RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

Trinidad Street

Patricia Burns

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arrow books

To Pam and Marion,
friends extraordinary

PART I

1898

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HALF-PAST FOUR AND a tribe of children erupted from the gates of Dock Street school. Boots clattering on the pavement, jackets and scarves and pinafores flying, they burst out into the street, girls from one entrance, boys from another, infants dragging behind big brothers and sisters. They mingled in the street outside and separated to go their various ways home through the packed terraces of Millwall. It was Friday afternoon, already dusk, and they were free of the three-storey prison for two whole days.

Ellen walked slowly, jostled by the shrieking throng, hardly noticing her young sister Daisy pulling at her arm.

‘Come on, Ellen, come on! I want to get home.’

But Ellen refused to be hurried. Her own thoughts engrossed her.

‘All right, all right,’ she said vaguely, oblivious to the urgent tugging at her sleeve.

Daisy gave up in disgust and ran on with a gang of friends. Yelling their joy at being let out, they scampered off down the street hand in hand. Ellen let her go. At eight, Daisy was quite old enough to take herself home. She thrust her hands into her pockets and frowned at the toes of her patched boots, turning over the events of the day in her mind. She did not notice the pair of boys closing in on either side of her.

‘Who’s the teacher’s pet, then?’

She started. Their faces leered at her, one sharp as a ferret, the other round and pasty. She knew just who they were. They were always in trouble for bullying. She tried to

dodge round them but they danced about in front of her, grinning.

‘Toffee nose, toffee nose. Don’t want to play with us no more.’

One snatched at her tam-o’-shanter and ran off. With a yell, Ellen was after him.

‘Give it us back!’

‘Teacher’s pet.’ He threw it to his friend.

‘Give it back!’

Grinning, the thin boy backed away, holding it in the air, the wool stripes bright against the blackened brick of the high schoolyard wall.

‘Pig. Beast. Give it us!’ Ellen tried to jump up and grab it, but the fat boy held her back while his mate whirled it round and round on his finger, faster and faster. The colours became a blur. Any minute now it would fly off and land in the dirt of the cobbled street. Her beautiful new hat, the only brand-new thing she had had for ages and ages. Tears of rage gathered behind Ellen’s eyes. She kicked and struggled while the two boys laughed and taunted her.

‘Come on then, swanky, come and get it!’

‘Lovely big hat for a big head!’

She managed to kick the shins of the one who was holding her. He swore and twisted her arm behind her back. A yelp of pain escaped from Ellen, making them laugh all the more.

‘Two on to one ain’t fair.’

A taller boy strode up and calmly caught hold of the tam-o’-shanter.

‘Let go of her or I’ll fetch you one.’

The tormenters glared defiance. The big boy thrust the hat into his pocket, grabbed each of them by the collar and with one swift jerk knocked their heads together. The crack echoed loud in the raw winter air.

Ellen was released. Panting, she rubbed her arms where hard fingers had bitten into them, her heart still beating wildly. She grinned at the two sulky faces. They glared back

at Ellen and her champion, who gave them a final shake and released them.

‘Now beat it,’ he told them.

For a few moments they tried to hold out, attempting to save face, but finally they backed down and turned away.

‘Blooming Trinidad Street lot,’ the thin one muttered as they both slunk off.

Interested spectators disappeared. Already the street was nearly empty of children. Gravely the big boy handed the hat back.

‘There you are, Ellen.’

Hero worship shining in her eyes, Ellen took it from his hands. Carefully she dusted the contamination of the bullies from it and pulled it back into shape, dwelling lovingly on the bright coloured stripes. Her mum had knitted this just for her, for Christmas. She arranged it over her plaits. Her head felt right now, with the hat’s woolly warmth on top.

‘Thanks, Harry. You saved my life.’

Harry Turner, blue eyes old in a youthful face, shrugged off the compliment.

‘’Snothing.’

‘If this hat’d got spoilt my mum’d go mad.’

‘Yeah, well – we got to stick together, ain’t we? Trinidad Street lot.’

‘Oh yes,’ Ellen agreed fervently. A lifetime’s loyalty bound them together. ‘What you doing up here, anyway? Shouldn’t you be at work?’

‘I’m on my way now. We’re taking a barge upriver overnight with one load and coming back down with another in the morning. I just called in here to give the kids a message.’

He started to walk up the street. Ellen tagged along.

‘Lucky for me you did.’

She wanted to keep him here. Harry was sixteen, five years older than she was, practically grown up. Once they had been friends, in a distant sort of way, for he was the

brother of her best friend Florrie. But now he had a man's job on the lighters and she was still a schoolkid. She felt undersized and gawky beside him. He had an air of strength and confidence about him rarely seen amongst the lads of her acquaintance who laboured long hours in unhealthy factories. His job on the river had built up his shoulder muscles and tanned his wide-boned face. All the girls in the street fancied him. She tried to think of something to say, something about his job. He forestalled her.

