

MAGGIE HOPE

Orphan Girl

All she wants is
a family...



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About the Book

She's no more than an unpaid servant...

Lorinda is only a child when tragedy deprives her of her true family. Sent to live with her aunt in her boarding house, she grows up desperately craving affection.

Finally she sees a chance to escape her drab surroundings and unkind family. But it will mean sacrificing true love and accepting a marriage of convenience...

About the Author

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

Also by Maggie Hope:

A Wartime Nurse

A Mother's Gift

A Nurse's Duty

A Daughter's Gift

Molly's War

The Servant Girl

A Daughter's Duty

Like Mother, Like Daughter

MAGGIE HOPE
Orphan
Girl



Chapter One

'You'll blooming well do what I say or you can get yourself up to the workhouse! Oaklands, that's where the other little bastards are! You impittent little basket, you're not going to turn out like your mother, not if I have the bringing up of ye!'

The hard, blue eyes of Auntie Doris Parker bored into Lorinda Leigh's uncomprehending head. Lorinda looked round the kitchen of the old terraced house: she looked at the table and chairs, scrubbed white with soda water daily: she looked at the piles of dishes waiting to be washed in the brownstone sink in the corner, then down at the stone-flagged floor which was sending icicles of cold shafting up through the thin leather of her boots.

What did Auntie Doris mean, she wondered through her misery, by the workhouse? Wasn't this a workhouse? Lorinda pushed the thought to the back of her mind. First of all she had to deal with the insult to her mother: she wasn't going to let anyone get away with talking like that about her mam.

'My mother was a good woman! Me grannie said so!' Lorinda lifted her chin and stared fearlessly up at her aunt. 'She was taken down, that's what me grannie said!'

'Taken down, eh?' Auntie Doris grinned in jeering amusement and Lorinda hated her. Her small fists doubled up at her sides. 'They all say that, don't they?' Auntie Doris continued. 'But they don't all go gallivanting off to London and leaving their by-blows to God and Providence!' She glared down at the little girl, seeing the stricken look in the violet eyes, eyes which seemed too big for the thin, pale

face. Long, black lashes lay over the white cheeks, hair just as dark curled over her shoulders. Doris Parker turned away and Lorinda was bewildered by the anger in her eyes. She watched dumbly as her aunt hung the apron on a hook behind the back door and took down her old black jacket, her shopping jacket.

‘Just you get on with the washing-up!’ Auntie Doris snapped. ‘I’ve wasted enough time fetching you all the way from Durham and it’s a scandal, the fares, a shilling and threepence for a little mite like you. Eight blooming miles, that’s all it is from Durham to Bishop Auckland! And the station a mile from the market place. Eeh, well, I’ve the shopping to do and a meal to make before the ironworks turns out. Now, just you make sure it’s all done by the time I get back.’ She pinned on an enormous, black straw hat over her thin, grey hair and, picking up her basket from the table, swept out of the back door and down the brick-paved yard.

Lorinda stared after her stolid form as Doris turned into Finkle Street. The girl thrust out her chin mutinously though her heart felt like a lead weight and tears were close. Sighing, she pulled a stool up to the sink and climbed onto it. She jumped as the door opened again and Auntie Doris poked her head round it.

‘An’ another thing, I’m not having such a daft name as Lorinda in my house. Lorinda, indeed! I’ll call you Ada like your mother, she never liked it but I think it’s good enough, a nice, down-to-earth name. Yes. You’ll be Ada from now on.’ Banging the door decisively behind her, she went on her way to the Co-op, the Store as everyone called it. So she didn’t see or hear Ada’s protest.

Ada! What was wrong with Lorinda? Her grannie had told her she was named for her great-aunt, it was a family name and Auntie Doris knew it. But now Lorinda was to be Ada. Her cup of misery was full to overflowing. Blindly she put her mind to the washing-up.

Carefully she carried a ladle can half-full of hot water, steaming hot from the boiler, by the side of the black-leaded range, and poured it into the enamel bowl, going back for another as a full can was too heavy for her. Being so short, she had some difficulty in reaching the bowl but she managed it without mishap. Grating hard, white soap with a handful of washing soda, she made a lather, just as her grannie had taught her. She began to wash the plates, steadfastly refusing to think about her grannie.

