
Opening Extract from...

The Fever Tree

Written by Jennifer McVeigh

Published by Viking

The Fever Tree

JENNIFER MCVEIGH

VIKING
an imprint of
PENGUIN BOOKS

VIKING

Published by the Penguin Group
Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England
Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA
Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4P 2Y3
(a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)
Penguin Ireland, 25 St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd)
Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road,
Camberwell, Victoria 3124, Australia (a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty Ltd)
Penguin Books India Pvt Ltd, 11 Community Centre,
Panchsheel Park, New Delhi – 110 017, India
Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, Auckland 0632, New Zealand
(a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd)
Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, Block D, Rosebank Office Park, 181 Jan Smuts Avenue,
Parktown North, Gauteng 2193, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

www.penguin.com

First published 2012
001

Set in 12/14.75pt Dante MT Std
Typeset by Palimpsest Book Production Limited, Falkirk, Stirlingshire
Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978–0–670–92089–1

www.greenpenguin.co.uk

Penguin Books is committed to a sustainable
future for our business, our readers and our planet.
This book is made from Forest Stewardship
Council™ certified paper.

ALWAYS LEARNING PEARSON

I

The first indication that her father was unwell had come in June.

Frances woke in the night and stared into the dark, listening. The house held its silence for a moment, then exhaled in a murmur of low voices which drifted up from the landing below. She drew a shawl from her bed and pushed open the door.

'Lotta?' she called down. Quiet for a second, then the creaking seesaw of Lotta's weight on the stairs, and the bobbing light of a candle. A billow of white nightgown, and the maid's broad, placid face swam into view.

'It's your father, Miss. He's back but he's not been himself.' She pressed past Frances into the bedroom.

'How do you mean?'

Lotta bent to light the candle by the bed, her chest expanding and contracting like bellows, the flame flickering as she breathed.

'What's wrong with him?' Frances demanded, grabbing at her wrist.

Hot wax spilt over their hands and Lotta drew back, wincing in pain. 'I don't know exactly. A coachman brought him in. Said he'd had a collapse.'

Frances struggled for a moment to imagine this. Her father, the sheer bulk and power of him, didn't seem capable of collapse. He was, in every way, a man of strength. The errand boy, so they said, who had conjured his furniture empire out of shillings like a magician pulling bank notes from the pockets of paupers.

She took the candle from Lotta and went down to the ground floor, her feet sticking on the chequered stone tiles in the hall. Her father was in his study, sitting in an armchair to one side of the cold fireplace. His shirt was unbuttoned and a grizzled beard was beginning to cover the deep grooves that lined his cheeks. He looked pale against the green walls and glossy rosewood furniture, but when he

saw her his face broke into an affectionate smile. He was exhausted, she decided with relief, but otherwise fine. A glass of brandy hung casually from one hand. If it tipped any further it would pour out on to the carpet. The breadth of his chest was exposed, and she saw that his body was tighter and more compact than she remembered, as though it had withdrawn into itself with age. She had admired his brute force as a child, the strength of his hands as he drew her wriggling on to his lap.

'Ah, Frances. I asked Lotta not to wake you,' he said, holding one hand out to her in apology for not standing up. She took it and smiled, bending to kiss him. He had been away on business and it was a relief to have him home.

'When did you get back? Are you ill?'

'Not at all, just a little tired.'

Then, because it occurred to her that it might all be his fault, 'Have you been drinking?'

Her father laughed, a rich, deep sound that soothed the edges of her fear and made her, involuntarily, smile. He glanced at the armchair which sat opposite him. 'You see, Matthews, how sharp she is, my daughter?'

Frances turned. She hadn't noticed the man sitting in the chair behind her, on the other side of the fireplace. He had a neat, angular face with a narrow forehead and greased brown hair cut close around his ears. It took her a moment to recognize him, but when he stood up and stepped towards her she remembered. 'Mr Matthews.'

'You must call him Dr Matthews, now,' her father said.

'Of course.' He was a cousin on her father's side who had stayed with them for a few months when he was a boy. He had the same serious expression she remembered as a child. 'Where is Dr Firth?'

'Dr Firth is out of town,' Edwin Matthews said with careful articulation. Even at sixteen he had sounded as if he were a master giving the lesson at school.

Frances was standing on the floorboards by her father's chair, her back to the empty grate and her feet nudging against the edge of the carpet. The dark, polished oak was coarse on the soles of her feet, and she rubbed her big toe across the smooth butt of a nail.