'What was all that about, anyway?'

A pink blush rose in Ellen's cheeks.

'Oh – because I got called in to see Mr Abbot.'

'You?' Harry looked amazed. 'I thought you was good at school.'

'It wasn't that, it was – it was about going to the Central.'

Harry whistled. 'You going, then? Going to the Central?'

She shrugged, trying to feign unconcern, but somehow it did not work. 'Dunno. Dunno what my mum and dad'll say.'

Harry paused, considering. 'They're all right, your mum and dad.'

'Yeah.' Ellen smiled. 'Yeah, they are. They're the best.'

'Do you want to go?'

Did she want to go? She longed to, yearned to, more than she had ever wanted anything in her short life.

'Oh yes,' she said, with such fervour that her whole face lit up.

Harry shook his head in disbelief. 'Funny girl. Couldn't wait to get out, myself. But each to his own.'

At the corner he stopped. 'I best be getting along.'

'Oh.' Disappointment dragged at her. She knew very well that he would not be walking home with her, that she was just a kid of eleven, beneath his notice, but still she did not want to part.

'Best of luck with your mum and dad.'

'What?'

'About the Central.'

‘Oh – yeah. Yeah, thanks, Harry. Thanks for everything.’

He brushed it off with a hunch of the shoulders and set off in the opposite direction to Trinidad Street, cap on the back of his head, a slight swagger to his walk. Her saviour. Ellen watched him until he was out of sight, swallowed up by the traffic from the factories. Then she turned for home.

Gradually her own preoccupations absorbed her again. Shaking off the fury and the triumph of the fight, she dawdled along Alpha Road, trying to decide what her mum and dad would say to the news.

Would they agree, would they be proud and say something like, ‘You always were the bright one’? Or would they say that no one in their family had gone to Millwall Central and there was no reason to start now? Or that she was to stay on at Dock Street and leave at fourteen to start paying her way in the world like everyone else – like Harry? Harry had not even considered doing anything but start work the day he was old enough. His mum had been desperate for a bit more money to come in. She couldn’t go on feeding a great boy who could be earning his own keep. A realization of her selfishness crept through the hope. There was no reason on earth why she, Ellen Johnson, should expect to be any different from anyone else, except – except – the small persistent belief that she was different. But how could she explain that to her mum and dad? They would not understand. Even worse, they might laugh.

She simply did not know how they would take it. Running over the alternatives in her head, trying to act it out, they all seemed possible. But most possible was a no of some sort.

Fear and excitement chased round her stomach, turning the emptiness of hunger into a hollow sickness.

‘Oi! Watch it, girlie!’

Ellen jumped back on to the pavement just in time. A van came sweeping round the corner into the side road just as she was stepping off. The piebald horse’s legs flashed by at

a smart trot and the iron-bound wheels passed inches from her nose.

‘You all right, dearie?’ a passing woman asked.

Ellen nodded. ‘Yeah.’ Her knees felt a bit shaky. She simply hadn’t seen the thing at all.

‘Blooming van drivers – think they own the place. You look where you’re going, dear. Run you down without a second thought, they will.’

‘Yeah. Thanks,’ Ellen said.

She crossed the road with exaggerated care.

The incident shook her out of her preoccupation for fully a block of houses. She even paused to look at the knife grinder with his painted handcart, joking with the housewives as they waited with their knives and scissors to be sharpened. She watched as he pumped the foot pedal and the band made the stone wheel go round. His blackened hands held the blade, steady and sure, and with a nerve-grating sound the edge came up sharp and bright. The women paid with ha’pence or sometimes with bundles of rags, though the knife grinder grumbled and said he wasn’t a rag-and-bone man and didn’t have time to go trading all this stuff. Ellen stayed until the last knife was sharpened, watching and listening, tracing with her eyes the swirls and lines of the patterns on the cart, green and red and yellow.

‘You going to my road?’ she asked. ‘My mum’s got a knife needs doing. She said so only the other day.’

The man took a pull from the bottle of beer he had tucked down the side of the cart and wiped his mouth on the back of his hand.

‘And where might that be?’

‘Trinidad Street.’

‘Done it.’

‘Oh.’ She was disappointed. It was more fun watching your own knife being sharpened. Not as good as the rag-and-bone man – you could bargain with him – and certainly not

as good as the barrel-organ man, but still fun. ‘Oh well, my mum’ll be pleased,’ she said.

The man grunted in reply, bent his stooped shoulders to grasp the handles of his cart and went trundling on.

