

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



A Family Christmas

Glenice Crossland

Contents

About the Book
About the Author
Also by Glenice Crossland
Title Page
Dedication
Acknowledgements
Prologue

Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven
Chapter Twelve
Chapter Thirteen
Chapter Fourteen
Chapter Fifteen
Chapter Sixteen
Chapter Seventeen
Chapter Eighteen
Chapter Nineteen
Chapter Twenty
Chapter Twenty-one
Chapter Twenty-two

Chapter Twenty-three
Chapter Twenty-four
Chapter Twenty-five
Chapter Twenty-six
Chapter Twenty-seven
Chapter Twenty-eight
Chapter Twenty-nine
Chapter Thirty
Chapter Thirty-one
Chapter Thirty-two
Chapter Thirty-three
Chapter Thirty-four

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About the Book

Lucy Gabbitas has just left school and is excited about joining her sisters at the local umbrella factory. But then her beloved father dies of lung disease leaving Lucy and her brothers and sisters broken-hearted. With barely enough to make ends meet, the family receive no sympathy from their tyrannical mother, Annie, and their first Christmas without him holds little comfort and joy.

Things seem to be looking brighter for Lucy when she meets John Grey and falls in love. That is until Annie becomes seriously ill and dies, and Lucy is forced to put her family first. But despite their continued hardship and despair, Lucy resolves to turn their home into a happy one for her brothers and sisters, and for the family of her own she dearly hopes for. And she is determined to make Christmas a joyous occasion for them all once more...

About the Author

Glenice Crossland lives in Sheffield. She has loved writing from an early age, only taking it seriously after early retirement from her job in a leisure centre. She has read one of her poems on BBC2, had several read on Radio Sheffield and more published in various anthologies. She is well known locally for her watercolours of churches and local traditions. Married with one son and grandchildren she still lives a few hundred yards from the house in which she was born. She is also the author of *The Stanford Lasses*, *Christmas Past* and *The Ever Open Door*.

Also by Glenice Crossland

The Stanford Lasses
Christmas Past
The Ever Open Door

*A
Family
Christmas*

GLENICE CROSSLAND



arrow books

For my husband and family,
with love, as always.

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Prologue

Lucy opened her eyes and peered into the darkness. She could just make out the stockings hanging over the brass knobs on the iron bed. She slid out onto the cold lino and ran to open the curtains. Jack Frost had been in the night and left pretty patterns on the window pane but she hadn't time to stay and admire them this morning. 'Wake up, Jane. Father Christmas has been.' Lucy lifted down the bulky stocking and hurried on bare feet across the landing to her parents' room. She climbed up onto the bed and scrambled over her dad until she could snuggle down between them.

'He's been.'

'Well I never. I wonder what he's brought.' Annie helped the five-year-old to empty her stocking. She loved the excitement of Christmas almost as much as her children.

'Just a minute, little lass. Let's have some light.' Bill Gabbitas reached for the matches and lit a bedside candle, sending shadows dancing on the wall, and setting himself off in a fit of coughing. Jane was the next to crawl up the bed. Annie pulled her down between the blankets and warmed her cold feet between her hands.

The toys didn't amount to much: a couple of skipping ropes and yoyos, knitted teddy bears which Annie had stuffed with bits cut from an old vest. Annie noticed that one ear had been stuffed more than the others but neither Lucy nor Jane seemed to notice. There were brightly coloured scarves and caps, too. Both little girls decided to wear them. In the toes of the stockings were shiny new pennies and a sugar mouse.

‘Can we come in, Mam?’ Nine-year-old Nellie and Mary, the eldest, perched on the bottom of the bed and opened their stockings, keeping up the pretence of Santa Claus for the benefit of their little sisters.

Ben came clattering down the attic stairs. ‘Thanks, Mam. Thanks, Dad.’ He shoved in between his sisters until he was up on the bed. Ben had a cricket bat – lovingly made by Bill – in his hand and Annie protected her heavily pregnant belly from her boisterous son. Laughing, she reached over and took hold of her husband’s hand.

‘Looks like we shall need a bigger bed next year, Bill love.’

‘Aye lass. It’ll be grand with a new bairn in the house, and perhaps it’ll be a little lad.’

