

Before the Storm

Judith Lennox

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Extract

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Chapter One

In the autumn of 1909, Richard Finborough was driving through Devon when his motorcar began to falter. A storm had got up since he had left his friends, the Colvilles, earlier that afternoon, and he had a growing suspicion that he had taken a wrong turning, heading across Exmoor.

He pulled into the side of the road. Rain lashed his face and a strong wind tugged his coat and threatened to blow away his hat. The light was failing and the wind whipped dead leaves from the beech trees. An inspection of the de Dion's bodywork showed him that the car had a damaged rear leaf spring. Reluctantly, he abandoned his original intention of spending the night in Bristol and began to look for a place that would offer him shelter. A few miles ahead, a fingerpost pointed to the town of Lynton. The car lurched as he took the turning.

In Lynton he booked into a hotel. The next morning, he rose and breakfasted. After he had arranged for the car to be taken to a blacksmith for repair, Richard decided to go for a walk. The town of Lynton perched high on a cliff, overlooking the

Bristol Channel. Lynton's sister village of Lynmouth lay below: from his vantage point, Richard could see that the continuing storm was whipping up white horses on a heavy sea. This part of north Devon was nicknamed 'Little Switzerland'. Richard could understand why – the incline of the hills and paths was dramatic; the houses seemed to cling precariously, struggling to keep hold of the cliff.

He headed down towards Lynmouth. The violent wind and the steep incline of the road meant that he had to watch his footing. Two rivers, in torrent because of the heavy rain and laden with branches torn from the trees in the narrow, wooded valleys, joined into one in the small village of Lynmouth before meeting the sea. Cottages clustered round the harbour. The tide was in and the fishing boats were moored to the quayside, the weather judged too foul, Richard supposed, for fishermen to venture out to sea. The flurries of rain were frequent and heavy: the landscape seeped water, sea and rain, like a sponge. Richard silently cursed the de Dion for marooning him in the middle of nowhere, in such weather.

His eye was caught by a flash of red at the far end of the harbour arm. Out of the storm-lashed greys and browns of water, sky and cliff he picked out the figure of a young woman. She was standing beneath a squat stone tower on the sea wall that reached protectively round one side of the harbour. Shading his eyes from the rain, Richard made out a flare of blue and white skirt beneath a red jacket and a banner of long black hair. The wind buffeted her and the sea spray rose high above her; not far from her, the waves churned angrily. She was standing too close to the edge, he thought – a freak wave and she might be swept away. The precarious position from which

she had chosen to watch the storm troubled him, and he was relieved when she turned and began to walk back towards the quayside.

Curious, Richard waited in the shelter of a doorway. As the woman neared him, he saw that she was drenched. He suspected that she must have been out in the rain for some time. He raised his hat as she passed him and she turned, noticing him for the first time. Then, with a toss of her wet black hair, she looked away and headed up the road that led back to Lynton.

Several times over the next day he thought about her. That black hair, that proud carriage, as, with her trailing skirts and soaked red jacket, she had passed him. Her haughtiness, her queenliness – a red queen, he thought.

The storm slackened and the fishing boats set out to sea. Ragged clouds trailed along a sky of washed-out blue-grey. Debris clogged the gutters and there was a line of flotsam and jetsam thrown up high up on the rocky shore.

Out of season, there were few other guests staying in the hotel. The dining room revealed a scattering of elderly gentlemen who Richard assumed were year-round residents, as well as a young couple, perhaps on their honeymoon, who giggled and held hands at their corner table. As the waitress served him, Richard interrupted her chatter to ask her about the woman at the harbour.

She looked blank; he prompted, ‘She was young . . . in her early twenties, I would guess. Black hair – and she wore a red jacket.’

A plate of plaice au *beurre blanc* was set in front of him. ‘Oh, you mean Miss Zeale, I expect, sir.’

‘Miss Zeale?’

‘Zeale’s a Bridport name, but she don’t come from round here. Bristol, maybe, I don’t know.’

‘But she lives in the town?’