Overhead the air was smutty with smoke from the multitude of steam engines running round the quays and warehouses of the docks. Mixed with it was the grey dust of the cement works and a reek of chemicals and oil and burning fat from dozens of factories. Ellen coughed. Like many of the Islanders she had a permanent cough, but she hardly noticed the smells. They were part of the Island, always there, like the ships’ sirens, the masts and the cranes, the trams and trains and the endless procession of horses and carts on the main roads to and from the docks. The docks dominated their lives. Behind the high walls of the warehouses to her right lay the Millwall dock. Looking down the length of Alpha Road, she could see tall masts and spars of sailing ships rearing over the chimneypots, together with the red and blue funnels of a liner. They were tied up in the West Indias. Her dad was up there, at the West Indias. When he came in, she would ask him about going to Millwall Central.

She played games, defying fate. *If it’s an odd number of windows to the corner, they will let me; if it’s an even number, they won’t*. Counting along the row, not letting herself cheat by looking ahead and working it out. *If I can hopscotch all the way up to the shop, they’ll let me. If three McDougal’s vans pass me before I get home, they’ll let me*. Twice she won. McDougal’s let her down.

She turned the corner by the Rum Puncheon into Trinidad Street. Home, her territory. She knew everyone in these houses. They might argue and squabble at times, but when it came to the push they would always stick up for each other against any outsiders. She was safe here. It wasn’t posh like Mellish Street, where the ministers and schoolteachers lived, but neither was it rough like Manilla

Street, where there were fights nearly every night. It was just right.

‘’Evening, Ellen!’ An old man dragging a little trolley piled with scavenged pieces of wood raised a hand in greeting.

‘’Evening, Mr Bright! Good day?’

‘Mustn’t grumble, girl, mustn’t grumble.’

Two rows of flat-fronted two-up and two-down houses faced each other in unbroken lines across the cobbled road, the tops of their windows slightly curved, their front doors letting straight out on to the pavement. One plane tree struggled to survive just about at the point where the Irish end gave way to the English. Ellen walked past a noisy group of boys playing football, their boots skidding and clumping on the cobbles. She looked at the places belonging to her particular friends. Here was the Turners’, over there the O’Donaghues’, by the tree her big brother and Harry’s big sister, newly married, lodged with Harry’s aunty Alma. Past Granny Brown’s and Peg-leg Gibbons’ and Loony Mike’s. Last year, on the Queen’s jubilee, they had all dragged tables and chairs into the street and had a party. Smiling to herself at the memory, she pushed open the door of number thirty-two.

‘Wipe your feet!’ Mum’s voice boomed through from the kitchen.

Ellen carefully erased all traces of dirt from boots a size too big for her narrow feet. Inside, it was almost dark. She negotiated the black islands of the put-you-up and table and hung up the tam-o’-shanter with her coat under the stairs, touching it with grateful fingers. She hesitated. Tell her now, straight out? Or wait for later and tell both of them together? She could not decide. Light and voices came through the kitchen door. Still dithering, Ellen went in.

The black range was alight, giving out a comfortable fug. Daisy and Jack were already sitting drinking mugs of tea at one end of the scrubbed table while Mum, massive in the cramped room, was ironing at the other end.

‘You took your time. Others’ve been back ten minutes.’

‘Oh –’

‘Always in a dream. Come here.’

Ellen nestled into the warm squashy body. Mum smelt of cooking and steam and Fairy soap.

‘Been a good girl today?’

Ellen nodded against the pillow of her mother’s bosom. Now was the moment, now. She opened her mouth but only a squeak came out.

‘That’s my chick.’ Mum released her and exchanged the cooling flat-iron for the one on the range. She spat on it, was satisfied with the sizzle and thumped it down on the shirt laid out on the table. ‘Pour y’self a cup of tea, lovey.’

Ashamed of her own cowardice, Ellen lifted the heavy brown teapot with its frilly cosy of multicoloured wool, added a drop of precious milk and two spoons of sugar.

‘Mum –’

‘But *why* can’t I go out and play football?’ Jack interrupted.

‘You know very well why. You tore all up the back of your jacket yesterday. I got better things to do than mend your clothes every day.’

Jack, nine years old but looking younger, kicked at the table leg. His thin face with its almost colourless eyes took on a mutinous look.

‘Ain’t fair.’

Daisy and Ellen exchanged a covert grin, waiting for the explosion. Mum thumped the iron down on the range. Arms akimbo, she glared down at him.

‘Fair? What’s fair? Me wearing my eyes out mending for you? And you can take that look off of your face, my lad. Any more trouble from you and your dad’ll have something to say when he comes in. When you’ve finished that tea you can go and fetch some more coal in for me.’