Chapter One

MRS RAWLINGS TOLD the two girls to sit at the table and she cut two wedges of chocolate sponge. Then she poured two glasses of lemonade. Whilst they were partaking of the refreshment she counted out the money for the bread and popped it in the basket.

‘Our William’ll be coming after today,’ Lucy said. ‘I’m starting work on Monday.’

‘Never. Don’t tell me you’re thirteen already.’

‘I am, on April the nineteenth my birthday was.’

‘Well! Why ever didn’t yer mention it? Here, let me find you a few coppers then.’ The woman searched in a huge leather purse and gave Lucy a sixpence.

‘It’s all right,’ Lucy blushed, ‘I didn’t tell you so you’d give me something.’

‘Course yer didn’t, love, but yer a good lass, so take it. And I hope yer enjoy yer work. If your William’s as reliable as you he’ll do me fine.’

‘Oh he is, Mrs Rawlings, you can depend on that.’ Bill Gabbitas had brought all his six children up to be reliable and dependable.

On Monday morning Jane and Lucy set off to work with Kitty nervously following in their wake. Mary had been gone a good half hour ago. Mary was saving up for her wedding and working all the hours she was offered. The girls hurried up three flights of steps and then Lucy began to panic when Jane instructed them to wait here for Mr Blackmore to set them on, before hurrying away and

leaving them there. What if she and Kitty were separated too and she didn't know anybody?

Kitty's face was as white as the cloth in which her bread and cheese were wrapped. 'Look at all them machines,' she whispered. 'I'll never know what to do wi' 'em.'

'I expect they'll show us what to do,' Lucy murmured.

'So there you are.' Mr Blackmore looked at Kitty. 'By gum, you're a little 'un, aren't yer? We'll 'ave to find a box or summat for yer to stand on. Come on then, let's get on.' Twenty pairs of eyes followed the girls along the shop floor. Lucy recognised one or two of them from their school days and began to feel a bit better. Mr Blackmore called to one of them and told her to fix the two girls up with aprons, then Kitty was taken further along the bench and Lucy was shown what to do.

'Put on the apron and then this pad on top,' the girl told Lucy. 'Your job is to straighten these ribs by knocking 'em on this pad, like this. Sometimes if the metal's too soft they bend and you 'ave to straighten 'em with yer hands, so you 'ave to wear these little leather caps to protect yer finger and thumb.' The girl showed Lucy how to do it. 'When we finish at end of shift yer've got to sort 'em out into two bundles, twenty-one-inch and twenty-four. Yer'll 'ave to do it yerself now or I shan't earn any bonus.' The girl left Lucy to get on with it and then came back. 'Oh I forgot, because yer a new lass yer've got to keep that bucket filled so we can wash our 'ands.'

'Where's the tap?'

'In't hardening shop.'

'Where's that?'

'On't next floor, and don't slop it all over't floor when yer fetch it, else somebody might slip and break their neck.'

Lucy started on the umbrella ribs, thinking she would never remember everything she had been told and wondering what Kitty was doing. The girl next to her was working so fast Lucy could hardly see her hands moving.

She would never be able to do that. Perhaps Mr Blackmore wouldn't keep them on if they couldn't keep up with the others. Then what would happen? She'd be in for a beating from her mam, that's what.

'How's it going, Lucy?'

Lewis Marshall came up to her carrying a huge bundle of ribs. She was relieved to hear a friendly voice but she hoped he wouldn't become too friendly and want to kiss her like he usually did. She daren't take her eyes off what she was doing. 'I'll never keep up with the others,' Lucy told him.

Lewis laughed. 'Of course yer will. Everybody's slow on't first day. I'll tell yer what, I'll keep bucket full, just for today and then you can concentrate on yer job.'

'Oh lor, I'd forgotten all about water,' Lucy moaned.

'I know, I've done it for yer, don't let on to old Blackmore, though,' Lewis laughed. 'I'll expect a kiss in return.'

Lucy blushed, hoping nobody had heard him, but the girl next to her was giggling. Lucy was relieved when the buzzer went, signalling dinner time. At least half a shift was over and it hadn't been too bad, even if Lewis Marshall did come pestering whilst she was eating her bread and cheese. 'I'll tell our Ben if yer don't go away,' she told him when yet again he leaned over trying to kiss her. He had fancied her for months.

