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Содержание

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Chapter One

The London season was at its height. The weather was warm and sultry, the days were at their longest. The shops were gay with beautiful dresses, richly trimmed bonnets, gloves, parasols, hats – the thousand and one pretty articles of usefulness and beauty which are considered indispensable by the people who drive about in carriages and live in the large houses in the West End of London.

The time was night, and the more important shops were shut, but the great houses in Grosvenor Square revealed at this moment their fullest and most brilliant life, for this was the time when the great receptions of the season were given.

Before one of the largest and most important of these mansions a small crowd had collected. It was the sort of crowd who are fond of getting peeps inside the lovely palaces which they must not enter. Rough-looking boys, eager, pinched women, a few men, and even some babies were present. They jostled one another, and each in turn tried to force his or her way to the front rank. They made remarks freely with regard to the people who were going inside the house. The beautiful girls and richly

dressed matrons called for their outspoken admiration. The men of princely mien and irreproachable attire caused the ragged girls and thin women to think timidly that fairy tales were true, and that real princes did live on the earth. The guests went up the carpeted steps, and disappeared one by one into the mansion. The people in the crowd scarcely breathed as they watched them. How the ladies did trail their long and exquisite robes! How like angels the girls in white looked, how like queens and princesses the older women appeared, how kingly were the gentlemen who accompanied them! Yes, the spectacle was a fairy one; it was delightful to enjoy it all for nothing.

The crowd were in an excellent humour, and did not mind when the policeman somewhat roughly pushed them back. All things considered, they enjoyed themselves quite as well as the people who went into the house, they were not jealous or envious in the least. Standing in front of this motley crowd, so much in front that the brilliant gaslight fell full upon their eager upturned faces, might have been seen a tall girl of about sixteen, and two boys a little younger. The girl was very upright, quite clean in her person, and not only neat, but picturesque in her dress. A many-coloured cotton scarf was twisted in the form of a turban round her head; a large apron of the same material nearly covered her black dress. On her arm she carried a large flat basket filled with roses, narcissus, forget-me-nots, and other summer flowers. Her eyes were very dark and bright, her hair black, her complexion a pure olive. She was not only a handsome girl, but her whole

effect was intensely foreign and picturesque. Her carriage was so upright, her simple pose so stately, that one or two ladies and some of the men who were going into the mansion were attracted by her appearance, and remarked her to one another.

The girl gazed after them, her black eyes wide-open, her lips slightly parted, an eager, hungry expression all over her face. The two boys who stood with her kept nudging each other, and whispering together, and making remarks, some under their breath, some out loud, with regard to the gay company who were going into the house.

The girl never spoke. Even when her brothers pushed her roughly, she only moved a little away from them in absolute silence.

"I say, Jill," – the elder of the lads gave the young flower girl a more violent shove than usual – "be yer goin' to stay here all night? Most of the folks have come by now, I reckon, and we'd best be moving on; there's going to be no end of fun presently at that big house over there by the corner."

Jill shook herself, stared eagerly at the speaker, and then said, in a quick, impassioned voice, "I never see'd nothing like this afore, Bob. Sech dresses, sech faces. Oh, the light and grandeur of it all! I've pictured it of course lots and lots o' times, but I never see'd it afore."

"I told yer it 'ud be fine," replied Bob; "come on, you'll see more of the same sort at the big house at the corner. You take my 'and, Jill, and let us run. We'll get in front of the crowd ef

we are quick."

"No," said Jill, "I don't want to see no other crowd. There were angels and princes and princesses going into that 'ere house. I don't want to see nothink more – my head's full o' the sight, and my eyes sort o' dazzled. I'm goin' 'ome now to mother; I ha' a power o' news to tell her."

She turned away as she spoke, moving quickly through the crowd with her free, stately step.

Many people turned to look at her, but she did not appear to see them. Even when one or two called to her to stop and sell some of her flowers, she did not pay the least attention.

The gay streets where the grand folks lived were quickly passed, and Jill found herself in a poor and squalid neighbourhood. The hour was late, but these streets were all alive as if it were noon. Children quarrelled and played in them, women gossiped, men lounged out of the public-houses, stared at Jill and called after her as she walked quickly by.

A child tumbled down in front of her path and lay screaming and rubbing its dirty little face in a puddle. This sight caused her to stop; she stooped, picked up the little creature, gave it a fully blown rose from her basket and walked on again.

At last she reached a large corner building which was let out in flats to poor people. She turned in here, ran up the stairs lightly and quickly, until she reached the top landing, there she stopped before a rudely-painted door.

The door had a knocker, which Jill sounded loudly. There

was no response whatever from within. She turned a little pale at this, put down her ear to the keyhole, and listened eagerly. Not a sound reached her from the other side of the closed door. She knocked once again, then putting her lips to the keyhole, she called through it in a high, sweet voice:

"It's me, mother; it's Jill! Open the door, please, mother, I ha' lots of news."

No response came to this petition. The same absolute, unbroken silence reigned inside the room. Jill paused to consider for a moment. The exalted dreamy look left her face; a certain sharpness, mingled with anxiety, filled her black eyes. After a very brief pause, during which she watched the closed door with a kind of sad patience, she picked up her basket and ran down to the next landing. The door here had a neat little knocker, which was polished and shining. Jill gave a single knock, and then waited for a reply. It came almost immediately. A woman with a night-cap on opened the door, uttered an exclamation at sight of the girl, put out her hand to draw her into the room, and spoke in a voice of agitation:

"You don't mean to tell me, Jill Robinson, that yer mother ain't 'ome yet? Why the – "

"Don't say any more!" exclaimed Jill, eagerly. "I'm goin' out to look for mother. She's maybe took faint, or something o' that sort. Will you take care of my flowers till I come back, Mrs Stanley?"

"Need you ask, honey? You lay 'em in there in the cool. You

'asn't sold too many to-day, Jill. What a full basket!"

"Yes, but they're mostly buds. They'll look lovely to-morrow when I freshens 'em up. Now I must go to look for mother."

"This ain't a fit hour for a girl like you to be out, Jill."

"Any hour's fit when a girl can take care on herself," responded Jill, proudly.

She ran quickly down-stairs, leaving her flowers in the passage of Mrs Stanley's little flat. Just outside the door of the big building she came upon a motley crowd of men and women. They were eagerly gazing at something which excited at once their amusement and derision.

The crowd was too thick for Jill to see what attracted them, but a sound, full, strong, and sweet, drew her attention. She was walking quickly past the people, but this sound arrested her steps. It caused the colour to flame into her cheeks, and an angry light to leap out of her eyes. With a rapid, deft movement she pushed her way through the people. She guessed, even before her eyes assured her of the fact, what was the matter.

"Go it again, Poll Robinson!" shouted the men. "Oh! you took that note prime. You never wor in better voice. Go it again, my beauty! Now then, let's listen, all of us, to handsome Poll Robinson. You give us another song, Poll, now then."

A tall, powerfully-built woman of about five-and-thirty was standing in the middle of the street; her bonnet was pushed on one side of her head, her dress was slovenly, her steps sadly unsteady. She was trying to dance for the benefit of the

assembled company, and at the same time was sending up full rich notes, from a throat of vast compass, into the summer night.

The song she sang was "Cherry Ripe." The crowd jostled one another, and applauded her loudly. When Jill burst like a young Fury into their midst, one or two of the men, and some of the women, were joining with hearty abandon in the chorus:

"Cherry ripe, cherry ripe,
Ripe, I cry —
Full and fair ones,
Come and buy!"

"Go it, Poll, go it!" they shouted again. "That's better! that's prime! Wish I could buy 'em, makes my mouth water to hear on 'em. Oh! you are in fine voice to-night, Poll Robinson."