Scowling, Jack obeyed. He picked up the bucket and disappeared out into the yard. The back door slammed

behind him in protest.

‘I’m a good girl,’ Daisy said self-righteously. ‘I got a merit mark today, I did.’

‘Did you, lovey? What for?’

Ellen sipped the scalding tea as Daisy chattered on. The warmth of the room seeped into her, making the chilblains on her fingers itch. On the range a pot bubbled, sending a delicious smell of stew into the room. It was mostly vegetables and barley by now, with just a trace of Wednesday’s neck of lamb, but it made her stomach lurch and growl. Home, familiar and secure, enfolded her. Resting her chin on her hands, she went over the morning’s momentous events again. Miss Evans calling her out in front of all the class, sending her to see Mr Abbot. The shame and the fear, wondering what she had done, wondering what crime she had committed. The walk down the brown-tiled corridor to his office was the longest she had ever taken. Then standing outside the door, plucking up courage to knock, wondering whether to make a run for it, where she could go all day until home time. She dreaded the smart of his withering tongue, so much worse than the sting of the cane. And then the amazement when she finally went in and saw he was smiling. Smiling! Mr Abbot!

‘. . . Ellen?’

She came back to the present with a start. Mum was looking at her, iron in hand.

‘Wake up, girl, do. Light the candle, I can hardly see.’

The room took on a homely glow, the feeble light heightening the cosiness, hiding the cheapness of the few possessions, the lack of colour, the damp patches.

Jack banged back in with the coal bucket, making the candle gutter in the draught.

‘Anyway,’ he declared, thumping it down beside the range, ‘Ellen got sent to Mr Abbot today, so there.’

‘You never?’ Mum stopped folding up a shirt and stared at her. ‘What you bin and gone and done?’

It was out. Ellen did not know whether to be relieved that the subject was in the open or angry that Jack had pushed her into it.

‘Nothing bad, Mum, honest!’ she said, gazing back earnestly at the accusing eyes.

‘I should hope not. You may be a dreamer but at least you never get into any trouble at school. What did he want?’

‘It was about this exam, Mum, this test. Mr Abbot said . . .’ Ellen took a deep breath, spoke more slowly, considering each word as it came out. ‘He said you can take this exam when you’re eleven, and if you pass it, you can go to Millwall Central. And he said he was sure I could pass it, and then he would be *pleased* to rec-recommend me. But you got to agree to it first, you and Dad.’

‘Millwall Central?’

The way the mother said it, she might have been saying Buckingham Palace. The dream receded, became hazy and distant, a castle in the clouds.

‘Yes.’

‘Cor, posh,’ Jack commented.

Ellen waited, heart thudding, for the verdict. The silence seemed to stretch to hours, years. Her mother was frowning, iron cooling slowly in her hand as she put her thoughts in order.

‘Don’t that mean staying on till you’re sixteen?’

‘Yes,’ Ellen admitted.

Again she thought of Harry leaving the day he was fourteen, like everyone else, going straight out to work. To stay on at school another two years seemed gloriously, impossibly selfish. School work she could do, she was good at. She was no good at drawing or sewing; people never picked her for their teams – she dropped balls and was last in races – but reading, writing, sums and learning by heart came easily to her. To be allowed two further years of it was a priceless gift.

‘Blimey.’ Mum’s voice was sharp. ‘You must think we’re made of money.’

A lurch of disappointment hit her in the stomach. They couldn’t afford it.

So that was that. No money. And yet she could not give it up just like that. She opened her mouth to plead, good reasons for staying on crowding her mind: the honour, making them and Mr Abbot proud of her, and more importantly the better job she would be able to get at sixteen.

But before she could get so much as a word out there was a thumping at the front door, uneven, desperate, and the words died on her tongue.

‘Martha – Martha!’

The street door handle rattled.

For a second all four froze. Then Mum moved across the room, surprisingly fast for such a large woman, negotiated the semi-darkness of the parlour with practised ease and opened the door. The three children sat motionless in the kitchen, listening.

‘Martha, thank God . . .’ The words were blurred with tears.

‘All right, Milly, all right, come in now, that’s it.’

They all knew the voice. It was Harry’s mother. They could all guess why she was here. Jack’s face took on a ghoulish interest.

‘What’s he done to her this time?’ he hissed.

Ellen felt queasy.

Mum came back into the kitchen, manoeuvring with difficulty through the door. She was supporting a thin woman who sagged inside her encircling arm, her breath rasping in great sobs. Ellen could not help staring. Milly Turner’s hair was half loose and straggling down. One eye was closed and swollen, blood poured from a cut on her lip and splattered the front of her soiled apron. She sank into

the chair that Mum pulled out for her and doubled over, arms clutched round her stomach, groaning.