'I'm not scared of 'im,' Lewis said, but she noticed he moved away. Everyone was in awe of nineteen-year-old Ben Gabbitas. At six foot two Ben only had to scowl at someone for them to make themselves scarce. If they had known Ben as well as Lucy did they'd have known he was one of the gentlest people in Millington and no troublemaker.

When Lewis had left, Kitty moved over to where Lucy was finishing her lunch. 'Don't take any notice of 'im,' Kitty said. 'Ee's a pest.'

'Well I wish he'd behave 'imself, embarrassing me like that.'

'Nobody would think owt; everybody knows what ee's like, they're all used to 'im.'

Even so, word had reached the ears of Jane Gabbitas by the end of the working day.

'What was Lewis Marshall saying to you at dinner time?' Jane enquired when they set off up the hill.

'Nothing.'

'Don't let him touch you, or you might have a baby.' Jane was fourteen and knew lots of things that Lucy didn't.

'He did touch me, on my arm,' Lucy panicked.

'Well, that doesn't count, but don't let him touch you anywhere else.' Jane decided to ask their Mary to have a talk with Lucy and explain to her about boys and babies and things. Jane had learned everything she knew from chats in the playground with her friends but Lucy seemed rather ignorant about such matters. However, she was far too embarrassed to talk to her sister herself. Besides, she wasn't sure if some of the things she'd heard were true or not.

Lucy was wondering why their Mary didn't have a baby; Jacob touched her on her knee when they were sitting together in the front room on Sunday afternoons. She and Kitty had seen him once when they had peeped through the window to see what they were up to. And Jacob always put his arm round her waist when they walked home from church. If their mam saw him their Mary wouldn't half cop it. Annie Gabbitas would think nothing of lashing out with the carpet beater, even if her young man was there. Lucy had had a wallop only yesterday for leaving the kitchen door open when the bread dough was rising on the hearth. Thinking of bread, she wondered what was for tea; the bread and cheese hadn't been enough to feed a bird. 'I'm hungry,' she told Jane.

'I am too. I could eat the coalman's horse. I expect it'll be stew again.' Stew was the usual meal in the Gabbitas household. Mr Brown the greengrocer always made Top

Row the last call and dropped off any greens that were turning yellow, half-rotten root vegetables and bruised fruit at their house. Annie repaid the man by sending young William to run errands for Mrs Brown on Saturday mornings. The old vegetables made a decent stew when simmered with a few neck of mutton bones. An oxtail would be added after a few days, providing dinners for at least a week.

‘I’m fed up of stew,’ Lucy moaned.

‘Aren’t we all?’ Jane rolled her eyes, then she blushed as she noticed one of the lads from Next Row walking towards them. Jane thought he was one of the most handsome lads in Millington, but he was sixteen and didn’t even glance at her. If any of the Gabbitas girls had attracted the attention of Josh Smith it was Nellie. At sixteen, Nellie’s curves showed through her frock – which she had long since outgrown. Nellie, like her sisters, would have to wait until Whitsuntide, when Mary, being the eldest, would have a new dress made by Annie, so that her old one could be handed down.

Poor Lucy, being the youngest, always had to make do with a faded fourth-hand dress. Not that she dared complain. So Lucy Gabbitas fixed a smile on her pretty, animated face and said her prayers every night that one day something nice would happen. Up to now nothing had, but Annie’s family had long since learned that if nothing good was expected, then nobody would ever be disappointed.

Bill Gabbitas was home when his two daughters arrived from work. Lucy’s heart seemed to miss a beat as she realised her father must be ill again to be home at this time. She ran to where he was lying on the old horsehair sofa. Lucy idolised her dad; he was a loving and generous man. Everyone loved Bill Gabbitas. It was only her mam who had changed and become miserable.

‘Hello, little lass.’ Bill held out his arms as Lucy fell into them. ‘How did yer day go?’ His daughter planted a kiss on her dad’s cheek, setting him off coughing. Lucy fetched a clean piece of linen from the cupboard by the fire and handed it to Bill. Her face turned pale as she saw the bright red streak of blood he coughed up onto the white rag.

‘Now look what you’ve done,’ Annie chastised Lucy. ‘Throwing yerself about. Get out to play.’

‘Leave her alone,’ Bill managed between the coughing. Just then Ben Gabbitas walked in and went towards his father. ‘Are yer bad again, Dad?’ He placed a cushion behind Bill’s head. ‘It’s time yer gave up that job. It’ll be the death of yer, if yer keep on much longer.’ Bill was a ripper in Millington Colliery, the same pit where Ben was employed.

