

## Chapter One

There were owls in the nursery when James was a boy. The room was papered in a pattern of winding branches, amongst which great green parent owls perched in identical courting couples. Beneath each pair, a trio of green owlets huddled, their sharp beaks slightly ajar. They sat between big, thistling green flowers with tiny white blossoms which made James think of mother-of-pearl buttons, the kind on Charlotte's Sunday dress. When he was alone in the nursery, James thought he could hear the owls chatter together softly, like monkeys, scratching and scratching their claws against the endless green branches. But when Charlotte was there, they were quiet, because she had told them that if they did not behave, she would get her box of watercolours and paint out their eyes.

At night James would hear the real owls screech outside and imagine them gliding through the dark. Sometimes there was the high sudden cry of a fox. And sometimes there was a noise from the house itself, a whispering creaking sound, as if the walls were sighing.

Often he would slip out of bed and down the corridor to

## *The Quick*

Charlotte's room. Charlotte would always be sound asleep: face down on the pillow, though Mrs Rowley, the housekeeper, said it was unnatural and would lead to Charlotte being smothered to death one of these days. James would slip under the blankets and lie down topsy-turvy, with his head at the bottom of the bed, his feet near the top. Charlotte would sometimes murmur and kick half-heartedly against him, then fall asleep again, and James would do the same, his feet pressed against her back until they grew warm. They would lie all night like that, snug as the pair of pistols that lived in the blue-lined case in Father's study.

When morning came James liked to wake early, open Charlotte's bedroom window and look down onto the grounds of Aiskew Hall, which went on for as far as he could see. There were wide lawns and gardens edged by paths and stately, lovely old trees – oaks and horse chestnuts and copper beeches and silver birches. Between the trees there were two grassy mounds. These were the icehouses, which now held gardening tools and other odd things.

At a distance, the gardens still had the illusion of being neat and well tended, as they had been before James and Charlotte were born. Long ago, in the prosperous days, there had been people to look after things: gardeners and undergardeners, two gamekeepers and a carpenter. A fire engine, too, drawn by horses. Now there was only Griswold, strange and grim-faced and sixty-three. There had been a young Griswold once – the gardener's son, who had been expected to take over from his father and who instead went off to foreign parts and then died (fighting the Shantee, said Ann, the housemaid. James thought perhaps this was a sort of banshee.)

After his son went away, Griswold had been left alone to wage a vain and bitter war against the gardens. He shot the rabbits but they came back, grazing the lawns at their leisure. The mighty rhododendron bushes flourished unchecked, and in the orchard the trees turned wild and the apples were eaten by blackbirds.

• • •

At the end of the hall gardens, the ground gave way to a sudden drop that felt like the edge of the world. Below was a ditch full of nettles, which was called a ha-ha. Beyond that there were wide flat fields for miles, green and gold in the spring, red-brown earth in the winter. There were oak trees and black sheep grazing and the ruins of a small Grecian temple, where long ago the ladies of the hall would sit to enjoy their books and needlework. Part of the roof had given way, and the pillars looked slightly crooked. It was not safe to sit there any more.

Charlotte had heard Mrs Rowley say that people in Aiskew village thought it was a scandal to leave the hall so neglected. Before now the hall people had always done their part in the village: there had been treats for the Sunday-school children; sometimes the hall ladies would take baskets to the villagers who were poor or ill. More than that, there was any amount of work at the hall: mouths to be fed, washing to be done, windows to be cleaned, horses to be stabled. It had been a fine place, back in the old days. Now it was mostly shut up. Everyone wondered why Charlotte and James's father troubled himself to keep the house at all, since he did nothing with it.

Charlotte thought that if Mother were still alive, then Father would have lived with them, at least some of the time, when he could be spared from his business, and the people in the village would have been friendlier. As things were, nobody much cared for James and her. Even Mrs Rowley seemed to prefer them to be elsewhere: outside in the gardens or at their lessons or in the nursery, anywhere as long as they were out of the way.