"You let her be," said Jill. "Oh! for shame ain't you cowards? Don't you see as she don't know rightly what she's doing? Oh! I *'ate* you – I 'ate you all. Don't you see for yourselves she's took mor'n she ought? Do you think she would sing to you like that ef she knew the reason why? No one ever tried harder to be good than poor mother. She never takes a drop except when the pain's too bad to be borne. Oh! ain't you cowards, every single one on yer? Here, mother, come home with me at once. You make way, you bad, cowardly men and women. Go home to your own beds, and let mother and me go to ours. Come along, mother, it's Jill! Come home with me at once. No, you ain't to sing any more. I'll pay you all out for this, neighbours, see ef I don't."

She took the woman under her wing, and, going quickly through the astonished, half-cowed, half-amused people, entered the house.

Chapter Two

Jill pulled her mother's hand fiercely inside her arm. The presence of the angry, upright girl had a sobering effect on the older women. A dim sense of shame and distress was stealing over her. She made violent efforts to keep from tottering, and, raising one powerful but shaking hand, tried to straighten her bonnet.

Jill walked past Mrs Stanley's flat, without stopping to fetch her basket of flowers. When she reached the top landing of the house she slipped her hand into her mother's pocket, took out the key which by then, and opened the door which led into the little flat. The flat consisted of two rooms and a narrow passage.

Still holding her mother by the arm, Jill went into the outer room. She found a box of matches, and, striking one, lit a candle which was placed on the round table.

"Now, mother, sit down," she said, in a tender voice. "Here's your own chair. Sit right down and rest a bit. I'll be no time boiling the kettle, and then we'll have a cup o' tea both on us together; you'll feel a sight better when you have had your tea, mother."

The woman sat on the edge of the chair which Jill had pulled forward, she loosened her bonnet-strings, and let her untidy, disorderly bonnet fall off her head of thick black hair.

"I'll never go and do it any more, Jill," she said, after a pause.

"The pain's better now, and next time it comes I'll bear it. I know I'm tipsy now, but, sure as my name's Poll Robinson, you'll see, Jill, as I'll never go and do it again."

"To be sure you won't, mother. Don't you fret. Forget all about it – forget as you were tipsy jest now in the street. You'll soon be as right as ever you wor. I'll fetch some cold water to bathe your face and hands, then you'll feel prime. You cheer up, mother, darlin', and forget what you 'as done."

"But you won't forget it, Jill. I've shamed you before the folk in the street, you can't go and forget it, it's contrary to nature."

"Why I'se forgot it, mother, already; you sit quiet, and let me tend you."

While Jill spoke she bustled about, placed the kettle of water on the little gas-stove to boil, and, going out into the passage, filled a basin fall of cold water from a tap. Bringing it back, she tenderly washed her mother's hot face and hands, combed back her disordered hair, coiled it deftly round her comely head, and then, bending down, kissed the broad, low forehead.

"Now you're like yourself, so sweet; why you look beautiful; you're as handsome as a picter. We'll forget all about that time in the street. See! the kettle's boiling, we'll both be real glad of our tea." The woman began to cheer up under the girl's bright influence; her head ceased to reel, her hand to shake; she felt instinctively, however, that she had better keep silence, for her brain was still too confused for her to talk sensibly.

The tea was made strong and fragrant. Jill stood by the little

mantelpiece while she sipped hers. Her eager eyes watched her mother with an affectionate and sad solicitude.

"Now, mother, you must go to bed at once, and have a good sleep," she said, when the meal was over.

"I didn't mean to go and done it," said the woman again.

"Course you didn't, mother, and you'll never do it no more. Go and lie down now."

"Where are the lads, Jill?"

"They'll be in presently. It's all right. You lie down; you look awful spent and worn."

"But the pain's better, my gal."

"That's right. You sleep while you're easy."

"Jill, don't you 'ate your poor wicked old mother?"

"No, mother. I love you better than all the rest of the world put together. Now lie down, and don't fret yourself. I has a sight of fine things to tell you in the morning; but go to sleep now, do!"

The exhausted woman was only too glad to obey. The moment her head touched the pillow, her tired eyes closed and she went off into dreamless slumber.

Jill stole softly from the room, closing the door behind her.

She had scarcely done so before a shuffling, lumbering sound was heard on the landing; the outer door was banged vigorously from without, and rough boys' voices called to Jill to open and let them in.

She flung the door open without a minute's delay.

"Come in," she said, "and take off your boots, and be quiet

ef you can, for mother's not well, and I won't have her woke to please anybody. You're both shameful late, and I've half a mind to let you sleep in the passage all night. There's your supper; and now *do* try to be quiet."

The elder boy, called Bob, pulled off his heavy boots and stole across the room. The younger followed his example.

"There's your supper," said Jill. She pointed to two plates, on which some lumps of cold suet pudding were placed. "Do be quick," she said, speaking petulantly for the first time, "for I'm so tired myself I'm fit to drop."

"Is it true that mother's bad, Jill?" asked the youngest boy, peering up at his sister half anxiously, half wickedly.

"Yes, of course it's true. Mother's often bad. Why do you ask?"

"But old Hastie down in the street, he said that she had gone and – why, what's the matter, Jill? You look so fierce that you quite take the heart out of a fellow."

"You shut up," said Jill. "You whisper in this room one word of what Hastie said, and you'll feel my fist, I can tell you."

"Only it's true, Jill, and you know it," said Bob, putting down his plate, and coming up and standing by his younger brother's side. "You needn't beat the life out of poor Tom for telling the truth. You know that Hastie only spoke the solemn truth, Jill, and you has no call to round on Tom."

"Hastie told a lie," said Jill; "and when Tom quotes his words to me, he tells lies."

"Then mother hasn't been out this evening."

"No; she's been in her bed since two o'clock, orful bad with pain. You're dreadful cruel boys even to doubt her. She's the best mother on this earth. Oh, let *me* see Hastie, and I'll give him a spice of my mind. Now go and lie down, the pair on yer. I'm shamed of yer bringing up them lies."

The boys slouched off, frightened at their sister's blazing cheeks and fiery words. They lay down side by side in an old press bed at one end of the kitchen, and Jill, opening the door, slipped softly down to fetch her flowers from Mrs Stanley. The old woman was still up. She looked at the girl anxiously.

"You found her then, honey?"

"Oh, yes; quite easy. She was out for a little bit of exercise. She's in bed and asleep a long time back."

"Where you ought to be, Jill. You look fit to drop."

"I ain't then; I'm quite fresh. Where are my flowers?"

"There, dearie. Good-night to you, Jill Robinson."

"Good-night, Mrs Stanley. Thank yer for keeping the flowers."

Jill took up her basket and departed. In the passage which belonged to her mother's flat she spent some little time watering her flowers, removing the withered ones, and making her basket look trim and fresh for the morrow.

The clock which belonged to a neighbouring church had struck one long before she laid her head on her pillow.

Chapter Three

About four o'clock on the following morning Mrs Robinson stirred, opened her eyes and looked around her.

The light was streaming full into the little bedroom. It was clean and fresh, for Jill would permit nothing else. There were no cobwebs to be seen on the walls, and the floor was white with constant scrubbing. The glass in the one small window was washed until it shone, and the little blind, which was neatly pinned across was fresh, and in perfect order.

Poll Robinson lay in bed and gazed around her. The scene of the night before bed passed completely from her memory and her mind now was altogether absorbed in wondering how she could outstrip Jill and smuggle some stale flowers, which she had hidden the night before under her bed, into her basket Jill never held with these doings, but Poll thought them perfectly justifiable. The way to do a thriving business was to mix the stale goods discriminately with the fresh, and to sell one with the other. Jill would not hear of it, and Poll had to own that Jill by her honesty and method, and by her own bright and spruce appearance, had gained a very tidy connection.