‘He can’t. What are we to live on?’ Annie snapped.

‘We’ll manage; we’re all working now, except our Will. Isn’t me dad more important than money?’

‘The rent’ll ‘ave to be paid if yer dad leaves work – have yer thought about that?’ The rent was deducted from Bill’s wages every week by the owners of the pit.

‘It’ll ‘ave to be paid if owt happens to me dad anyway. Unless we get the house transferred into my name. We can do that.’

‘I don’t want owt to happen to me dad.’ Lucy began to cry.

‘What did I tell yer? Get outside and play.’ Annie grabbed the carpet beater and whacked Lucy hard.

Ben grabbed the beater out of his mother’s hand. ‘Leave her alone. The child’s done a day’s work. She wants some food inside her. Not that we get much to say we’re all tipping up our wages; I’d like to know what yer do with it all.’ Ben snapped the handle of the beater in two and threw it out of the door. Lucy couldn’t help admiring him for standing up to her mother.

‘What did yer do that for? Yer like a mad man.’

'Aye well, it's time somebody opened their mouth around here. Our Lucy's a good lass; yer always on at her. Besides, what do yer want with a carpet beater when we've no bloody carpets?'

Bill began coughing again, the rag turning scarlet when he couldn't stop.

'Fetch the doctor, Jane,' Ben ordered.

'We can't afford no doctor,' Annie snapped.

'Fetch him, go on.' Ben ignored his mother. He had had enough of her penny-pinching ways. Jane ran all the way down past the three other rows of houses, all identical to Top Row, and up the hill by the clock till she reached the doctor's house. She might as well have saved herself the trouble. By the time Jane returned with the doctor, Bill Gabbitas had breathed his last breath.

All Top Row was in mourning. Neighbours came from every house offering help, a loaf of bread – though God knows they had hardly enough to feed their families – and most importantly they offered a shoulder to cry on. Annie did her fair share of weeping, never considering the sadness her children were experiencing, and regardless of the fact that she had given little thought to the suffering of her husband over the last few years. In fact Annie seemed incapable of caring for anyone.

Ben comforted William and Lucy as best he could, knowing they were the two closest to their father. Mary sent Nellie and Jane off to work, knowing not only that it would be good for them but that her mother would expect a full wage packet from them at the end of the week. She kept Lucy at home. The lass couldn't be expected to master a new job in the state she was in.

Arrangements were made for the funeral at Cragstone Parish Church, even though Annie grumbled that the carting of the coffin all the way to Cragstone would cost more. Ben put his foot down and insisted that as his

father's birthplace had been Cragstone and as he had been baptised there, he would be buried and laid to rest close to his parents and grandparents. Ben considered his father would be at peace away from his nagging misery of a wife. Annie complained, but Ben told her she could argue till kingdom come; if he was arranging the funeral that was where his father would be interred. He sent William to the insurance agent's house with a message and was relieved when the man came with the news that the premium was up to date and money for the funeral would be forthcoming.

Annie set Lucy to work cleaning the front room so that Bill would look nice laid out in his coffin. After that Lucy baked a batch of loaves. She thought she'd be better off at work, but didn't dare say so, even though the broken carpet beater had been dumped in the midden behind the lavatories. The heartbroken girl sobbed all the time she was kneading the dough, grief-stricken that her kind, loving dad had gone for ever. Lucy hated her mother on that day, remembering how she had tried to prevent their Jane from fetching the doctor. She hoped her mother would cough herself to death, just like her father had from the consumption. It would serve her right if she did. Then she wondered who would look after them if their mother died as well. Perhaps Lucy shouldn't wish her dead after all; she didn't love her, though. Her mother had been mean to her father and Lucy would never forgive her for that.

She wondered if the others were remembering all the times their dad had been too ill to go to work but had gone anyway, knowing his life wouldn't have been worth living if he hadn't made the effort. Lucy could remember when her mam had been different, affectionate and smiling a lot. She didn't know why she had changed, but she vowed that if she ever had a husband and family she would never treat them the way her mother had treated her dad and her brothers and sisters.

