

PART ONE

Ann Handley

CHAPTER ONE

Father knows best

1851

Ann left school as usual, mid-afternoon, and crossed the lane to the footpath leading through the fields. It was a fine spring day with a bouquet of flowers amongst the hedgerows, but she felt down-hearted. Today was her last day of schooling, and she knew she would miss it as an escape from home. She wasn't in a hurry, because she had a tense relationship with her parents; they were strict and demanding and being outside gave her a feeling of freedom and independence.

Because of her father's attitude, Ann only attended the practical lessons of weaving, knitting and sewing. Father had been clear, "You'll be a housewife and learn all you need to know from Mother. There's no use wasting time at school learning to read and write."

Hints Farm, where her father worked as a labourer, provided them with a thatched cottage - a simple abode with three rooms, a brick floor, and one fireplace. The water from the nearby well needed boiling before drinking.

Upon her return home, she entered the kitchen and saw her mother pouring tea.

“Ah, you’re back. Here —” Mother said, handing a steaming cup.

Ann reached out to take it but the mug fell to the floor and broke; liquid splashed everywhere.

“You stupid girl! Look what you’ve done. Clean it all up immediately,” Mother bellowed, pointing to the mess on the floor.

“You let go before I had hold of it,” Ann whined, her shoulders slumped.

“Don’t blame me for your carelessness.”

After clearing up, Ann poured herself another cup.

The incident confirmed her frustration about her parents. Mother often complained about Ann being slow with her jobs, or hanging about instead of doing something useful. Ann did, though, enjoy helping with meal preparation, and Mother praised her for her bread. As they had no oven, she took her dough to the village bake house and waited until it was ready. Their principal foods were milk, cheese, and eggs. Fresh fruit and vegetables were available in the garden and pickled or made into jam for winter. Twice a week they cooked a meal with smoked meats or bacon. Fancier dishes, like black pudding, were only for special occasions; they were treats the family could rarely afford.

One Sunday morning, the Handley family went to St Peter’s, the local parish church in Coreley, a farming village in Shropshire. Ann wore her simple blouse. Her brown hair and dark eyebrows framed her face of light complexion, and blue eyes. At fourteen she no longer ran around in the boisterous way her young siblings did, climbing on walls and balancing on top.

During the lengthy sermon, Ann’s mind wandered. Eyeing other girls in church with their ornate dresses made her envious. She yearned to wear skirts with flowery patterns, but her father objected to modern dress, saying it was boastful. He insisted she wore a simple long skirt and a grey head-scarf. The aggravation caused her to scratch the back of her hand until it bled. Mother noticed and gave her arm a swipe; Ann’s cheeks blushed with embarrassment. She longed to be outside, with the other girls, chatting about boys.

After dinner, Father always read from the bible, for ages it seemed. She didn’t protest because she knew there was nothing to gain by complaining.

“Today I’m going to read about obeying rules. It’s from Deuteronomy,” he said, opening the worn-down bible.

“If a man has a stubborn and unruly son who will not obey the voice of his father or mother, then his father and mother shall take him to the elders. They say, ‘Our son is stubborn and rebellious; he won’t obey us;

he is a glutton and a drunkard.’ Then all the men of the city shall stone him to death with stones. So you will purge the evil from your midst, and all Israel shall hear, and fear.”

Ann and her siblings remained silent. She thought how terrifying it must be, to be stoned to death in front of your parents, the ones you’d hoped loved you.

Father explained. “God gave us rules for living. On the road we have the rule that carriages keep left. Without rules, there would be more accidents. We trust that the on-comer will stick to the left because he knows the rules too. If we all do what the bible says, we’ll have the same rules and all know what to expect from each other. Rules also apply in families. You children need rules so that you feel safe and know what’s expected of you. God, our Creator, expects us to follow his rules as His children. Rules give us order and have been turned into laws so that judges can pronounce punishment on those not obeying the rules.”

Mother told a story about a cousin who didn’t observe the law.

“A relative called William Handley went out shooting with his brother and a friend. One night they crept into Shoulder of Mutton woods to place traps,” she said.

“Where’s that?” Ann’s brother, George, asked.

“Over near Bayton,” Mother replied. “Anyway, the day after, someone overheard them talking about going back for the game and alerted the gamekeeper. That night he heard a gunshot and walked carefully to the fence, so’s not to disturb the poachers. Sticks cracked as if there was a person nearby. He ducked behind the fence. When he peered over the fence, he glimpsed a figure who raised his gun and shot.”

“Have you made this up? It sounds like a tale,” George said, in disbelief.

“It’s a true story. It happened about twenty years ago. Anyway, the gamekeeper staggered home. He’d been hit in the right eye, blinding him. They caught and arrested the men. When questioned, the friend said William fired the shot. He was tried, sentenced to death, and executed.”

Father added, “So, you need to watch yourselves!”

“I’d do nothing like that,” George said. “They should have been cleverer at poaching.”

Ann could see a serious look on the younger children’s faces as the message sunk in that their father would punish them if they did anything unlawful.

After the evening meal, Father ordered, as usual, “Ann, get moving, clear the table and help your mother with the washing-up. George and Thom, I want you outside straightaway. We’ve got work to do.” The boys stood up and scrambled to the door.

Being the eldest daughter, Ann was painfully aware she had to help her mother. She asked to keep going to school, but Father objected. Mother didn't contradict him as Ann's extra hands would lighten the workload in a household of five children, and a dog. The young ones, William aged ten, and Fanny, aged seven, needed regular attention. Ann's older brothers, George and Thom, had left to work on farms further away, where they boarded. But when they came home, they brought dirty clothes and joined in the meals.

Ann reluctantly accepted working at home where she had to endure constant criticism. She did her part to help with the washing, cooking, changing beds, and looking after the little ones. Weekly chicken coop cleaning was the worst job, when she wore a scruffy old apron and a frayed scarf. Droppings covered the perches and boxes, and revolting crusts had to be scraped off. An ammoniac smell irritated her nose when she scooped up dirty bedding from the floor, making her eyes water. After she laid down new straw, the coop was clean and the air sweet.

Her mother complained if she didn't clear up immediately after making a pie, or muttered about her being slow to hang the washing on the line. When her father came home, things were worse. He could be furious about the smallest annoyance, such as slippers not in the correct place, or a lack of firewood next to the fire. He expected things done his way and in the proper order. Ann didn't dare defy him, she kept calm, and took satisfaction from having a hearty meal ready when he came home.

Ann always looked forward to the annual village fair, a weekend each summer when everyone in the village enjoyed themselves. Prizes were awarded for the best cow, sheep and horse. But also for the finest cakes and jewellery. Each year, Ann did her utmost to make a prizing-winning cake and often won an award. There was a raffle with prizes of local produce and craft work. Games included skittles, hoopla, and quoits. On Saturday evenings, the band played and Ann joined the country-dancing. That weekend, her father and mother were usually more relaxed about the rules.

After enjoying the fair and returning to the daily chores and criticism, Ann felt even more depressed and longed for a change in her life.