they had hands enough to do both jobs, whereupon he set his side of the family to creating yarn. Only the fulling and dyeing had to be contracted out. Otherwise, the family bought raw fleeces and did the rest themselves.

Under Nicholas's roof, only Margaret now spun yarn. She had a knack for creating a thin, strong woollen thread which she sold, undyed, on market days, a small but useful addition to the household coffers.

Renting the third house was a wise move from every point of view. The various cousins, uncles and aunts who had been squeezed in with Nicholas and Margaret could now occupy the

next-door premises. Meanwhile, as time went on, Laurence and Elena brought their family to ten, plus a daughter-in-law and three grandchildren. As yet, the youngsters were too small to be useful, but they would soon be big enough to learn to spin. They would also take up space. Laurence eased the congestion as best he could by building a workroom on to the back of his house. Nicholas likewise constructed a weaving shed to the rear of his. These additions made little difference, though. The Weavers remained much as they always had been: amiably argumentative—and crowded.

With so many mouths to feed and three rents to be paid, their prosperity had to be carefully nurtured. They grew vegetables and reared poultry in the long back gardens of the three houses and Nicholas now rented a meadow on a hillside at the seaward end of the village, where he kept not only his three ponies but also two cows. He had built a byre-cum-stable there as shelter for the animals and somewhere to store tack and winter fodder. Margaret was good at dairy work as well as spinning thread, and they had cheese and cream for everyone.

It was also a family custom to marry their daughters off early, taking their youthful appetites for food into other people's households. Sometimes even surplus boys were exported. Nicholas and Margaret had two young sons and one of them, eventually, might have to leave home. "A good rose bush needs regular pruning" was the way Nicholas put it.

And the next one to be pruned, thought their daughter Liza, is going to be me.

From the moment her parents arrived home from George Lanyon's funeral, she had sensed that something was in the air, though at first it wasn't clear what the something was. The

return of Nicholas and Margaret chanced to coincide with a busy time. New orders for cloth had come in, and there had been a problem at the Cleeve Abbey fulling mill, which the Dunster weavers used as well as the monks, to get their cloth cleaned with water and fuller's earth before dyeing. A thunderstorm on the moors had sent quantities of peat down the Avill River and polluted the water supply. "It's always happening. Nature wants us to dye all our cloth dark brown," Nicholas grumbled. "We'll have to send it somewhere else till the river clears. Can't go delaying orders from new customers. That's bad business."

But concerned though the family had been with these matters, there had been something else on their minds. Twice Liza had walked into a room to find her parents talking to other family members, and the conversation had stopped short the moment she appeared. And she had noticed her parents glancing at her, pleasantly enough, but thoughtfully, too, as though they were wondering...

Wondering what? Liza could guess the answer to that. Indeed, she had been through all this before and was fairly sure that she recognised the symptoms. They had a marriage in mind for her and were asking themselves whether she would be pleased with it or not.

She had been expecting something like this. After all, she was the eldest daughter. She was twenty-three now and should have been wedded long ago. Three of her younger sisters were married and the little one, Jane, the infant of the family, was single only because she was as yet only seven years old. Liza had stayed unmarried so far because first one thing and then another had interfered with her parents' plans. They had arranged a very good match for her when she was sixteen, but the young man incon-

siderately died of a fever before the wedding day. Another proposal came in quite soon, but the prospective bridegroom, though well-off and good-natured enough, was nearly fifty. Liza objected and neither Nicholas nor Margaret were easy about the matter, either. The argument—put forward by Aunt Cecy, one of the older family members—that she would probably become a wealthy widow before long and could then please herself, failed to convince either Liza or her parents and the negotiations died away.

There had been others, too—a suitor who changed his mind and another whose parents changed it for him because they had found a better prospect. Time had gone on.

“And now,” said Margaret indignantly when at last the business problems had been overcome and the family had gathered together—without Liza—for a full-scale discussion of the proposal which she and Nicholas had brought back from Allbrook, “and now there’s gossip. Folk have such vile minds.”

She broke off to cough, because during the summer they did not light the fire in the big main room and now, when autumn had set in and they needed warmth, the chimney was smoking. She had pulled her spinning wheel out of the way of possible smuts, but was still using it, important though this gathering was. The steady whirr formed a background to the business in hand.

“Liza’s a good wench,” she said when the coughing fit was over. “And we’ve said naught to her about these hints we’ve heard, that she’s been meetin’ a man in secret, because hints is all it is, and we reckon they come from jealous old women with clatterin’ tongues and naught better to do than make up nasty stories about young girls who still have pretty faces and all their teeth! But it’s time we got her settled—that’s true enough. She’s got a right to depend on us for that.”