It was the first Christmas without Bill Gabbitas and even the younger ones would be glad when it was over. The older ones could remember a time when the house had been a wonderland of holly, ivy and even a mistletoe bough. Even in the latter years when their mother had moaned about the extra work Christmas caused – not that she had made much of an effort – there had been the excitement of Christmas morning. A sugar mouse, a penknife, a picture book or a pretty lace hankie, all supplied by their father. Even Annie complaining about the wasting of money hadn't spoiled the fact that their father had given each of them something personal, and given it to them with love. There had been the carol singing, accompanied by Bill on the old melodeon brought down from the attic, with neighbours calling in to join in the jollity. Now it was just like any other day, except that the fact that it was Christmas meant that their hearts were heavier and the memories more poignant without the presence of their beloved father.

When Ben tried to add a little cheer to the special day by handing each of them a few shiny new pennies and a small bag of sweets, his mother accused him of being uncaring, with his father not yet cold in his grave. Ben knew he would only cause a scene if he spoke his mind and, not wishing to make the day even more miserable for his sisters and brother, walked out of the house and along the row. He would go for a walk in the peace and quiet of the Donkey Wood until he had calmed down. He brushed the tears from his cheeks as memories of his dad invaded his thoughts.

'A bloody right family Christmas this has turned out to be,' he muttered. As he turned down Side Row Ben wondered if he would ever know a merry one again. Not in his mother's house, that was for sure.

Chapter Two

IT WAS A lovely April day and Lucy's sixteenth birthday, though no one except Kitty Marshall had remembered. Kitty now worked next to Lucy on the same bench and had grown tall enough to dispense with the box she used to stand on.

'It's your birthday, Lucy,' she said as they walked to work.

'How do you know?' Lucy asked, surprised.

'Me mam said. She said your birthday's on Primrose Day, that's how she remembers.'

'Is it Primrose Day today then?' Lucy wondered why Kitty's mam had remembered and her own mam hadn't.

'Well me mam says it is.' The girls hurried as the buzzer sounded. Their Jane would be late again; she was staying out too late talking to the lads on Next Row. Her mam'd go mad if she got the sack and she wouldn't be given a second warning. Lucy had almost dragged her out of bed but she was still nowhere in sight. Mr Blackmore was standing in his usual place by the door, glancing at his watch as each employee entered the building.

'Good morning, Mr Blackmore. It's a lovely day.' Lucy tried to engage the boss in conversation in order to distract his attention from the fact that her sister wasn't with her.

'And it's Lucy's birthday today, Mr Blackmore,' Kitty added.

'Is that so? How old are yer today then?'

'Sixteen, sir.' Lucy really missed her dad on special days like birthdays and Christmas. It never felt the same without her warm and loving dad.

'And never been kissed, eh?' The man chuckled at his own humour.

'She'll not tell you even if she has,' Kitty laughed.

Lucy sighed with relief as Jane came rushing up the steps.

'Oh well, many more happy ones to follow, Lucy.'

'Thank you, sir.' The girls hurried to their bench and began work.

Lucy sang as she worked. She would be getting a rise in wages now she was sixteen. She wasn't sure how much, but it would be better than the nine shillings she was taking home now. Not that she would see any of it. Her mother was waiting at the door every Friday for the wage packets to be handed over. She would give them back a measly one and sixpence for spending money. Kitty's mam gave her half a crown, but then Kitty had a dad, and her mam wasn't a tyrant like Annie.

When they got home that night Ben gave Lucy two shillings as a birthday treat. He gave it to her on the quiet, telling her not to let her mother know or she wouldn't rest until she got her hands on it. Lucy hid it in the brass knob on the black iron bed she shared with Jane. Unlike Ben, who still lived at home, Mary had left home now and married Jacob, who had been her young man since school days. Of course she had been forced to leave work on her wedding day, but Mr Blackmore would often send for her back if they had a rush order, then Mary would be given the sack again when the work was done. Mary didn't mind; she loved Jacob and was quite content cleaning for one or two Millington ladies such as Mrs Rawlings and Mrs James, the wife of the schoolmaster. Jacob had found them a little house on the opposite hillside. Like Mary told her sisters, the further away from her mother, the happier she would be.

Annie Gabbitas's temper was worse than ever, not helped by the pain in her leg, which sometimes became so swollen

it felt near to bursting. Lucy was the only one who seemed to feel any sympathy for the woman, despite her mother's foul moods. Ben scowled as the dinner was served out. 'I thought we might have had summat a bit different than stew seeing as it's our Lucy's birthday,' he said.