She looked up at the dingy, green-painted dado on the walls with the light-green distemper above it. Somehow the walls made her think of Durham Gaol, so bleak and forbidding when she walked past it with her grannie. There now! And she wasn't going to think about her grannie. Lorinda plunged her thin wrists and hands into the steaming water, wincing as the soda burned into a cut on her little finger. She had done that with the bread knife, when her grannie had first been taken bad. Lorinda had tried to tempt her appetite with bread and milk broily but it wasn't any good, grannie couldn't eat anything. And now ... Lorinda concentrated on the plates, rubbing hard with the mop to get off the traces of congealed porridge, using her thumbnail for the stubborn bits. In spite of her resolve, memories kept intruding into her thoughts, causing her to sniff back the tears.

Lorinda's heart burned as she remembered Auntie Doris's sneering reference to her mother, who was, after all, Auntie Doris's own sister. Lorinda couldn't remember her mother at all; she could remember nothing before living in the little house in Durham City with her grannie. But Grannie would talk to her about her mam, telling her how she had gone south so that she could earn good money and be able to send for her daughter as soon as she could.

'We were all right,' Lorinda said aloud, talking to the plate in her hand. 'Me and Grannie were all right.' That's

what Grannie always said. Grannie never made Lorinda feel she was a burden, not like Auntie Doris did.

'We're all right,' Grannie would say. 'I've got me bit of charring for the students up at the university. And I can always take in washing. A good washerwoman I am. And you're such a help to me, Lorinda. Your mam will send some money soon, you'll see; till then we'll manage.'

But me mam didn't send money home for us, Lorinda thought. And she didn't send for me or come back for me. Lorinda picked up a pint pot and scoured it with the mop. She had been sure that when the new century came her mam would come home. Everyone said that things would get better in the new century and Lorinda had looked forward to it eagerly. It was a bright promise, the new century.

But it was 1901 already and Lorinda was seven and a half years old and still her mam hadn't come for her. By now, her mam was like a character in a fairy story to Lorinda. She didn't come, not even when Grannie took to her bed and Mrs Armstrong came in from next door but one, and Grannie had to go to the fever hospital and Lorinda wasn't allowed to see her for fear of the fever. Then there was the awful day that Grannie died and Auntie Doris Parker came, trailing Uncle Harry, bustling in and taking over the house and Lorinda.

Lorinda was lifted up to see her grannie in the coffin but it wasn't really Grannie, her grannie was gone. So she had to go too, with Auntie Doris and Uncle Harry with his sandy moustache and shiny, wet lips. He didn't say anything at all to her, simply looked at her and at Auntie Doris and then back at Lorinda.

'There's no help for it, Harry, we'll have to take her in.'

Auntie Doris was firm. There was only one boss in their house and it wasn't Uncle Harry, that was what Grannie used to say. 'Though why we should have to, I don't know,' Auntie Doris continued in an aggrieved tone of voice. They

were picking over Grannie's things at the time to see if there was anything worth saving. 'Her mother should come for her really.'

'Yes please!' Lorinda breathed as she obediently packed her woven straw box after the funeral. 'Please come, Mam!'

So far this hadn't happened, which was why Lorinda was standing on a cracket at Auntie Doris's sink, in the kitchen of a boarding house in Finkle Street, with her tears going 'plop' in the washing-up water.

'Ada!' she said out loud and sighed. She had been proud of her pretty name; no one else in the street in Durham had been called Lorinda. Still, Ada was her mother's name and she comforted herself with the thought that she could still be Lorinda in her own mind. She sighed and wiped her eyes on the corner of her apron; she wasn't going to let Auntie Doris see her cry. Squaring her shoulders and lifting her chin, she got on with the work.

'I'll stick up for myself,' she said out loud. Grannie always said she should stick up for herself, not let anyone get her down.

Soon Auntie Doris was back and the rest of the day passed in a blur for the newly named Ada. She fetched and carried at her aunt's demands until her thin arms ached with tiredness.

'There's six men and a lad will be wanting their dinners at half past six on the dot,' said Auntie Doris, blowing a strand of grey hair back from her red face as she lifted an enormous iron pan from the fire and rested it on the fender. Uncle Harry was laying the tables in the front room where the lodgers ate their meals, presided over by Auntie Doris and Uncle Harry. 'You can eat your dinner in here,' she added. 'I don't want you in the front room, getting in the way, most like.' As she spoke she was dishing out huge platefuls of meat pudding, potatoes and cabbage. Deftly

she piled them onto a battered tin tray and took them through the door into the hall.

Relief and delight shone in Ada's eyes. She had been afraid she wasn't going to get any dinner herself. Her stomach rumbled. After all, she hadn't eaten since leaving Durham that morning.

Auntie Doris was soon back in the kitchen for the jam roly-poly, shovelling it onto thick, white soup plates and smothering it in yellow custard.

'Let the bairn go in and sit at the table with us.'