But though Poll liked the money which now flowed in regularly, she sighed more than once for the good old days when she need not scrub her sitting-room nor polish her windows, nor worry herself about her unsold flowers.

The flowers did very well thrust under the bed in the old times, and they sold very well, too, mixed up with fresh bunches the next day.

The neighbouring clock struck a quarter past four, and Mrs Robinson, with a profound sigh, raised herself on her elbow, and looked at her sleeping daughter.

There was a good deal of resemblance between the mother and child. Both were dark, and had big, brilliant eyes, and masses of raven hair.

The face of the older woman looked young enough this morning. The lines of care, pain, and dissipation had vanished with her last night's sleep. A high colour, partly caused by an inward fever and ache, which scarcely ever left her, gave a false beauty to Poll Robinson's face.

She stooped, kissed Jill on her forehead, and getting out of bed began to dress. She saw that the girl looked tired, and she determined to go to Covent Garden for the fresh flowers herself.

She hastily put on her clothes, and slipping her flowers from under the bed, went out into the kitchen. The boys were snoring loudly in their press bedstead. Poll went across the room, and shook Tom vigorously.

"Look yere," she said, "you tell Jill that I'm fetching the flowers this morning. Tell her to lie easy, and take her sleep out. Do you hear me, you good-for-naught? Do you hear what I'm saying? or are ye too sleepy to take it all in?"

"I hear right enough, mother," replied Tom, rubbing his sleepy

eyes. “Are you better this morning, mother?”

“Yes, to be sure; why shouldn’t I be?”

Tom looked down at Bob, who was asleep. Then he glanced towards the open door of the bedroom. He was not at all afraid of his mother; but he had a wholesome dread of Jill.

“Look yere,” he said: “is it true what Hastie says?”

“What did Hastie say?”

Mrs Robinson placed her arms akimbo.

“He said as you were real bad last night, – real bad – and out in the street, you mind.”

“Well, and what ef I wor?”

“Only, Jill says it’s a lie. She said she’ll smack Hastie for saying it.”

Mrs Robinson’s face underwent a quick, queer change.

“Bless Jill,” she said. “You lie down and go to sleep, Tom, and don’t bother me.”

The boy slipped at once under the bed-clothes. He pretended to sleep, but he watched his mother furtively. Seen now in her fresh trim morning dress she was a presentable, and even handsome woman. She put on a coloured apron of the same pattern and design as Jill’s, twisted a turban round her head, and taking up her basket prepared to go out.

First of all, however, she went to an old bureau, and pulled open one of the small top drawers. In this drawer she and Jill kept their loose pence and silver. She was looking now for the money to buy the flowers with which she must stock her basket.

She knew that this time yesterday there were three shillings in pence and silver in the drawer. Now when she opened it, nothing whatever in the shape of money was to be seen. A piece of gay print, with which she intended to make an apron for herself, had also vanished.

Poll stood before the empty drawer with astonishment and confusion. Where had the money gone?

She thrust her hand into her pocket. Had she by any chance put it there when she went out to buy drink? If so, it was gone. Her pocket was quite destitute of the smallest coin. Could she have left the door open when she went out? No, she was quite confident on that point. She had a vivid recollection of locking the door, and taking the key with her.

The money was gone, and she could in no way account for its disappearance. What was she to do? She had not a halfpenny in the world to buy flowers with. Should she wake Jill, and tell her of her loss? No, she did not want to do that. The girl was looking sadly tired, and Poll did not want to confess that through her weakness and want of self-control some of their valuable little earnings had vanished.

She stood for a moment considering. Then she determined to go to the market, and trust to one of the flower merchants giving her sufficient flowers to stock her basket and Jill's on credit. She must start at once, for the morning was passing, and the best and cheapest flowers would be sold.

She opened the door, and closed it softly behind her. Then

she ran with a quick, light step down-stairs. No one would have recognised this trim and active woman for the disreputable-looking creature whom Jill had rescued the night before.

She quickly passed the buildings where their little flat was, and entered the low neighbourhood of Drury Lane. Drury Lane was a great haunt for flower girls. Poll had lived there herself for years. A memory of the old free life came back to her as she walked, and she could not help breathing a hearty sigh. The old life seemed attractive to her this morning; she forgot the blows her cruel husband had given her; she forgot the dirt, and the sickness, and the misery. She only remembered the absolute freedom from restraint, the jolly, never-may-care sort of existence. Everything was altered now; for Jill had taken the reins into her own hands. She and her mother belonged to the respectable class of flower girls. They bought good flowers straight from the market, and sold them to regular customers, and had their own acknowledged corner where they could show their wares in tempting and picturesque array. They were clean, decent sort of people now. Poll knew this, but she could not take pride in the fact this morning.

She walked quickly along, with her usual swinging, free sort of motion. Some of her old cronies nodded and smiled to her. Poll was so good-tempered and good-natured that the flower girls who were still low down, very low down in the world, could not look on her with envy. She would have shared her last crust with the worst of them.

Jill was not nearly so popular as her mother, far Jill was proud, and did not want to know the girls who had been the friends of Mrs Robinson's youth.

A red-eyed woman, with a bent figure, a white face, and a constant cough, came up and joined Poll as she approached the neighbourhood of the great market.

"And how are you, Betsy?" asked Poll. "Does your cough hack you as bad as ever?"

"No, it's better," replied the poor creature. "I bought some of them cough-no-mores, and they seem to still it wonderful. I'm glad I met you, Poll; I think it wor the good Lord sent you in my way this morning." The woman gasped painfully as she spoke.

"Here, lean on me, Betsy Peters," said Poll, stopping, and offering her strong arm. "Don't press me, like a good soul, for my side aches orful. Now then, wot is it, Betsy?"

"It certain sure wor the good Lord let me meet yer," repeated Mrs Peters. "I cried to Him for near an hour last night, and yere's the answer. It's wonderful, that it is."

"Only me and Jill we don't believe in the pious sort," answered Poll. "Not that it matters, ef I can help you, Betsy."

"Yes, but it do matter," replied Mrs Peters. "It seems a pity, for that sort of belief is a real comfort to poor folk. My word, ain't I held on to it many and many a time? It wor only last night, and I were praying fit to burst my heart, and at larst it seemed to me as ef I see'd Him, His face wondrous pitiful-like, and his smile that encouraging. And I seemed to hear Him a-saying, 'You hold on,

Betsy Peters, for you're a'most in Paradise now. You give a good grip o' Me, and I'll land you safe.' My word! it did comfort me. It seemed to lift me out o' myself. It's a pity as you don't hold on to that sort of thing, neighbour."

Poll gave a quick, impulsive sort of sigh.

"Well, I'm glad as you finds the comfort o' it, Betsy," she said. "But what can I do for you? We're most at the market now."

"Ef you could lend me a shilling to buy flowers, neighbour? My man came in drunk last night, and he carried away every penny as I put by in the tin box. There's little Jeanie, she is low and wake, and I've nothing for her breakfast but some tea-leaves that I've watered twice afore. Ef you lend me a shilling, Poll, jest to see me over to-day, I'll pay you back sure and faithful to-morrow morning, so I will."

Poll's handsome face grew dark.

"In course I'd lend it to you, you poor critter," she said, "but I han't got it. You'll scarce believe me when I say that I come out without a penny piece in my pocket. Jill and me, we are well-to-do, as flower girls go, but yesterday some villain of a thief came in and stole our bits of savings. I ha' come out now to ask Dan Murphy to give me flowers on tick. I can't help you, neighbour, however willin' I am."

Mrs Peters's face turned deadly pale. She pulled her feeble arm away from Poll's and looked at her with trembling lips and eyes that shone through a dim veil of tears.

