

MAGGIE HOPE



The Servant Girl

Can she overcome the hardships of her past?



Maggie Hope was born and raised in County Durham. She worked as a nurse for many years, before leaving her career behind to raise her family.

Also by Maggie Hope:

A Wartime Nurse

A Mother's Gift

A Daughter's Gift

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A Daughter's Duty

Like Mother, Like Daughter

Orphan Girl

Eliza's Child

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Servant Girl



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To Valerie and Peter

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My thanks are due to Mrs Armstrong of Boulby Grange, also the staff of Saltburn Library for all their help. The work is a product of my imagination and I have combined fact with fiction in describing Saltburn-by-the-Sea and the surrounding area for the sake of the story.

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PART ONE

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Chapter 1

Hetty Pearson stood by the wrought-iron gates and looked up at the strips of iron tortured into curlicues and bows and dangerous-looking spikes. She changed the straw box containing her few possessions from her left hand to her right and moved from one foot to the other, easing the place where her new shoes had rubbed in the long walk from the station to Fortune Hall.

Sighing, she looked up at the ironwork again, noting the fancy 'F' intertwined with leaves, looking so much like the letters on the lectern cover in the chapel at home and therefore slightly sacrilegious. She missed Morton Main suddenly, acutely; it was a pain so sharp it sliced through her and she would have turned round and gone straight back to the station except that she knew she didn't have enough money for a ticket.

'You're fourteen now, pet,' Mam had said as they stood on the station at Bishop Auckland, only that same morning it had been but it felt like aeons ago. 'Howay now, be a good lass, don't get upset. You know you're

lucky to get a place so near, only the North Riding after all. You might have had to go south, think of that. Lots of girls do.'

'I'm all right, Mam,' Hetty had said.

Maggie Pearson gazed at her daughter who'd looked anything but all right, her face, so white beneath her mop of dark hair, and body as thin as a skinned rabbit. There was a hunted look in her eyes too, like a rabbit's. Maggie pushed the thought from her for though she felt like gathering Hetty to her and running out of the station and along the path to the bus stop where the bus would be turning round to go back to the village, she knew she had to try to send Hetty on her way cheerfully.

'Look now, it's farming country, you'll have meat every day. You'll come home with roses in your cheeks and fat as butter,' she said.

'I don't want to get fat,' said Hetty. She didn't want to talk about where she was going, she wanted to remind her mother that Cissy wouldn't go to sleep if she wasn't told a story first. Cissy was just a baby, not yet three, and she liked the story about the fairy who lived in the shed in the garden best. But the train was coming in, there was no time for anything else but a hug and then she was on the train and waving to her mother whose face was suspiciously red as she dabbed her eyes under the brim of her shabby black straw hat.

'Write every week now, won't you, pet?' Mam called.

'I will,' promised Hetty, and it was all she could say

for she was too full of panic now that the time had come and she was actually leaving.

‘An’ do what you’re told, be a good lass now.’

The train was pulling out and Mam was a forlorn figure in a shabby straw hat and down-at-heel shoes, getting smaller and smaller, and then she disappeared altogether. Hetty settled back into her seat and stared fixedly out of the window, willing herself not to cry. She took out the letter which had come with the postal order for her fare to Yorkshire and instructions for the walk from the station to Fortune Hall.

She read the letter again as she stood outside the locked gates on the lonely moor. Maybe she had made a mistake, maybe this wasn’t the place at all. Wasn’t it supposed to be a working farm? Here there was just a drive curving round a small copse, not a house in sight. And anyway, there was a heavy chain on the gate fastened with a padlock and no sign of anyone to unlock it.

‘You’ll have to ring the bell if you want to get in that way.’ The voice came from behind her, unnerving her, making her jump. She turned to find her eyes in line with the finest pair of boots she had ever seen and she stepped back, bumping into the gates. There was a boy on a horse, a great horse, bigger than the cart horse old Mr Gibson had to draw his butcher’s cart at home. It pranced a little and snorted and she watched it warily, not taking her eyes from it to give its rider more than a quick glance. He was young, not much older than she was, thin and tall with a

freckled face and light brown hair sticking to his forehead under his riding hat.

‘Walk around the wall, you’ll come to the main entrance,’ he advised her. He wheeled his horse away without more ado and cantered over the moor. He might have showed her where, she thought tiredly, picking up her box and beginning the trudge round the eight-foot-high wall. It went on and on. Surely the whole farm wasn’t walled in? She had to dodge overhanging branches, sycamore and elm mostly, and further on a stand of ash. She was just beginning to think the wall encircled the whole moor never mind the farm when all unexpectedly she came to a gate, not half so imposing as the first one but open and with a gatehouse to one side. A small man in old-fashioned breeches and braces over his collarless shirt stopped raking the gravel path in front of the cottage and leaned on his rake, surveying her up and down.

‘I reckon you must be the new lass for t’house,’ he said. ‘Not afore time neither. You’re late.’

‘I had to walk from the station,’ said Hetty. ‘Then I went to the wrong gate.’ She stood waiting. Though it was already September and there was a cold wind blowing across the moor, she felt hot and tired.

The man propped his rake by the wall and pushed his cap back on his head. ‘Well then,’ he said, ‘I reckon you’ll be ready for a nice glass of my Joan’s lemonade. Come on in and rest a minute before you face that lot up at the Hall. It won’t hurt Mrs Peel to wait a mite longer.’ His

face creased into a smile and his blue eyes twinkled from the wrinkles and Hetty felt better immediately. She had been on the way since early morning and here it was two o'clock already and if she could just sit down a minute or two and have a cold drink, well then, she could face the world. She followed him inside, noting the date above the lintel of the door: 1798 it said. Oh, it was an old house and when she got inside it looked even older. There were tiny latticed windows with flowered cretonne curtains and an old brick fireplace with a round oven and bright brass handle.