The waitress gave a nod of the head in a vaguely inland direction. ‘Up at Orchard House. Miss Zeale was Mr Hawkins’ housekeeper. He died three weeks past, poor old gentleman.’

The following morning, Richard obtained directions to Orchard House before walking up the steep hill that lay behind the town. To either side of him was woodland, pierced by deep rocky clefts. At length, a narrow lane, pocked with puddles and enclosed by high hedgerows and tall beech trees, led off from the main road. The air held the tang of wet earth and fallen leaves.

The house was easy to find, its name announced in curling wrought-iron letters on the front gates. The whitewashed building was set back from the road behind a garden that had been battered by the storm. An iron and glass veranda, weighed down with climbing plants, ran the length of the house. Richard thought the place had a closed-up look, the curtains drawn, the gates firmly shut.

He was about to turn away and head on up the hill when the front door opened and Miss Zeale came out. She was wearing the red jacket again, this time over a dark skirt.

Richard opened the gate. ‘Miss Zeale!’ he called out.

Frowning, she walked towards him. ‘Yes?’

‘I wonder if I might trouble you for a glass of water.’

A moment’s pause, as though she was considering refusing him, and then she said, ‘Wait there,’ and went back inside the house. She returned a few minutes later holding a glass.

‘Thank you.’

‘How do you know my name?’

‘The waitress at my hotel told me. I’m Richard Finborough, by the way.’

She had folded her arms across herself and turned aside, seeming not to notice his outstretched hand. As he drank the water, he flicked a glance at her profile, noting the straight, somewhat Grecian nose, the full curve of her lips, and the almost translucent pallor that contrasted so strikingly with her black hair.

He thought there was a tension in their silence; to break it, he asked, ‘Have you lived here long?’

‘Two and a half years.’

‘It’s an isolated spot.’

‘Yes. I like it here.’ She turned to face him. Her eyes, a very pale greenish blue with a ring of darker colour around the rim of the iris, were hostile. ‘If you would excuse me, I have work to do.’

‘Yes, of course.’ He handed her back the glass. ‘Thank you for the water, Miss Zeale.’

She intrigued him. Those eyes, of course, and her unusual and astonishing beauty, so unexpected, out here in the wilderness, like discovering an exotic flower on a compost heap.

Richard considered himself to be a fair judge of beauty. Among all the pampered princesses of his acquaintance in London, he could think of none who outclassed Miss Zeale. And her cold dismissal challenged him. Good-looking, affluent and confident, he wasn’t used to being dismissed, especially by a servant.

In the afternoon, a message arrived at the hotel, telling him that the de Dion was ready. Waiting in the cottage parlour, he fell into conversation with the blacksmith's wife. Talk drifted, as he had intended it to, to Miss Zeale.

He asked, 'She doesn't come from Lynton, does she?'

The blacksmith's wife snorted. 'Not her.'

'Where, then?'

'Couldn't tell you, sir. Keeps herself to herself, that one. You'd think yourself lucky to get the time of day out of her.' A duster swept with unnecessary briskness across the mantelpiece. 'She'll be gone soon enough, I dare say.' The tone of voice hinted that, in the opinion of the blacksmith's wife, Miss Zeale could not leave Lynton soon enough.

'Because of her employer's death?' he supplied. 'Which will mean, I suppose, she must look for another place.'

Another snort. 'Oh, I shouldn't worry about the likes of her. Her sort always falls on their feet.' A tap on the window told him that the blacksmith had arrived; Richard went outside to collect the motorcar.

Waking early the next morning, he saw that the sky was a shimmering blue, the streets and houses licked gold by the sunrise. He had planned to depart for London first thing, but instead he found himself dressing and leaving the hotel, breathing in great lungfuls of cold, salt-tinged air as he headed through the town. His route took him past the church where, among the yews and gravestones, he spied a flicker of movement. He stood motionless, watching as Miss Zeale emerged from the churchyard. She was wearing black, this time, and her face was veiled. He noticed that one of the graves, not yet marked by a headstone, was scattered with roses.

‘Good morning, Miss Zeale,’ he said.

‘Mr Finborough.’

He found himself foolishly gratified that she had remembered his name. ‘I thought I might head uphill. May I walk with you?’