"Oh, it seems orful," she gasped. "And I made so positive as

the Lord wor there, and that He heard me, and sent you as a hanswer. It seems – it seems as ef – "

"As ef there weren't no Lord," repeated Poll.

"No, no; ef I thought that – " Mrs Peters turned ghastly, and pressed her hand to her heaving heart.

"And you shan't, neighbour," exclaimed Poll, a great wave of crimson spreading over her face. "You shan't lose your last drop of comfort, not ef I know why. You go and stand round there, neighbour, and I'll come and share my flowers with you, see ef I don't. I'll go on tick for enough for us both. You stand there, Betsy, and wait, I'll be safe to come back to you."

Poll vanished almost as she spoke into the crowd of people who were already pressing towards the flower merchants and vendors of vegetables, roots, seeds, fruit, and the other articles sold in the market.

The scene was an intensely busy and lively one. The farmers, who had come up from the country in the quiet hours of the night, had unpacked their wares, and spread them out to the best advantage.

The costermongers and flower girls were eagerly buying, wrangling, chaffering, nudging, and jostling one another. Now and then a high coarse laugh rose on the air, now and then an oath; sometimes a cry of anger or disappointment.

Poll, threading her way through the thickest of the crowd, approached a stall which belonged to a flower merchant from whom she and Jill constantly bought their goods. She had little

doubt that he would allow her to replenish her own basket and Jill's, and to get a bunch of flowers over and above the quantity she required, for poor Mrs Peters.

Poll came up confidently.

"Is Dan Murphy here?" she asked of a small boy who stood by the stall, and who looked around him.

"Dan Murphy? Don't yer know?" he exclaimed.

"Don't I know what, you little beggar? Get out of my way, and I'll speak to him myself."

The boy responded to this sally by standing on his head. Then resuming his former upright position, he stuck his tongue in his cheek and winked at Poll.

She raised one vigorous arm to give him a blow across his face, but he dodged her, and vanished.

Her coast was now clear, however. She went up to the stall, which was well stocked with both fruit and flowers, and repeated her question.

"Is Dan Murphy here? I wish to speak to him." When she asked her question a man with a Jewish type of face stepped forward and replied civilly:

"Can I serve you, ma'am?"

Poll bestowed a withering glance upon this individual.

"No, lad, you can't serve me," she replied. "I want the owner of this stall, Dan Murphy. He's an old crony o' mine."

"You haven't heard then, ma'am, that Murphy has sold his business to me. This stall is mine now."

"My word, but that's a blow." Poll was turning away.

"Can't I serve you, ma'am?" called the new owner of the stall after her.

"No, lad, no; that you can't."

She walked across the market, stepping daintily between long rows of flowering plants and great piles of strawberries, currants, raspberries, and other summer fruits. The air was redolent with the sweet, fresh smell of fruit and flowers; the hawkers were pressing their wares, and customers were rapidly filling their baskets.

Poll thrust her hands deep into the big pockets of her gay apron, and gazed around her.

A vendor with whom she often dealt held up some bunches of pink and white peonies for her inspection. She knew how Jill's face would darken and glow with pleasure over the peonies. What a sight her basket would look filled with these exquisite flowers.

The man had poppies of various colours, too, and any amount of green for decoration.

"Come, missis," he called to Poll. "You won't see flowers like these yere in a hurry, and they're cheap – dirt cheap. You see these poppies; ain't they prime?"

Poll shook her head.

"Don't tempt me," she said. "I ain't got a cent with me, and the only man as 'ud give me flowers on tick has just gone and sold his business. I do call it 'ard."

"So do I," said the owner of the poppies. He was a good-

humoured, rosy-faced young farmer.

"You look a tidy sort," he said; "not like any o' they – " He pointed with his thumb in a certain direction where a group of slatternly flower girls of the true Drury Lane type were standing. "You don't belong to 'em," he said.

"No, that I don't. Worse luck for me. They ha' got flowers to sell, and I han't any."

"I wouldn't trust the likes o' them with even a penn'orth of flowers on tick," said the farmer.

"And right you are, young man. You keep what you has got and trust no one with goods until you gets money for 'em. Good morning to you."

"But, I say, look you here, missis."

"What is it?"

"You look a tidy sort. Maybe I'll give you some of these poppies. You're safe to sell 'em, and you can pay me to-morrow. Here's a shilling's worth – these pink ones, and some white, and a bunch of green. You bring me the money to-morrow, won't you?"

The young fellow picked up a great bunch of the flowers, thrust them into Poll's hands, and turned to attend to another customer.

She stood still for a moment too surprised to move. Then, with a fierce colour in her cheeks, strode across the market to the corner where she had asked Betsy Peters to wait for her.

"Yere, Betsy," she said, thrusting all the flowers into the woman's basket, "ef there is a thing as sells, it's a white or a pink

poppy. Seems as if the very of the stingiest of the ladies couldn't stan' up agin' a pink poppy. You'll owe me a shilling for these, Betsy, and you'll pay me when yer can. Good morning to yer; I'm off back to Jill."

Chapter Four

When Poll returned home and showed her empty basket, Jill could not help uttering an exclamation of surprise.

"Why, mother, you han't brought in no flowers!" she said, "and I made sure you had gone to fetch 'em."

"Let me set down, Jill. That pain in my side, it do seem to bite orful hard this morning."

"Oh, poor mother! Set down and never mind the flowers. You shouldn't have gone out so early, you know you shouldn't. Here's a cup of coffee. Drink it, do."

The little kitchen was a picture of brightness and neatness; the small stove was polished like a looking-glass. Jill placed a coarse white cloth on the table, drew it up to her mother's side, placed the breakfast cups and saucers in order, laid bread and a piece of salt butter on the board, and, sitting down herself, filled two large breakfast cups with coffee, which was really good and fragrant.

Mrs Robinson drank off a cupful thirstily. She laid it down with a sigh of relief.

"You're a real good gel, Jill," she said. "And now I'll tell you what happened to me."

"Never mind, mother. You take your breakfast, and set quiet; I'll go and fetch some flowers myself, as soon as we ha' done."

"You can't, child; there ain't no money."

"No money? But there was plenty in the drawer last night."

"Look for yourself, Jill."

Jill paused in her occupation of cutting thick bread and butter. The boys had already eaten their breakfasts, and gone away.

She gave a quick glance round the cosy little room. The sun shone in at the window. The influence of the pleasant summer day was reflected all over Jill's young face.

"There's time enough," she said, with a slow, satisfied smile. "You eat your breakfast, mother, and I'll fetch the flowers arter."

"But you can't, when there ain't no money. I tell yer somebody crep' in yere yesterday, most like when I wor – when I wor – "

"Never mind about that, mother. You had the pain bad, and you were drowsy, and you left the door on the latch. That were how the thief got in, worn't it, mother?"

"Ef you like to have it so, child. Seems to me – "

"Yes, I like to have it that way," repeated Jill. "You were drowsy, and some one come in and took the money out of the drawer. Give me yer cup, mother, and I'll fill it again."

Mrs Robinson pushed her cup away from her, and stood up.

"Do you know what it is?" she said. "That there are times over and over again when I'd a sight raythe you struck me than took things as you do."

"But I couldn't take 'em any other way, mother, you know I couldn't. I – I love you too much." Jill's lips trembled. There was a fierce passion in the way she said "I love you too much."

"And I put shame on you larst night, child. And now we are beggars. All our little savings is gone, and it's owing to me."

"No, we ain't beggars – I ha' a stocking put away in another drawer. It's for Nat and me 'gainst we set up housekeeping. I never spoke of it 'cause I 'arned every cent of it arter hours; but I'll take some to-day to stock our baskets, and then we'll be off to work."

Mrs Robinson strode noisily across the floor. She took Jill's face between her two hands, and kissed her on each blooming cheek. Then she sat down with a profound sigh of relief.