The old man spoke to a diminutive elderly woman who was standing at the table kneading dough – teacake dough, Hetty realised. It had nutmeg and spices in it, and the smell, together with that of baking bread, made her mouth water and she had to swallow hard. It was ages since Mam had been able to afford to put spices as well as currants in the teacakes, even when she could afford to make teacakes.

'I don't know, Bill, where's thee manners?' scolded the old woman to her husband and then she turned to Hetty. 'I'm Joan Oliver, love, and this is my man, Bill Oliver. Bill is gatekeeper for the Fortunes and general handyman too and that means he's at everyone's beck and call. Come away and sit down, love, take the weight off your feet. You're but a slip of a lass – are you sure you're old enough to leave school?'

'I'm fourteen, Mrs Oliver,' said Hetty as she sat down

on an apple-backed chair with a horsehair cover which immediately began to prickle against her legs, reminding her of her grandma's chairs at home in Morton. Her spirits lifted slightly. They lifted more when Mrs Oliver put a glass of lemonade in front of her, cool and cloudy and with a slice of real lemon floating on the top.

'Now I've got some new bramble jam, first of the year,' said the old woman. 'I'm sure you could eat a bit of bread and butter with a spoonful of jam?'

Hetty nodded, unable to speak.

'There then, get that down you, and then Bill will take you up to the big house.'

'Thank you, Mrs Oliver.'

Half an hour later she was trudging behind Bill Oliver up the road and there, round a bend, was Fortune Hall. It was a big house, all right, she thought, and she was going to be housemaid in it. Fervently she hoped she wasn't going to be the only one. It wasn't a grand house like the bishop's palace in Auckland, no, nor yet so big, and there were stables and cow byres and barns to one side of it and never in a million years could she imagine a cow byre on the side of the bishop's palace. But the house was imposing for all that; solid stone set square against the moorland wind, two storeys with high mullioned windows and tall chimneys with fancy pots.

'Watch your shoes, lass,' advised Mr Oliver. 'Keep them out of the muck, I see that stable lad's fell behind in his work as usual. There was horse muck on the cobbles,

and hens rooting about in the yard, and in the corner a dog set about barking, warning them away.

‘Shut thee mouth, Jess,’ said Mr Oliver, not unkindly, ‘this here’s Hetty and she’s coming to work here so you’d best get used to her.’ The dog wagged its tail and retreated to its kennel where it sat down, watching Hetty with bright intelligent eyes.

‘You found your way, then?’ The young rider she had met earlier was crossing the yard from the stables, and smiled amiably at Hetty. With his hat in his hand, he had a red ring around his forehead where it had rested and his hair had been pushed back over his head so that it stuck up untidily. Hetty smiled shyly at him.

‘Aye, Master Richard. I brought her in,’ said Mr Oliver. ‘Now seeing as you’re here, you’ll mebbe take her into the house?’

‘Right enough.’

Mr Oliver gave Hetty her straw box, which he had been carrying on his shoulder, and with a word of thanks she followed the boy into the house through the door which led directly into a sort of rear kitchen. Hetty’s heart was beginning to beat uncomfortably. She stared at the stone-flagged floor, only recently scrubbed by the look of it. Master Richard’s boots left a trail of what looked suspiciously like horse muck as he led the way through to a large inner kitchen, a room with a black-leaded range not much different from Hetty’s mother’s in Morton. But there was a newer range beside it, the latest thing with a

red-tiled oven door and surround and a cheerful fire burning in the grate. 'Vaughan's Model Oven 1931' it read in raised lettering on the oven door.

'This is the new maid, Mrs Peel,' said the boy, and winked at Hetty. He picked up a fairy cake from the tray on the scrubbed kitchen table and went off munching it, through a door at the other end of the kitchen.

'Don't go through there with those boots on, Master Richard!' the woman in the large white apron and old-fashioned cap called after him, and sighed as the door banged to and he was gone. 'He's been told time and time again to come in the small door and leave his boots in the lobby,' she grumbled. 'Now there's more work to be done and it's Ethel's afternoon off.' She turned back to Hetty, who was standing with her box before her like a shield.

'So you're the new housemaid. Hetty Pearson, isn't it? There's not much of you, is there? Such a skinny bit of a thing, you are.'

'I may be skinny but I can work,' said Hetty, drawing herself up to her full height and lifting her chin. If anyone else said she was skinny she would scream, she thought.

'Hmm, I'm sure. Well, you should call me Mrs Peel, I'm the housekeeper here at the Hall. Come on then, I'll show you where you're to sleep. Bring that box you're guarding with your life and you can leave it upstairs. It'll be quite safe there.'

They climbed narrow flights of stairs, six in all, two to each floor so that Hetty was thinking that if they went any

higher they'd burst out through the roof. Mrs Peel stopped on a tiny landing and pushed open a brown-painted door.

'That's it, then,' she said, puffing. 'Trust Ethel to have a day off when there's a new starter to bring up here. Put down your box and hang up your coat. I'll give you an apron when you get back down and then you can clean up after the young master. Let's see what sort of a job you make of that.'

Wondering how she would find her way back to the kitchen, Hetty watched the housekeeper disappear down the staircase. She stood a moment in the silence, or rather listening to the muffled noises of the old house. Somewhere a door banged; a pigeon cooed close by. There was a squeaking sound. Oh God, don't let it be rats, she prayed. Hetty had had an irrational fear of rats ever since she'd found one climbing into her young sister's pram and it hadn't run away when she flung her arms at it and shouted, just turned and stared at her with red-rimmed eyes.

She shook her head. After all, she was not a bairn any more, she was practically grown up, working for a living, she wasn't frightened because she was on her own in the attic of an old house. She picked up her box yet again and took it into the room. Mind, an attic it is, she thought despairingly. The roof came right down to within six inches of the floor and the floor itself was of rough wooden planks. Whoever had built the house hadn't thought it necessary to use good materials up here.