Ada looked up to see Uncle Harry, who had appeared behind his wife. The wet ends of his moustache were sucked to a point and Ada stared at them, feeling slightly repelled.

'You mind your own business! She's my sister's brat, not yours!' came the sharp retort, causing Uncle Harry to shrug and back out of the kitchen ineffectively. Ada sat down at the kitchen table; she didn't mind where she ate so long as she ate. Her thin legs dangled inches from the floor and she propped herself up with her elbows on the table.

'Sit up straight! And mind you eat it all up! I cannot abide wasted food. While you're a good girl and do your work properly, you will get proper meals.'

To do Auntie Doris justice, the plate she set before the girl was piled high with meat pudding and potatoes and Ada tucked in with a will, relishing the thick, meaty gravy. Auntie Doris left her to it, going back into the front room with her tin tray loaded with plates of jam roly-poly.

Ada had eaten only a few mouthfuls when her head drooped, the long, black lashes closing over the violet eyes. She woke with a start and propped her chin on her left hand, the elbow supported on the table. She tried another bite of the suet pudding doused in rich gravy but she was unequal to the task and inevitably her head sank lower and lower until it was cradled in her arm and she fell properly asleep. For she was still only seven years old and the

momentous happenings of the day had been too much for her altogether.

A few minutes later the door to the passage opened and a boy of about fourteen came into the kitchen on his way to the lavatory in the back yard. His sandy eyebrows lifted in surprise when he saw the little girl sleeping peacefully at the table, her dark curls falling over her forehead and her hand clutched round a spoon over her rapidly congealing dinner.

Clumsy in his hobnailed boots he tiptoed to the back door, fearing to disturb her, but she was too sound asleep for that. He closed the door quietly behind him as he wondered who she was, surely not family; as far as he knew the Parkers had no children. The peaceful scene was changed as he came back into the house, the angry voice of his landlady rang out as he opened the back door.

'I told you to eat your dinner! Well, you'd better eat it now, cold or not or you'll get it for your breakfast. I don't hold with wasting food, I told you before!' Doris Parker was standing with her hands on her hips, her eyes glaring from a bright, red face as she bent over the child shouting her threats.

The boy closed the door and began the walk through the kitchen, away from the angry voice. But he stayed a moment, his attention arrested as the girl lifted large, violet eyes and stared back at her aunt. For all her small stature, her chin was set firmly and defiantly.

'I couldn't help going to sleep, could I? I was tired!'

'Don't you cheek me, just you do as you're told!' Auntie Doris raised her hand for a blow, she was admitting no excuses.

After a moment, Ada dropped her eyes and started to eat. She took a bite and chewed doggedly, looking up from her plate and letting her gaze rove around the room. Noticing the boy, she paused and looked curiously at him. He winked

at her, rolling his eyes in the direction of Auntie Doris before grinning his support.

Ada smiled, revealing a missing tooth, and winked back, albeit inexpertly. She saw a red-headed, green-eyed boy, tall and well-built. He was dressed in old working clothes: a red-checked shirt which clashed violently with his carrot hair, together with an old and stained serge suit which looked far too tight for him. A good two inches of wrist showed beneath the cuffs of the jacket. His hands, though rough and scarred by manual work, were well-shaped and capable-looking. Ada had time to notice all this before her aunt butted in.

‘Get on through with you, Johnny Fenwick. You know I don’t like my boarders hanging about in the kitchen.’ Auntie Doris had seen the latter part of this exchange and she wasn’t slow to show her disapproval.

Undeterred, Johnny gave Ada a last sympathetic grin before returning to the front of the house. He pondered afresh on the presence of the girl as he went. There was something about her, a vulnerable yet defiant quality that disturbed him, and when Mrs Parker had raised her hand to the child he had felt instantly protective of her. Shrugging his shoulders – after all, he knew practically nothing of the girl – he climbed the stairs to his tiny room, which had been split off a larger one by shaky wooden boarding. Sitting on the bed, the only place there was to sit, he picked up an engineering manual from the tiny bedside table and was soon lost in his studies.

Meanwhile Ada bent her head over her food once more and managed with some trouble to finish her meal. She sat back in her chair, feeling bloated and uncomfortable, and looked up at Auntie Doris who was busy washing the dishes.

‘Can I go to bed now, Auntie Doris?’ The small voice with its humble plea came out with more pathos than Ada realised and her aunt was not completely insensitive.

‘Well,’ she said grudgingly, ‘I suppose you will be tired. All right, get ready for bed. I’ll get you a dish of water and you can get yourself washed. You’ll sleep in here, I can’t afford to give you a bed upstairs. I need them for the lodgers.’