Annie sniffed. 'What's so special about birthdays? All they do is make you a year older. Though now she's sixteen I'll look forward to a rise in her board.'

'Oh aye, I didn't think yer'd forget that.' Ben took a mouthful of bread dipped in stew, swallowed it and then said, 'Anyway, I've decided our Lucy's to have a new frock. You can wait an extra week for the rise. Next week you can go to Sheffield, Lucy. I'll take yer. You can buy some material and if me mother won't make it up for yer we'll ask our Mary.'

Annie Gabbitas had a look on her face enough to turn the milk sour. 'So you're the boss in this house now are yer?'

'No, but our Lucy's sixteen and never once in all those years has she had owt new to call her own and it's about time she had.'

Lucy's eyes were lit up like stars, but she was frightened by the look on her mother's face. Annie was liable to throw something if she was that way out.

'I'll say when she can 'ave a new frock, nobody else. She'll bring her wage packet to me next week the way she always does, and that's the end of it.'

Lucy felt her lip tremble. She mustn't cry. She should never have listened to their Ben.

'Right then, you do that, Lucy; you give her yer wage packet and I'll buy the material for a dress out of my wages.' Ben stood up and carried his empty plate to the sink in the corner. 'And from now on she'll get two thirds of me wages and I'll 'ave the rest to do what I like with, like other men my age.'

'Yer can't do that. You'll bring home yer wages to me, just like you've always done.'

‘But that’s where you’re wrong, Mother. I should ‘ave put me foot down years ago but I wanted to be a dutiful son. But do you appreciate anything anyone does for you? Do you hell as like. Well, perhaps you’ll realise what you’re missing when you aren’t getting it any more. Though I doubt it, because all you think about is yerself.’ He grabbed his jacket from the hook behind the door and stormed out, slamming the door behind him. Just then young William came in carrying a bundle of firewood. He looked round at the pale faces. ‘What’s up? It looks like a funeral in ‘ere.’

‘Get yer coat off and I’ll put yer dinner out,’ Lucy told her brother. Her mother had sat herself down in the rocking chair, her face like a thunder cloud; she didn’t say a word, knowing she had gone too far this time.

Always one to keep his word, Ben came home from work on Saturday at dinner time, got washed and changed out of his pit clothes, polished his best boots with spit and flattened his hair down with water. ‘Well, Lucy, are yer ready?’

Lucy had been ready all morning, hopping from one foot to the other until Kitty had told her to concentrate on her work or Mr Black would notice. Even though Lucy no longer helped her, Annie had craftily told Mrs Rawlings that Lucy would go round and see her after dinner, but Lucy had arranged for Will to go in her place. William didn’t mind; he enjoyed helping her and Mrs Rawlings always gave him a slice of bread and jam. Mrs Rawlings’s jam was delicious, even though he had once worried for weeks after swallowing a plum stone, when Albert Marshall had told him it might sprout inside him and grow into a tree.

Lucy had only ever been to Sheffield once, when her dad had taken them all to the station to wave his sister Kate off on the first stage of her journey to America. It had been a lovely outing, even though her dad had had tears in his eyes at the thought of never seeing his sister again. Then

her mam had gone and spoiled it all by saying Aunt Kate was no better than she should be – whatever that might mean – because she had the courage to go off and try to make something of herself. Lucy wished she could go off to America instead of living with her miserable mother.

Lucy shook herself from her reverie. She had changed her mind half a dozen times at least about what colour her dress would be. First she thought she would like a brown dress which would be serviceable, then she thought if it was to be the only dress she would have in the next few years she would like a pretty one in pink or cream.

As it turned out her mind was made up for her as they approached the market stall. The first roll of material she saw was blue muslin, sprigged with tiny white flowers. None of the others could make her change her mind, especially when Ben told her it was the exact colour of her eyes. The man told her how many yards she would need and Ben said, 'Right, we'll take it.' Then he said, 'Now, help me choose some for our Jane.'