She said indifferently, ‘As you wish.’

As they walked, his remarks on the beauty of the day and the violence of the storm met with no response. Any question she answered as briefly as possible.

They reached Orchard House. Glancing up at the lovely old building, he found himself saying, ‘You’ll be sorry to leave, I dare say. A place like that, you’d miss it.’

Her face was still covered by the veil. When she spoke, her voice was as cold and as hard as ice.

‘I know what they say about me in the town, Mr Finborough.’

Startled, he stared at her. ‘You must excuse me—’

‘Whatever stories you have heard, they are not true. Whatever tittle-tattle has reached your ears, you should forget. And now, if you would be kind enough to let me past . . .’

He realised that he was standing in front of the gate. He held it open and she entered the garden.

She addressed him once more. ‘Please do not try to speak to me again. All I ask is to be left alone. Please find the courtesy to let me be.’

Then she walked to the house. He watched her shut the front door firmly behind her and then he walked away.

Driving back to London, pushing the de Dion as hard as he dared, Richard’s rage consumed him for much of the journey. Miss Zeale’s tone of voice had been an insult, and as for her

words – she had spoken to him with a scorn he would have reserved only for his laziest employee or a dishonourable business acquaintance. Reaching the city, he went straight away to his offices and took out his fury on his assistant, John Temple.

Richard Finborough had lived in London for seven years. He had left his home in County Down in Ireland at the age of eighteen, knowing that there was no future for him there. The Irish Land Wars and subsequent Land Purchase Acts had left the family estate, Raheen, impoverished and reduced in size until only the house and thirty acres of parkland remained. When Richard was sixteen, his father had died, blaming the British Government for its betrayal of Anglo-Irish families. Richard did not share his father's bitterness, and besides, he had no wish to live as a farmer or landlord. And he had witnessed young in life the destructive nature of disappointment, how it eats away at you, changes you.

So he had been relieved to leave the estate in his mother's care and travel to London. He had quickly come to love London. He loved it because it seethed with energy and activity, and because you could almost smell the money. Buying and selling was London's business; it permeated the streets and buildings. London's pulse beat hardest in the City and in the docks, where the great ships unloaded their cargoes from the Empire, filling their holds with the products of cotton mills and iron foundries before setting off again across the globe.

Richard had worked first for an import agency, in the offices of a family friend. After three years, he had branched out on his own. He had discovered that he had a natural business acumen, that he was capable of both cool-headedness and ruthlessness, and that he had a nose for which industries might

thrive and which had peaked and would decline. As soon as he reached his majority, he sold his father's remaining investments. Most of the stocks and shares earned him little, but a piece of land in a prime area of the city, the last fragment of what had once been a substantial London holding, realised a large sum.

With the profit from the land deal he had paid off the most pressing of the debts on the Irish estate. There was enough money left over to buy a tea-packing factory and a small button-making workshop in the East End of London. A beginning, he thought: the beginning of the empire that he, Richard Finborough, would create. Once, the Finboroughs had been wealthy and powerful, with splendid properties and acres of land on both sides of the Irish Sea. Time, the course of history, and his father's ill-judged expenditure had taken away all that. Richard's ambition had been fired by loss, fed by his early exposure to the possibility of ruin. He would not rest until the family rose once more from the ashes, its assets secured, a modern dynasty.

Arriving back in London, he worked late and did not return to his Piccadilly mansion flat until well after nine o'clock that evening. By then, his anger with Miss Zeale had diminished, punctured by other more complex emotions. Refusing his manservant's offer to prepare him supper, he changed and left the flat. After he had dined at his club, he made his way to a reception at a house in Charles Street, knowing that Violet Sullivan would be there.

Violet was the younger daughter of a wealthy industrialist, Lambert Sullivan. Richard and Violet had enjoyed a flirtatious, sparring acquaintance for some months. Violet was pretty and

self-assured; Richard had once or twice toyed with the idea of marrying her. Her small, neat, rounded figure was alluring, and an alliance with the powerful Sullivans could only be to his advantage.