When Father had left Charlotte and James at Aiskew after Mother's death, he had said that he would make all the proper arrangements. Then they did not hear from him for a long while. Eventually he wrote to tell Mrs Rowley that he had engaged a governess. The letter went on to say that he would approach Mrs Chickering, his aunt, who might be able to make a long visit to Aiskew, to help Mrs Rowley set things in order and make the

## *The Quick*

place comfortable again. Once all this was done, perhaps he could be spared from business long enough to come back to Yorkshire himself and see them.

At first they were all of them – Charlotte and James, Mrs Rowley and Ann, and Mrs Scholes, the cook – in the habit of speaking as if Mrs Chickering might arrive any day. But months went by, and she did not appear. It was her health, Mrs Rowley said, sounding rather scornful. Mrs Chickering never seemed strong enough to travel. A year passed, then another.

Ann and Mrs Scholes were the only servants at Aiskew – apart from Griswold, who scarcely counted. They were both up from York and spent a great deal of time huddled in the kitchen for warmth, complaining over the remoteness of the house, the dreariness of the mists, and the loneliness of their situation. Sometimes there was a governess for Charlotte and James – but these ladies never stayed for very long.

So Charlotte did her best: they would have to be brave, she told James, and she devised ordeals for them to perform – walking down one of the long corridors alone after dark, or keeping one's head under the bathwater for a minute at a time. Or – this was worst of all – shutting oneself in the priest hole in the library.

The library was full of treasures. The cousin – the very distant cousin who had owned the hall before them – had bought books at a fearful rate, adding to an already extensive collection. There was no one to stop Charlotte and James from taking what they wanted, poring over whichever old, delicious-smelling volumes they chose.

It was a beautiful room, too: there was a red carpet and red-and-gold paper on the walls and a beautiful marble fireplace with a pattern of grapes carved all the way round.

The priest hole had been added to the house by the cousin. He had many romantic ideas and had lavished money on trifles. Much of the grounds and the farmland had been sold to pay

the resulting debts, and the estate had been much reduced, and the cousin had died in Italy of grief or something else.

The cousin had thought that the priest hole might make the house seem older than it really was, though why he should have wanted this neither Charlotte nor James could have said. It was frightening inside – stuffy and smelling of wood and polish. Ann sometimes left dusters and brooms in there, and if you weren't careful you could knock them over in the dark. The door to the priest hole was hidden, fitted cunningly behind one of the bookshelves. It opened with a secret spring concealed behind a dummy book – *Fungi of the British Isles, Vol II*. The false spine was scruffy claret-coloured leather, faded from the touch of many hands. If you didn't know which one it was, you might never find it. From inside the priest hole, there was no way of getting out again.

You passed the ordeal if you didn't scream for help. When the door was shut, it was so close to your face that it felt difficult to breathe. There was no light. It felt as if everyone outside had gone away and there would be no one ever coming to let you out.

They did not do this ordeal often – only when the door's fascination grew too much. It was the best ordeal of all and would make you the bravest, Charlotte said. And this was good, because if you did enough ordeals, you would be grown up.

• • •

One June morning, when Charlotte was nine-and-a-half and James was five, she took a box of coloured chalks out to the terrace and set about teaching him his letters. This was necessary because Miss Prince, their latest governess, had gone home to Shropshire two weeks earlier without being able to make James properly acquainted with any letter other than S (with which, for reasons he was unable to explain, he had an odd fascination).

## *The Quick*

The terrace had large flagstones which would grow warm in the sun, so that in the hottest days of summer it was pleasant to walk over them barefoot. Charlotte took a piece of white chalk and drew a large *A* onto one of the stones. Then she moved a little way along, stooped again, and drew *B*.

‘What’re you doing?’ James asked.

Charlotte glanced up, brushing her hair out of her eyes with a chalky hand. It left a dusting of white at the top of her head, making her look as if she were wearing a powdered wig, like a lady of a hundred years ago.

‘You have to know the alphabet,’ she said.

‘Why?’ James asked, staring at *A* with vague mistrustful remembrance.

Charlotte looked up from *F* with a frown. ‘Because you have to. What would you do if you grew up and you couldn’t read? People would think you were ignorant.’

She said *ignorant* in a disagreeable way she had learned from Miss Prince – leaning on the *ig*, making it sound like a finger jab to the ribs.

