Prologue

They had been reminiscing about their previous dogs, including Ebenezer and Florence, two Scottish deer-hounds known as Ebb and Flow; and Pandora, a West Highland terrier of decided views who adored Mrs Law.

"It was no sinecure, though, being her idol," commented Mrs Law. "She was a most exacting creature: exuberant and busy and cheerful, but not above the occasional sulk. A dog of moods. A bad mood could be dispatched upon the presentation of Bourbon biscuit. She rejected Garibaldi ones, perhaps for political reasons."

Frida glanced up. Her mother's sense of humour was surviving her grief.

"You are strong," she said.

The widow of Thomas Graves Law smiled sadly.

"There is no sunshine without shadow," she said. She stared into the fire before resuming. "That was your father's way of putting it. He faced both life and death with equanimity: as, once upon a time, I failed to do."

"Once upon a time?" prompted Frida. She was soon to be married, and eager to accumulate as many family stories as possible before leaving her childhood home.

"You are right," said Mrs Law. "I am strong. But I wasn't, once. Or possibly it was rather that I pretended I wasn't.

I had my strength. I lacked the courage to use what strength I had, and so I lived—and nearly died—below my best."

"When was that?" Frida looked up again from her position on the floor where she was sitting beside her mother's armchair. Her long merino dress was crumpled. They were in the drawing room of Woodlands, a large Victorian family house near Edinburgh. It was an evening in October 1904. Outside, the trees rustled and swayed; a wintry wind was driving small hard snowflakes at the closed and heavily-curtained windows.

"That was my worst time." The full stop was audible. It closed a conversation that had hardly begun. Mrs Law's lips were compressed, underlining the end of it. She looked severe. How many faces there were, reflected Frida; for each of us had several—and how little we knew of the lives being lived behind them. How little, indeed, she knew of her own mother.

This thought lingered at the back of Frida's mind later that evening, after her mother had retired. Her two younger sisters living at home were still up; the distant strains of a piano duet were just audible as Frida wandered along a passage in the opposite direction, towards her father's book-lined study in the east wing. She had not entered this room since his death the previous March. The door creaked as she opened it and interrupted the still, unlived-in air. The desk with its worn leather top looked naked without its usual neat piles of books and papers. Thomas Graves Law had been a tidy and methodical man, only able to concentrate if everything around him was meticulously arranged. Now there was, apart from the blotter, nothing on the desk but her mother's

Cuttings Book, in which Mrs Law had accumulated, over the years, articles and various other items relating to her husband's public life. Frida sat down and opened it.

The earlier pages consisted mostly of book reviews and accounts of lectures given to learned societies; all, Frida noticed, dated after her father's appointment as Librarian to the Signet Library in 1879. There were even passing mentions of his attendance at Edinburgh city functions and social occasions. Later came the report of Edinburgh University's award to him of an honorary LL.D.; and later still the record of his retirement presentation. The most recent cuttings were the obituaries, from the *Scotsman*, the *Scottish Law Times* and one or two historical and literary journals.

She reread them slowly. They were more concerned with the librarian and scholar than the father she knew. But how fragmentary was her memory of him. She would treasure these fragments. She thought of him now, in this room, standing short and erect at the window, looking out across the lawn to the wood.

"You spoil the children," her mother was saying; Frida couldn't remember what had prompted the remark. Probably father had been away and had brought them presents on his return. He had turned round with a smile.

"Not as much as W. E.," he had said of his friend Mr Gladstone. "He butters his granddaughter's bread on both sides: literally; or so he told me recently at Hawarden."

TGL, as Mr Gladstone, other friends and even his family usually called him, had often stayed at Hawarden. Returning once from such a visit he had quoted with amusement a remark about John Cross's recently published life of his

late wife George Eliot. “It is not a life at all,” the old Prime Minister had grumbled. “It is a reticence in three volumes.”

Less frequently, the Gladstones had come to stay with the Laws. There was an excellent but temperamental cook at Woodlands. Mrs Gladstone, always preoccupied with her husband’s digestive processes, would take the liberty of intruding upon Cook’s culinary domain to check the latter’s ingredients and methods. Cook routinely took umbrage. This usually resulted in her giving notice, a habit Mrs Law did not want encouraged. Good cooks were rare in Edinburgh.