Over her head, Mum fixed the three pairs of wide eyes with a warning look and indicated the door with a thrust of the chin that said *Out* more plainly than words. Silently, they obeyed, Ellen swiftly, pulling Daisy and trying not to look at the abject woman, the dark welling blood. Jack followed reluctantly, dragging his gaze with difficulty from the fascinating sight.

The footballers were gathered in a bunch round the door, a dozen boys aged from eight to twelve or so, all bursting with interest, eager for the next stage of the entertainment.

‘What’s he done?’ one demanded.

‘Is she bad?’

‘What’s your mum said?’

‘She’s real bad, all blood.’ Jack mimed Milly’s posture, exaggerated her groans, working it up into a real performance. ‘Oh God, oh help me, I’m dying.’

The boys shrieked with glee.

‘She never!’

‘Go on!’

‘She did, she did. Bleeding all over the place, all down her front, all over the floor. Moaning and groaning. I think she’s dying. I think he’s killed her this time. Aaagh – aagh –’

Ellen could not bear it. She rushed at him, pushing him, beating him with her fists. Her brother laughed and dodged. The other boys danced around, imitating her in squeaky voices.

‘Stop it, stop it, you’re horrible!’

Jack leaned over and groaned one more time, then ran off up the darkened street.

‘Come on, let’s play football. What’s the score?’

‘Horrible boys,’ Ellen muttered. ‘I hate them.’

‘Yeah, they’re pigs,’ Daisy agreed.

The pair of them stood in the doorway, shivering. They had come out in such a rush they had not collected their

coats. Ellen was just wondering whether she could creep back in and get them, whether she even wanted to go in and perhaps hear something upsetting, when she saw the three youngest Turner children. Five doors down, they were huddled together in a defensive bunch. Without further thought, she hurried towards them.

‘It’s all right,’ she said. ‘My mum’s looking after her. My mum’ll see she’s all right.’

In the middle of the little group, Florrie nodded dumbly. A year younger than Ellen and small for her age, with a narrow chest and dark-ringed eyes, she stood with one arm round six-year-old Ida and the other round little Johnny. Both younger ones were whimpering.

‘You all right?’ Ellen asked. ‘He didn’t hurt you?’

Florrie shook her head. There was something frozen about her. Instead of speaking, Ellen sat down on a step and tried to pull Johnny on to her lap to comfort him, but he squealed and clung to his sister, burying his face in her thigh. Florrie’s hand caressed his tousled head, but she did not look at him. Her mouth was tightly clamped, her eyes hard and bright in the half-light. Her silence was disturbing. Ellen shivered. The cold was penetrating.

‘Come and sit down,’ she urged. ‘Keep warm.’ She patted the step beside her. All Trinidad Street steps were scrupulously clean, scrubbed each morning by women with calloused knees and rough red hands. Daisy complied immediately, plumping down beside her and nestling close.

‘I’m cold,’ she complained.

Ellen ignored her. She was looking at the strange doll-like creature that was her friend, except that no doll could look so dark and unyielding. The real Florrie did not seem to be there. She did not seem to be hearing or seeing anything. Ellen stared at her, biting her lip, wondering what to do. Then at last her words appeared to get through, as if they had had to go a long, long way. Florrie sat, slowly, stiffly. Johnny climbed on to her lap, Ida burrowed against her.

Ellen put an arm round Florrie's bony shoulders and tried to be like her mum, comforting, making everything right, but she did not know what to say. There was nothing she could say to a friend whose dad had just done that to her mum. It was not the first time it had happened and it would not be the last. Nothing Ellen could say would change it or make it better. She could only hug Florrie. The cold from the stone step seeped through pinafore, dress and drawers. Johnny was wet, and smelt.

Still Florrie sat rigid, staring across the street. Ellen spoke to the little ones, telling them not to worry, that their mum would be all right, all the while stealing sideways glances at her friend.

Then Florrie spoke.

'I hate my dad. I hate him. I'll kill him one day, so help me. I will, I'll kill him.'

The venom in her voice made Ellen catch her breath.

'Yes,' was all she could say.

The two little ones whimpered.

'Hate him –' There was a break in her words, then her shoulders were shaking, great dry sobs tearing at her chest. Ellen's throat tightened in sympathy and tears swelled behind her eyes. There must be some way she could protect Florrie, someone who would help. Then she swallowed hard. Of course – her hero.

'If only Harry'd been there. He'd've stuck up for you.'

Harry was like that, he looked after his little sisters and brother and he rescued Ellen's hat from the bullies.

Florrie said nothing. The sobs still shook her thin body.

'Wouldn't he?' Ellen insisted. She held on to the conviction. There must be someone who could do something. Florrie could not be all alone bearing this terrible thing. 'Harry would look out for you,' she repeated.