Lucy danced with excitement; she had worried about what Jane would think about her new dress. She chose a pale-green crepe de chine. 'That'll suit our Jane's hair,' Lucy said. Jane was as dark as Lucy was fair. Ben agreed the material was lovely. After he had paid the man he told Lucy he was going to splash out on dinner in a small restaurant in High Street. Apparently he had been there before with one of his many girlfriends. All the girls were after Ben Gabbitas but up to now he had not yet settled for one. Lucy hardly dared speak as they climbed the stairs to the cafe; she had never eaten out before. She sat primly on the edge of her chair until Ben told her to relax and enjoy herself. Lucy read the menu and chose fishcakes and fried potatoes with peas. The meal was the most delicious Lucy had ever eaten. Ben told her to pour the tea and her hand shook as she lifted the silver teapot. She thought she would

die if she spilt it on the white damask cover. 'Oh Ben, are yer sure you can afford this and the material as well?'

Ben laughed. 'Oh aye, me mother did me a favour when she refused to buy you a dress. Now I'm keeping a third of me wages I'll be much better off and besides that, anything I make on piecework I'm going to keep from now on.'

'And knowing how hard you work you'll make quite a bit.'

'Aye, and do yer know, Lucy? I don't feel guilty at all. Me mother's a greedy old bitch; she's all take. Yer shouldn't feel sorry for her. She's doing well out of us all and on top of all we tip up she's a pension of fifteen shillings for her and our Will. She should be rolling in it and could keep a good table, but all she does is stash it away. God knows what for.'

'I expect it makes her feel secure.' Lucy always tried to see the good in anyone, even her miserable mother. 'Besides, she works hard and keeps the house clean.'

'Oh aye, with the help of you lasses. And you're like a little mother to our Will. Don't think I 'aven't noticed how she has you all running around after her. Have yer finished? If you have we'll have a walk on the Moor and a look in Cole Brothers.'

Lucy could have sauntered all day looking in the shop windows and planning what she would buy if she had the money. They walked back through the gardens and took a short cut down Chapel Walk towards Haymarket. She decided to go to Woolworths and spend the two shillings Ben had given her. She bought pearl buttons, a paper pattern and enough lace to trim the two dresses, then she remembered she would need sewing thread. Everything cost sixpence so her precious two shillings were gone, but it would be worth it when she and Jane walked out on Sunday evenings in their new dresses.

The house where Lucy lived was identical to all the others in the four rows - known to everyone in Millington as Top

Row, Next Row, Second Row and Bottom Row. Although they had proper names like Saunders Street, no one ever used them except on correspondence delivered by the Royal Mail. Each house had two downstairs rooms, two bedrooms, an attic and a cellar where the coal was kept. The top of the cellar was fitted with shelves where the food was stored, not that there was ever much on the shelves of the Gabbitas residence. Outside the houses on Top Row was a large yard overlooked by a pretty flower-strewn bank leading to the allotments. In the yard were two blocks of water closets, one to every two houses. The attic served as a bedroom for Ben and Will, with Nellie, Jane and Lucy in one room and Annie in the other. Mary's marriage had given the girls a little more space.

All the families were friendly and always ready to lend a hand or a bite to eat in times of need. Even Annie could not be faulted by the neighbours. They saw her as a good mother, spotlessly clean and a woman who had carried on regardless after the loss of her husband. No one outside the family would have believed how cold and unfeeling she could be.

The only one who had ever got herself talked about on Top Row was Evelyn Smithson. Evelyn was rumoured to entertain men in the afternoons when the curtains were drawn; Lewis Marshall often commented that Evelyn was dropping her bloomers again. Mrs Slater said none of it was true and the only reason the curtains were ever drawn in the daytime was when Evelyn's baby boy was napping on the couch and the sun was in his eyes. Mrs Slater said the only man ever to have visited the house had been little Bernard's father, and she should know, living next door. Still the rumours persisted and the Gabbitas girls considered this unfair as they thought Evelyn was lovely, always good for a laugh and a cup of tea. Besides, she was a wonderful mother to her little boy, despite finding it hard to make ends meet.