Ada looked round in dismay; she couldn’t see that there was anywhere to sleep in the kitchen. There was not even a settee – was she to sleep on the clippie mat on the floor? But she hadn’t noticed that in the corner there was a red mahogany chiffonier sideboard. Auntie Doris pulled open the doors and revealed a fold-up bed.

‘There are blankets and a pillow in the drawers. Now don’t forget, when you get up in the morning you’ll have to fold the bedclothes and put them away. Tidy, mind! You’ll get up at five o’clock. I can’t do with the bed out when I’m making breakfast for the boarders. Now run along to the netty, then you can get ready for bed.’

Obediently Ada slipped out of the back door and into the yard. There were two doors in the corner at the far end but from the coal dust on the step of the first one, the netty had to be the second, Ada reckoned. She stretched up to the latch and there it was, an ash closet with a scrubbed wooden seat and a large – very large – hole, and there was not a small one beside it as at Grannie’s. She climbed up and sat, hanging on desperately, terrified she would fall in and thankful when she could clamber down at last. Well, at least it seemed to be for the sole use of the occupants of the house and not shared with the neighbours like the water closet they’d had in Durham City. Quickly she pulled up her drawers and rearranged her skirt, shivering in the chill of the autumnal evening before scurrying back to the warmth of the kitchen.

Auntie Doris was pouring water into an enamel dish on the table. She scowled at the little girl. ‘Wash properly, mind. Take your dress off first.’ She brought white Windsor

soap, a piece of flannel and a worn, rough towel and placed them beside the bowl.

Ada unbuttoned her brown cotton dress with its black crepe armband and sat down on the clippie mat to untie her tall boots. The laces were stiff and hurt her fingers.

'Eeh, man, howay here and I'll do it!' Auntie Doris was impatient with Ada and her hands were rough and horny, the veins standing out lumpily on the red skin. 'I want you in bed in five minutes,' she said.

Grannie's hands had been rough and red too, Ada thought, but Grannie was gentler somehow and Ada hadn't minded. Auntie Doris pulled off the boots, scratching Ada's skin with a jagged nail. Then, after Ada had washed, Auntie Doris pulled and tugged a metal comb through Ada's curls, forcing her head back and bringing tears to her eyes.

At last she was ready and could climb onto the lumpy mattress and pull the blankets up to her chin. The blankets smelled of the same soap she had used to wash her face, and the smell reminded her of Monday washdays when she had helped Grannie, catching the clothes as they came out of the rollers of the iron mangle. It was comforting somehow. Ada watched as Auntie Doris pulled a folding screen across the foot of the bed, hiding it from anyone going through the kitchen to the yard but not entirely screening the kitchen from Ada's gaze.

Tired as she was, she felt she wouldn't be able to sleep for everything was so strange. And any road, she thought forlornly, she had never slept in a kitchen before. She would be the only one downstairs! Her vivid imagination was already conjuring up dark shapes in the gloom. After Auntie Doris put out the gas it would be even darker, eerie and strange. Ada's heartbeat quickened. The gas went 'plop' as Auntie Doris turned it off and went out of the door, closing it firmly behind her. Ada squeezed her eyes tight shut.

‘Matthew, Mark, Luke and John,’ she prayed desperately, keeping her eyes closed in case she saw anything horrible in the shadows, ‘bless the bed that I lie on.’ But it was no good, without her grannie’s soft voice intoning the prayer with her she couldn’t remember no matter how hard she tried. A tear squeezed its way out of her closed lid and coursed down her cheek unheeded.

‘Psst!’

The hiss made her jump rigid, her eyes starting open in alarm. It was a moment before she realised it was Johnny Fenwick peeping round the screen, a candle in one hand and a paper bag in the other. The glow from the candle made his face all light planes and dark hollows but it was definitely Johnny.

‘I’ve brought you some pear drops.’ He moved swiftly towards her as he whispered and put the bag of sweets on her pillow. Grinning, he backed away with a finger to his lips before she could find her tongue and thank him.

Wondering, she picked up the bag and its contents, sniffing. It was the familiar pear-drop smell, sweet and acidic at the same time. How did Johnny Fenwick know she loved pear drops more than anything? Hadn’t her grannie bought them of a Saturday night and hadn’t they sat before the fire sucking them together? Ada clutched the sweets to her and turned over onto her side. She relaxed, feeling better already, a lovely warm feeling overcoming her fears. She had a friend. Johnny Fenwick was her friend. Her eyelids drooped and Ada slept.