'Last time' – Florrie spoke in gasps – 'Harry tried – to stop him – and my dad hit him – down the stairs –'

Ellen felt sick all over again. It was all too big for her. She felt powerless. The street that usually seemed so secure had a hostile feel to it. The windows were blank and unseeing, the doors hid unfriendly faces. There was no one to turn to.

The door opened behind them. Ellen nearly fell back into the empty space. A feeble light fell on their pinched faces.

‘What you kids doing on my step?’ a sharp voice demanded. ‘Blooming kids, always up to no good. Time you was home. It’s nearly dark.’

Ellen looked up at the small elderly figure. For a moment she was confused. She had not noticed whose doorstep they were sitting on. Some people minded, some didn’t, but all grannies were formidable. She began to mutter an apology.

‘Just you get off of my step. What –’ The voice changed, became gruffly kind. ‘Oh, it’s you is it, Florrie Turner. P’raps you better come in. Sitting there in the cold with nothing on you. Catch your death. Why didn’t you knock? Stupid girl.’

Florrie said nothing, so Ellen said thank you for all of them. She had got her bearings again now. It was Granny Hobbs. She was all right if you kept the right side of her, but woe betide you if you got on the wrong one. She could bear a grudge for years. She scrambled to her feet and tried to pull the others up too.

‘Florrie’s a bit upset,’ she said.

‘I can see that, Ellen Johnson. I may be old, but I’m not blind. Not stupid, neither. I can guess why she’s upset, too. Same old story, eh?’

Ellen nodded. Granny Hobbs grunted disapproval.

‘Bring them little ’uns in, and hurry up about it. You’re letting cold air into the house.’

Ellen tried to usher the Turners and Daisy through the door, but Florrie planted her slight body resolutely on the step and refused to move, while Ida and Johnny clung on to her like limpets.

Footsteps clumped down the street, breaking into a weary trot. Ellen looked up and realized why the Turners were

waiting. Their aunty Alma was coming.

Even in the growing darkness, Alma Billingham struck an exotic note in the drab street. A purple coat trimmed with balding black velvet strained across her ample bust. On her floppy hat a garden of scarlet artificial poppies nodded and quivered as she moved. There was a strong reek of gin and cigarettes about her, and she was tired, a bone weariness from a long day's work that showed in her voice and her movements; but in spite of all this, relief flowed through Ellen. Here at last was someone to take charge, to lift this impossible responsibility.

'Been at it again, has he?' she asked, resigned.

Ellen nodded. 'My mum's looking after Mrs Turner.'

'Right, thanks ducky.' Alma looked down at the three younger children. 'You lot come on in to my place. I'll find something for you to eat. Don't know what that big sister of yours is about. Why didn't she come down and get you in? Hope she's not ill again.'

'I see,' Granny Hobbs' voice piped up again, highly indignant. 'Going with her, are we? Going with her when you could have come in to a respectable house.'

Alma gave her a look of contempt. 'Oh, shut your mouth, you old bat.'

Ellen shrank away, trying to keep out of it. Granny Hobbs shut her door with a bang.

Alma shrugged and held out her hands to the children. Florrie got to her feet and picked up Johnny, Alma took Ida's hand and put an arm round Florrie.

'Come on, ducks, cheer up. It ain't the end of the world, you know.' She smiled at Ellen and Daisy. 'You're good girls, you are. Like your mum. You go and tell her to bring Milly over, will you? Say thank you for me and that I'll take care of her now.'

Ellen nodded. She could have hugged Alma, gin smell and all. Alma would make Florrie back into herself again.

'That's the ticket. You run along home.'

Thankfully, Ellen obeyed.

She opened the kitchen door cautiously and peeped round. There was a sharp smell of witch hazel in the room. Milly was silent, her eyes closed, wet rags on her bruises. Her mother looked up sharply from stoking the range.

‘Mum.’ Ellen kept her voice to a whisper. ‘Mrs Billingham has come home. She’s taken the little ones in and she says will you bring Mrs Turner along ’cos she’ll take care of her now.’

‘Right.’ Her mother put down the coal shovel and wiped her hands on her apron. She stooped over Milly Turner, her voice gentle. ‘You hear that, Milly? Alma’s back. Now you stand up – careful now – and I’ll help you over. Your sister’ll see you’re all right.’

Ellen held the doors as her mother helped Milly hobble out of the house. Daisy came in and they both huddled close to the range, feeling the warmth thawing their chilled bodies. They heard their mother yelling at the door for Jack to come home, and soon they were all sitting round the kitchen table once more, drinking another cup of tea.

‘Is she going to be all right?’ Ellen asked.