Tonight, though, she failed to charm. Her coquettish taps of her fan and her girlish laughter seemed contrived and arch. Her face, with its ivory skin as smooth as a peeled almond, seemed vacant, her conversation uninformed. Miss Zeale's features, with their mysterious, otherworldly beauty, intruded in Richard's mind's eye as he and Violet conversed.

He left the reception early. The sky was clear, stars piercing the darkness. He walked aimlessly for a while, enjoying the cool of the London night after the overheated room. Then, in a private booth in a pub, he ordered a brandy and soda and found himself reliving, yet again, that morning's scene.

I know what they say about me in the town, Mr Finborough.

The previous day, the blacksmith's wife's disapproval of Miss Zeale had been undisguised. It didn't take much imagination to work out why she might be an object of censure. Miss Zeale's pride, her reserve, her desire for solitude, and her beauty, of course, would all provide fuel for resentment and gossip. He guessed that she was unconventional, and small, remote communities are often suspicious of a lack of convention.

Richard finished the first brandy and ordered another. Miss Zeale's neighbours' disapproval would have one likely focus, of course: her morals, or supposed lack of them. Men would desire her and women would envy her. His own interest in her – his questioning of the waitress and the blacksmith's wife – would have provoked shaken heads and knowing comments. Unwittingly, he may have added to Miss Zeale's difficulties.

Worse, it now occurred to him that she had believed his interest in her fired by gossip. That she had thought he had spoken to her because he believed her easy, available.

Richard put his head in his hands. It was all he could do not to groan aloud at his clumsiness. Forget the woman, he told himself. There were hundreds of beautiful women in London and hundreds of miles between Lynton and London. He need never see her again.

His thoughts pleasantly blurred, Richard walked across the city to the house of his mistress, Sally Peach.

During the days that followed, Richard forced himself to concentrate on his work and to plan for the future. The tea-packing factory had potential, but its present premises were too small to allow for expansion, and the button-making workshop wasn't much more than a shed in which rows of women worked, squinting in the poor light. Both businesses must grow in order to survive and prosper. The labouring classes were starting to demand higher wages: once the bulk of the population earned more they would be able to buy more, and Richard intended to capitalise on that. He knew that the days when a businessman might cater only for the wealthy were over, and he had no intention of being left behind by changes he was convinced were inevitable. He wouldn't make his fortune selling exclusive teas to the rich, but he might make it by selling a cheaper yet smartly packaged tea to the less well-off.

As for the workshop, buttons made of mother-of-pearl, shell and glass were all very fine, but they were slow and expensive to manufacture. For some time now, Richard had been searching for a cheaper, more adaptable material. Earlier in the year, he

had made the acquaintance of Sidney Colville, a polytechnic-trained chemist who was interested in the properties and use of casein plastics. A strange, shy, unsociable man, given to shutting himself away for weeks with his work and refusing to speak to anyone, Colville spent much of his time in the West Country, with his invalid sister, Christina. Richard found himself thinking that it was time to pay the Colvilles another visit.

He made his arrangements with the Colvilles and gave instructions to John Temple to cover for him in his absence. He wasn't self-delusional enough, however, to believe that his only motive in returning to Devon was to find out more about casein plastics. This time, he thought, he would tread carefully. Sidney Colville and Miss Zeale had something in common: both were tricky customers.

It was mid-afternoon when Richard reached Lynton and the sky was already darkening. Impatient to see Miss Zeale, he did not, as he had intended, book into the hotel first, but took the steep, narrow road that led to Orchard House.

He parked the car and, peering over the gate, caught sight of Miss Zeale in the garden. Something seemed to twist his heart and he was aware of an odd mingling of emotions: pleasure and fear and – what was it? – anticipation, as if he was about to embark on some long and difficult journey. And recognition – though they had exchanged only half a dozen sentences, she seemed familiar, as if he had known her for a long time.

For several minutes, he watched her unnoticed. The wind buffeted the exposed hillside garden, tugging at her uncovered hair and billowing out her skirts. It seemed to him that she worked with a driven, almost angry energy. A slash of the scythe,

and a tangle of brambles were felled. A wide sweep with the rake at the browned horse chestnut leaves that blotted the lawn, and they were gathered into pyramids. But the wind had got up and, even as Miss Zeale worked, leaves spiralled from the heaps. Her shoulders drooped, as though she was tiring.