James scowled. ‘I don’t care.’

‘Well, Father probably thinks you can read already,’ Charlotte said, and drew *N* – it came out bigger than she had intended, all pointed angles, making James think of a gate locked shut.

He watched her in silence and made no further argument. After a moment, he went over to where she was kneeling, the twenty-sixth flagstone, and inspected what she had drawn. It was an angry angular slash, a diagonal stroke, its elbows pointing both directions in a standoffish sort of way.

‘What’s that?’ James asked, pointing at it with his foot.

‘It’s *Z*,’ said Charlotte.

‘It looks like half an hourglass.’

‘Well, it isn’t.’ Charlotte stood up and brushed the dust from her hands. ‘Now go and stand by the fountain.’

James did as he was told. The fountain was a bone-dry stone

bowl at the middle of the terrace, supported by three naked cherubs with mossy legs and expressions of baffled malignity. One of them was missing his nose, and this misfortune, which ought to have made James feel sorry for him, only made him the most hateful of the three.

Charlotte had climbed onto the low wall of the terrace and was pacing up and down. 'When I call the letter, you have to go and stand on it.'

'I can't. I don't know what they are.'

'You have to work them out. When you know them all, then you win.'

'Win what?'

'A prize.'

'What prize?'

'You'll find out when you win,' Charlotte replied, and then she took a breath and bellowed, 'R!'

It was a magnificent cry – *ARRRR!* – like a pirate with rum on his breath and matches smoking in his beard. (They had a book about pirates, which Charlotte would sometimes read aloud, though not on Sundays.)

James hesitated. The chalk lines seemed to run into one another, squirming away from him when he looked at them.

'Go on,' Charlotte said – and James moved reluctantly in search of the right letter.

They stayed out until it was time for lunch, and then again until it was sunset and the shadows from the great trees in the grounds were stretching across the lawn towards the house. It took a long time for James to learn, but, though Charlotte was often cross, she never lost her temper.

She never lied, either; that was one of the nice things about her. She had said that James would manage to do it, and after a time she was proved right and the letters were safe in his head, like the days of the week or the sound of his own name. And there was a prize, just as she had said: a sugar mouse, pure white, with a piece

## *The Quick*

of string for a tail. James decided that he was called Aljijohn.

‘Algernon, you mean.’ Charlotte said.

But James shook his head. ‘Aljijohn,’ he said, and took Aljijohn upstairs and made a bed for him on the chest of drawers out of an empty matchbox and a handkerchief.

‘You should eat him,’ Charlotte suggested, when she saw Aljijohn’s bed. ‘Otherwise he’ll go bad.’

James frowned. ‘He’s my friend,’ he said. But that evening it was liver for dinner, and James went to bed hungrier than usual, and in the morning there was nothing left of Aljijohn but a mournful-looking piece of string and an empty matchbox.

‘He would have wanted you to eat him,’ Charlotte said later. ‘It was what he was for.’

‘Are you sure?’ James asked.

She nodded.

‘But I feel all horrible inside, like hurting. I wish I hadn’t thought of him being Aljijohn.’

‘It wasn’t real, though,’ Charlotte said.

Last year, she had been reading to him from a very old book called *The Surprising Adventures of Baron Munchausen*, and the pictures had frightened him so much that Mrs Rowley had taken it away. He had bad dreams afterwards for three nights running. Already she knew that an idea could pain him like a bruise. He had grey eyes that showed every thought, and Charlotte sometimes worried that he might be hurt in some way that she would not be able to prevent.

• • •

This was the way things used to be, and afterwards it seemed to have lasted for many years. This was the way things used to be, and at the time it did not feel as if anything would ever change. As far as they could see, all that happened was they got older. James was six now and could climb higher than before;



he could follow Charlotte over walls and fences. Mrs Rowley began to say that he ought to be sent away to school, but nothing came of it.

Some evenings they would sit in front of the nursery fire, whilst Charlotte taught James to read words the same way she remembered being taught: with short sentences, sounding each letter as she went, as if she were testing a rotten floorboard that might give way beneath her. James liked a rhyme, and so they had *the cat sat on the mat*, and *the fox sat on the box*. After a while they progressed to *the robin sat on the bobbin*, and *the weasel sat on the easel*, and from then onwards James began to write for himself – small stories and rhymes, which were not usually very good. But he was still young, and Charlotte tried to be encouraging.

