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Cavendon Hall

Written by Barbara Taylor Bradford

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Barbara Taylor
Bradford

Cavendon
Hall



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ONE

Cecily Swann was excited. She had been given a special task to do by her mother, and she couldn't wait to start. She hurried along the dirt path, walking towards Cavendon Hall, all sorts of ideas running through her active young mind. She was going to examine some beautiful dresses, looking for flaws; it was an important task, her mother had explained, and only she could do it.

She did not want to be late, and increased her pace. She had been told to be there at ten o'clock sharp, and ten o'clock it would be.

Her mother, Alice Swann, often pointed out that punctuality might easily be her middle name, and this was always said with a degree of admiration. Alice took great pride in her daughter, and was aware of certain unique talents she possessed.

Although Cecily was only twelve, she seemed much older in some ways, and capable, with an unusual sense of responsibility. Everyone considered her to be rather grown up, more so than most girls of her age, and reliable.

Lifting her eyes, Cecily looked up the slope ahead of her.

Barbara Taylor Bradford

Towering on top of the hill was Cavendon, one of the greatest stately homes in England and something of a masterpiece.

After Humphrey Ingham, the 1st Earl of Mowbray, had purchased thousands of acres in the Yorkshire Dales, he had commissioned two extraordinary architects to design the house: John Carr of York, and the famous Robert Adam.

It was finished in 1761. Lancelot 'Capability' Brown then created the landscaped gardens, which were ornate and beautiful, and had remained intact to this day. Close to the house was a manmade ornamental lake, and there were water gardens at the back of the house.

Cecily had been going to the hall since she was a small child, and to her it was the most beautiful place in the world. She knew every inch of it, as did her father, Walter Swann. Her father was valet to the Earl, just as his father had been before him, and his great-uncle Henry before that.

The Swanns of Little Skell village had been working at the big house for over one hundred and sixty years, generations of them, ever since the days of the 1st Earl in the eighteenth century. The two families were closely intertwined and bound together; the Swanns had many privileges, and were exceedingly loyal to the Inghams. Walter always said he'd take a bullet for the Earl, and meant it sincerely.

Hurrying along, preoccupied with her thoughts, Cecily was suddenly startled and stopped abruptly. A figure had jumped out onto the path in front of her, giving her a shock. Then she saw at once that it was the young gypsy woman called Genevra, who often lurked around these parts.

The Romany stood in the middle of the path, grinning hugely, her hands on her hips, her dark eyes sparkling.

'You shouldn't have done that!' Cecily exclaimed, stepping sideways swiftly. 'You startled me. Where did you spring from, Genevra?'

Cavendon Hall

‘Yonder,’ the gypsy answered, waving her arm towards the long meadow. ‘I see yer coming, liddle Cecily. I wus behind t’wall.’

‘I have to get on. I don’t want to be late,’ Cecily said in a cool, dismissive voice. She tried to step around the young woman without success.

The gypsy dodged about, blocked her way, muttering, ‘Aye. Yer bound for that owld ’ouse up yonder. Gimme yer ’and and I’ll tell yer fortune.’

‘I can’t cross your palm with silver, I don’t even have a ha’penny,’ Cecily said.

‘I doan want yer money, and I’ve no need to see yer ’and, I knows all about yer.’

Cecily frowned. ‘I don’t understand . . .’ She let her voice drift off, impatient to be on her way, not wanting to waste any more time with the gypsy.

Genevra was silent, but she threw Cecily a curious look, then turned, stared up at Cavendon. Its many windows were glittering and the pale stone walls shone like polished marble in the clear northern light on this bright May morning. In fact, the entire house appeared to have a sheen.

The Romany knew this was an illusion created by the sunlight. Still, Cavendon did have a special aura about it. She had always been aware of that. For a moment she remained standing perfectly still, lost in thought, gazing at Cavendon . . . she had the gift, the gift of sight. And she saw the future. Not wanting to be burdened with this sudden knowledge, she closed her eyes, shutting it all out.

Eventually the gypsy swung back to face Cecily, blinking in the light. She stared at the twelve-year-old for the longest moment, her eyes narrowing, her expression serious.

