

Chapter 1

Before there was anything, there was the dream. Before Richard, before I even knew the hills around Wideacre, the sweet rolling green downs which encircle and guard my home – there was the dream. As far back as I can remember, the dream is there. Was always there.

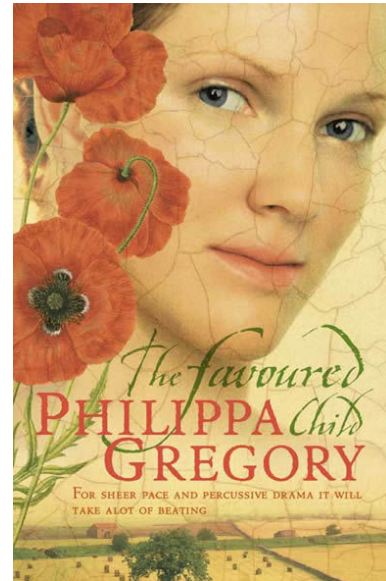
And it is not the dream of a child. It is not *my* dream. It belongs to someone else. But I do not know whose dream it is.

In the dream I am hurt – hurt and heartbroken with a pain that I hope has never been felt in real life. My feet are sore from walking far on stony cold ground, and they are wet with mud, Wideacre mud, and with blood from a hundred cuts from the sharp chalk and flint stones. I am stumbling in midnight darkness through the woods near our house towards the river, the River Fenny, and I can hear the roar of its winter-deep waters, louder even than the howling and tossing of the wind in the treetops. It is too dark for me to see my way and I stumble in the blackness between the shattering blasts of lightning.

I could walk easier but for my burden. The only warm dry part about me is the little bundle of a new-born baby which I am holding tight to my heart under my cape. I know that this baby is my responsibility. She is mine. She belongs to me; and yet I must destroy her. I must take her down to the river and hold that tiny body under the turbulent waters. Then I can let her go, and the little body in the white shawl will be rolled over and over by the rushing flood, away from my empty hands. I must let her go.

The roaring noise of water gets louder as I struggle down the muddy footpath, and then I catch my breath with fear when I see the river – broader than it has ever been before, buffeting the trunks of the trees high on the banks, for it has burst out of its course. The fallen tree across the river which we use as a bridge is gone, hidden by boiling depths of rushing water. I give a little cry, which I cannot even hear above the noise of the storm, for I do not know how I am to get the baby into the river. And she must be drowned. I have to drown her. It is my duty as a Lacey.

This is too much for me, this fresh obstacle on top of my tears and the pain in my heart and the pain in my feet, and I start to struggle to wake. I cannot see how I can get this warm soft sleeping baby to the cold dashing river water, and yet I have to do it. I am stumbling forward, sobbing, towards the river, which is boiling like a cauldron in hell. But at the same time a part of my mind knows this is a dream – the dream which I always have. I struggle to be free of it, but it holds me. It is living its life in my mind. It is as if I have split into two people. One of them is a little girl struggling to wake from a nightmare, tossing in her bed in the little room and crying for her mama to come. And the other is this woman with a baby warm under her cloak and an utter determination to



drown her like an inbred puppy in the cold waters of the river which rushes from the slopes of the downs and through Wideacre and away.