‘You could write a whole book,’ she told him. ‘When you’re grown up. And have a house in London.’

James said, ‘I want to live here when we’re grown up. But just us.’

The hall was going to belong to James when they were older. They had always known this.

‘Read,’ she ordered, pointing to the slate that lay on the floor between them.

Aiskew was still everything, of course. Later she would not recall feeling discontented at that age, but she had known, even then, that there would be a time when she would want to be elsewhere. Sometimes she dreamed of a view she had seen once, fleetingly, from a train window – the moors, dark purple beneath a grey sky.

A little while afterwards, something unexpected happened. Father wrote to say that instead of sending a new governess to replace Miss Prince’s successor – as everyone had expected – he would shortly be coming back to Yorkshire himself.

‘Why’s he coming back?’ James said, when Mrs Rowley told them the news over breakfast.

‘Why shouldn’t he?’ Mrs Rowley replied. ‘Eat your porridge.’

## *The Quick*

‘Does he want to see us?’ Charlotte asked.

‘Of course,’ said Mrs Rowley, frowning, as if Charlotte’s question were somehow impertinent. ‘And he writes that he requires some rest. His physician says that his health is not all it should be.’

‘What’s wrong with him?’ Charlotte said. ‘Is he ill?’

‘The porridge has got hedgehog in it,’ James announced suddenly, dropping his spoon onto the table. ‘Look!’ He pointed to a dark husk of oat.

‘Don’t slop your breakfast about like that, James,’ Mrs Rowley said, ignoring this accusation, which James had made many times before. She put Father’s letter away, and the chance to ask further questions was lost.

On the afternoon that Father was expected, James and Charlotte were sent into the garden to be out of the way. There was enough to do in preparing the house without having them to worry about as well, Mrs Rowley said. They were to be back by four o’clock sharp, to be washed and dressed in time to greet their father.

Shooed outside – like chickens – they wandered rather aimlessly into the grounds. Somehow it was always less fun to be told to go out and play.

They went past the rose garden (where Griswold looked up from his work and stared at them), past the lake and the orchard, out to the rhododendrons, which crowded thickly around the secret statues: a beautiful lady in a scarf and nothing else, a fawn, a centurion (he was getting a bit mossy in places), and a blue-metal gentleman wearing a hat like an upturned mixing bowl, sitting astride a cow. The statues were further additions of the cousin’s. There had been wonderful summer parties in the gardens in his day; they would string coloured lanterns up in the trees and dance outside as darkness fell. Sometimes Charlotte and James found odd relics of that time – half a shattered champagne glass, a playing card wiped blank with rain.

They played amongst the statues for a while, and when they

were tired they sat down to rest on the steps outside the arbour at the end of the yew walk. Inside, the arbour was overgrown with honeysuckle and home to a large family of spiders, which liked to drop from the ceiling without warning. On the top step, Charlotte had tried to carve her name but had only got as far as *Cha* before giving up, exhausted by the effort.

It would be half past four by now, Charlotte thought, perhaps even later. Father must have arrived.

'Perhaps he'll come and find us,' she said. She remembered a Christmas a long time ago, a game of hide-and-seek. Father had been laughing, searching for her in the silliest places, like Mother's bureau or inside a thimble.

'There's someone coming,' James pointed straight ahead, to the end of the yew walk. 'There.'

It was Mrs Rowley. She was walking briskly, holding her skirts out of the damp grass. 'There you are,' she said, when she was within speaking distance. 'I told you to be back at four o'clock.'

'Sorry,' Charlotte replied. 'We forgot. Is Father here?'

'Yes. He's been— He's gone upstairs.'

'Can we see him?'

'Tomorrow, perhaps,' Mrs Rowley said. 'The doctor's with him now.'

She looked worried, Charlotte thought. Frowning but not angry.

'Is he all right?' she asked.