Cecily was acutely aware of the gypsy’s fixed scrutiny, and said, ‘Why are you looking at me like that? What’s the matter?’

Barbara Taylor Bradford

‘Nowt,’ the gypsy muttered. ‘Nowt’s wrong, liddle Cecily.’ Genevra bent down, picked up a long twig, began to scratch in the dirt. She drew a square, and then above the square she made the shape of a bird, then glanced at Cecily pointedly.

‘What do they mean?’ the child asked.

‘Nowt.’ Genevra threw the twig down, her black eyes soulful. And in a flash, her strange, enigmatic mood vanished. She began to laugh, and danced across towards the dry-stone wall.

Placing both hands on the wall, she threw her legs up in the air, cartwheeled over it and landed on her feet in the field beyond.

After she had adjusted the red bandana tied around her dark curls, she skipped down the long meadow and disappeared behind a copse of trees. Her laughter echoed across the stillness of the fields, even though she was no longer in sight.

Cecily shook her head, baffled by the gypsy’s odd behaviour, and bit her lip. Then she quickly scuffled her feet in the dirt, obliterating the gypsy’s symbols, and continued up the slope.

She’s always been strange, Cecily muttered under her breath, as she walked on. She knew that Genevra lived with her family in one of the two painted Romany wagons, which stood on the far side of the bluebell woods, way beyond the long meadow. She also knew that the Romany tribe was not trespassing.

It was the Earl of Mowbray’s land where they were camped, and he had given them permission to stay there in the warm weather. They always vanished in the winter months; where they went, nobody knew.

The Romany family had been coming to Cavendon for a long time. It was Miles who had told her that. He was the Earl’s second son, had confided that he didn’t know why his father

Cavendon Hall

was so nice to the gypsies. Miles was fourteen; he and his sister DeLacy were her best friends.

The dirt path through the fields led directly from Little Skell village to the back yard of Cavendon Hall. Cecily was running across the cobblestones of the yard when the clock in the stable-block tower began to strike the hour. It was exactly ten o'clock and she was not late.

Cook's cheerful Yorkshire voice was echoing through the back door as Cecily stood for a moment, catching her breath, and listening.

'Don't stand there gawping like a sucking duck, Polly,' Cook was exclaiming to the kitchen maid. 'And for goodness' sake, push the metal spoon into the flour jar before you add the lid. Otherwise we're bound to get weevils in the flour!'

'Yes, Cook,' Polly muttered.

Cecily smiled to herself. She knew the reprimand didn't mean much. Her father said Cook's bark was worse than her bite, and this was true. Cook was a good soul, motherly at heart.

Turning the door-knob, Cecily went into the kitchen, to be greeted by great wafts of steam, warm air, and the most delicious smells emanating from the bubbling pans. Cook was already preparing lunch for the family.

Swinging around at the sound of the door opening, Cook smiled broadly when she saw Cecily entering her domain. 'Hello, luv,' she said in a welcoming way. Everyone knew that Cecily was her favourite; she made no bones about that.

'Good morning, Mrs Jackson,' Cecily answered and glanced at the kitchen maid. 'Hello, Polly.'

Polly nodded, and retreated into a corner, as usual shy and awkward when addressed by Cecily.

Barbara Taylor Bradford

‘Mam sent me to help with the frocks for Lady Daphne,’ Cecily explained.

‘Aye, I knows that. So go on then, luv, get along with yer. Lady DeLacy is waiting upstairs for yer. I understand she’s going to be yer assistant.’ As she spoke, Cook chuckled and winked at Cecily conspiratorially.

Cecily laughed. ‘Mam will be here about eleven.’

The cook nodded. ‘Yer’ll both be having lunch down here with us. And yer father. A special treat.’

‘That’ll be nice, Mrs Jackson.’ Cecily continued across the kitchen, heading for the back stairs that led to the upper floors of the great house.