The family seldom entered the study except after an absence, when a tradition of assembling there had arisen, to welcome TGL home. On one occasion, Frida remembered, he had been to Oxford to give a lecture.

“Oxford is much as usual,” he had reported. “Except that Charles Dodgson has instituted afternoon tea at Christchurch.”

Frida’s own favourite description of her father was not in the Cuttings Book. It was contained in the preface to his recently—posthumously—published collection of *Essays and Reviews*, edited by P. Hume Brown. Frida herself did not know P. Hume Brown, but he, as he revealed in his introductory memoir, had certainly known her father. She had read this preface so many times that she knew some paragraphs by heart.

> He had an exuberance of vitality, which seemed more in keeping with a life of action than a life of study. His varied experience, his multifarious information so far away from the beaten track, and his abounding spirits, made him one who carried wisdom and good humour wherever he went.

Their family friend Lord Guthrie had also written of the man as well as the scholar.

> Dr Law's was a unique personality, formed by a unique experience and a unique career. He was a remarkable combination, so able, so learned, and yet to the very end he retained the simple-heartedness of childhood and the chivalry and enthusiasm of youth.

Frida recognised the unique personality, whose wisdom and warmth and gusto had enriched her childhood. She paused to remember their special walks, when she was small; Father and she, just the two of them, would walk to Duddingston Loch, or to Craigmillar Castle, or the little seaports of Joppa and Musselburgh. She remembered their special hedge—in a sunny lane between Duddingston and Craigmillar—which was always, inexplicably, as much as a month in advance of its kind, putting forth green shoots in February, and sometimes even earlier. She remembered their sometimes pausing, on the homeward journey, to buy brown sugar to make toffee. She remembered how much they talked on these excursions, and the way he talked—but never talked down—to her.

He had been one of those unusual adults who assumed no ultimate authority over children, and who are prepared to play as seriously as themselves. He never seemed to tailor what he said to fit her limited understanding, and thus he extended it. And since she had grown up they had continued to talk. He was not, she had observed at dinner parties, a great conversationalist. He was probably too conscious, too reflective, too rich in second thoughts. He was, though, an outstanding lecturer; and in quiet *tête-à-tête*, with pauses, and time to choose his words, she had learnt so much, shared

so much and been so amused. Above all, and the thought of it brought tears to her eyes, she remembered his laugh. A unique personality, a unique father, yes.

But what was unique about a career as Librarian to the Signet Library? What constituted his unique experience? I know Father, she thought sadly, no better than I know Mother. Or more precisely, I know them both, insofar as anybody knows anybody; but I know remarkably little *about* them.

Frida closed the Cuttings Book, but not before retrieving a loose letter which had slipped out, a letter which her mother must have saved, years ago, from her own childish hands.

Loch Awe Hôtel
24 July 1883

My darling Bida, I am very glad to hear that you have been good and enjoyed your tea party. When I come back, we will have a tremendously big tea party in the garden-but that is only if there is no noise and crying out walking. Goodbye, and take care of Mummy. Grandmama and Aunt Janet send their love.

Your loving father,

TGL

It was the first letter she had ever received. Bida had been her own first attempt at her name, and had become a family nickname.

Frida did some quick calculations. She was her parents' eldest child, born on the 30th of November 1879; so she

would have been three years old when she received the letter. Her parents had probably married in 1877 or 1878, early in 1879 at the latest. She had never known the year, but they celebrated their wedding anniversary on the 15th of April. Her father, she calculated, would have been about forty-three, and her mother thirty-five: a late marriage for both of them. What had happened in their earlier lives? When had Mother's "worst time" been?

The *Peerage* would at least cast some light on dates. Frida went over to the reference shelves, extracted the stout red volume, and sat down again in her father's chair. She turned to the relevant page.

A minute later, she leant back, conscious of the accelerated beat of her heart. She took a deep breath and looked at the page again. There, clearly, were her parents' names: Thomas Graves Law and Wilhelmina Frederica Allen. There was no mention of herself. All the other children—her four sisters and her one brother—were listed accurately with their dates of birth. Father and Mother always referred to their children when speaking of them collectively as "The Six". Here there were only five.

