

Chapter 1

Stephen's mouth was filling with mud, wet slurry pressed on his eyelids, slid into his nostrils like earthworms. He flailed helplessly against the weight of it on his face, on his body, in his hair. He felt the silty terrible power of it pinning him down. When he opened his mouth to scream it poured into his throat, he could taste its wetness: the terrible non-taste of earth.

He choked on it, retching and heaving for breath, spitting and hawking. He was drowning in it, he was being crushed by its weight, he was being buried alive. His hands like paddles, he scrabbled against it, trying to claw a space for his face, and then he grabbed linen sheet, woollen blankets, counterpane, and he opened his eyes, clogged only by sleep, and saw the white ceiling of his home.

He whooped like a sick child, gasping in terror, rubbing his face roughly, dragging his palm across his lips, across his tongue where the dead taste still lingered. He whispered 'Oh God, oh God,' pitifully, over and over again. 'Oh God, oh God.'

Then he turned his head and saw her. In the doorway was his mother, her dressing-gown pulled on over her thick cotton nightdress, her tired face set in lines of fear and ... something else. He stared at her, trying to read the expression on her face: disapproval.

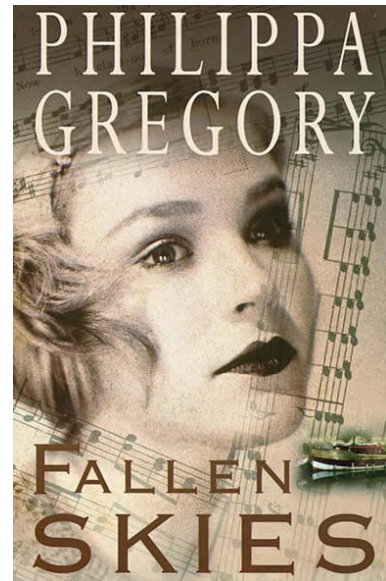
His bedside table was overturned, the ugly pottery electric lamp broken, his jug of water spilling into a puddle on the carpet. 'I'm sorry,' he said. He was humble, ashamed. 'I was dreaming.'

She came into the room and lifted up the table. She set the empty jug and the pieces of the bedside light on it in mute accusation. 'I wish you'd let me call Dr Mobey,' she said. 'You were having a fit.'

He shook his head quickly, his anger rising. 'It was nothing. A bad dream.'

'You should take one of my sleeping tablets.'

Stephen dreaded deep sleep more than anything else. In deep sleep the dream would go on, the dream of the collapsed dug-out, the dream of scrabbling and suffocating, and only after a lifetime of screaming horror, the bliss of feeling the earth shift and tumble and Coventry's gentle hands scraping the soil from his face and hearing his voice saying, 'You're all right, Sir. I'm here now. We'll have you out in a jiffy.' Stephen had wept then, wept like a baby. There had been no-one but Coventry to see his coward's tears, and he had wiped them away with dirty bleeding hands. Coventry had dug bare-handed,



refusing to put a spade in the earth. He had scabbled in the mud like a dog for its master and then they had both wept together; like new-found lovers, like reunited twins.

‘I’ll go downstairs and make myself a brew,’ he said. ‘You get to bed. I don’t want any tablets.’

‘Oh, go to sleep,’ Stephen’s mother said irritably. ‘It’s four in the morning. Far too late for tea.’

He got out of bed and threw his dressing-gown around his shoulders. When he stood, his height and maleness could dominate her. Now he was the master of the house, not a sick man screaming with nightmares. ‘I think I’ll have a brew and a cigarette,’ he said with the upper-class drawl he had learned from the senior officers in the trenches. ‘Then I’ll sleep. You toddle off, old lady.’

She turned obedient but resentful. ‘Well, don’t make a mess for Cook.’

He shepherded her out of the room and she shied away from him as if fear were contagious, as if terror were catching.

‘I wish you’d let me call Dr Mobey,’ she said again, pausing on the landing before she turned into her bedroom. ‘He says it’s very common. They have all sorts of things to cure nervous troubles. It’s just hysteria.’

Stephen smoothed his moustache, his broad handsome face regaining its confident good looks. He laughed. ‘I’m not a hysteric,’ he said. His voice was rich with his male pride. ‘Not me,’ he said, smiling. ‘I just get the odd bad dream.’

He turned away from her and loped down the stairs. The hall was dark but the fanlight above the front door showed him the green baize door that separated the domestic quarters in the basement from the rest of the house. He opened the door and went quietly down the back stairs.

The kitchen was light; it was warm from the kitchen range. Coventry was at the stove, warming a teapot. He looked up when Stephen entered and took him in, took him all in, with one comprehensive glance. Stephen sighed with relief at the sight of him. ‘Had a bit of a dream,’ he said. ‘Fancied a cup of tea, and here you are. Ministering bloody angel.’