"Ain't you a good 'un?" she said. "Any mother 'ud be proud of yer. You hurry and buy the flowers, dawtie dear, and then we'll be off."

Breakfast was speedily finished, the breakfast things put away, and then Jill, drawing a ribbon from inside her dress, produced a small key. With this key she opened a small drawer, took some money out of an old stocking, locked the drawer again, slipped the key into its hiding-place, and went out.

After she was gone Poll sat very still. The bright colour which always flamed in her cheeks had somewhat faded; her big, dark eyes looked weary. After a time she gave utterance to a low moan.

"This pain's orful," she murmured. "I'd give the world for a nip of brandy. Coffee! What's coffee when you ache as I ache? A sip or two of hot gin, or brandy and water, 'ud make me feel fine. Jill's the best gel, but she don't know what it is to have the thirst on her like me."

Poll went into the little sleeping-room and flung herself across the bed. When Jill returned with the flowers she found her lying

there, her face white and drawn, her eyes closed.

At the sound of the brisk step, Poll made a vigorous effort to sit up, but Jill's young glance could not be deceived.

"You shall not stir to sell a flower to-day," she exclaimed. "You lie where you are, and take a good rest. I ha' got some beauties in the way of flowers, and I'll sell 'em all, and we'll have a jolly supper to-night. I met Nat when I were out, and he said he'd come in to supper. You stay where you are, mother, and I'll ask Mrs Stanley to come and see arter you. I know she will, ef I ask her."

"The pain's werry bad this morning, Jill."

"Mrs Stanley shall go and fetch a bottle of that soothing stuff from the chemist round the corner. That'll put you to sleep, and then you'll be a sight better. Now I must go."

Jill kissed her mother, took up her flower-basket, stopped at the next landing to speak to Mrs Stanley, and finally tripped down-stairs with her basket of blooming flowers on her arm.

Outside the house she was met by a tall fair-haired young costermonger who took her basket from her, and turned to walk by her side.

"You shouldn't do it, Nat," she said. "It's a sin to be wasting your time, and the morning's late enough as it is."

"Late?" echoed the young giant with a gay laugh. "Why, it ain't nine yet, Jill, and anyhow I stole the time from my breakfast. I can just walk as far as your stand with you. And you'll give me a posy for my pains, won't you?"

"You choose it, Nat," said Jill.

"No, no, you must do that. Ain't you got a rose under all 'em flaring poppies, and a bit o' mignonette? Them's my style. You make 'em up for me, Jill, in a posy, and I'll wear 'em in my button-hole all day, no matter who chaffs me."

Jill replied by a gay little laugh. The summer in the day got more and more into her face. She gave Nat many shy and lovely glances.

"Look yere," he said suddenly; "you ain't answered my question."

"What is it, lad?"

"When are we to be married, Jill? I'll ha' a holiday in three weeks, and I thought we might go before the registrar just then, and afterwards go away for a week into the country. What do you say?"

"Oh, I can't say nothing. There's mother, you know."

"But your mother won't keep us apart, Jill. That 'ud be cruel."

"No, but I can't leave her. You know that."

"Well, look yere; I don't want you to leave her. I'm doin' well wid my barrer, and you and me, we might take the flat alongside of Mrs Stanley's, just under where you now live. Surely your mother and the boys could manage for one another, and you'd be always close to see to 'em, ef they was in any fix. The rooms is to be let, I know, and ef you say the word, Jill, I'll speak to the landlord this very night."

"But that flat costs a heap o' money; it don't seem right

nohow," said Jill.

"Yes, it's as right as anything, darlin'. I'm 'arning good money now, it's all perfectly square. You leave it to me. You say yes, Jill; that's all you ha' got to do."

"I'll think it over, lad, and let you know to-night. Here we are at my stand now. Good-bye, Nat dear – oh, and here's your posy."

The young man took it with a smile.

"Pin it in for luck," he said. "Now I'm off I'll be sure and come round this evening."

He blew a kiss to Jill, turned a corner, and disappeared.

Her stand was outside a large railway station. Six or seven other girls also sold flowers there, but not one of them could vie with Jill for picturesque arrangement.

She sat down now, and taking up her basket began hastily to divide her flowers into penny and twopenny bunches. This piece of work she generally did at home, but to-day she was late, and had to arrange her wares as quickly as she could while waiting for her customers.

The sun shone all over her as she worked. She made a gay bit of colour, and more than one person turned to look at her. Her black rippling hair was coiled round and round her shapely head. Her turban, too hot for this sultry day, was flung on the ground by her side. Her black dress fitted her slim figure to perfection, and her gay many-coloured apron gave a bizarre effect to her costume, which exactly suited the somewhat foreign type of her face.

The flower girl who eat next her, in her untidiness, her dirt, and almost rags, acted as a foil to Jill. She had bedizened her person in a cheap dress of faded crimson. Her hat, nearly a foot high, was perched on the back of her uncombed hair. It was trimmed with rusty crape and rendered gay with one or two ostrich feathers, and some bunches of artificial poppies.

This woman, between forty and fifty years of age, was, in her way, a favourite. She indulged in a brogue which declared her Irish origin, and whatever the weather, whatever the prospect of the flower-sellers, she always managed to keep the laugh and the ready jest going.

"Did you ask me what me name was, honey?" she would say to a customer attracted by the gleam of mischief in her eye. "Oh, then, glory be to heaven, it's Molly Maloney, at your service, and where would you find a better or a swater? Do take a bunch of flowers, lady, do now, and I'll pray for a good husband for you every time as I goes down on my bended knees."

Sallies of this sort provoked smiles even from the refined people who wished to buy flowers, and secured roars of laughter from the other flower girls, who delighted in egging Molly on to "give sauce," as they termed it, to the fine folks.

On this particular morning, however, Molly's pleasantries were not so frequent as usual. She whispered to Jill that little Kathleen, that jewel of a girl, was down with a cowld, and she was moighty bothered with her, and didn't know whether to send for the doctor or not.

"You might come and see her, Jill," said Molly Maloney. "Kathleen she worships the very ground you treads on, and she's down with a cowld or a faver, or something. I'll have no doctor to see her, no that I won't, for he'd be after ordhering her off to the hospital, and that 'ud kill her entirely. Oh, glory to heaven, what fine flowers you have this morning, Jill! I'm shamed to sit near you, that I am. Look at mine. They were under Kathie's bed all night, and they seem to smell of the faver. Oh, I'll get 'em off ef I sell 'em chape. You lend me a coil of wire, honey, and you'll see how I'll smarten 'em up."

Jill handed the wire to her neighbour with scarcely a remark. Her thoughts were far away with Nat, and the home they might soon have together. She wondered if they might really dare to take that flat next to Mrs Stanley's – if by any possible means they could justify for themselves the extravagance of paying seven shillings a week for their rooms. Then how would her mother do without her? Who would help her mother when she got those queer attacks of pain, those unsupportable hours of agony which had hitherto found relief only in the one way?

Jill knew that it was very wrong of her mother to drink. The girl's own nature was so upright, so sweet, so high, that it was absolutely repulsive to her to see any one in the state in which she often now discovered her poor mother. The aim and object of her life was to hide the disgrace of her mother's intemperate fits from the rest of the world; she called them by any name but the true one. She was ready to cover them with any amount of

lies if necessary; she would have knocked down any one who accused her mother of getting drunk; even Mrs Robinson herself, in her repentant moments, did not dare to call a spade a spade – did not dare to speak of what she had done by its true name. Jill never blamed her, she put it all down to the pain and misery. It seemed to her there was no remedy left to her mother but to drown her sufferings in drink, and yet the fact cast a shadow over her own life, and caused her to sigh heavily, even though Nat was coming in the evening, and they could talk about their wedding-day, which was so soon to arrive.