Nell Jackson watched her go, her eyes narrowing slightly. The twelve-year-old girl was lovely. Suddenly, she saw in that innocent young face the woman she would become. A real beauty. And a true Swann. No mistaking where she came from, with those high cheekbones, ivory complexion and the lavender eyes . . . Pale, smoky, bluish-grey eyes. The Swann trademark. And then there was that abundant hair. Thick, luxuriant, russet-brown, shot through with reddish lights. She’ll be the spitting image of Charlotte when she grows up, Cook thought, and sighed to herself. What a wasted life *she’d* had, Charlotte Swann. She could have gone far, no two ways about that. I hope the girl doesn’t stay here, like her aunt did, Nell now thought, turning around, stirring one of her pots. Run, Cecily, run. Run for your life. And don’t look back. Save yourself.

TWO

The library at Cavendon was a beautifully proportioned room. It had two walls of high-soaring mahogany bookshelves, reaching up to meet a gilded coffered ceiling painted with flora and fauna in brilliant colours. A series of tall windows faced the long terrace that stretched the length of the house. At each end of the window wall were French doors.

Even though it was May, and a sunny day, there was a fire burning in the grate, as there usually was all year round. Charles Ingham, the 6th Earl of Mowbray, was merely following the custom set by his grandfather and father before him. Both men had insisted on a fire in the room, whatever the weather. Charles fully understood why. The library was the coldest room at Cavendon, even in the summer months, and this was a peculiarity no one had ever been able to fathom.

This morning, as he came into the library and walked directly towards the fireplace, he noticed that a George Stubbs painting of a horse was slightly lopsided. He went over to straighten it. Then he picked up the poker and jabbed at the logs in the grate.

Barbara Taylor Bradford

Sparks flew upwards, the logs crackled, and after jabbing hard at them once more, he returned the poker to the stand.

Charles stood for a moment in front of the fire, his hand resting on the mantelpiece, caught up in his thoughts. His wife Felicity had just left to visit her sister in Harrogate, and he wondered again why he had not insisted on accompanying her. Because she didn't want you to go, an internal voice reminded him. *Accept that.*

Felicity had taken their eldest daughter Diedre with her. 'Anne will be more at ease, Charles. If you come, she will feel obliged to entertain you properly, and that will be an effort for her,' Felicity had explained at breakfast.

He had given in to her, as he so often did these days. But then his wife always made sense. He sighed to himself, his thoughts focused on his sister-in-law. She had been ill for some time, and they had been worried about her; seemingly she had good news to impart today, and had invited her sister to lunch to share it.

Turning away from the fireplace, Charles walked across the Persian carpet, making for the antique Georgian partners' desk, and sat down in the chair behind it.

Thoughts of Anne's illness lingered, and then he reminded himself how practical and down-to-earth Diedre was. This was reassuring. It struck him that at twenty Diedre was probably the most sensible of his children. Guy, his heir, was twenty-two, and a relatively reliable young man, but unfortunately he had a wild streak that sometimes reared up. It worried Charles.

Miles, of course, was the brains in the family; he had something of an intellectual bent, even though he was only fourteen, and artistic. He never worried about Miles. He was utterly loyal: true blue.

And then there were his other three daughters. Daphne, at seventeen, the great beauty of the family. A pure English rose, with looks to break any man's heart. He had grand ambitions

Cavendon Hall

for his Daphne. He would arrange a great marriage for her. A duke's son, nothing less.

Her sister DeLacy was the most fun, if he was truthful; quite a mischievous twelve-year-old. Charles was aware she had to grow up a bit, and unexpectedly a warm smile touched his mouth. DeLacy always managed to make him laugh, and entertained him with her comical antics. His last child, five-year-old Dulcie, was adorable; much to his astonishment, she was already a person in her own right, with a mind of her own.

Lucky, I've been lucky, he thought, reaching for the morning's post. Six lovely children, all of them quite extraordinary in their own way. I have been blessed, he reminded himself. Truly blessed with my wife and this admirable family we've created. I am the most fortunate of men.

As he shuffled through the post, one envelope in particular caught his eye. It was postmarked Zurich, Switzerland. Puzzled, he slit the envelope with a silver opener, and took out the letter.