She was dressed inappropriately and she shivered, too cold to be standing in the study in her nightdress. She had the feeling that she had interrupted a private conversation, and the silence of both men seemed to be an invitation for her to leave. Perhaps she ought to have been grateful to Edwin Matthews for coming out to see her father in the middle of the night, but she felt only frustration. It had been a long time since she had seen her father, and she wanted to talk to him properly, which meant alone.

'Well, now you're back,' she said, 'we will make sure you are well looked after.'

'Frances, I am fine.' Her father waved his hand, suddenly impatient. 'And you must go to bed. I am overworked, that is all, and I called for the doctor to give me something to help me sleep.'

She looked at him for a moment longer. He raised his glass as if to say – that's enough concern, leave me – but his hand tremored as he brought it to his lips. He hadn't mentioned a collapse. Perhaps Lotta was exaggerating. Either way, she wouldn't push him on the subject, not now. She bent down, kissed him again, and went upstairs.

She paused on the landing outside her father's room. Lotta was turning down the bedcovers. 'I would like a few words with the doctor once my father has gone to bed. Would you ask him to wait?'

The window in her bedroom gleamed pale and cold behind the curtains. She drew her shawl from the back of the chair, stepped behind the red damask folds and stood looking into the street below. The rain had stopped. It was perfectly quiet. Too early yet for the butcher boys in their blue aprons. The lamp at the end of the street throbbed a dull yellow through the milky fog, and she watched a lamplighter appear out of the shining gloom, lean his ladder against the crosspiece and turn off the dial. The flame shrank to an orange ball, guttered and went out. He paused, one hand on the post, and gazed along the street behind him as if waiting for the city to stir itself and shake off sleep.

The candle wax had sealed itself in a smooth, hard film over the back of her hand. When she flexed her palm it cracked in shards on to the carpet. She trailed her fingers across the burnt skin, to the

soft inside of her wrist. Her pulse came in a quick, restless beat, echoing the dull thud which knocked against her stomach. What if he was seriously ill? This was the terror that had kept her awake as a child, when his booming voice and unruffled calm had been the only thing to puncture the gloom and silence of the house after her mother had died.

After a moment she stepped out from behind the curtain and lit the lamp at the dressing table, illuminating an assortment of brushes and combs, bottles of perfume, scented oils and china powder boxes. She brushed out her hair until it became a crackling, fiery mass of copper curls then dampened it with lavender water and wove it into a long plait. Her reflection looked back at her from the small mirror on the table. At nineteen years old she had the sense that her life ought to be full of opportunity, but instead she felt as if she were suffocating. She shook her head slightly, running her hand over her plait, and saw, in the reflection, the two porcelain dolls her father had given her as a child sitting on a chair by the bed. They stared back at her with glassy eyes, silence breathing from between their half-opened lips.

There was a knock at the door. 'The doctor is waiting for you, Miss.'

He had been shown into the morning room on the ground floor, and she found him standing at the window with his hat already in his hands, ready to leave.

'How is my father?'

'Sleeping.' Then, walking a little way towards her: 'I have looked forward to seeing you again, Miss Irvine, though I might have hoped it would be under better circumstances.' His warmth disconcerted her, and though she couldn't have said why, she found it threatening. His eyes, she noticed, were very pale, almost grey in the half-light that warmed the green glass at the garden window. They were intent and watchful, and very bright: without them his face would have been a mask. She didn't think he was a handsome man – perhaps he looked too serious to be handsome – but he had a certain intensity which demanded your attention.

'Should I be concerned?' she asked, and when he didn't reply: 'Dr Matthews, tell me – is something wrong with him?'

The doctor stood perfectly still, almost a silhouette against the window, with the fingertips of one cupped hand resting on the corner of her desk. There was something cold-blooded about him. Where the light caught the edge of his face, she could see his skin was sallow and drawn. He must have been up all night. He licked at his lips to moisten them. 'I think he is suffering from nervous exhaustion.'

'Nervous exhaustion?' She gave a small laugh. 'You're sure it's nothing else?'

He didn't reply.

'I don't think you know my father, Dr Matthews. He isn't the nervous type.'

'They often aren't.'

'And what, in your professional opinion, has brought this exhaustion on?'

'Miss Irvine, you should get some sleep.' He touched her lightly on her upper arm. 'There is no use in worrying.'

She shivered, shrugging off his hand, which might have been there out of professional concern but seemed to assume an intimacy between them. She regretted not having dressed before coming down. 'Thank you, but I'm all right.'