But there was a tiny window and red-checked curtains, drawn so that some of the afternoon sunshine got in and lit up the two beds with their red-checked counterpanes. There were two tiny chests of drawers and a washstand with a cheap pottery basin and jug standing on it and some soap in a soapdish, all decorated with unlikely pink roses and violent green leaves.

One of the beds was obviously in use, the bedclothes had just been pulled together rather than made, so Hetty put her box on the other and started to unpack when she remembered that Mrs Peel had said she was just to leave her coat and go straight back down. There was a hook on the back of the door so she hung her coat on that, then she looked in the small mirror over the washstand and pulled her comb through her hair.

I'm not going to think of anything, she told herself in the mirror, I'm not thinking of Mam or Dad or home nor nothing. I'm just going to get on with it, do what I'm told, think about nothing, else I won't get through the rest of the day without making a baby of meself. I won't cry though, no matter what. But her feet hurt. Hurrying, she rummaged through the box and found her old school shoes. They had steel segs in the toes and heels to make them last and clattered a bit on the floor but they were well polished and, most important of all, they were comfortable. The relief she felt when she put them on was instantaneous and her spirits lifted. She even managed to grin at herself in the mirror and she snatched another minute to look out

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of the tiny window at the moor and the track she had so recently travelled, snaking away into the distance.

Why, it wasn't that different from the fell back home, she thought. Though from this distance the heather wasn't half so bonny as that back in the Durham dale. Feeling better having come to this conclusion, she closed the attic door after herself and made her way downstairs.

Only she must have taken the wrong turning on the first landing she came to and suddenly the floor was stained and polished so that it shone and a lush red carpet ran down the middle. And when she got to the head of the next flight of stairs, the banisters were polished mahogany and the stairs themselves were broad and shallow and swept down grandly to the next floor.

Hetty hesitated. Maybe she should go back, but now she wasn't sure which way she had come and felt thoroughly disoriented. And worse, there were people talking close by. She shrank back into an alcove but it was too late, there was a man looking down at her with exactly the same expression on his face as her gran wore to inspect her shoe when she'd trodden in some dog dirt.

'Good Lord!' he said. 'Just look at this, Richard.' He put a hand on Hetty's shoulder and pulled her forward into the light. 'It's a bundle of rags. I'll lay you odds on she's here to see what she can pilfer from the bedrooms and we've caught her in the act!' Roughly he grabbed her wrist. 'Don't think you can get away, girl, I'm going to hand you over to the police!'

A bundle of rags? Why, she had on her good dress, it wasn't a rag at all. Oh, it might have a darn in the elbow where she'd torn it on a fence but it was a nice cotton dress, with blue flowers on it. Mam had got the material in the market at Bishop Auckland. Hetty burned with humiliation. She tried to tug her arm away from him but his grip was firm.

'Let me go, you great bully! This is a nice dress an' all, me mam made it for me!' Hetty twisted and writhed to get away but his grip was hard on her shoulder, the fingers biting in cruelty. So she lashed out with her foot, catching him on the shin with the steel segs in the toe of her boot. He swore and jumped back but he didn't let go.

'Leave her alone, Matt, do. She's not a thief, she's the new housemaid. I suspect she's just got lost on her way downstairs.'

It was Master Richard who was with him, oh praise the Lord for that, she hadn't noticed at first. He wouldn't let this man with his cruel face and slitty blue eyes hurt her. Richard was her friend, she knew it instinctively. He carried some clout too, for the one he called Matt let her go immediately.

'Oh God, where did they pick this one up? I suppose it was a Durham pit village judging by that execrable accent. No doubt she came cheap, that's all Father cares about.' He bent down and rubbed his shin, wincing. 'Get out of my sight,' he said to Hetty. 'And don't think I'll forget you lashing out at me. What the hell have you got on your feet? A pair of pit boots?'
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Chapter 2

‘What are you doing, coming in through the front of the house? The back stairs not good enough for you, then?’ Mrs Peel frowned as Hetty pushed open the baize-covered door to the kitchen. She didn’t seem to be looking for an answer which was just as well, thought Hetty, for she could hardly speak she felt that mortified. That Matt, whatever else he was, was a nasty, superior sort of bloke and he had been so contemptuous of her that her face burned at the memory. She had fled down the grand staircase and instinctively made for the back of the house and found the kitchen. She came to a halt, breathing heavily, feeling sweat trickle down her spine.

‘Come on then, fill the bucket and get that passage cleaned up, before the master sees it. He can’t abide muck from the farm in the house and Richard’s a good lad really, we don’t want to get him into trouble. There’s a sacking apron hanging there.’ The housekeeper pointed to a bucket standing by the stone sink under the window and obediently Hetty picked it up and stood it in the sink.

There was a hot tap. By, that was a good thing, hot water out of a tap. What would Mam give for such luxury? Even as she filled the bucket and found a bar of Sunlight soap and a rag under the sink, she pondered on where the hot water came from, how it was heated. As far as she could see there was no set pot or any sort of boiler.

‘Hurry up now, get on with it, you’re not going to turn out to be a daydreamer like the last one, are you?’ Mrs Peel’s tone was sharp and Hetty hastily lifted the bucket out of the sink.

‘No, Mrs Peel,’ she said, wondering who the last one was and why she had left. Maybe if she could make friends with the other girl – Ethel, was it, the housekeeper had called her? – maybe Ethel would tell her all she wanted to know.

‘Mind you clean it up properly and then when it’s dry you can polish it,’ Mrs Peel said as she went out through the baize door again.