At the sound of his footsteps on the cinder path she turned. 'Here,' he said. 'Let me help.'

Taking off his coat, he tossed it over a branch of the tree and seized the rake.

She said furiously, 'What do you think you're doing?'

'Sweeping up these leaves before they're blown away.'

'Please go, Mr Finborough.' Her voice shook with anger.

He continued raking the small piles of leaves on to the patch of waste ground beside the lawn. 'It's a big garden to manage on your own.'

A silence, then she said stiffly, 'A Lynmouth boy used to come up to do the heavy work but he hasn't been for a month or so.'

'Why not?'

She gathered the two halves of her jacket protectively round her. Her gaze settled coolly on him. 'Why do you think, Mr Finborough?'

'I've no idea.'

'He doesn't come – or his mother doesn't let him come – because I'm here on my own now. Because I might infect him with my wickedness.' She spat the word out.

Anger and exertion had given colour to her pale skin, intensifying her beauty.

He said, 'Might you?'

He thought she might slap his face; but then, once more,

she seemed to droop a little. 'Why must people always believe the worst?' she said bitterly. 'Isn't life hard enough without seeing sin where it doesn't exist?'

'People get bored, I suppose. These little towns must be dull enough, especially in winter. Anyone at all different provides fodder for rumour.'

She looked down, frowning. 'I don't try to be different. I have only ever tried not to be noticed.'

'You shouldn't mind the gossips.'

'I don't. Not for me. But that they should have criticised him . . .'

'Are you speaking of your employer?'

'Yes.' The frown deepened. 'Charles became very frail during the last months of his life. I dare say I gave him my arm as we walked through the town. Or maybe I helped him off with his shoes when his rheumatism was so bad he couldn't stoop to undo them, and some busybody walked past the gate as I was doing so. That people should choose to misinterpret things in such a vile way disgusts me.' She looked up at him. 'Why have you come here, Mr Finborough?'

Now, all the leaves were gathered together in a heap. 'Because I like bonfires,' he said with a smile. He took a lighter from his coat pocket and struck it. The dry leaves caught and smouldered. 'To tell the truth, I came here to apologise to you, Miss Zeale. I realised, after I returned to London, that I must have put you in a difficult position. I wanted to explain to you that I had no ulterior motive in speaking to you that day.'

'You have driven here from London?'

'Yes.'

‘And you expect me to believe that you came all that way to say this to me?’

‘Not at all. I have business near Woolacombe.’

‘Oh.’ She flushed.

The fire had spread, flames darting from the crackling leaves.

‘When we last met,’ Richard went on, ‘I was stranded a long way from home. Under those circumstances one tends to find oneself talking to whomever one catches sight of in the street. I noticed you the first day I came to Lynton. There was a gale and I always like to watch rough seas so I walked down to Lynmouth quayside. I saw you on the harbour arm. I was concerned about you.’

‘Concerned?’

‘You were standing in the shadow of the old tower. You were too close to the waves, I thought.’

She gave a short, dismissive laugh. ‘I go to the Rhenish Tower when I need to think. It’s a habit of mine. I like it there.’

‘What were you thinking about?’ He caught himself quickly. ‘I’m sorry – how intrusive of me . . .’

There was a silence, and then she glanced back at the house and said, ‘It’s no secret. I was thinking of my future. I shall have to leave here soon.’

He remembered how she had seemed to perch too close to the edge of the stone parapet. ‘You looked . . . precarious.’

‘I was safe enough. What would you have done, Mr Finborough, if I’d fallen into the sea? Would you have dived in and rescued me?’ Her tone was mocking.

He said evenly, ‘Yes, I think so.’

‘How very gallant, to be so concerned about someone you did not know at all.’

‘Have you never been so in need of company, Miss Zeale, that you’d talk to a stranger you saw in the street?’

