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Opening extract from  
**I Capture the Castle**

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## *Chapter One*

I write this sitting in the kitchen sink. That is, my feet are in it; the rest of me is on the draining board, which I have padded with our dog's blanket and the tea cosy. I can't say that I am really comfortable, and there is a depressing smell of carbolic soap, but this is the only part of the kitchen where there is any daylight left. And I have found that sitting in a place where you have never sat before can be inspiring – I wrote my very best poem while sitting on the henhouse. Though even that isn't a very good poem. I have decided my poetry is so bad that I mustn't write any more of it.

Drips from the roof are plopping into the water butt by the back door. The view through the windows above the sink is excessively drear. Beyond the dank garden in the courtyard are the ruined walls on the edge of the moat. Beyond the moat, the boggy ploughed fields stretch to the leaden sky. I tell myself that all the rain we have had lately

is good for nature, and that at any moment spring will surge on us. I try to see leaves on the trees and the courtyard filled with sunlight. Unfortunately, the more my mind's eye sees green and gold, the more drained of all colour does the twilight seem.

It is comforting to look away from the windows and towards the kitchen fire, near which my sister Rose is ironing – though she obviously can't see properly, and it will be a pity if she scorches her only nightgown. (I have two, but one is minus its behind.) Rose looks particularly fetching by firelight because she is a pinkish gold, very light and feathery. Although I am rather used to her I know she is a beauty. She is nearly twenty-one and very bitter with life. I am seventeen, look younger, feel older. I am no beauty but have a neatish face.

I have just remarked to Rose that our situation is really rather romantic – two girls in this strange and lonely house. She replied that she saw nothing romantic about being shut up in a crumbling ruin surrounded by a sea of mud. I must admit that our home is an unreasonable place to live in. Yet I love it. The house itself was built in the time of Charles II, but it was damaged by Cromwell. The whole of our east wall was part of the castle; there are two round towers in it. The gatehouse is intact and a stretch of the old walls at their full height joins it to the house. And Belmotte

Tower, all that remains of an even older castle, still stands on its mound close by. But I won't attempt to describe our peculiar home fully until I can see more time ahead of me than I do now.

I am writing this journal partly to practise my newly acquired speedwriting and partly to teach myself how to write a novel – I intend to capture all our characters and put in conversations. It ought to be good for my style to dash along without much thought, as up to now my stories have been very stiff and self-conscious. The only time Father obliged me by reading one of them, he said I combined stateliness with a desperate effort to be funny. He told me to relax and let the words flow out of me.

I wish I knew of a way to make words flow out of Father. Years and years ago, he wrote a very unusual book called *Jacob Wrestling*, a mixture of fiction, philosophy and poetry. It had a great success, particularly in America, where he made a lot of money by lecturing on it, and he seemed likely to become a very important writer indeed. But he stopped writing. Mother believed this was due to something that happened when I was about five.

We were living in a small house by the sea at the time. Father had just joined us after his second American lecture tour. One afternoon when we were having tea in the

garden, he had the misfortune to lose his temper with Mother very noisily just as he was about to cut a piece of cake. He brandished the cake knife at her so menacingly that an officious neighbour jumped the garden fence to intervene and got himself knocked down. Father explained in court that killing a woman with our silver cake knife would be a long weary business entailing sawing her to death; and he was completely exonerated of any intention of slaying Mother. The whole case seems to have been quite ludicrous, with everyone but the neighbour being very funny. But Father made the mistake of being funnier than the judge and, as there was no doubt whatever that he had seriously damaged the neighbour, he was sent to prison for three months.

When he came out he was as nice a man as ever – nicer, because his temper was so much better. Apart from that, he didn't seem to me to be changed at all. But Rose remembers that he had already begun to get unsociable – it was then that he took a forty years' lease of the castle, which is an admirable place to be unsociable in. Once we were settled here he was supposed to begin a new book. But time went on without anything happening and at last we realized that he had given up even trying to write – for years now, he has refused to discuss the possibility. Most of his life is spent in the gatehouse room, which is icy cold in

winter as there is no fireplace; he just huddles over an oil stove. As far as we know, he does nothing but read detective novels from the village library. Miss Marcy, the librarian and schoolmistress, brings them to him. She admires him greatly and says 'the iron has entered into his soul'.

Personally, I can't see how the iron could get very far into a man's soul during only three months in jail – anyway, not if the man had as much vitality as Father had; and he seemed to have plenty of it left when they let him out. But it has gone now; and his unsociability has grown almost into a disease – I often think he would prefer not even to meet his own household. All his natural gaiety has vanished. At times he puts on a false cheerfulness that embarrasses me, but usually he is either morose or irritable – I think I should prefer it if he lost his temper as he used to. Oh, poor Father, he really is very pathetic. But he might at least do a little work in the garden. I am aware that this isn't a fair portrait of him. I must capture him later.

Mother died eight years ago, from perfectly natural causes. I think she must have been a shadowy person, because I have only the vaguest memory of her and I have an excellent memory for most things. (I can remember the cake knife incident perfectly – I hit the fallen neighbour with my little wooden spade. Father always said this got him an extra month.)