'He needs rest,' Mrs Rowley answered. 'You children must be very quiet when you're inside, so as not to disturb him.' She glanced around her, eyeing the arbour with evident disapproval. 'You'd best play outside for a little while longer,' she added. 'Come in before dark.'

She gave them one last, sterner look, then turned away and started back towards the house.

They did not see Father the next day, because he was too ill to have visitors. From Mrs Rowley they heard that he was no better.

## *The Quick*

There was a different doctor with him now – not from Aiskew or even brought in from York but all the way from London. It must be interesting to be so important, Charlotte thought – like being the king in a play. She heard Mrs Rowley telling Ann that really, Mrs Chickering ought to be there, that someone from the family should.

The doctor did not leave, nor did Father come downstairs. Mrs Rowley was crosser than usual, and Ann began to look at Charlotte and James strangely. The weather grew worse. On some days it was too cold and wet to venture out of doors. In the house there were only a few rooms which were not forbidden – their bedrooms and the nursery, where they also took most of their meals now. They were not to run and they were not to raise their voices.

At first they did their best to carry on being good. But as the house stayed hushed and Father remained upstairs, they began to make small trespasses: downstairs to the ballroom (all shut up now), or out to the stables. Nobody seemed to notice what they did. Charlotte thought perhaps it would be good to store up some more bravery – the way you could save up hunger, when you knew there was going to be cake later. So they did more ordeals.

In the orchard they climbed to higher branches, balanced their way across the narrow red-brick garden wall. Then in the wider grounds they turned over rocks and forced themselves to pick up spiders – and later a toad, which had strayed onto the terrace.

Afterwards it would be one of the things Charlotte remembered clearly: the cool, warty brown skin of the creature, the rough sensation of its webbed feet against her palm. It was smaller than she had imagined, with wide yellow eyes. She was afraid it might bite (*could* toads bite?) but it did not. It sat quiet, still and frightened in her clasped hands as she carried it down to the lake. When she set it down, it took a few seconds for it to understand its freedom and hop away.

It had been raining for three days when they went back to the library. They were not seen on their way down – the servants

were elsewhere, the doctor was with Father, Mrs Rowley was in her own room. She had told them that morning that Mrs Chickering would be arriving today at long last, and though neither of the children could quite believe her, the news made Charlotte feel restless, uneasy.

‘Let’s do an ordeal,’ she said to James.

Though there was hardly any need for stealth, they crept into the library as if they were housebreakers, enjoying the furtiveness of it. The clock above the mantel ticked to itself, a low, friendly sound that one hardly noticed after a little while. Apart from this there was silence.

Charlotte thought about saying to James that just coming downstairs without being seen was a good enough ordeal, and perhaps they had better go back. But he had already gone to the priest hole and, with his hand on *Fungi of the British Isles, Vol II*, was struggling to open the door. He could manage it for himself, usually, though sometimes he would stand on a pile of books, to make it easier to reach.

Charlotte pushed him aside – not too roughly. ‘Let me do it.’

They never grew tired of watching part of the bookcase suddenly jolt forwards and swing open. Once, Charlotte had pushed at the spring with too much force, and two shelves of books had crashed to the floor. Today she was very careful.

‘Do you want to go first,’ she asked, ‘or shall I?’

‘Can I?’ James said. It was best to go first – it meant the ordeal would be over sooner.

She nodded. ‘I’ll shut it and count to a hundred.’

The door was heavy, and though Charlotte was tall and strong for her age – Mrs Rowley had taken to calling her a *great girl*, in a tone not at all complimentary – it was a struggle to push it closed.

When it was done, she leaned against the door and called to James, ‘Are you all right?’

‘Yes,’ James said, and sneezed. ‘Go on, count.’

## *The Quick*

She always counted loudly, so that he would know how long there was to wait.

She had reached twenty when she heard the footsteps. It was Mrs Rowley – Charlotte knew her tread well enough. She was outside, hurrying closer. And as she approached she called, ‘Charlotte? James? Are you here?’ Charlotte looked about for somewhere to hide, but there was no time – Mrs Rowley had already opened the library door.

Charlotte thought she would be angry, but instead she only said brusquely, ‘Where’s your brother?’

‘I don’t know.’

She sighed, then took Charlotte by the wrist and said, ‘Well, come along.’