There weren’t many marks on the floor and it was easily cleaned for this part of the hall leading into the kitchen was covered in a dark linoleum. It was only when Hetty was on her knees that she could discern the pattern of leaves and squares in various shades of dark brown. She scrubbed away until the linoleum was spotless and then sat back on her heels feeling satisfied. She pushed a lock of dark hair back behind her ear. Thank goodness Mam had cut it for her before she came. Mam was a dab hand at cutting hair. It was so easy to look after when it was cut

in a short bob and anyroad it was all the fashion; all her friends were having their hair cut.

Hetty's thoughts always went off on a course of their own when she was doing anything so boring as scrubbing a floor. Though her movements were automatic she was thorough if she was thinking of something pleasant, such as how her mam had cut Hetty's best friend Dorothy James's hair for her, making a real good job of it and even using a razor on the ends so that the blonde hair nestled into the nape of Dorothy's neck. Hetty was that proud of her mam. By, she was clever an' all, she was. And Mam only charged tuppence and Dorothy said that if she'd had to go to the hairdresser in Bishop Auckland it would have cost one and sixpence, which of course Dorothy hadn't got, being as how her father was locked out of the pit along with most of the miners. Bar the safety men that was. Hetty's own dad was studying to be an overman and then he would go down the pit even when the men weren't working just to make sure it was safe. By, she hoped he passed his examination.

Suddenly Hetty's attention was jerked back to the present as she heard a door open somewhere at the front of the house beyond the sweep of the staircase. A man laughed and she shrank back. She didn't want to meet that one again, oh no! Picking up her bucket she retreated into the comparative haven of the kitchen quarters.

'Come on then, lass, take off your pinny and wash your hands and come and have your tea,' said Mrs Peel, smiling

at Hetty, who blinked in surprise, the change in the house-keeper was so marked. Mrs Peel was sitting at the head of the table, which was now laid with a plain white cloth and there was fresh bread and slices of tongue and pickled beetroot and the biggest, ripest tomatoes Hetty had ever seen. There were three men sitting at the table, all of them in their shirtsleeves and corduroy trousers held up by braces and wide leather belts.

‘Yes, Mrs Peel.’ Hetty hurried over to the sink to do as she was bidden for as she smelled the food there suddenly seemed to be a gaping hole in her stomach, she was so hungry. It was hours since she’d had the bread and jam at the Olivers’.

‘This the new maid, then?’ commented one of the men, the eldest of the three. He was a short man but brawny, with grizzled hair and the weathered red face of a man who worked in the open air all day. Just like the farmer on the hill above Morton Main, thought Hetty, a nice man who used to let the miners’ children look at the lambs when they came in the spring and gather blackberries from the hedgerows in the autumn so long as they didn’t tramp across the fields. Hetty smiled shyly as she sat down at the table and took the cup of tea Mrs Peel handed to her.

‘This is Hetty,’ said Mrs Peel. ‘Hetty, this is Mr Jones, our herdsman.’ She was looking at him in a way which Hetty could only describe as soppy. In fact, she was a little embarrassed for the older woman, but Mr Jones seemed not to notice it.

‘And there’s Sam and Bob, sitting there making pigs of themselves wi’ the tongue,’ he said. The other two men, Sam, a lad in his teens, and Bob, not much older, grinned, taking no offence at all. ‘You’d best dig in, lass, you look as though you could do wi’ a bit o’ meat on your bones. Are you sure you’re old enough to leave school?’

‘I’m fourteen,’ asserted Hetty. She took a slice of bread, thickly spread with creamy farm butter, and placed a slice of tongue on it to make a sandwich. Oh, it was lovely, the meat thick and tasty and the bread fresh and crusty. For a minute or two she could think of nothing else but her sandwich.

‘You like your meat, then,’ observed one of the farm hands, Sam it was, the younger one. ‘Did your mother not tell you not to bolt your food?’ Hetty put the sandwich down on her plate, her face bright red. She looked across the table at him, ready to retort. By, she’d had enough of humiliation for one day, she thought. But Mr Jones beat her to it.

‘You mind your own business, young Sam,’ he snapped. ‘I’ve not noticed you be backward in coming forwards when it comes to eating. Get on with your own meal, there’s plenty to do outside afore you go home tonight.’

‘Aw, I didn’t mean owt, I was only funning,’ protested Sam. ‘An’ you know it’s my turn to get off early. I’m going to the pictures in Hutton, they’re coming to the church hall tonight. A cowboy it is.’

‘Come now, Mr Jones,’ Mrs Peel said sweetly, ‘I’m

sure the lad meant nothing. Let's not have any bad feeling at the table. If there's anything I dislike it's words said at the table.'

'You're a good woman, Mrs Peel,' said the herdsman. 'But we have to keep the young ones in order, haven't we? An' happen the lass didn't have much dinner.'

Hetty stared at her plate, her hunger gone.

'Finish that sandwich and drink up your tea, Hetty,' ordered Mrs Peel. 'Don't forget that floor will be ready to polish now it's dry and I'll need you later on to help with the family dinner.'

The sandwich tasted like sawdust to Hetty but she ate her way steadily through it and drank the strong sweet tea. By this time the men were finished their meal and Mr Jones had taken a pipe out of his pocket and was looking at Mrs Peel enquiringly.

'Do smoke if you wish, Mr Jones,' that lady said.

'Please may I leave the table? I've had sufficient, thank you,' said Hetty, and Bob and Sam exploded into laughter. Now what had she done? Wasn't she just following the lessons in manners she had been taught at school?

'Go and get on with your work,' Mrs Peel said, frowning at her while Mr Jones half rose in his chair and gave the lads a glare which quelled them in an instant.

Polishing the linoleum in the hall, rubbing at it until her arm ached and the smell of lavender polish hung heavy in the air, Hetty willed herself not to cry. By, she thought, it had been a long day and not at all as she had thought it

would be. She was so confused and her head ached with tiredness. Maybe tomorrow would be better. Because if it wasn't she didn't know what she would do. Run away? But where would she run to? And anyroad, Mam needed her to send some of her pay home, things were so hard for them there.