Three years ago (or is it four? I know Father's one spasm of sociability was in 1931) a stepmother was presented to us. We *were* surprised. She is a famous artists' model who claims to have been christened Topaz – even if this is true there is no law to make a woman stick to a name like that. She is very beautiful, with masses of hair so fair that it is almost white, and quite extraordinary pallor. She uses no make-up, not even powder. There are two paintings of her in the Tate Gallery: one by Macmorris, called *Topaz in Jade*, in which she wears a magnificent jade necklace; and one by H. J. Allardy which shows her nude on an old horsehair-covered sofa that she says was very prickly. This is called *Composition*; but as Allardy has painted her even paler than she is, *Decomposition* would suit it better.

Actually, there is nothing unhealthy about Topaz's pallor; it simply makes her look as if she belonged to some new race. She has a very deep voice – that is, she puts one on; it is part of an arty pose, which includes painting and lute-playing. But her kindness is perfectly genuine and so is her cooking. I am very, very fond of her – it is nice to have written that just as she appears on the kitchen stairs. She is wearing her ancient orange tea gown. Her pale, straight hair is flowing down her back to her waist. She paused on the top step and said: 'Ah, girls . . .' with three velvety inflections on each word.

Now she is sitting on the steel trivet, raking the fire. The pink light makes her look more ordinary, but very pretty. She is twenty-nine and had two husbands before Father (she will never tell us very much about them), but she still looks extraordinarily young. Perhaps that is because her expression is so blank.

The kitchen looks very beautiful now. The firelight glows steadily through the bars and through the round hole in the top of the range where the lid has been left off. It turns the whitewashed walls rosy; even the dark beams in the roof are a dusky gold. The highest beam is over thirty feet from the ground. Rose and Topaz are two tiny figures in a great glowing cave.

Now Rose is sitting on the fender, waiting for her iron to heat. She is staring at Topaz with a discontented expression. I can often tell what Rose is thinking and I would take a bet that she is envying the orange tea gown and hating her own skimpy old blouse and skirt. Poor Rose hates most things she has and envies most things she hasn't. I really am just as discontented, but I don't seem to notice it so much. I feel quite unreasonably happy this minute, watching them both; knowing I can go and join them in the warmth, yet staying here in the cold.

Oh, dear, there has just been a slight scene! Rose asked Topaz to go to London and earn some money. Topaz



replied that she didn't think it was worthwhile, because it costs so much to live there. It is true that she can never save more than will buy us a few presents – she is very generous.

'And two of the men I sit for are abroad,' she went on, 'and I don't like working for Macmorris.'

'Why not?' asked Rose. 'He pays better than the others, doesn't he?'

'So he ought, considering how rich he is,' said Topaz. 'But I dislike sitting for him because he only paints my head. Your father says that the men who paint me nude paint my body and think of their job, but that Macmorris paints my head and thinks of my body. And it's perfectly true. I've had more trouble with him than I should care to let your father know.'

Rose said: 'I should have thought it was worthwhile to have a little trouble in order to earn some real money.'

'Then *you* have the trouble, dear,' said Topaz.

This must have been very annoying to Rose, considering that she never has the slightest chance of that sort of trouble. She suddenly flung back her head dramatically and said: 'I'm perfectly willing to. It may interest you both to know that for some time now, I've been considering selling myself. If necessary, I shall go on the streets.'

I told her she couldn't go on the streets in the depths of Suffolk.

'But if Topaz will kindly lend me the fare to London and give me a few hints –'

Topaz said she had never been on the streets and rather regretted it, 'because one must sink to the depths in order to rise to the heights', which is the kind of Topazism it requires much affection to tolerate.

'And anyway,' she told Rose, 'you're the last girl to lead a hard-working immoral life. If you're really taken with the idea of selling yourself, you'd better choose a wealthy man and marry him respectably.'

This idea has, of course, occurred to Rose, but she has always hoped that the man would be handsome, romantic and lovable into the bargain. I suppose it was her sheer despair of ever meeting any marriageable men at all, even hideous, poverty-stricken ones, that made her suddenly burst into tears. As she only cries about once a year I really ought to have gone over and comforted her, but I wanted to set it all down here. I begin to see that writers are liable to become callous.

Anyway, Topaz did the comforting far better than I could have done, as I am never disposed to clasp people to my bosom. She was most maternal, letting Rose weep all over the orange velvet tea gown, which has suffered many

things in its time. Rose will be furious with herself later on, because she has an unkind tendency to despise Topaz; but for the moment they are most amicable. Rose is now putting away her ironing, gulping a little, and Topaz is laying the table for tea while outlining impracticable plans for making money – such as giving a lute concert in the village or buying a pig in instalments.

I joined in while resting my hand, but said nothing of supreme importance.