Then after a moment, she said, 'Dr Matthews, what concerns my father concerns me also.'

'I suspect I couldn't tell you anything about him that you don't already know.'

Whatever Edwin Matthews might think, this wasn't necessarily true. There was very little she knew about her father's life outside the house.

'I should like to know if he said something to you.'

'Your father and I talked – yes – but for the most part about mining in Kimberley.'

'He has investments in coal?'

'No!' He gave a thin, dry laugh. 'Diamond mining, and he didn't mention investments. Kimberley is in South Africa. I live at the Cape.'

She flushed. Of course, Kimberley was the famous diamond-mining town.

'Who painted these?' Edwin had picked up the watercolours of her father's roses which were laid out on the desk.

'I did.' The weather had kept her indoors, and she had spent most of the last two weeks at her easel in the morning room. There had been few visitors, and the time had been marked out by the tapping of her paintbrush as she cleaned it in the jar and the muffled voices of the tradesmen which drifted up from the kitchen below.

'They're very good.' He was looking at her closely, as if adjusting some calculation in her favour, and she felt an old annoyance. This was the same arrogance he had had as a child, always judging the world according to his own criteria.

'Were you taught to paint?' he asked.

'A little.' She shrugged her shoulders. 'But always portraits. I prefer to paint plants.' Frances enjoyed the meticulous task of committing every detail – the veins, hairs and shifts in colour which most eyes failed to notice – to the page. The painting was always a compromise. It looked so little like the thing you painted, but its difference – the struggle for representation – was also its beauty. She pointed to the cut blooms in a jar on the table. 'My father's roses. They're lovely, don't you think?'

'Perhaps, but I have never liked domesticated plants. There is something excessive in their prettiness.' He paused. 'They seem decorative to a fault.'

'But splendid nonetheless.'

'I can't admire splendour if the cost is sterility.' He gestured to her watercolours. 'These roses are either grown from cuttings because they can't propagate themselves, or they are grafted on to the stronger roots of other plants to help them survive. They have to be nurtured by the careful gardener in a perfectly controlled environment. Monstrosities, Darwin has called them. Deviations from their true form in nature.'

'And if they were left to grow in the wild?' she asked, curious.

'They would either die, or revert back to their aboriginal stock.' He put the pictures down and said, 'I should leave you to rest.' As he

walked past her towards the door she stopped him, not wanting him to go without some kind of explanation.

'I don't see what could have brought it on,' she said, insisting. 'I have never seen my father under pressure. He isn't afraid of anything.'

'We are all afraid of something, Miss Irvine,' he said in a quiet voice, his cool gaze flickering over her. 'Some of us are just better at hiding it than others.'

His words unlocked a kernel of fear. When he was gone she felt it growing inside her, winding cold tendrils round her ribs, and letting an agony of sadness seep into the edges of her exhaustion.

2

When her parents first married, Frances's father had lived as close to respectability as he was able. They had a small cottage in St John's Wood, no carriage and a maid who worked overtime to keep the house from turning itself inside out. On Frances's sixth birthday, her father hired a carriage. It was a sky-blue day, the streets glistening with last night's rain, and they splashed through the wide open spaces of Kensington, past half-erected streets and fields churned to mud under the wheels of builders' carts; past timber merchants, rubbish piles and brick kilns that gave off the hot, stuffy smell of a bread oven. Everywhere were the sounds of construction; the shouts of workmen and the clinking of buckets being drawn up scaffolding. Her mother must have been sickening already because Frances remembered her excitement was tempered by concern for her pale face and bruised eyes, which squeezed shut each time the coach jolted on the pot-holed road.

They pulled up outside a large, stucco-fronted terraced house and her father introduced her to a short, stocky Irishman with a wide smile and the same softly guttural accent as his own. 'Kerrick, you're to do whatever Frances asks of you.' And Kerrick had introduced her to the two greys, who nibbled at her fingers with soft, whiskered lips and breathed hotly into her hair. When she asked who the house belonged to, her father had laughed and said it was theirs.

Eight months later, her mother had died, and the house which had seemed to promise happiness became a place of mournful reproach. Frances suspected her father was grief-stricken, but it was hard to be sure. Once the funeral was over he never discussed her death, and though there were things about her mother that she wanted to know – why her lungs were diseased, and whether she had been in pain – she didn't have the courage to ask. On her father's

instructions, every trace of her mother was removed. Wardrobes were emptied, photographs were taken down and the morning room was cleared of her letters and diaries. The long drawing room, where Frances had imagined elegantly dressed women rustling in front of the gilt mirrors, was shuttered up. Her father worked a great deal and came home infrequently. His life was orchestrated around business, and on the rare occasions he brought guests back to the house they were clients who sat with him in his study, smoking and talking, with the door firmly closed.