It was still dark when Ada woke. For a moment she was bewildered, not knowing where she was or what it was that had caused her to wake up. She peered fearfully round her at the gloom. As her eyes grew accustomed to it, there was enough light getting in the kitchen window to show her a grotesque shape at the end of the screen. Ada stared hard, trying to make out what it was. It looked like a huge head

on hunched shoulders. The light outlined what seemed to be a large nose, long and bent. Ada stared hard at it, trying to make it out. She felt a new discomfort, she wanted to go to the lavatory but she was afraid to move in case she attracted the attention of the strange being.

The back door opened with a squeak of unoiled hinges and she heard heavy footfalls crossing the room; there was a pause before a flickering light was lifted and she saw the figure of a man through the gap between the screen and the wall. He was opening the door to the passage.

'Dafty!' Ada said it aloud, scolding herself, for as the man lifted his candle she had seen no monster but her own clothes which Auntie Doris had flung over the top of the screen, one sleeve jutting out and looking like anything but a nose! Sitting up in bed, Ada felt on the floor for her boots, pulling them on over bare feet.

Bye! She'd been lucky there, she thought in relief. What would Auntie Doris have said if she had wet the bed? Would she have been sent to the workhouse? Quickly she made her way to the back door in the grey light of predawn. The man, whoever he was, had left the bolt drawn so she got out easily enough.

The air was fresh and cold, making her shiver in her flannel nightie. She hurried as fast as she could, gasping as a blast of cold air from the hole in the seat hit her bare flesh. She raced back to the kitchen and jumped into bed. As she snuggled down into the warm cocoon of blankets, her elbow encountered something hard. Groping down, she found the bag of pear drops. Popping one into her mouth, she sucked luxuriously and thought about the boy who had given her the sweets, Johnny, Johnny Fenwick.

Doris Parker was also awake, lying beside her snoring husband. She was wondering if she had done the right thing in bringing her niece to live with them. In the half-light she stared at the framed text which had been her

mother's and now hung on the wall opposite the bed; she couldn't make out the words but she knew they said, 'God Is Love'. She thought back to the time when she had embroidered it and given it to her mother for Christmas, she'd been so proud of it. But Mam had been absent-minded, too interested in the new baby, who had a snuffling cold. Her sister Ada was the first baby in the family to live more than a few weeks since Doris herself and Mam lavished all her anxious care on her.

The familiar jealousy flared in Doris's breast as she remembered Ada, her sister. It was Ada who got all the treats, Ada who had naturally curling hair and good looks and it was Ada who in the end came to nowt. Doris remembered the thrill of satisfaction she felt when she found out that Ada was expecting a baby. She turned over in bed and smiled; now she was in charge of the bairn.

The bairn was such a little stick of a thing for all her seven years, but she seemed strong enough. She'd pay for her keep all right. Doris's anger rose again as she remembered the spark in Lorinda's eye: she might be small but she showed the spirit of her flaming nowt of a mother. Doris grinned. She'd brought her down a peg or two calling her Ada.

'I'll bray that impittance out of her,' Doris said as she wearily got out of bed. 'I'll start as I mean to go on.'

'What? Eh?' Harry turned over and looked at her sleepily.

'I said nowt for you. Just you get yourself up and see to the breakfast tables, the men'll be down before we know it.' Doris poured cold water into the basin on the washstand and splashed it over her face and arms before drying herself on the rough towel which was hanging on the side rail. Aye, she'd soon train the lass to the work, it would ease her own burden.

Chapter Two

'Come on, you! Up you get!' The strident voice woke Ada from a pleasant doze, Auntie Doris sounded angry already and Ada sat up in alarm. Flinging the girl's clothes on top of her, the woman folded the screen and set it back against the wall, glaring sideways at her niece as she did so.

'Howay now, get yourself dressed, you don't want to be caught in your nightie, do you? The men will be coming through here in a minute.'

Auntie Doris turned up the gas in the mantle above the table and lit it with a match. Then she turned her attention to the range, raking out the ashes into the box underneath, screwing up yesterday's *Northern Echo* and laying it in the grate. She took sticks from the oven and criss crossed them over the paper, covering them with the still warm cinders and coal from the scuttle, all the time working at a furious rate and berating Ada while she worked for being slow.

'And don't forget to tidy the bedclothes away, neat and tidy now! Then I'll show you how to put up the bed.' She filled the kettle and put it to boil on the gas ring by the fire before turning to her niece with her hands on her hips.