Desperately trying to lighten her mood, Hetty began to think of Saltburn. How lovely it had looked earlier in the day when she had taken half an hour between trains and hurried along the cliff top to gaze out to sea, with the sands stretching along to Marske on one side and Huntcliff soaring on the other. She remembered coming on the chapel trip to Saltburn-by-the-Sea when she was little. By, it was nice. The houses were all grand with bay windows and lace curtains and they swept down to the top of the cliff in terraces all named after jewels. When she had made her fortune she would go to live in the jewel streets, oh yes, she would. One way or another she was going to do that.

At nine o'clock Ethel came back from her afternoon off and Hetty's heart lifted as soon as she saw her. She was older than Hetty, about nineteen, and as round as a barrel with red cheeks and mousy brown hair and the brightest pair of sparkling hazel eyes which twinkled merrily as she looked Hetty up and down.

'So you're the new lass, are you?' she said. Hetty waited for a comment on her skinniness but Ethel said

nothing. Or at least she did, but it was a nice comment. 'I wouldn't mind being thin like you,' she said. 'I bet you could be a model like those on the front of *Woman's Weekly* when you get a bit older. Or even a film star with those big dark eyes and wavy hair.' She held up a strand of her own mousy locks ruefully. 'Do you think I'd look better if I bleached mine? It's neither one thing nor the other as it is.'

Hetty was shocked at the idea. Only fast girls bleached their hair, or at least that's what Mam said. Nobody in Morton Main did anyway. Luckily, she didn't have to give an answer for Mrs Peel had just come into the kitchen from the front of the house and heard the question.

'I see you two have met,' she said. 'But mind you, Ethel Weldon, if you bleach your hair you'll be out of here like a shot, make no mistake about that. And don't be putting ideas into Hetty's head, neither, she's only fourteen, you should be setting her an example. Now where have you been? You're half an hour late already. I've had to serve in the dining room for you.'

Ethel pulled a face at Hetty behind Mrs Peel's back. 'Sorry, Mrs Peel. But it's a long walk up from the village, you know.'

'I hadn't noticed it getting any longer than it always is,' retorted the housekeeper. 'Come on now, I want to get finished in time tonight.'

There was no doubt that Ethel was a good worker, thought Hetty. Once she had an apron tied round her

middle she set to with a will and soon all the dishes from the family's meal were carried through from the dining room and between the two of them they were washed and dried and put away in the wall cupboards. After steaming mugs of cocoa the two girls were dispatched to bed.

The day had gone on forever, thought Hetty wearily as she trudged after Ethel up the last few stairs. There was electricity in the main part of the house but not in the attic and both the girls carried candlesticks in their hands. The flames cast eerie shadows on the walls of the dingy top landing. Hetty was glad that she had Ethel with her, her imagination had been vivid enough in the daylight. Now she stared straight ahead at Ethel's back, determined not to look into the shadows. 'For fear of something 'orrible,' her brother Frank would have said – but then, he'd always made fun of her being scared of the dark.

Inside the bedroom, with the door shut and the curtains drawn against the great black emptiness of the moor, it was cosy enough. When the girls had undressed and washed in the tepid water from the jug they jumped into bed and blew out the candles. Hetty lay on her back covered only by the sheet for it was a warm September night and the heat had risen through the house until it was trapped under the eaves.

'It's a warm room, anyroad,' she remarked, and Ethel laughed.

'Oh, aye, mebbe it is now, but wait until the winter sets in proper – you'll change your mind then all right. An'

be glad of a hot-water bottle, I reckon. I'm glad you've come, though, Hetty. You'll see, we'll get on like a house afire. I'm fed up having all the work to do mesel' since Jenny left.'

'Why did she leave? Was she getting married?'

'No, not her, though I daresay she wished she had been. No, she left in a hurry with a bun in the oven.'

Hetty sat up in bed, shocked to the core. 'A baby, do you mean? And she wasn't getting married?'

'She wouldn't say who the feller were, though I have me suspicions. She was no blooming good at housework anyway. Forget about Jenny, don't waste any sympathy on her. You'll have enough to think about, wi' your looks.'

Hetty lay quiet, wondering what she meant for a few minutes. Her back and limbs were aching with tiredness but her mind was buzzing so that she felt she would never drop off to sleep. Then what would she do at five-thirty in the morning when she had to get up to light the kitchen fire? Maybe if she had one or two questions answered...

'I met Master Richard today, he seems nice. But the other one, Matt, who is he exactly?'

'Be careful not to get in that one's way, Hetty,' answered Ethel. 'He's got a nasty tongue all right. Thank goodness he's away at the university most of the time. Master Richard's a nice enough lad, though. He goes to school at Barnard Castle during the week but comes home at weekends. It's a pity Master Matthew is the eldest, that's what I think. He treats us like dirt.'

‘I know. I got lost on my way downstairs and ended up at the front of the house and he said I must be a thief. He... he said I was a bundle of rags.’

‘Take no notice. Like I said, he’s just got a nasty tongue. Thinks too much of himself, he does. What are they anyway? Nowt but jumped-up hill farmers. Because the master made some money with the minerals on his land, they think they’re gentry. But you can see for yourself, the master still farms, it’s in his blood.’

‘I’ve never met him.’

‘You will soon enough. He’s all right and the mistress too – though you don’t see much of her. Mrs Peel runs the house as you might have noticed. A bit strange is the missus.’

‘Strange?’

‘Aye. Well, you’ll see for yourself as I said.’ Ethel yawned hugely. ‘I’m tired. I’ve been walking out with my boyfriend. I’ve got a lad, you know.’ She said it as though Hetty would not believe her but Hetty did. Ethel was a nice girl, anyone could see that.

‘What’s he like?’ she asked.