It is raining again. Stephen is coming across the courtyard. He has lived with us ever since he was a little boy – his mother used to be our maid, in the days when we could still afford one, and when she died he had nowhere to go. He grows vegetables for us and looks after the hens and does a thousand odd jobs – I can't think how we should get on without him. He is eighteen now, very fair and noble-looking, but his expression is just a fraction daft. He has always been rather devoted to me; Father calls him my swain. He is rather how I imagine Silvius in *As You Like It* – but I am nothing like Phebe.

Stephen has come in now. The first thing he did was to light a candle and stick it on the window ledge beside me, saying: 'You're spoiling your eyes, Miss Cassandra.'

Then he dropped a tightly folded bit of paper on this journal. My heart sank, because I knew it would contain a poem; I suppose he has been working on it in the barn. It is written in his careful, rather beautiful script. The heading is, ‘“To Miss Cassandra” by Stephen Colly’. It is a charming poem – by Robert Herrick.

What am I to do about Stephen? Father says the desire for self-expression is pathetic, but I really think Stephen’s main desire is just to please me; he knows I set store by poetry. I ought to tell him that I know he merely copies the poems out – he has been doing it all winter, every week or so – but I can’t find the heart to hurt him. Perhaps when the spring comes I can take him for a walk and break it to him in some encouraging way. This time I have got out of saying my usual hypocritical words of praise by smiling approval at him across the kitchen. Now he is pumping water up into the cistern, looking very happy.

The well is below the kitchen floor and has been there since the earliest days of the castle; it has been supplying water for six hundred years and is said never to have run dry. Of course, there must have been many pumps. The present one arrived when the Victorian hot-water system (alleged) was put in.

Interruptions keep occurring. Topaz has just filled the kettle, splashing my legs, and my brother Thomas has returned from school in our nearest town, King's Crypt. He is a cumbersome lad of fifteen with hair that grows in tufts, so that parting it is difficult. It is the same mousy colour as mine; but mine is meek.

When Thomas came in, I suddenly remembered myself coming back from school, day after day, up to a few months ago. In one flash I relived the ten-mile crawl in the jerky little train and then the five miles on a bicycle from Scoatney station – how I used to hate that in the winter! Yet in some ways I should like to be back at school; for one thing, the daughter of the manager at the cinema went there, and she got me into the pictures free now and then. I miss that greatly. And I rather miss school itself – it was a surprisingly good one for such a quiet little country town. I had a scholarship, just as Thomas has at his school; we are tolerably bright.

The rain is driving hard against the window now. My candle makes it seem quite dark outside. And the far side of the kitchen is dimmer now that the kettle is on the round hole in the top of the range. The girls are sitting on the floor making toast through the bars. There is a bright edge to each head, where the firelight shines through their hair.

Stephen has finished pumping and is stoking the copper – it is a great, old-fashioned brick one which helps to keep the kitchen warm and gives us extra hot water. With the copper lit as well as the range, the kitchen is much the warmest place in the house; that is why we sit in it so much. But even in summer we have our meals here, because the dining-room furniture was sold over a year ago.

Goodness, Topaz is actually putting on eggs to boil! No one told me the hens had yielded to prayer. Oh, excellent hens! I was only expecting bread and margarine for tea, and I don't get as used to margarine as I could wish. I thank heaven there is no cheaper form of bread than bread.

How odd it is to remember that 'tea' once meant afternoon tea to us – little cakes and thin bread and butter in the drawing room. Now it is as solid a meal as we can scrape together, as it has to last us until breakfast. We have it after Thomas gets back from school.

Stephen is lighting the lamp. In a second now, the rosy glow will have gone from the kitchen. But lamplight is beautiful, too.

The lamp is lit. And as Stephen carried it to the table, my father came out on the staircase. His old plaid travelling rug was wrapped round his shoulder – he had come

from the gatehouse along the top of the castle walls. He murmured, ‘Tea, tea – has Miss Marcy come with the library books yet?’ (She hasn’t.) Then he said his hands were quite numb; not complainingly, more in a tone of faint surprise – though I find it hard to believe that anyone living at the castle in winter can be surprised at any part of themselves being numb. And as he came downstairs shaking the rain off his hair, I suddenly felt so fond of him. I fear I don’t feel that very often.

He is still a splendid-looking man, though his fine features are getting a bit lost in fat and his colouring is fading. It used to be as bright as Rose’s.

Now he is chatting to Topaz. I regret to note that he is in his falsely cheerful mood – though I think poor Topaz is grateful for even false cheerfulness from him these days. She adores him, and he seems to take so little interest in her.

I shall have to get off the draining board – Topaz wants the tea cosy and our dog, Héloïse, has come in and discovered I have borrowed her blanket. She is a bull terrier, snowy white except where her fondant-pink skin shows through her short hair. All right, Héloïse darling, you shall have your blanket. She gazes at me with love, reproach, confidence and humour – how can she express so much just with two rather small slanting eyes?

I finish this entry sitting on the stairs. I think it worthy of note that I never felt happier in my life – despite sorrow for Father, pity for Rose, embarrassment about Stephen’s poetry and no justification for hope as regards our family’s general outlook. Perhaps it is because I have satisfied my creative urge; or it may be due to the thought of eggs for tea.