Her mother sighed. ‘I dunno, lovey. I hope so. Alma’ll look after her. She’s all right, Alma, whatever they might say. Heart’s in the right place. You just thank your lucky stars your dad ain’t like that.’

Daisy chattered, asking questions that their mother answered abstractedly or not at all. Jack tried to tell them about his game. Ellen could only think of Florrie, hard and frozen.

Her mother got up. ‘We’ll have our tea now,’ she decided. ‘You kids are cold and it’s Friday night. There’s no knowing what time your dad’ll be in. I’ll keep his for him.’

Daisy and Ellen stared in dumb amazement. Jack yelled ‘Hooray!’ and jumped up to get the knives and forks without even being asked. They bustled about, washing hands, fetching plates. The stew was ladled out, potatoes and

carrots and pearl barley with the odd scrap of meat swimming in gravy. Silently they shovelled it into grateful mouths, felt the tasty warmth of it filling empty stomachs. They mopped up the last drops and sat back. The world was a happier place.

'Just you girls learn a thing or two from this,' their mother told them. 'You make sure you choose the right boy when you get married. Get it wrong then and you're in for a life of misery. There's no backing out of it once you're married. Stuck with it, you are, whether you like it or not. And as for you, Jack, if I ever hear you've done something like that, I'll have the hide off you, grown man or not. You hear me?'

'Yes, Mum.'

Slowly the problems of the Turners faded in Ellen's head and the question of her own future came back into focus. As if reading her mind, her mother spoke.

'What was all that about Millwall Central?'

Ellen sighed. 'It's all right. I know I can't go.'

Her mother was silent, frowning into her teacup. 'Girls and boys from there get office jobs, don't they?'

Daisy came unexpectedly into the conversation. 'May Dobb's sister went there and she's got an office job at Maconochie's. May says it's a lovely job. She sits all day on a high stool writing things.'

'Sits!' Mum sounded impressed. 'I didn't never have a job sitting, not in all my life.'

'She wears a tailored coat and skirt to work,' Daisy added, warming to her theme. 'Not an apron. May says she wants to do that too. I don't. I don't want to sit writing all day long. I hate writing.'

'Sounds better than bottling pickles or getting scalded by the jam,' Mum said. 'Meet a nicer class of young man, too.'

They all knew what she meant: nicer than Archie Turner.

Ellen was silent. She wanted to go to Millwall Central. Wanted it like she'd never wanted anything in her life before. But she knew it was impossible.

Her mother put the tea down and gathered Ellen to her.

‘You’re a good girl. I’d like to see you with a job in an office. Real nice, that’d be. Ladylike. You deserve a chance to better yourself, get away from what some have to suffer. We’ll afford it somehow. I can always get a job if I have to. It’s not as if you little ’uns are babies any more. But we’ll have to see what your dad says. Wait till he’s had his tea. Then we’ll see.’

For several moments Ellen could not take it in. It was too good to be true.

‘Oh, Mum – do you mean it? Do you really?’

‘’Course. Maybe I’m daft, but of course I mean it. Someone in our family with an office job! It’s worth going out ship scrubbing for that.’

‘Oh, Mum! Oh, thanks.’ Ellen stood up and flung her arms round her mother’s neck. She was nearly there.

2

TOM JOHNSON STRAIGHTENED up and kneaded the small of his back where it creaked in protest at the long day's work. Old, he was getting old. He couldn't take it like he used to. Half his life he had been here now, here at the West Indias, or over at the East Indias, and very occasionally – if times were bad – down at the Millwall. He had settled into his own specialization and was recognized as a skilful shipworker. Thousands upon thousands of tons he must have shifted in his time.

The raw products of the great British Empire and the untamed world beyond came rolling up the Thames in the holds of great timber sailing vessels and huge iron steamships, and an army of dockers unloaded them to be fed into the hungry factories of London. Wool from Australia, fruit from South Africa, coffee from Brazil, sherry from Spain, cotton from America, it all came ashore to be heaved into the warehouses by Tom and his like and disgorged again to feed and clothe and service the sprawling capital and the people of the lands and towns.

The romance of it all had fired his imagination once, but it was all too familiar now. Just another day to be got through, endless hours of lifting and carrying, with arms and legs and back aching more with each sack or bale or keg. He knew how to conserve his strength, how to lift so as to put as little strain as possible on his body, how to pace himself through the day so that the foreman had nothing to hold on him. But the fact remained that he was forty-one and past his prime. Today he had been brought face to face with the fact that he could no longer keep up with the younger men. Here he was

on the quay, trundling a truck, the two-wheeled carrying device used for taking goods into the warehouses or transit sheds. He, Tom Johnson, was down amongst the quay workers because he was not quick and strong enough to work on the ship any more. His pride had taken a bad blow, but it was the same pride that stopped him from showing it.