When he glanced at the signature, Charles was taken aback. The letter had been written by his first cousin, Hugo Ingham Stanton. He hadn't heard from Hugo since he had left Cavendon at sixteen, although Hugo's father had told Charles his son had fared well in the world. He had often wondered about what had become of Hugo. No doubt he was about to find out now.

April 26th, 1913

Zurich

My dear Charles,

I am sure that you will be surprised to receive this letter from me after all these years. However, because I left Cavendon in the most peculiar circumstances, and at such odds with my mother, I decided it would be better if I cut all contact with the family at that time. Hence my long silence.

Barbara Taylor Bradford

I continued to see my father until the day he died. No one else wrote to me in New York, and I therefore did not have the heart to put pen to paper. And so years have passed without contact.

I will not bore you with a long résumé of my life for the past sixteen years. Suffice it to say that I did well, and I was particularly lucky that Father sent me to his friend, Benjamin Silver. I became an apprentice in Mr Silver's real-estate company in New York. He was a good man, and brilliant. He taught me everything there was to learn about the real-estate business, and, I might add, he taught me well.

I acquired invaluable knowledge, and, much to my own surprise, I was a success. When I was twenty-two I married Mr Silver's daughter, Loretta. We had a very happy union for nine years, but sadly there were no children. Always fragile in health, Loretta died here in Zurich a year ago, much to my sorrow and distress. For the past year, since her passing, I have continued to live in Zurich. However, loneliness has finally overtaken me, and I have a longing to come back to the country of my birth. And so I have now made the decision to return to England.

I wish to reside in Yorkshire on a permanent basis. For this reason I would like to pay you a visit, and sincerely hope that you will receive me cordially at Cavendon. There are many things I wish to discuss with you, and most especially the property I own in Yorkshire.

I am planning to travel to London in June, where I shall take up residence at Claridge's Hotel. Hopefully I can visit you in July, on a date that is convenient to you.

I look forward to hearing from you in the not-too-distant future. With all good wishes to you and Felicity.

Sincerely, your Cousin,

Hugo

Cavendon Hall

Charles leaned back in the chair, still holding the letter in his hand. Finally, he placed it on the desk, and closed his eyes for a moment, thinking of Little Skell Manor, the house which had belonged to Hugo's mother, and which he now owned. No doubt Hugo wanted to take possession of it, which was his legal right.

A small groan escaped him, and Charles opened his eyes and sat up in the chair. No use turning away from the worries flooding through him. The house was Hugo's property. The problem was that their aunt, Lady Gwendolyn Ingham Baildon, resided there, and at seventy-two years old she would dig her feet in if Hugo endeavoured to turf her out.

The mere thought of his aunt and Hugo doing battle sent an icy chill running through Charles, and his mind began to race as he sought a solution to this difficult situation.

Finally he rose, walked over to the French doors opposite his desk, and stood looking out at the terrace, wishing Felicity were here. He needed somebody to talk to about this problem. *Right away.*

Then he saw her, hurrying down the steps, making for the wide gravel path that led to Skelldale House. *Charlotte Swann.* The very person who could help him. Of course she could.

Without giving it another thought, Charles stepped out onto the terrace. 'Charlotte!' he called. 'Charlotte! Come back!'

On hearing her name, Charlotte instantly turned around, her face filling with a smile when she saw him. 'Hello,' she responded, lifting her hand in a wave. As she did this she began to walk back up the terrace steps. 'Whatever is it?' she asked when she came to a stop in front of him. Staring up into his face, she said, 'You look very upset . . . is something wrong?'

'Probably,' he replied. 'Could you spare me a few minutes? I need to show you something, and to discuss a family matter. If you have time, if it's not inconvenient now. I could—'

'Oh Charlie, come on, don't be silly. Of course it's not

Barbara Taylor Bradford

inconvenient. I was only going to Skelldale House to get a frock for Lavinia. She wants me to send it to London for her.'

'That's a relief. I'm afraid I have a bit of a dilemma.' Taking her arm, he led her into the library, continuing, 'What I mean is, something has happened that might become a dilemma. Or even a battle royal.'