There must be some obvious explanation which is eluding me, Frida told herself slowly, emphatically clutching the comfortably solid edge of the desk. I exist. I am their daughter. Of that there is no question. I resemble both of them in various ways. There must be some mistake—two mistakes: a misprint of the marriage date, given here as 1880, and the omission of my name and birth date; though, she thought apprehensively, Burke's *Peerage* is renowned for its

scrupulous reliability. But even less likely was the possibility of her parents behaving with the least impropriety.

Despite the lateness of the hour, Frida dashed back along the passage then past the old schoolroom. The piano duets had ceased, she noticed, but her sisters hadn't gone to bed: a stream of busy inconsequential chatter issued from the room, reminding her, ridiculously, of reams of flowered chintz. She ran up the heavily balustraded main staircase to Mrs Law's bedroom.

"Mother?" she said loudly, knocking imperiously.

"Darling, come in, do. What is it?"

Mrs Law was already in bed at the far end of the room, and she looked across, smiling, at her daughter.

"Do leave that dress out for Bontine to iron. How can I persuade you to sit on chairs instead of the floor?"

"Why am I not listed with the others in the Peerage, Mother? And was the date of your marriage really 1880?" She spoke without prevarication, more abruptly than she had intended, even accusingly. Suddenly, silently, Mrs Law began to weep. Frida stared in horror.

Then she ran over and knelt down beside the bed.

"Dearest, dearest Mother … Please stop … Forgive me, I was just curious … It's not important."

Mrs Law chuckled through her tears.

"It *is* important," she contradicted. She was sixty; lean and lined and lively, she looked physically older and at the same time curiously, eagerly, young.

"I think I am relieved," she said, sniffing, and fumbling under her pillows for a handkerchief.

"I have wanted to tell you for years, though I have also dreaded doing so. But your dear father was always so against it. He didn't want old wounds to be opened; and I bowed to his wish."

She lay back on her pillows.

"It is an old old story. The only person living, apart from myself, who knows it in any detail is Bontine. But you, my darling, have every right to know it. There was misery in both our lives before we married—and indeed for some two years afterwards. Our one concern has been that what happened might affect you."

"Me?"

Mrs Law nodded.

"And the rest of the Six?"

Mrs Law shook her head.

"Just you, my darling."

Her eyes filled with tears again. Frida rose from her kneeling position and hugged her before returning to her position on the floor.

"I might as well continue the crumpling process," she said lightly. "Bontine likes ironing, or so she says; so the more crumples the greater, surely her satisfaction! Dearest Mother," she went on, more seriously. "Whatever happened, it is far too late to talk about it now. You must sleep. But I just want to tell you that I know, whatever skeletons may be inhabiting our family cupboard, they are not of your, nor of father's, making. As far as I am concerned, you both gave me all that a child could wish. You taught me how to live—how to laugh and to love. We were talking of strength earlier this evening, your strength. I've got it too, Mother. You gave it to

me. The strength to be myself, the strength to commit myself in the way Father and you were committed; the strength to face whatever the future brings. My one grief is that Father never knew Charlie, so much a part of my future; that Father won't be giving me away next year at my wedding."

"What a comfort you are. But I *want* to tell you and am now resolved to do so. It is fitting, especially now that you are engaged. Not tonight. Not only is it, as you say, too late; but I need time. Time to think, time to dig up buried memories. I haven't forgotten, but I need to remember. Then, in a day or two I shall talk to you—or I shall write to you: I might be more coherent on paper. But now, my darling, kiss me goodnight and go to bed."

Mrs Law heard her daughter's footsteps retreating along the corridor to her own room; then she turned down her bedside lamp.

Memories, her friend Louis had told her long ago, are a fairy gift which cannot be worn out with using. This was true of her trouble-free childhood and the serene years of her marriage; such memories as these were solace indeed in the impoverished present.

There was, though, a gap: the years in between: years she had tried to forget; not a fairy gift at all. But the 1870s were the very years she must bring to mind. She would do so, she decided, by reviewing her life chronologically, beginning with childhood: then the years in between would simply be a bridge to her life with TGL.

Mrs Law slept little that night. She lay in bed and remembered.