As she arranged her flowers with deft fingers this morning she made up her mind that she would say yes to Nat. She would be in the same house with her mother, and could still look after her. As to the boys, they were both of them doing for themselves. Jill scarcely gave them a thought at all in making her arrangements.

Yes, she would marry Nat, and trust to his never discovering that ugly secret about her mother.

She had just finished the arrangement of her basket, picturesquely heaping her masses of pink, white, and yellow poppies at one side, and her roses and forget-me-nots at another, when a tall girl, dressed in the costume of the Flower Girls' Guild, came up with a basket of flowers on her arm and spoke to her.

She was a handsome girl, and looked striking in her neat grey dress and scarlet apron. Her hair was of a pale gold, her eyes large and blue; the expression of her somewhat pale face a little austere. Her basket was full of lovely fresh flowers, but although

they were superior to Jill's in quality, they did not make nearly so fine a show.

"Is that you, Jill?" she called out. "Nat told me you were here. Why ain't your mother with you? Ain't she well?"

"No, she has a fit of that old pain over her," responded Jill. "I left her lying down. The pain takes a deal out of her, and I thought she had best be quiet."

"Don't she see no doctor? We has a splendid one belonging to the Guild; ef you and your mother would only join, you'd get a heap o' good out of it, Jill. But you're that obstinate, and when the best thing in the world is offered to you, you won't so much as open your eyes to see it. I wonder Nat holds on to you, that I do."

Jill smiled, reddened, and was about to reply, when the Irishwoman called out in her brilliant tones:

"What I say of Nat Carter is this, that he's the luckiest gossoon in all London to have got the purtiest bit of a colleen to say she'll wed him. Why, you ain't got looks lit to hold a candle to her, Susy Carter, even though you are Nat's sister."

"Well, well," said Susan, in a slightly patronising manner, "we must each of us go our own gait. If Jill and her mother won't join the Guild, I can't force 'em. Maybe you'll do it later on, if Nat wishes it, Jill. And, oh, what do you think, here's a bit o' luck; I has just got that stand I was waiting for so long near the Marble Arch. The girl wot had it died yesterday, and I've stepped into her shoes, and a right good think I'll make of it. I must be off now, or I'll lose customers. Good-bye, Jill. Oh, by-the-way, you

might as well mass these colours for me. I can't make my basket look like yourn, however hard I try."

Susy Carter put her basket on the ground as she spoke. Jill bent over it, re-arranged the flowers without a word, and returned it to her.

"Thank you – thank you," she cried delightedly. "Why, Jill, what fingers you has! Who but yourself would have thought of putting these pink peonies close to all them crimson poppies, and then throwing up the colour with this bunch of green. Oh, it's daring, but it's lovely; it'll fetch like anything. Now I'm off You get your mother to see a doctor, Jill."

"No, I won't," said Jill, shortly, "I don't believe in 'em, neither does mother."

"Right you are, honey," exclaimed Molly Maloney, "I don't hold by docthors, nayther. If my little Kathleen dies of the faver – bless her, the darlint! – why, I know as it's the will of the Almighty. But ef the docthor came and gave her his pizens – what is it, miss – what now?"

"Do you say you have a child down in fever?" said Susy Carter, speaking in a quick, passionate voice.

The Irishwoman was lounging with her back against the wall. She now started upright, and spoke defiantly.

"And why mayn't I have my darlint child down with the faver?" she demanded, her eyes darkening with anger.

"Did you keep those flowers in the room with the sick child all night?"

"Yes, my purty, I did. Would you like a bunch? you shall have it chape. A ha'p'ny for this rose; it'll look iligant pinned on the front of your dress. Now, then, only a ha'p'ny. Why, there ain't no chaper flowers in the whole of London."

"It's very wicked of you to sell those flowers," said Susy. "You may give the fever to a lot of other people by doing so. That's the good of belonging to our Guild. We have a beautiful cool room to keep our flowers in at night, so that no one can be poisoned by them. They keep fresh, and they last, and they don't carry horrid diseases about with them. It's very wicked of you to sell those flowers. You ought to throw them away."

She picked up her basket as she spoke and marched off.

Molly sat down, muttering angry words under her breath.

"I wonder you takes up with the likes of her, Jill," she said, when she had cooled down sufficiently to address a few words to her companion.

Jill, who was in a day-dream, looked round with a start.

"Take up with whom?" she said.

"That consated bit of a colleen, Susy Carter. You're goin' to marry her brother. Seems to me you're throwing yourself away. Why, honey, you're illigant enough and handsome enough to be any man's chice."

"Yes, but I love Nat," interrupted Jill. "I'm not marrying Susy – I don't much care for Susy. Yes, ma'am? These bunches are twopence each, these a penny. I'll give you this bunch of poppies for sixpence, ma'am, and put some green with it."

A lady who had just come up from the Underground Railway had stopped, arrested by the beauty of Jill's flowers. She was holding a prettily dressed little girl of about six years old by the hand.

The child was all in white. She had cloudy golden hair falling over her shoulders, her round pink and white face resembled a daisy in its freshness.

The lady was in deep mourning; the expression of her slightly worn face was sad.

"Shall I put the poppies up for you, ma'am?" repeated Jill.

"Yes. I will give you sixpence for that bunch, but be sure you let me have some green with it."

"I want to spend my penny on flowers, mother," said the child.

"Well, darling, choose. This nice flower girl will give you a pretty posy for a penny."

"I want two posies," said the child. "One for Dick, and one for Dolly. It's Dick's birthday, but if I give him a posy, and don't give Dolly one, Dolly will cry."

The pretty child's little voice was full of anxious confidence. In making her statement she felt sure of sympathy, and she addressed not only her mother, but Jill and Molly Maloney.

Molly, who was squatting down on her knees, began to murmur an eager torrent of Irish blessings.

"Eh, glory! What a darlint it is!" she said. "For all the world like my little Kathleen! And so you want some flowers, my beauty? You let me sarve her, Jill. I has got rose-buds and

mignonette all made up most enticing only a ha'p'ny a bunch."

"I want two bunches," repeated the child in her clear, precise voice, "one for Dick, because it's his birthday, and one for Dolly. Dolly's free years old, and she'll cry if I don't take her a flower. I've only got *one* penny."

She opened the palm of her little hot hand, and showed Molly the coin.

"Now then, you shall choose, my pet," said the Irishwoman. "These bee-u-tiful flowers was growin' on the trees half-an-hour ago; why the jew is scarcely dried on 'em yet. You choose, my pretty, you choose. Oh, the smell of 'em, why they'll nearly knock you down with the swateness. Thank you, lovey, thank you. May the Vargint bless you, me darlint, and that's the prayer of poor old Molly Maloney."

The child received the rather stale rose-buds and mignonette with silent rapture. Having received her prizes she scarcely gave another glance at Molly, but began chattering eagerly to her mother about the bliss which Dick and Dolly would feel when she presented the posies to them.

The lady having paid Jill for the flowers, took the child's hand and walked away. Molly gave a laugh of satisfaction as they did so.

"I told you so," she said, turning to Jill, "I said if I sold 'em chape I'd get rid of 'em, and they was under Kathleen's bed all night. I called 'em fresh to the child, bless her. She *is* a beauty, but – why, what's the matter, Jill?"

"Nothing," said Jill, suddenly. "Look after my flowers, Molly, I'll be back in a jiffey."

With feverish haste she pulled some of her choicest button-holes out of a great heap in one corner of her basket, and leaving Molly open-mouthed with amazement, ran as fast as she could down the street after the lady and the child.

"Here, little missy," she said, panting out her words, for her breath had failed her, "you give me them posies and take these. These are a sight fresher and better. Here, missy, here!"