‘Where—’

‘Your father wants to see you.’ She hurried Charlotte out of the library before Charlotte could say another word.

Father’s room was dark, and smelled wrong somehow. There was the doctor from London standing by the bed – he was quite young, with yellow hair and a bony face.

Father was lying still. Charlotte remembered him tall and broad-shouldered, infinitely strong. Now he was thin and wrecked, and his eyes – dark like Charlotte’s – were bloodshot and stared nowhere. He gasped as he breathed.

He could not speak, Mrs Rowley said, but Charlotte might take his hand and speak to him, if she did not raise her voice.

She couldn’t think what to say. In the end she muttered that she hoped he would be better soon and that James hoped so, too. She thought he turned his head slightly at James’s name.

‘That’s enough,’ Mrs Rowley said. ‘Your father will be tired. You may kiss him.’

She would rather have not, but there seemed nothing else to be done. He was very hot and smelled of sweat and fever and sourness. She wanted to rub her mouth afterwards, to wipe the sickness off.

‘There, now,’ Mrs Rowley said. She looked at the doctor, who shrugged. ‘Perhaps you may see him again tomorrow—’

Then the doctor said, sharp and sudden, ‘Take the child away.’

Father’s face had changed. Something bad had happened, perhaps as Charlotte kissed him.

The doctor leaned over Father with a frown, and Mrs Rowley took Charlotte’s hand and pulled her outside. She shut the door.

Charlotte turned and ran – down the corridor, down the stairs, back to the library. But she halted at the door: there were voices coming from inside. It was Ann, talking to someone.

‘. . . see if she can be spared,’ she was saying, and the other person murmured something in reply. The stranger sounded like an old lady – it must be Mrs Chickering, arrived at last.

Charlotte barely had time to duck out of sight before Ann came out of the library, heading in the direction of Father’s room. Charlotte hoped that Mrs Chickering might follow Ann upstairs to see Father, but she did not. Instead, Mrs Rowley entered the library – followed, a short time afterwards, by the doctor. He was wiping his hands. She thought later that she might have imagined this detail, but there it was in her memory – a tall, thin-faced man, fastidiously wiping his fingers on a handkerchief. He went into the library and shut the door.

The three of them stayed in the library for the better part of an hour. Charlotte could hear voices but not words. She waited, growing cold in the draughty, wood-panelled corridor.

At last they emerged, and all went upstairs again. Charlotte ran at once into the library, hardly caring if they were out of earshot or not. The room was as it had been before. She rushed to the priest hole and opened the door. James was sitting there – leaning against the wall, his eyes closed.

‘Are you all right?’ she asked.

James opened his eyes. ‘Did you see him?’

‘Yes,’ she said. She saw what a bad thing she had done. She tried to think of something comforting. ‘He said your name.’

## *The Quick*

He looked at her and didn't speak.

'I'm sorry.' She knelt, tried to help him up, but he wouldn't let her.

His fingers were bleeding – he must have been scrabbling at the door, the rough, splintery wood.

'We'd have been in trouble if they found you here,' Charlotte said.

He stared up at her and drew his knees up to his chest so he was curled up on one side, reminding her of the woodlice that lived in the shady places of the garden, which would roll into a ball if you shook them from their rotten log.

'I'm sorry,' Charlotte repeated.

'I hate you.'

She didn't know what to do.

'Well,' she said at last, 'there's no need to be a baby about it, anyway.' She hated herself for saying that, and hated him for flinching and saying nothing, and she stalked out and went to her own room and lay down on the bed, trembling.

It was later that she discovered what the grown-ups had been talking about in the library. Hidden behind the bookshelf, James would have heard the doctor telling the others that Father was dead.

A mouse died somewhere under the floorboards, a few days before the funeral. There was no smell like that of a dead mouse, nothing so insistently rotten. Griswold was brought in to try to find the body, but without any success. Mrs Rowley had said that they would just have to wait for the odour to depart on its own. It was worst in the room where Father was laid out, but they did not like to move him.