I knew it. Flat on the planks of the floor overhead, with one ear pressed to a chink between two boards, Liza felt her stomach clench in fright. Earlier that day she had heard her name mentioned in a conversation among her elders and had without hesitation done some deliberate eavesdropping. She had guessed right, it seemed. Her marriage was being planned and it seemed that her future was to be discussed this morning, in her absence. Slipping away from duties in the kitchen, she had gone to her chamber just above the main living room, and then, having taken the precaution of bolting herself in, flattened herself to the floor to eavesdrop for the second time that day.

It wasn't the sort of behaviour her parents would have approved of in any of their daughters; in fact, they would have been appalled. But then, they would be even more appalled if they knew about Christopher, Liza thought, and by the sound of it, they had heard something. She could guess the source of the rumour, as well. That wretched woman who had the cottage down by the packhorse bridge. She had seen Liza and Christopher together and must, after all, have recognised them.

Lying flat, her left cheekbone in danger of being grazed by the floor, Liza felt tears pricking behind her eyes. She tried to blink them away. She had *known* this was coming. She had *known* that, sooner or later, arrangements would be made for her and all her dreams would be destroyed. She had thought she was prepared. But now...

Oh, dear God. Oh, Christopher, my dear love. I can't bear it.

A few feet away, below Liza, Aunt Cecy was staring coldly at Margaret, who stared back in an equally chilly manner. They all

addressed Cecy as *Aunt*, but she was actually the wife of Nicholas's oldest cousin, Dick Weaver, who was the son of Great-Uncle Will, the most ancient member of the tribe. Her virtue was as rigid as her backbone, and her backbone resembled a broom handle. Her mouth and body were overthin, and alone among the women of the family she had had trouble giving birth. Her two daughters had been born, with great difficulty, eight years apart, with several disasters intervening. They had both been married off at the age of fourteen and had seemed glad to leave home.

"If that girl b'ain't wed soon," Aunt Cecy said now, "her pretty face'll get lines and her teeth'll start going. Margaret, do you have to keep on with that everlasting spinning when we're talkin' over summat as solemn as this, and what in heaven's name is wrong with that there chimney?"

"I think birds must have nested in it since the spring-cleaning. We'll have to clear it. The men'd better lop a branch off that birch tree in the garden to push down it. As for spinnin', I like keepin' my hands busy," said Margaret. "I can spin and talk, *and* listen."

Aunt Cecy snorted. Laurence, who had come across the cobbled road with Elena and others of his family, threading their way past the permanent market stalls which occupied the middle of the street, said reasonably, "Never mind the tales. Nicholas here says he's had an offer. If it's a good one, where's the problem?" He was very like Nicholas, with the same hearty voice and the same robust outlook on life. "Even if she has had...let's be charitable and say a friend—in secret—what of it? Who didn't, when they were young? All that'll be over. Who is it you've got in mind?"

“Peter Lanyon,” said Nicholas. “Grandson of George, whose burial Margaret and I have just been to.”

“Liza’s older than Peter, isn’t she?” Elena said. “Does it matter, do you think?”

“Er...” said their daughter-in-law, and her husband, Laurie, a younger version of Laurence, grinned. Laurence burst out laughing and so did several of Nicholas’s cousins.

“Our Katy here’s two years older than young Laurie and who cares? Didn’t stop them having twin sons inside of a year!” Laurence said.

“Liza ought to be married,” Nicholas said. “And I’ve called you all in here to discuss this proposal from the Lanyons. Peter’ll do as far as I’m concerned. He’s good-looking and good-natured, and Richard’s offered me a deal. He got me in a corner at his dad’s funeral and put it to me. I’ve a good dowry put by for Liza, but he’s suggested something more. He wants to be cut in to our business. We’ve always bought about half his wool clip—he sells the other half when the agents come round from the big merchants. Now he says we can have the wool for a discount if he can have a regular cut off the profits when we sell the finished cloth and yarn. He asked a lot of questions and we went into another room and he clicked a few beads round his abacus, arriving at a figure. I reckon he’s judged his offer finely. He’ll come out on the right side more often than not. In effect, we’ll pay more for his wool, not less, only not all at once, but...”

“Looks as if he’s takin’ advantage.” Great-Uncle Will didn’t like to walk far, so he spent his days sitting about. At the moment he was in a bad temper because the smoking fire had driven him from the settle by the hearth, where he liked to sit on chilly days, driving him back to his summer seat by the window. His voice

V A L E R I E A N A N D

was sharp. “We want to get Liza off our hands. He’ll oblige if he’s paid!”

“Quite. We’ll have to look on his cut from our profits as part of Liza’s dowry,” said Nicholas. “Getting the wool cheap won’t offset it, most years anyway. But he also pointed out that once we’re all one family and one business, there are things we can do to help each other. Put opportunities each other’s way—things like introductions to new customers, or brokering marriages. Word to each other of anything useful like new breeds of sheep. He’s thinking to buy a ram from some strain or other with better fleeces. If he does, we’ll gain from that after a while. Meanwhile, we’ll have got Liza settled and she’ll be eating his provender, not ours.”