She pushed some lovely Gloire-de-Dijon, red geranium, and mignonette into the child's hand. The little one grasped them greedily, but held fast to her wired moss-rose-buds and forget-me-nots.

"I'll keep them all," she said. "Thank you, girl."

"No, no, make her give 'em up, ma'am," said Jill, turning to the lady. "I don't think they're wholesome. The woman's child is ill, and them flowers was in the room all night."

"Throw them away this moment, Ethel," said the mother in alarm. "What a kind girl you are! How can I thank you? No, Ethel, you must not cry. These are much more beautiful posies. Thank you, thank you. But how shameful that one should be exposed to such risks!"

But the lady spoke to empty air, for Jill, having seen the roses and forget-me-nots flung into the middle of the road, had instantly turned on her heel. Molly was rather cross when she came back, but as Jill gave no explanation whatever with regard

to her sudden rush down the road, she soon relapsed into gloomy silence and into many anxious thoughts with regard to her little sick Kathleen.

The brilliant sunshiny morning did not fulfil its promise. In the afternoon the wind veered round, the sky became overcast, and between two and three o'clock a steady downpour of rain began.

Such weather is always fatal to the selling of flowers; at such times the ladies who are out in their fine summer dresses are little inclined to stop and make purchases. Gentlemen don't want button-holes when they are wrapped up in mackintoshes; in short, the wet weather makes the pleasure-seeking public selfish.

Jill had been rather late arriving at her stand, and in consequence the gentlemen who almost always stopped to buy a button-hole from the handsome young flower girl had carried their custom elsewhere.

With the exception of the lady who had bought a sixpenny bunch of poppies, Jill had only sold two or three pennyworth of flowers when the downpour of rain began. As to Molly, even her halfpenny button-holes, quite an anomaly in the trade, could scarcely attract under such depressing circumstances.

The volatile creature began to rock herself backwards and forwards, and bewail her hard lot. What *should* she do, if she did not sell her flowers? There was nothing at all in the house for little sick Kathleen.

"Not even money for the rint," she moaned, "and that cruel baste of a landlord would think nothing of turning us both into

the street."

She poured her full tale of woe into Jill's ears, who listened and made small attempts to comfort her.

"Look yere," said Jill, suddenly, "I'll tell yer a sort of a fairy tale, if you'll listen."

"Oh, glory!" exclaimed Molly, "and I loves them stories. But it's moighty cowld I am. You spake on, honey, and I'll listen. It's comforting sometimes to picter things, but *I'd* rayther think of a right good dinner now than anything under the sun."

"This isn't a dinner," said Jill, "but it's lovely, and it's true."

"Fairy tales ain't true," interrupted Molly.

"Some are. This is – I see'd it with my own eyes last night. I went with the boys to Grosvenor Square, and I see'd the fine folks going into a ball. There was the madams in their satins, and laces, and feathers, and the men like princes every one of them. And the young gels in white as ef they were sort of angels. You could smell the flowers from the balconies right down in the street, and once I was pushed forrard, and I got a good sight right into the house. My word, Molly, it wor enough to dazzle yer! The soft look of it and the richness of it, and the dazzle of the white marble walls! Oh, my word, what a story I could make up of a princess living in a palace like that. What's the matter, Molly."

"Whisht," said Molly, "howld your tongue. There's some corpses coming down the road. If there's one thing I love more than another it's a corpse, and there are three of them coming down in hearses. Three together – glory! There's a sight! 'Tis a

damp day they has for their buryin', poor critters!"

Molly stood up in her excitement, pushing her despised basket of withered flowers behind her. The wind had blown her tall hat crooked, and had disarranged her unkempt grey hair, which surrounded her weather-beaten countenance now in grisly locks.

Putting her arms akimbo, she came out from under the shelter of the railway portico to see the funeral processions go by. Three hearses, one following the other – such a sight was worth a wet afternoon to behold. Molly, in her excitement, rushed back to where Jill was standing, and caught her roughly by the arm.

"Come on," she said. "They are the purtiest coffins I has seen for many a day. By the size of them they must howld full-grown men. Ah! what a wake the critters would have had in ould Ireland! Swate it would have been, and wouldn't the whiskey have flown around! Ah, worra me, it's a sorrowful day when they don't wake the dead. There they go! there's the first – six foot high if he was an inch – a powerful big coffin he takes. Well, he'll find it damp getting under the earth on a day like this. My word, Jill! Look at the flowers! Why, they're heaped up on that coffin, and chice 'uns too – roses and lilies, and them big white daisies. Oh, shame, they'll all go underground, I expect. Here's the second! Can you see it, Jill? He's not so big, five foot seven or eight, I guess. Heaps of flowers, too. Simple waste, I call it, to give flowers to a corpse. It can nayther smell 'em, or look at 'em. Ah, and here's the last – poor faller, poor faller!"

The Irishwoman's ready tears sprang to her eyes. She turned

and faced Jill.

"He ain't got one single flower on him!" she said. "Poor faller! Where's his wife, or his swate-heart? Poor faller, I do call it a negleckful shame of them."

"But I thought you said – "

"Never mind what I said, I forgits it meself. There's the coffin, without a scrap of trimmin' on it, and the poor corpse inside a-frettin' and a-mourning. Oh, it's moighty disrespec'ful. Suppose it was your Nat, Jill?"

"No, it should never be my Nat," said Jill, with a little cry.

Her quick, eager sympathies were aroused beyond endurance. The plain deal coffin, lying bare on the shabbiest of hearses, appealed to her innermost heart.

"He shall have posies, too," said the flower girl, with a cry.

She rushed back to the corner when her basket was placed out of reach of the rain, swung it up on her powerful young arm, and rushing out fearlessly into the street, flung the brilliant contents all over the deal coffin.

"Let him have them to be buried with!" she said, addressing her words to a few of the passers-by, who could not help cheering her.

Chapter Five

Soon after this Jill went home. She carried an empty basket, and what was far more unusual, a pocket destitute of the smallest coin. The few pence she had earned during this unlucky day she had given to Holly, to help her to meet her rent and to buy some necessaries for little sick Kathleen.

Jill went home, however, singing a low, glad song under her breath. Her temperament was very excitable, she had gone through times of great depression in her life, but she had also known her moments of ecstasy. Some of these blissful limes were visiting her to-day. She did not mind the rain nor her empty pocket. She was glad she had pound the flowers over that plain deal coffin. It gave her delight to think that the pauper should go down to the grave as gaily decked for the burial as his richer brothers.

She stepped along quickly and lightly, singing short snatches of the street melodies of the day. The fact of having an empty pocket did not trouble her to-night. She had only to draw on her secret store. She had only to take a little, a very little, from the money put carefully out of sight in the old stocking, and all would be well.

It seemed only right and proper to Jill that to-day should be the day of gifts, that she should pour her flowers over a dead man, and should give the few pence she had earned to comfort

a sick child.

These things were only as they should be, for to-night the crowning gift of all would take place, when she put her hand in Nat's and promised to wed him before the registrar in three weeks' time.

Jill reached home at last and ran lightly up the stairs to the top of the house. She was in a hurry, for she wanted to take some money out of the stocking to buy a suitable supper for Nat. If she could, too, she would purchase a bunch of cheap flowers to decorate the room.

In her excitement and strong interest, she, for the first time, gave her mother the second place in her thoughts. But as she reached the roughly-painted door which was shut against her, a sudden pang of fear went through her heart, and she paused for a moment before raising her hand to raise the knocker. Suppose her mother should be ill again, as she was the night before! Suppose – a hot rush of colour spread all over Jill's dark face.

Nat knew nothing of these illnesses of her mother's. Nat had never seen Poll Robinson except gaily dressed, bright good-humour in her eyes, pleasant words on her lips, and a general look of comeliness radiating from her still-handsome person.