Another character on Top Row was Mrs Murphy, who seemed to have a new baby every year. Because Mrs Murphy was so fat nobody ever knew she was carrying until she actually gave birth. She would simply go to bed, bear the child and get up again, resuming her place in the chair in front of the fire where she would sit, day in and day out, leaving the kids to get on with life. Amazingly, they all seemed to thrive amongst the clutter and grime, unlike the babies Mrs Cadman had borne. Although Mrs Cadman's house was well furnished and clean and although she attended the clinic regularly, two of her babies had died, one poor little mite at birth and another of a fever. Now her third child had been taken to a hospital on the other side of Sheffield suffering from typhoid. The little boy had been seriously ill on admittance but was said to be recovering slowly. Lucy hoped the baby would pull through as Mrs Cadman would make a perfect mother. Lucy tried to compare her to her own, though it was difficult to imagine Annie travelling miles every day if any of them were ever ill and taken to hospital.

All in all Top Row was a decent place in which to live, just a short walk from the main road where all the shops and the town hall were situated, then there was the market on Fridays, the church school at the bottom of the hill opposite the parish church and the Miners' Club. Lower down were the steelworks, trailing the length of the valley with the river Don flowing alongside them. The opposite hill was sparsely populated and usually blanketed by smoke from the works and coke ovens. On the far side of the hill was the colliery where most families on Top Row had at least one member of the family working. The pit was hidden from view in the midst of Sheepdip Wood, a popular walk on Sundays for the people of Millington, especially courting couples. Lucy was glad they lived on this side of the valley, which was much more populated but greener and seemed

untouched by the smoke or grime. Close to the rows were the Memorial Gardens and the clock tower.

Then there was the Donkey Wood leading to the football field and the new council school. Council houses were already springing up in one area and Lucy was sad that the strawberry fields would be lost for ever to make way for the new developments. At least the Donkey Wood would remain intact; Mr Blackmore said it had been bequeathed by the owners of the works to the good people of Millington to be used for their enjoyment and pleasure in years to come. The Donkey Wood was used for walks, blackberrying and for picnics. It was a good place to play, with a stream to paddle in and trees to climb. Of course Lucy had been too old for playing for a few years now, but it would be good to walk in the Donkey Wood in her new dress. She wondered if their Nellie would lend her her new button-up boots just for once, so she could show off and look beautiful for a change.

Nellie Gabbitas had more on her mind than buttonup boots. She wondered how to tell her mother the news without her starting to rant and rave. She would wait until their Ben and Lucy came back from Sheffield; Ben would be on her side and would protect her. How awful to need protecting from the lashing tongue of one's own mother. Nellie worked at a large, rambling old house known as Cragstone Manor, situated on the edge of Cragstone. The manor had recently been renovated and opened to accommodate paying guests, mostly gentlemen visiting the steelworks or colliery for conferences or merely an excuse to party and get drunk. Nellie had worked in service from leaving school, starting as chamber maid and progressing to assistant cook. Now the cook was retiring and Nellie had been offered the post with an increase in wages. The position was a living-in one and Nellie had not had to think twice before accepting. The trek to Cragstone - a distance of several miles - was

arduous on dark mornings and nights, particularly in winter on the country lanes. Besides, she would have her own room and as much food as she could eat. The only thing worrying her was her mother's reaction. Of course she would miss her sisters and brothers, but it would be a relief to get away from her mother. In fact, she couldn't wait to get away and begin her new job the day after tomorrow. Oh, she wished their Ben would come home; she thought they would have been back by now.

'What's up with yer? You're like somebody with St Vitus' dance,' Annie admonished her daughter.

'Nothing, nothing's wrong with me. I just thought they'd have been back by now. I hope nothing's happened to them.'

Annie grimaced. 'What can possibly have happened to them?'

Nellie didn't need to answer as the door opened and in skipped Lucy, who couldn't wait to show off the new material. 'Oh Nellie, you'll never believe how beautiful it is. Where's our Jane?' Lucy thought she ought to show Jane first, seeing as it was a surprise for her.

'Upstairs, changing pillow cases ready for washing on Monday,' Annie said, 'unlike some who's time to go gallivanting.'

Lucy went clattering up the stairs, bearing the parcels of cloth. Jane was in Annie's room, mending a hole in the striped pillow to stop the floes falling out. 'Look at this, Jane.' Lucy opened the parcel, exposing the beautiful lime-green material.

'Oh, Lucy, it's gorgeous.' Jane tried to hide the envy she couldn't help feeling. 'You'll look lovely in that.'

'No, you will. It's yours.'

'Mine?'

'Yes, yours. This is mine.' She showed Jane the blue.

'Mine! I can't believe it.'

'And I bought a pattern and some lace and buttons.'