Mrs Chickering had been the one to give Charlotte and James the news of Father's death. Some hours after her arrival, they were brought into the library and introduced to her. She was thin and white-haired and kept her mouth held tight in a way which



must have been very uncomfortable. Perhaps she had forgotten she was doing it. She inspected them both in silence for a little bit, and then told them that Father had gone away, and they would both have to be very good from now on.

Mrs Chickering was afraid of things, Charlotte soon discovered – afraid of fire and rats, afraid that the servants were dishonest, afraid that the dinner had not been properly cooked. She was afraid that the children had been spoiled, she was afraid that they were both very ignorant and that Charlotte was grown into a hoyden. She never ate very much at mealtimes but consumed lavender lozenges almost incessantly; the scent went with her everywhere.

Mrs Chickering said that of course Charlotte and James might not attend the funeral. Instead, they sat in the nursery on the day Father was buried – James in front of the fire, Charlotte curled in a chair, watching him. She wanted to go over and sit beside him but was afraid he would tell her to go away. And so she sat quietly, as if it were still all right between them.

In the days after the funeral, things began to change quickly. James was to be sent to school. Money would be more difficult now, Charlotte learned. They would have to economise. The hall would be shut up entirely. Charlotte would live with Mrs Chickering (and James, when he was not at school) in East Lodge, the cottage close to the ha-ha, near the edge of the estate. This was bad enough; worse was the fact that James remained changed. One wet afternoon, the day before he was to be sent away to school, Charlotte discovered him in the library, writing. The library was the only place that was much the same – everywhere else was already packed away. They had made so little impression on the dust and quiet of the house, Charlotte thought. In a few days, when they and the servants and Mrs Rowley were all gone, there would be scarcely any sign they had lived there at all.

‘What’s that?’ she asked, looking at James’s writing.

‘Story.’

## *The Quick*

His handwriting was still terrible. She peered over his shoulder and could not make out a word. He kept his head bent over his work.

There was something wrong, something hurt somewhere in him. It was her fault, of course. He must be anxious about being sent away to school, but he refused to talk about it.

She wanted to say again that she was sorry, but she had told him this many times already, and the time for it was long past.

Instead, she said, 'I wish you weren't going.'

Still he said nothing, which was becoming his way. After a pause she went back upstairs, to finish her packing.

James's school term seemed to last a long while. For reasons of economy and also tradition, he was sent to Father's old school – a small institution of no great academic reputation. He wrote regularly to Mrs Chickering and Charlotte – dutiful letters, addressed to them both. When he was at last released for the holidays, the dogcart was despatched to bring him from York station, and Charlotte went out of the house to meet him. She walked slowly through East Lodge's small garden, down the path that led into the hall grounds. There was no distant sign of light from the hall. Every room was shut up now. Some of the more expensive pieces of furniture had been sold. It was as if their lives were a pencil line drawn on a piece of paper and someone had followed behind with an India rubber, erasing the line as they went. Charlotte still had the key to the French windows that led from the terrace into the library. Sometimes she would visit, but only in daylight and only this room. Gradually her footsteps began to show in the dust. Mrs Chickering said that she would not be able to return for much longer; sooner or later the place would have to be let.

It began to rain as Charlotte went through the trees, skirting the yew walk and the statues – which would soon disappear entirely into the bushes. She was grateful for the cool air and the

silence. She was not sure what James would say to her, and if he could not forgive her now, then she did not know how she was to stand the months and years ahead of her, with only Mrs Chickering for company.

At the edge of the trees she saw him – a little way distant, wearing a scarf against the damp evening. With his face hidden by fog, he looked like someone else, and for an instant she was afraid. But it was him, and they embraced without speaking under the dark, rain-heavy trees.

She had feared that he might be a stranger now, but he was still himself – older and more serious in just those few months, and with a new, watchful expression, but still James. As they embraced, she realised that he had grown. She would not always be taller.

She decided that things would be all right. She would keep him happy, and the memory of what she had done to him would help her, would make her more vigilant and loving, so that no harm would ever come to him again.

He was looking back at the hall – the unlit, uncurtained windows. She did not like the place in dusk any more. It was too melancholy.

‘We’d better go in,’ she said. She turned away, and together they made their way through the trees towards East Lodge, down the old paths they both knew well.