Her expression became guarded again. ‘Once,’ she murmured. ‘A long time ago. Not now.’ The fire was dying down; the animation vanished from her face and she shivered. ‘I must go. I have work to do. Good evening, Mr Finborough.’

Richard made sure not to return too soon to Orchard House. He spent the next few days with the Colvilles in the cottage they had rented near Woolacombe, where Sidney Colville, in an expansive mood, scrawled on scraps of paper, trying to explain the chemistry of casein plastics to him. Every now and then they went out to take some fresh air. Sidney, a keen ornithologist, pointed out sea birds to him. Richard listened politely and thought about Miss Zeale.

Back in Lynton by the end of the week, he made it his business to find out about her. Enquiries told him that Miss Zeale’s Christian name was Isabel, and that she had begun to work at Orchard House over two years ago, in the summer of 1907. Charles Hawkins, her employer, had been the headmaster of a boys’ preparatory school until his wife’s death seven years previously. Though Mr Hawkins’ eccentricities had been tolerated in the town, his housekeeper’s were not. Miss Zeale’s dress, her accent, which lacked the Devon burr, her refusal to respond to curiosity about her past: all had aroused resentment. Even her fondness for reading books had fuelled her neighbours’ suspicions. Richard concluded that in the eyes of her neighbours, Miss Zeale had committed that most heinous crime: she had got above herself. Her darkest sin was only hinted at, however. No one quite had the nerve to say to him

that Isabel Zeale had exploited her position as housekeeper by becoming Charles Hawkins' mistress, though the insinuations were plain.

The next time Richard saw her was in town. He had walked to the harbour after breakfast; heading back through Lynton, he caught sight of her ahead of him. She was wearing her red jacket and was carrying a shopping basket. As he watched, a group of men, falling out of the pub, jostled her on the pavement, knocking her basket out of her hand. He heard laughter and jeers as a loaf of bread tumbled into the gutter and a bag of flour split open, showering the cobbles.

Miss Zeale stooped to gather up her belongings. A cabbage had rolled to Richard's feet: picking it up, he headed quickly to her side.

'Here,' he said, putting it into her basket. 'I'll help you with the rest in a moment.'

She grasped his sleeve. 'No. Let them be.'

'They struck you deliberately. I saw it. They shouldn't be allowed to get away with it.'

She said, her voice low and urgent, 'If you speak to them they will only torment me more. Mr Finborough, you will leave here in a day or two, but I must stay. I have nowhere else to go.'

Reluctantly, he nodded. He helped her pick up her remaining packages. The bread lay in the mud and her newspaper was soaked, the pages turning to papier-mâché.

He said, 'At least let me replace some of these things.'

'No, thank you.' She was very pale. 'But if you would be so kind as to walk a little of the way home with me – just to make sure . . .'

He took her basket and they walked up the pavement together.

A voice called out to them just before they reached the corner of the street. 'Like rich men, don't 'ee, my lover? Rich old men suits 'ee best!' There was a ripple of laughter. Richard saw Miss Zeale whiten and set her lips.

He gave her a few minutes to regain her composure and then, as they headed uphill, he asked, 'Who were they?'

'The Salters? They're fishermen – brothers – they live in Lynmouth.'

'They are acquaintances of yours?'

'There was a time when—' She broke off, biting her lip. Then she murmured, 'I was very lonely when I first came to live here. I may have passed the time of day with Mark Salter once or twice. It was foolish of me, because he interpreted it in the worst possible way.'

'Are you often troubled like this?'

'They're braver now Mr Hawkins is no longer here to protect me.'

'Braver?' He glanced at her. 'Is that what you call it?'

She tossed back her hair. 'They don't frighten me. Mark Salter fancies he wants to marry me. They make out I've offended them because I've refused him. As if I would ever marry such a low, ignorant man!'

They had reached the narrow wooded lane that led to Orchard House. She held out her hand for the basket. 'I'll be quite all right now, Mr Finborough.'

'Nonsense. I'll see you back to the house.'

They walked along the narrow lane. The branches of the beech trees cast a lacework of shadows across the road; beyond the beeches, a thicket of hazel blocked the hill and the town from view.