Ada was scrambling into her clothes, pulling on her coarse, black stockings, pulling the legs of her drawers down over the stockingtops. She fumbled with the buttons of the dingy brown dress, managed them in the end, and then it was the turn of her pinafore. Tying the neat bow at the back as Grannie had taught her, she took a broken piece of comb out of the pocket and dragged it through her tangled curls, fastening them back from her face with a piece of black tape. Auntie Doris watched as Ada folded the

blankets, pursing her lips as she struggled with their weight but not offering to help. At last the bedclothes were in the drawer and before long the chiffoier was back to looking like a sideboard again.

Uncle Harry shuffled into the kitchen, his pale eyes watering and his nose bright pink. He glanced briefly at Ada, who was standing uncertainly, not knowing what she was expected to do next, before going over to the range and holding his brown-spotted hands out to the fire. His wife grunted her impatience.

'For God's sake, Harry, show the girl how to set the table. We haven't got time to stand about gormless! I'm too busy now to have you in here anyway.' Auntie Doris nodded her head purposefully to Ada, who followed Harry as he shuffled back to the front room without even bothering to answer his wife. Ada looked about her with interest. So far she hadn't been beyond the passage door and she had thought she was to be confined to the kitchen for ever.

The room where the lodgers ate their meals and spent their spare time was as dismal as the kitchen, she thought. Two square tables were covered in scratched and worn 'American oilcloth' and the chairs set around them were mismatched and ugly, though they were sturdy enough. A scrubbed wooden cupboard on the wall was the only other furniture; the only attempt at decoration was one picture on the wall, a cheap print of 'The Thin Red Line'. The red coats of the soldiers were faded to a dirty pink and brown spots of damp adorned the corners.

Uncle Harry drew back the thin brown curtains to disclose a thick lace, 'dolly-dyed' to a sickly shade of cream. Ada stood in a corner and watched him curiously as he turned up the gas jet and opened the corner cupboard. The room looked no more inviting for the extra light.

'Howay then, lass,' he said as he motioned her over. 'You get out the pots, they'll be down for their fodder before we know it.'

Ada came to his side obediently, waiting for him to hand down the pint mugs and knives and forks which she could see were in the cupboard. She looked up in surprise as he glanced quickly at the door before patting her bottom lingeringly. Her mouth dropped open as he put an arm around her thin body and squeezed her to him. She didn't know what to do or how to respond to him so she kept herself rigid. It was the first friendly touch she had had since she came to Bishop Auckland, but it didn't feel right somehow, not really friendly. Desperately uneasy, she just wished he would let her go.

'I'm your friend,' Uncle Harry said softly and his wet moustache brushed her cheek, making her skin shrink, 'I'll look after you.'

There was a noise in the passageway just outside the door and Uncle Harry released her abruptly, causing her to stagger a little. Ada took the mugs he handed down to her without looking at him and moved away to set the tables. Her face was red and she felt awkward and strange and very unsure of herself.

Suddenly the ache for her grannie was a hard lump in her stomach which refused to budge, a lump as heavy as lead. Her eyes blurred and she couldn't look at Johnny as he came into the room, closely followed by the other lodgers. Johnny paused, glancing curiously from Ada to her uncle. He could sense there was something wrong. But Ada brushed past him quickly, anxious to get back to the kitchen and the rough voice of Auntie Doris. At least she knew where she was with Auntie Doris.

Ada sat back on her heels and surveyed the front steps she had just finished scouring with sandstone. She thought they looked nice and clean but would Auntie Doris? Standing up, she took deep breaths of the cold early-morning air. It wasn't very often Ada got the chance to be out in the fresh air; Auntie Doris didn't like her to go out much. She'd been

in Finkle Street for a month and she hadn't been to school yet. Ada liked school, she looked forward eagerly to starting a new one here in Bishop Auckland. If it was like the school in Durham she would soon make friends with the other girls, she knew. Maybe Auntie Doris would let her go next week.

'Are you not finished out there yet?'

Ada jumped as Auntie Doris came out into the passage and stood with her hands on her hips glaring at her.

'Yes. Yes, I am.'

Picking up her bucket and piece of sandstone, Ada hurried through the house. She emptied her bucket in the yard drain and then began washing up the breakfast dishes. By this time she didn't have to be told what the next job for her was, she had quickly got into the routine.

Auntie Doris was black-leading the range, her brush going rhythmically to and fro, to and fro. Ada looked at her sideways. She didn't seem to be in a really angry mood, just intent on getting the oven door to shine.

'Am I going to school next week, Auntie?'

The question sounded loud in Ada's own ears, and her heart pounded as she bent over the plate she was scrubbing clean of grease. Auntie Doris stopped buffing the oven door. She stood back and looked at her niece, her mouth set.

'No you're blooming well not!' she said flatly. 'You'll learn all you need to know here in this house.' She turned back to the range. As far as she was concerned the subject of school was closed.