There was a tutor who came every morning and taught her mathematics, geography and a little Latin. He introduced her to watercolours, teaching her the fundamentals of painting, and she ruined reams of paper before she learned that, with colour, subtlety is everything. Her nurse spent long afternoons in the playroom embroidering cushions for her niece's trousseau. She tried to coax Frances to do the same, but never insisted because Mr Irvine had told her not to press his daughter into anything she didn't care for.

Frances stalked the house in the afternoons, finding odd corners to sit in where she let her thoughts drift with the dust through the high-ceilinged rooms. When she thought about the house as an adult, she saw it from the strange perspectives she had inhabited as a child. A cupboard door warped with age, so that she could pull it shut from the inside, or the dining-room table like the roof of a coffin, rough and unvarnished on its underside, with the curved bow legs of the Georgian chairs boxing her in like the muscled calves of so many guests.

Her mother's family, the Hamiltons, lived in Mayfair, but she didn't meet them until a few years after her mother had died. They didn't approve of her father with his Irish blood and poor connections, and they refused to acknowledge Frances. Her father, she learned later, had persisted in trying to reconcile the families in the hope that the connection would benefit her, and eventually they relented. When Frances was nine she was invited to visit her cousins, Lucille and Victoria. She was nervous, and didn't think she had made a good impression, but the invitation was repeated,

and thereafter she went to see them once a month, though it was understood that the visits would not be reciprocated.

At dinner one evening, a few months after meeting the Hamiltons, she looked up to find her father staring at her. She was chewing a piece of meat off the end of her fork. His lip curled with distaste. 'Frances, have you forgotten your manners?'

She was conscious of having done something wrong, but she wasn't sure what it was.

'Your knife. You don't care to use it?'

She looked down at her knife and coloured. She hadn't used it before, not for eating, but he had never minded until now.

'Christ!' He brought his fist down on the table, making her jump along with the candlesticks. 'The Hamiltons are right. You're ten years old and you eat like a little savage!' She put down her fork and stared at him, mortified. Most of her life was spent trying to avoid disappointing him. 'If I had wanted you to have the manners of a factory girl I would have sent you to live with your cousins in Manchester!'

He hired a governess to solve the problem. Miss Cranbourne arrived with a military sense of purpose. Every aspect of Frances's life came under scrutiny. According to the governess, she frowned when she concentrated, slouched when she walked, and ruined her fingernails with chewing. Her voice was too shrill – a sign of wilfulness – and she spent too much of her time painting and daydreaming. For every minute of the day there was a task. There were lessons in letter writing, flower arranging, drawing portraits, cross-stitch and crocheting. Etiquette manuals were learned by rote. She embroidered cushions and slippers, fashioned bell pulls, painted fire screens and modelled a whole basket of fruit out of wax. She pressed flowers and learned their Latin names. She acquired hairpins, fancy brushes and combs, and learned about ringlets, frisettes and braids and how to pile her hair on top of her head in a bandeau. For her freckles – the result of a slow and enfeebled circulation – she was prescribed cold baths, applications of buttermilk and a bowl of carrot soup for breakfast. The sun was strictly off limits, and the windows in her bedroom were draped with muslin.

Frances applied herself to the new governess's regime, if not to please Miss Cranbourne, then to please her father, and because she knew her cousins would tease her less if she shared some of their accomplishments. She found most aspects of her new life stifling, but there was one introduction for which she was genuinely grateful. Miss Cranbourne suggested her father buy a piano, and he agreed. Her mother, he told her, had been talented. Twice a week, a teacher came and unravelled the music like a foreign language and, as Frances played, she could feel the house flickering to life, becoming for a moment the place it might have been had her mother lived.

She was thirteen years old when Edwin Matthews came down from Manchester to stay with them in London. It was hot that summer, and London sweltered. The smell of sewage came in from the streets, milk turned sour and curdled in their tea, and the air outside was choked with smoke. Her father hated the heat. He complained in the evenings that it was like living in Rome, and Frances remembered the pictures she had seen of a Roman caldarium, its floor a burning panel of hot marble.