He glanced now at the foreman, king of the quay. They were old enemies, Tom and Alf Grant, well matched, but Alf always had the last say since it was he who had the power. He was the one who called the men on at the start of the day. He could get a man blacked so that no one would take him on.

Alf had his back to him, seeing to the gang on the forward hold, and Tom could relax for a moment.

'Grand sight, ain't she?' An old sailor stopped by his side, his white beard sticking out like wire wool all round his face. He was looking up at the ship they were unloading, pride in his seamed face.

'Yes – grand.' Tom rolled his fists into his stiff and aching back.

'You should see her under full sail, rolling through the roaring forties. Nothing to beat her bar the clippers. Wonderful old girl, the *Ariadne*. Wonderful.'

Tom cast an eye over the elegant lines of the windjammer – her four tall masts; her tangle of rigging; the long yellow bowsprit jutting along the quayside, and under it the garishly painted figurehead of a half-naked woman. Round her in the oily waters of the dock clustered a bunch of lighters and sailing barges receiving cargo to take up the river or round the coast to quays and small ports, waterside factories and warehouses. Beyond her a line of ships was moored, nearly all sailormen, passenger and cargo, discharging their loads on to the dockside before going round empty to the export pool to fill up with manufactured goods for the outward journey.

The old sailor was still talking. ‘I remember when we was coming out of Rio with a cargo of coffee – ’88 that would’ve been, or ’89 – and we just . . .’

Tom was not listening. The ship did not hold his attention. She was right enough, but when all was said and done, just another set of holds to be unloaded. It was the men on the quayside he was watching, the sweating gangs toiling amongst the snaking ropes, the unstable heaps of cargo, the tall cranes with their dipping beaks and swinging chains, the slippery cobbles and the leaky barrels of inflammable oil or dangerous chemicals. *They* were the ones who laboured, who spent the strength of their youth for a tanner an hour. *They* were the ones who should have the power, not Alf Grant and the bosses. Down the line the money went, hand to hand with everyone taking his cut, till it came to the bottom, where the real work was done – with the dockers. Not much left for them. But they were only casual labourers, after all, and there were plenty more at the gate. They didn’t matter. It made him sick, the way they were treated. Tom was a lucky one, a ‘Royal’, taken on in preference to the masses for any job that was going. The foremen knew that he was strong and reliable, that he could be trusted and that he knew what he was doing. He could be sure of getting work if work there was, and his family never went cold or hungry. But his sympathy was with the casuals. His days were concentrated on fighting for a better deal for the men on the quay.

Tom’s eyes sought his son, up on the deck. The vessel still had the old-fashioned hand winches, and Will was up there as winchman with one of the O’Donaghue boys. Stocky and straight-backed with well-muscled shoulders, he gave an illusion of height, though only in contrast with the undersized race that grew up in the streets of the Island. He was grown bigger than Tom, with a mind and a life of his own. A fine man, his Will, but wild. He had hoped Will would get a steady job, free from the hand-to-mouth life of the

docker, but regular work had not agreed with him. He'd got the sack from five different places before taking his chances here at the docks. Even now he was larking about with Pat O'Donaghue; Tom could hear his laugh ringing out. 'Don't worry yourself,' his wife Martha would say. 'Don't worry, he's a good boy. He'll settle, now he's a married man. That Maisie's a nice little thing. She'll be a decent wife and a good mother.' Tom hoped she was right.

'Young fools.' Brian O'Donaghue's voice sounded at his shoulder, just a faint hint of a brogue softening the London accent. 'Get themselves thrown off.'

'No sense,' Tom said.

Both men watched their sons with a mixture of irritation and pride.

'Ah well, you're only young once now, aren't you?' Brian was tolerant. 'Let them have their time. Never did me no harm. Though you were always the serious one, now I call it to mind.'

'Yeah.' Things had been much worse when he had started work. That was before the great strike. At least now if you worked for an hour you were paid a tanner. But there was a long way to go yet. There was work to be done, battles to be won so that life could be better for Will, and for his unborn child.

'Johnson!' Alf Grant's voice sliced through the rattle of machinery, through the rumble of engines, through countless human cries. 'Johnson! Slacking again. Get back to work. I've no room for idle men.'

'Slave-driving bastard,' Brian muttered, without rancour.

Tom stayed still for just long enough to save face, holding Grant's eyes, then turned slowly to pick up the next tub of molasses.

Up on the deck, Will Johnson and Pat O'Donaghue battled with the heavy winches, hauling the cargo up out of the hold and down into the lighters clustered round the ship. They worked steadily for two hours or more, arms and backs