‘He’s a lovely lad and he likes girls with a bit of flesh on them. Something to take hold of, he says. He works at the Moorcock in the village. The heavy work and that. But he’s got ambition. One day he’ll have his own pub, he reckons.’

Ethel fell silent and Hetty turned over on to her side and closed her eyes. It would be a full day tomorrow.

Goodnight, Mam, she whispered. Goodnight, Dad. God bless all the family. Give Cissy a kiss for me. And the others an' all, but especially Cissy. For a minute her heart ached to see her little sister and then she was asleep.

Chapter 3

The days at Fortune Hall began to settle into a routine for Hetty. She and Ethel were up while it was still dark, and while Hetty saw to the fire in the kitchen, Ethel lit the one in the dining room so that the room was nicely warmed up before the master came down to breakfast at seven-thirty, for autumn on the moor could be cold. The boys, when they were at home, didn't rise for another hour and Mrs Fortune never came downstairs at all in the mornings. Instead, Mrs Peel prepared a tray of buttered toast with the crusts cut off – a scandalous waste of food Hetty thought when she first saw it, but then she supposed the bits went to the hens so it wasn't so bad. There was a dish of fine blackcurrant jelly on the tray and a silver coffee pot and dainty cup and saucer and plate. Though how anyone could drink coffee instead of tea at that time of the morning, Hetty couldn't imagine. Not that the mistress drank much, mostly the tray came down untouched, showing little regard for the careful preparation Mrs Peel had put into it.

The master sent for Hetty that very first morning, even before he had his usual interview with Mr Jones. A good job, she thought, that Mrs Peel had got her her uniform from the dressmaker in the village the night before. Somehow she hadn't felt the same about her dress with the blue flowers since Master Matthew had been nasty about it.

So she stood before the master's desk in the black dress, and black cotton stockings, which she hated with a fervour she had never felt for any other items of clothing in her life. The pinafore she wore was a bit on the big side and the cap came over her ears but Mrs Peel said she would grow into them. Mr Fortune was writing in a big book and Hetty stood quietly watching him. She soon forgot about what she was wearing for she was so interested in him and the way he wrote, with great flourishes and much underlining which her teacher had told her was a bad thing and not the right way to emphasise anything. His fingers were strong and brown with fine hairs on the back and he was tall and broad and older than her own father, maybe as old as the mine manager at Morton though he was better dressed, she could tell that. His leather riding boots, which were stretched out and crossed one over the other, were easily as fine as those of Master Richard and polished so brightly they reflected the light from the windows. She could see them plainly for they came almost all the way through the kneehole of the desk. There was a smell about the place just like that in the mine manager's

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house and it was a moment before Hetty identified it as bay rum, or at least that was what Dad had told her it was. She wrinkled her nose. It wasn't very nice.

The room was though, she thought, her attention wandering. It was large and high-ceilinged with the walls covered in bookcases filled with books which didn't look as though they were there to be read; they were all bound in a dark red leather with the titles picked out in gold lettering. On the top of the desk there was more red leather, this time well-used and scuffed. By, thought Hetty, I would read the books if they were mine. They made her fingers itch to get at them and open them up and see what they said.

'Now then, Miss Pearson.'

Hetty jumped. Never in her life had she been called Miss Pearson. She looked back at Mr Fortune who was gazing at her from under bushy eyebrows which were startlingly dark though his hair was silver.

'Yes, sir?'

'Hetty, isn't it? How old are you, Hetty? You're very small and thin.'

'I'm fourteen, sir.'

'Hmm. Old enough, and perhaps it's a good thing you don't look older.'

She couldn't think why that should be. 'I can work, sir,' she volunteered.

'Yes. Well, I expect you can. For if you don't, you'll be on your way home before you know it. There are plenty

more where you came from,' he said, his tone impersonal, distant almost, as though his mind was on other things.

Hetty closed her mouth tight to stay the retort rising to her lips but she could feel the angry colour in her cheeks and there was nothing she could do about that. This man – and he was nowt but a man, her dad always said no one was better than anyone else no matter how much money or fancy houses they had – this man had learnt no manners when he was a bairn, that was for sure.

'Well, that's all I wanted to say. You can go and get on with your work. And mind you do what Mrs Peel tells you, then you'll be all right.' He bent his head over the book once again, appearing to forget all about Hetty.

'Thank you, sir,' she said. If he forgot his manners, she wasn't going to. She had got as far as the door when he spoke again.

'Don't bang the door,' he said. Resisting the impulse to fling it to as hard as she could, she closed it carefully without a sound.

The day went by quickly enough. She scrubbed the kitchen floor while Ethel turned out the bedrooms, and she cleaned and polished the stairs while Ethel did the hall. Hetty even got to use the vacuum cleaner and marvelled at how easy it was to clean the carpets with it. It gave her something to think about. How did it work? She puzzled over it, it was better than worrying that she would meet up with Master Matt and he would be nasty again. By, she didn't know whether she could control her tongue

if that happened. And it stopped her thinking about home. It was nice that Ethel was there. Even when they weren't working together they would pass in the hall or elsewhere and Ethel would grin at her or pull a funny face, oh yes, it made Hetty feel good.

'Well, that's the boys away again, thank goodness,' said Mrs Peel when they sat round the kitchen table at noon and ate shepherd's pie that was like a dream, so loaded with meat it was. And the potato was creamed with butter and crisp and brown on top, and there were carrots and cabbage, and rice pudding with nutmeg on the top to follow. Hetty was busy thinking how lovely it would be to sit down to a meal like this at home with little Cissy and the boys and Mam and Dad, they hadn't done that for a long time even before the lockout. The thought almost took away her appetite.

'Master Richard's all right but I can't abide the other one, I don't mind telling you,' said Mr Jones. 'Well, he's gone now, until Christmas, I hope. That lad has no idea how to look after his own horse. Why only t'other day he came home with Marshal all lathered up—'

'Yes, well, best not talk about the family, Mr Jones,' said Mrs Peel. 'You never know who might be listening.'