Nat had always looked at Jill's mother with admiration in his open blue eyes. Jill had loved him for these glances. Nothing had ever drawn him nearer to her than his liking for the comely, pleasant-spoken woman, who was so dear and beloved to the girl herself. Suppose he saw Poll as Poll was sometimes to be seen!

Jill clenched her well-formed brown hand at the thought. She sounded a long knock at the door, and waited with a fast-beating heart for the result.

To the girl's relief a step was heard immediately within, and Poll, her face pale, her eyes heavy from long hours of suffering, opened the door.

"Oh, mother," said Jill, with a little laugh, "oh, mother dear."

She ran up to the woman and kissed her passionately, too relieved to find Poll in full possession of her senses to notice the white, drawn, aged expression of her face.

"Mother," said Jill, "here's an empty basket, and has nothing in my pocket, either."

"You look bright enough about it, Jill," said Poll. "No flowers and no money! What's the meaning of this ill-luck?"

"No, no, mother, you ain't to say the word ill-luck to-night. There ain't no such thing, not this night leastways. I'll tell you another time about the flowers and about having no money. Nat's coming, mother, Nat Carter, him as I'm keeping company with. And I'm – I'm going to say 'yea' to his 'yea' at last, mother. That's why there shouldn't be no ill-luck on a night like this."

Jill's sparkling eyes were raised almost shyly to her mother's. She was not a timid girl, but in acknowledging her love for the first time a sensation of shyness, new, strange, and sweet, crept over her.

She half expected her mother to fold her in a voluminous embrace, but Poll did nothing of the kind. She stood very upright,

her back to the window, her massive figure flung out in strong relief against the background of evening light. But the pale, and even woe-begone expression of her face was lost in shadow.

"I must take some money out of the stocking to buy supper with," said Jill. "Susy may be coming as well as Nat, there's no saying; anyhow I'd like to have a good supper."

She walked across the room to the place where the bureau stood.

"Don't, Jill," said Poll suddenly. "I thought may be you'd be coming in hungry, and I has supper."

"You has got supper ready, mother?"

"Yes, child, yes. Don't stare at me as if you were going to eat me. I thought may be you'd be coming in hungry, and that the boys would want their fill, and that – "

"Mother, you didn't think as Nat were coming?"

"How was I to tell? When gels keep company with young men there's never no knowing when they'll make up their minds to wed 'em. Anyhow I bought some supper this morning, and here it be. You come and look, Jill."

Poll took her daughter's hand with almost unnecessary force, and opening a cupboard in the wall, showed a fresh loaf of bread, a pat of butter, some radishes, a good-sized pork-pie, and a pound of uncooked sausages.

"There's a few potatoes in a bag there," said Poll. "We'll put 'em down to boil, and set the sausages on to fry. Ain't that a good enough supper even for Nat, Jill?"

"Oh, mother, it's a feast fit for a wedding," said Jill, laughing with pleasure. "And flowers, I do declare! Mother, there's no one like you. You forgets nothing."

"Don't praise me to-night, child, I can't quite abear it," said Poll. "Go and smarten yourself up for that young man of yourn, and let your old mother cook the supper."

Jill went into the other room, coiled her black hair freshly round her head, took off her gaily-coloured apron, and put on in its place a white one trimmed with embroidery. In her hair she stuck a crimson rose, and came back to the kitchen looking demure and sweet.

Nat arrived in good time, accompanied by his sister, Susy. The boys came in after their day's work, and the whole party sat down to the excellent supper which Poll had prepared.

The meal was nearly drawing to a close when Susy, bending forward, said in her sharp voice to Jill —

"Nat tells me that you and he will most likely wed one another afore the next Bank Holiday."

Jill coloured, glanced at Nat, who was watching her with all his heart in his eyes, and then nodded to Susy.

"And you and he mean to take the flat under this?"

Jill nodded again.

"It's early days for you to speak of these things with Jill, Susy," said her brother. "We hasn't made up all our plans yet, Jill and me."

"Oh yes, you has, Nat. And what I say is this, that seven

shillings a week is a sight too much for you two to pay. It's beginning extravagant, and what's that but ending in ruin? Yes, I'm out-spoke," continued Susy, raising her shrill, confident young voice, "and what I say is, 'begin small, and you'll end big!' Ain't I right, Mrs Robinson?"

"For sure, dearie," said Poll, in an absent voice. She was scarcely attending.

"Be you a-going to get married, Jill?" exclaimed Tom in an ecstasy. "Oh, jiminy! Won't we make the cakes and ale fly round on the day of the wedding! My stars, I'd like to go courting myself. Will you have me to go company with, miss?"

He pulled his forelock and gave Susy an impudent leer as he spoke. She did not take the least notice of him, but continued in a tone of solemn earnestness:

"You know, Jill, that you and Nat are goin' to take the rooms under this. And what I say is they're too dear and too many. What do you want with four rooms all to yourselves? You'll be both out all day, Nat with his donkey-cart, and you with your flowers."

"May be not," interrupted Nat. "May be I can 'arn enough for both of us."

"Oh, no, you can't, Nat; and Jill ain't the one to let you. You'll both be out all day, and you can't make no use of four rooms, let alone the furnishing on 'em. Now I ain't talking all this for nothing. You are both set on the rooms, and it ain't no use trying to turn obstinate folks from their own way. What I want to say is this, that I'm willing to take the best bedroom off you, ef you'll

let me have it, and pay you 'arf-a-crown a week for it. And Jill can let me cook my food by her fire, and use her oven when I want to. That will be a bargain as 'ull suit us both fine, and your rent 'ull be brought down to four-and-six. What do you say, Jill? I'm looking for fresh quarters, so I must have my answer soon."

Jill looked at Nat, who rose suddenly, went up to his sister, and laid one hand suddenly on her shoulder.

"Look you here, my gel," he said, "Jill and I can say nothing to-night. We'll give you your answer in a day or so. And now, Jill, if you'll put on your hat we'll go out a bit, and have a talk all by ourselves and fix up matters."

"It would be a right good thing for Jill to join the Guild," said Susy. "You ought to persuade her, Nat. She'd be a credit to you in the uniform, instead of going about the outlandish guy she is, in that flashy apron and turban."

"The prettiest bit of a wild flower in Lunnon for all that," murmured Nat under his breath. His honest eyes glowed with admiration. Jill smiled up at him.

She went into the other room to fetch her despised turban, which she tied under her chin, instead of coiling it as usual round her head.

"You'll wait till we come back, Susy," said her brother. She nodded acquiescence, and proceeded to give enlarged editions of her views on various matters to poor Poll. The boys lounged about for a little, then went out.

Susy helped Poll to wash up the supper things, and then she

drew in her chair close to the little stove, glad, warm as the evening was, to toast her toes, and quite inclined to pour some more of her wisdom over Poll's devoted head.

Mrs Robinson, however, had a knack of shutting up her ears when she did not care to listen. She sat now well forward on her seat, her big hands folded on her knee, her large black eyes gazing through Susy at something else – at a picture which filled her soul with sullen pain.

Susy expatiated on the delights of the Flower Girls' Guild, on the advantages of the neat uniform, on the money-profit which must surely arise by keeping flowers in the room provided by the Guild all night. Susy was intent on proselytising. If she could only get Mrs Robinson and Jill to join the Guild she felt that her evening's work would not be in vain.

Poll sat mute as if she were taking in every word. Suddenly she spoke.

"What are you staying on for, Susy Carter?"

Susy, drawn up short, replied with almost hesitation —

"Nat told me to wait for him. But I can go," she added a little stiffly, "ef I'm in the way. I ain't one to stay loitering round in any room ef I'm not wanted."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.