'I'd like you to make him feel at home.' Her father pushed his plate away, leant back in his chair and lit a cigar. Now that it was evening, the window to the street below was slightly ajar, and a breeze stirred the gauze curtains. 'And I shouldn't try to talk to him about his mother.' Frances knew already, without having to be told, that dead mothers weren't appropriate conversation.

She had never heard of Edwin Matthews before. He was a distant cousin, had been born in Manchester, and at sixteen was three years older than Frances. His mother had drunk herself to death, leaving her husband with five boys. His father, a steel worker, had written to Frances's father asking for sponsorship. Edwin was hard working, he said, and might do well in the right hands.

He arrived by train on the hottest day of the year, wearing a blue wool jacket stained under the arms where he had sweated through. He stood on their doorstep with his trunk of books and an air of extreme self-consciousness: a tall, slim boy with very pale

skin and hands so fine boned they might have been a girl's. His face looked hot and shiny. Pimples had erupted on his forehead, and they crept down his nose. When Kerrick – in shirtsleeves – tried to relieve him of his jacket, he shook his head, a rush of colour turning his cheeks scarlet.

Her father had told her he might be uncomfortable in a London house, and he was right. Edwin looked as though he was scared to breathe in case he knocked something over. He took his shoes off before walking upstairs, he opened doors with extreme caution, and he was able to sit for hours reading a book without moving a muscle except to turn the page. He was scrupulously tidy, scrubbing his hands before every meal until they looked raw.

That first night, she remembered, he had almost burnt the house down. He'd never seen how to work a gas lamp, and he blew the flame out when he went to bed. Frances woke up to Kerrick shouting, hammering on Edwin's door, telling him not to light a match, but to come straight out. She stood at the top of the stairs and watched him apologizing. His pyjamas were too small for him, and his skinny ankles poked out of the bottom. He glanced up the staircase and saw her watching. His face twisted in embarrassment.

Despite his social unease he was perfectly self-contained, preferring to spend time alone studying than in company. He reminded Frances of a child she had read about in a newspaper who never said a word until he was eight then one day at breakfast began reciting *King Lear*. Edwin wouldn't try anything unless he was sure of it first, and he watched their household with meticulous care until he could mimic how they talked, walked, answered callers and drank their tea. Within a few weeks he had all but smoothed out the accent which would remind people he was Irish. All this, she realized later, was crucial education. He couldn't have hoped to have a successful practice when he was older unless he learned to mingle with Society.

At supper, her father would ask him about the family. There seemed to be hundreds of relations, and she couldn't keep track of the names: Irvines, Matthewses, O'Rourkes, Dohertys, Connellys,

O'Donnells. They each had their different story, and her father would draw Edwin out of his shell, encouraging him to give his opinion on the famines of his father's generation, the pomposity and greed of English landlords, the slums in Manchester, and the lucky ones – the émigrés who had escaped to America. It was a bleak picture they painted, and Frances didn't want anything to do with it. She had scarcely known that she was Irish until Edwin had come to stay, and now he was contaminating them with his talk of filth and desperation.

'Papa, he's barely civilized,' she told her father when she was alone with him. Edwin had bad manners – he didn't use the butter knife and he heaped the sugar into his mug with his dessert spoon. Her father had turned very still, but she carried blindly on, trying out the word her cousin Lucille had given her. 'I don't want to sit at the table with an africanoid.'

The slap – the first and only time her father hit her – stunned her. She felt as if she had been branded. He stalked out of the room, leaving her standing in his study, mouth open in shock, her cheek burning hotter by the second. They never discussed it afterwards, but she realized then that there was a difference between her and her father. Perhaps it had always been there – but Edwin had been the one to show it to them.

In the evenings, after supper, her father liked her to play the piano. Edwin watched with the fascination a collector might bestow on a fine piece of china. Afterwards, he would ask her father if he could play chess with Frances in the library. She would have liked to say no, but her father always assented on her behalf. These were the only times she heard Edwin speak confidently. He talked to her with the careful deliberation one uses to instruct a child, taking a methodical interest in her strategy, laying out the fundamentals of the game until she could put up a sustained defence. He coached her with patience, ignoring her determined silences, and when she toppled her king in defeat, wanting to have the game over with, he would talk her through, with pedantic satisfaction, how she might have won. When she looked up from the board he would be watching her with unguarded curiosity, as

if she were an equation which, when solved, might bring him some advantage.

She remembered resenting his intrusion into their lives, and when he left at the end of the summer for school she was relieved to have him gone.