Hetty came back from her dream of home and realised they were discussing Master Matt. He'd gone and until Christmas! A wave of thankfulness swept over her. Now she didn't have to be looking over her shoulder all the time in case the hated voice caught her unawares.

‘Nay, I’m saying nowt more, you’re right, Mrs Peel.’ Mr Jones shook his head and took out his pipe with his usual enquiring glance at the housekeeper.

After Mrs Fortune’s tray had been brought down and the washing-up was finished, Ethel washed out the cloths. ‘Come on, we have time for a walk round in the fresh air,’ she said to Hetty. ‘No one’s going to miss us for ten minutes or so.’

They walked through the orchard, which was at the back of the house, behind the farm buildings. The apple trees were stunted and neglected-looking and the few apples left on them were scabby. But the wind blew hard across the moor and the orchard was unprotected. The trees were all bent before the prevailing wind. A few hens picked about under them and a litter of piglets grunted and squealed over fallen apples and Hetty laughed in delight at the sight of their snouts, all black from burrowing in the sparse soil.

‘We’ll walk to the ridge, shall we?’ asked Ethel, and without waiting for an answer strode to the edge of the trees and on, up a narrow path between the paddock and the heather. Only five minutes later they were on top of a small ridge and there the moor was laid out before them, nothing but heather for miles save for the roofs of the village below, the little stone church, and sheep scattered about searching for fodder.

‘It’s lovely, Ethel,’ said Hetty.

‘Is it?’ Ethel gave the view a dismissive look and sat

down on an outcrop of stone, patting the space beside her in invitation. 'I don't know. I've lived here all my life. Now I like a bit of life – to go into Whitby. Once I went to Harrogate with the mistress – her family lives in Harrogate. At least they did, I think they're dead now. I liked Harrogate but I wouldn't like to live there, not unless I was a nob. But there's plenty to do if you have the money to do it.' Ethel sighed and looked down at the village. 'My dad worked in one of the Fortune mines but it closed down and now he's out of work.'

'Mine an' all,' said Hetty. 'I mean, he works in the pit and now it's closed down.'

'Life's bloody awful, isn't it?' said Ethel, and Hetty blinked. She'd never heard it put in such strong language but when she thought of it, yes, life was awful.

'Will Master Matthew be gone a long time?' she asked hopefully as they made their way back to the house.

'Until Christmas with any luck.'

Hetty felt as though a load had been lifted from her shoulders. Christmas, that was weeks and weeks away. Weeks when she wouldn't have to worry about meeting up with him, just his father. Master Richard now, he was all right. Did he take after his mother? She still hadn't met Mrs Fortune. Hetty reckoned she must be really poorly to have to stay in her room all the time, poor woman.

A few days later Hetty got to see Mrs Fortune. It was on Ethel's half day.

'Take the mistress's tray up, Hetty,' a harassed Mrs

Peel told her, 'and mind you don't trip and spill anything. The mistress can't abide a messy tray. And don't make a clatter neither. She'll have a headache, I suppose, she usually has in the mornings.'

Hetty had had to wear her best shoes until she could have the segs taken out of her comfortable ones down at the cobbler's in the village. By, she thought as she crossed the hall and started to climb the stairs, she'd been that glad when she got her old shoes back, even if it did mean she would have to have them mended more often now.

There was a bowl of fresh flowers on a table outside Mrs Fortune's door and on impulse Hetty put down the tray and took a rose out of the display and laid it on the tray. There. When her gran had been badly she had really appreciated it when Hetty took her roses from her dad's prize bushes. 'The scent makes me feel better already, pet,' she had said. Smiling slightly at the memory, Hetty knocked at the door and, as she had been told, opened it and took the tray inside without waiting for an answer.

'Who are you? Where's Ethel?'

The windows were shrouded with heavy curtains and it was dark in the room and stifling. The voice coming from the bed was querulous. Hetty put down the tray on the bedside table, moving a bottle and glass aside to do it.

'My name is Hetty, ma'am,' she said. 'I'm the new maid.' There was a stale, sour smell in the room which made her gag a little. The poor woman, had she been sick? Maybe a sip of tea and a piece of toast would do her good.

‘I’ve brought your breakfast tray,’ she added. Without thinking, Hetty crossed to the window and pulled the cord and the heavy curtains swished back, flooding the room with light. She looked for the catch to open the window and was stretching towards it when a sharp cry stopped her.

‘Leave that window alone! If I want it open, I’ll say so. Who did you say you were?’

‘Hetty, ma’am. I’m the new maid. I’ve brought up your breakfast tray.’ She moved back to the bed. ‘Will I help you sit up, ma’am?’ She bent over the bed and took hold of the dishevelled bedclothes to pull them straight. The thick satin-covered quilt had slid to the floor, and she picked it up and replaced it on the bed. Meanwhile the woman lay there watching her through narrowed eyes. Hetty had grown accustomed to the half-light and saw Mrs Fortune was a woman perhaps a little older than Mrs Peel, though she had an abundance of dark hair which was spread over the pillow and down her shoulders. Impatiently she pushed the hair back from her forehead.

‘I don’t want any breakfast, I don’t feel well,’ she said. ‘Take it away.’

Hetty gazed at her. Poor woman, she thought. She remembered the time she’d had diphtheria when she was ten and how awful she had felt. She’d wanted to be left alone then, but when the nurses in the fever hospital had washed her and brushed her hair and changed her sheets, how much better she had felt. And surely Mrs Fortune would feel better if she ate a little breakfast?

‘Do you have a headache?’ Hetty asked, quite forgetting to call the lady ‘ma’am’. ‘I can fetch some fresh water and bathe your forehead, if you like? And if you have a clean nightie...’