Ada pressed her lips tightly together to stop herself from crying. She continued with the washing-up and after a while she no longer wanted to weep, she began to feel rebellious instead. Why shouldn't she go to school?

Everybody went to school. How would she ever be able to read and write if she didn't go to school? Auntie Doris was horrible, she had no right to stop her. She hated Auntie

Doris. She glared her hatred behind her aunt's back. Auntie Doris continued with her work, serenely unaware of the feelings she had roused in Ada.

When the washing-up was finished, the draining board scrubbed down and the cloths wrung out and hanging on the brass rail above the range, Ada went out to sweep the back yard. Gradually she worked off her bad feelings towards Auntie Doris, there was nothing she could do to alter things now. She would leave it for now, but Auntie couldn't keep her off school for ever. Any road, if her mam came back for her – and Ada prayed every single night that she would – Auntie Doris would no longer have the charge of her. Mam would let her go to school, surely she would. Ada fell to dreaming about how it would be if her mam came back. They would go to live in Grannie's old house in Durham and Johnny would come to tea and she could change her name back to Lorinda. Bye, it would be lovely.

The morning of Ada's eighth birthday she was out of bed and had the screen put away and the bed back to a sideboard before Auntie Doris came down to the kitchen. When her aunt came in Ada smiled at her, waiting for her to say, 'Happy birthday'. She'd been a good girl and got on with her work. Surely Auntie Doris would know what day it was? But Auntie Doris merely grunted and went to fill the kettle at the tap over the sink. Ada waited. Maybe when the breakfast was ready Auntie Doris would give her a little present, a bag of sweets or something to mark the day.

In the dining room, setting out the tables, Ada glanced out of the window at the sun shining on the pavement. Dust motes hung in the air as a sunbeam came in and brightened the room. Ada felt optimistic: surely now she was eight Auntie Doris would let her go to school? The lodgers began to filter in and take their places at the tables, most of them morose and taking little or no notice of her. Their minds were on the day ahead of them.

'Hello, Ada.' A softly whispered voice in her ear made her turn eagerly to Johnny with a wide, welcoming smile.

'Hello, Johnny. Do you know what day it is today?'

Johnny paused on his way to his seat and looked at her vivid face. Her cheeks were rosy with excitement and her lovely eyes sparkled.

'Er ... May the twentieth?'

'No, silly! Well, yes, it is, but it's my birthday. I'm eight today.'

'Are you, pet? Happy birthday, Ada!' Johnny looked round the room at the older men. 'Did you know it was Ada's birthday today?'

They looked up. Seeing her shining face, most of them relaxed and wished her many happy returns. Two of them even reached into their pockets and brought out pennies for her. Ada was delighted.

'Eeh, thank you,' she breathed, clutching her pennies to her. It was such a long time since she'd had a penny of her own.

'I'll have a surprise for you tonight, Ada.' Johnny winked at her. Just then they heard Auntie Doris calling from the kitchen.

'Are you not finished in there, Ada? What the heck are you doing?'

Ada quickly slipped the pennies into her apron pocket and ran out of the dining room.

'What're you looking so pleased about?' Auntie Doris looked up from the table where she was dishing up the plates of porridge.

'It's my birthday today, Auntie.'

'Aye, well, I know that,' said Auntie Doris. 'What that has to do with anything I don't know. Howay, give us a hand.'

Ada's moment of happiness dimmed as she began to pile the plates onto trays and Auntie Doris took them through to the boarders. She was not going to let Auntie spoil it for her, she decided. Grannie had always made her birthday a

special day and Auntie Doris was just being nasty the way she was sometimes. Anyway, she had Johnny's surprise to look forward to that night.

Uncle Harry was sitting at the end of the table drinking a mug of tea, but as his wife went out of the door he got up and moved towards Ada. He caught hold of her arm and drew her towards him, bending his face close to hers so that she could see the bits of porridge sticking to his moustache, wet and shining.

'Haven't you got a birthday kiss for Uncle Harry, then?'

'Let me go, Uncle Harry. I have to see to the bacon.' Ada felt sick as his hands began to wander down her back.

'Give me a kiss then.'

Ada closed her eyes and pecked him on the cheek. 'I can hear Auntie Doris coming,' she said. Uncle Harry released her and sat down at the table as his wife came back into the kitchen.

Ada carried on with her work. She soon recovered her spirits, looking forward to the evening when Johnny would come back from work with his surprise, and planning what to do with her pennies. She would buy a present for Johnny when it was his birthday, she decided. Meanwhile she would hide them in the chiffonier drawer.

'When is it your birthday, Johnny?'