‘Go away, I said!’

‘Oh. Yes, ma’am.’ But still Hetty hesitated. Mrs Fortune opened her eyes properly and stared at her balefully but after a moment her gaze softened as she saw the genuine concern in Hetty’s expression. Oh well, she might as well let the girl do what she wanted, then perhaps she’d be left in peace. Besides, the thought of having a wash without having to make the effort herself began to seem appealing.

‘Go on, then. There are nightgowns in the top drawer of the dressing table. But don’t chatter, I can’t stand anyone chattering in the mornings.’

‘No, ma’am.’ Hetty fairly skipped to the adjacent bathroom where luckily there was a bowl she could use and lovely fluffy towels and fancy soap. She held the soap to her nose and it smelled lovely. She almost remarked to Mrs Fortune how lovely it was but stopped herself just in time, remembering about the chattering.

Shortly she had coaxed the invalid into having what Hetty’s gran called a proper wash and Mrs Fortune was sitting up in bed with the pillows propped up behind her and her hair tied back with a blue ribbon, the bed freshly made up.

‘Now, wouldn’t you like a nice cup of tea and mebbe a bit of toast?’ Hetty coaxed. ‘I know when you don’t feel

well you don't want to eat but my gran always says if you're badly you need good food to be able to fight it. An' there's a nice coddled egg and it's still hot. See, it's under this cover. Doesn't it look nice?'

Elizabeth Fortune looked at the tray which Hetty had brought to her side and hesitated. Maybe she could drink a cup of coffee. 'I hope that is coffee, not tea?' she said, frowning slightly.

'Oh, yes, I forgot, it's coffee. If it's cold I can bring some fresh?'

'Just pour me half a cup, it will do.'

Somehow, when Hetty took the tray back down into the kitchen most of the egg had been eaten and two pieces of toast. In the bedroom, Elizabeth lay back on the pillow, her headache faded to insignificance. The curtains were drawn back to let in the light and she had a wrap over her shoulders to save her from the draught from the window.

'I'll just open it a little bit,' the girl had said. She had a gentle touch that one, and a way with her. There was no denying Elizabeth felt better. Perhaps she would get out of bed in an hour or two and sit by the window. She looked up as the door opened without a preliminary knock. Havelock, of course, bringing in the stink of the farmyard no doubt. She picked up the bottle of cologne which Hetty had placed conveniently on her bedside table and dabbed a little on her temples.

'Good morning, my dear,' he said, striding into the room and across to the window. 'What's this? Feeling

better this morning or did that fool of a girl Ethel do this without your permission?’

‘No, no, Havelock, of course she didn’t. In any case, it wasn’t her, it was the new girl, Hetty.’

‘I’m not sure about that one, she’s nobbut a child herself. She can’t be much use, little and thin she is, there’s nothing to her. I don’t doubt she’ll have to go at the end of the month.’

‘No, she won’t,’ Elizabeth said with some heat. ‘I like her and you’re not going to get rid of her like you did Jenny.’

Havelock looked impatient. ‘The lass should have kept her legs crossed, then she wouldn’t have been in trouble,’ he snapped. ‘What did you want me to do, keep her on and look after the brat?’

‘Why not? After all—’ his wife began, but he was striding to the door.

‘I’m not arguing with you, I have better things to do. I’ll see you later on if I have time but I’m late, I have a meeting in Thirsk.’

‘Good morning to you, Havelock,’ said Elizabeth wearily as the door banged to behind him. She sank back on to her pillows and stared out of the window at the clouds chasing across the sky. There would be a storm, she thought dully. Slipping down the bed she turned her face into the pillow and closed her eyes. Her headache was returning.

Chapter 4

‘Hetty! Hetty! Eeh, lass, I’m that glad to see you,’ cried Thomas Pearson as he strode down the station platform at Bishop Auckland. Hetty gazed at him, too full to speak for a minute, her heart in her eyes. He wore no cap like most of the other men, he could always be picked out of a crowd by his bare head with its mop of dark hair. No matter what the weather, Thomas didn’t wear a cap. He wore no overcoat either, though the snow was falling fast now and settling on Hetty’s shoes as she stood there, her basket by her side. He did wear a white scarf, tied at the front and tucked into the vee of his waistcoat, and his pit boots with steel toecaps shining through the snow which encrusted them for his pit boots were weatherproof – which was more than could be said for his shoes.

All this passed through his daughter’s mind in the few seconds it took him to reach her and peck her on the cheek. Her arms went up and she hugged him and felt his cold cheek against hers, freshly shaved and smooth. She smelled the clean smell of him, Sunlight soap mingled

with Woodbine cigarettes. She felt the thin cloth of his suit, damp now with the snow.

Thomas put an arm around her shoulders. 'There now, pet,' he said awkwardly and glanced around in case anyone was watching this display of emotion. 'Howay now, we'll get the bus home if we hurry.' He picked up her basket box and put it on his shoulder and they walked side by side out of the station and down Newgate Street to the bus stop for Morton Main. They didn't speak again until they were sitting side by side on the bus, except to answer the conductor who limped up to them and handed out tickets in exchange for tuppence.

'Thanks, Jack,' said Thomas. Jack, who had been wounded in the war and had one leg shorter than the other, leaned on the back of the seat and smiled at Hetty.

'Back for the New Year, are you?' he asked. 'What's it like in Yorkshire, then?'

'All right,' she said.

'Aye. Well, I must say, you're looking well on it. Growing into a young lady she is, Thomas, you'll have to keep an eye on her in a year or two.' Jack grinned at him man to man but Thomas frowned.

'Nowt of the sort,' he growled. 'My Hetty's been brought up right, a good lass she is.'

'Oh, aye, I never meant owt, I didn't,' Jack hastened to say, and stood up straight and went off down the bus in search of more fares.

Hetty was staring out of the window, trying to see