The evening had come at last and Johnny took advantage of the Parkers' presence in the dining room to slip out to see Ada under the pretence of going to the lavatory in the yard. He sat down at the kitchen table with Ada, a pleased smile on his face. He had brought her a bunch of ribbons, blue, red and green, to tie in her hair, and she kept glancing down at the parcel in her lap, delighted with the bright colours. Her dinner was hardly touched, she was so excited. Bye, it was lovely! She had thought she wasn't going to get any presents at all and here Johnny had picked

the very things she loved. Though these, too, had better go in the chiffonier drawer.

‘Not for ages yet, not till November. Bonfire night,’ said Johnny. ‘Now, are you sure you like the ribbons? I can take them back -’

‘Eeh, don’t be barmy, Johnny Fenwick! I love them, I do. Thank you, Johnny, I’ve never had such bonny ribbons, I haven’t.’ There was the distant sound of the dining-room door opening into the passage and a shadow crossed her face. Quickly she slipped over to the chiffonier and stowed the lovely ribbons away before her aunt came in. When the kitchen door opened Johnny had disappeared down the yard and Ada was steadily eating her dinner.

‘Howay then, get a move on!’ Auntie Doris snapped. ‘We want the dishes cleared tonight, you know, not tomorrow.’

Ada said nothing; she wasn’t going to let anything spoil her pleasure in Johnny’s thoughtfulness. Bye, he was a lovely lad, he was!

‘Johnny, will you learn me to read? And maybe write my name?’ Ada asked timidly. Her hopes of going to school were growing dimmer as the weeks turned into months. Johnny might help her, she thought and looked anxiously at him, afraid he wouldn’t think much of her for not being able to read.

Johnny frowned. ‘Don’t you go to school, Ada? And it’s “teach”, not “learn”.’

Ada blushed painfully, not only because she had used the wrong word but also because she was ashamed of the reason Auntie Doris gave her whenever she asked about school. She bent her head over the fork she had been polishing with ash from the grate and didn’t speak until she had put down the fork and picked up a knife, rubbing hard on the blade.

‘I’ve seen you watching the others go down the street to school. Why don’t you?’ Johnny went on.

Ada kept her head bent, she was near to tears. Just then they heard Doris Parker coming and swiftly Johnny went out and down the yard. Ada would get into trouble for talking to him and it wouldn't be the first time. For once, Ada was glad of the interruption; she rubbed harder and harder on the knife until it sparkled through the tears on her lashes.

'You not finished those knives yet?' Auntie Doris said sharply, glancing through the window at Johnny as he disappeared through the gate. 'You've been talking to that lad again, haven't you?' As she passed Ada's chair she brought her horny hand casually across the young girl's head, making her ears ring. Ada now had an excuse for the tears in her eyes. She finished cleaning the cutlery and took it to the sink to wash with soap and water. Johnny hadn't said he would *teach* her, she thought. She resolved to ask yet again about school.

'Please, Auntie, can I go to school?'

The question seemed to hang in the air and Ada waited hopefully for Auntie Doris's answer. Auntie Doris didn't reply for a minute and Ada began to think she wasn't going to.

'Well, if I can't go to school, can I go to Sunday school?' Ada persisted. She had kept her star card showing her good record for attendance in Durham. She remembered that lovely day when she and Grannie went on the Sunday-school trip to Redcar. Bye, the sea was grand, and the sands and the Punch and Judy show. Her reminiscences were interrupted harshly by Auntie Doris.

'Go to school? How many times do I have to tell you you're not going to school? Nor Sunday school neither. I'll not have you shaming me by letting everyone know I've a bastard niece on my hands. What do you think the Sunday-school teacher will think?'

Auntie Doris's red face was glistening with sweat as she took the oven cloth from the brass rail over the range and

opened the oven door. A great blast of hot air was let out into the kitchen and the smell of newly baked bread filled the room. She pulled a loaf tin out of the oven and expertly upended the loaf onto the cloth in her hand, tapping the bottom of it to see if it was ready. Satisfied, she brought out the rest of the batch and put them to cool on the table before turning back to Ada with her hands on her hips.

'An' I expect you don't go telling any busybody who has the impittance to ask why you're not at school that you live here. You're only visiting while your mam's away.' Doris Parker wiped her forehead with the oven cloth and glared at the girl.

Ada said no more. She was humbled as she was reminded yet again of her origins; Auntie Doris was always doing that. She wondered why - Grannie hadn't minded her going to school, not even Sunday school. I must be really bad, she thought and carried on washing the knives and forks, her dark head bent over her work. I must be very bad not to be able to go to school. But as far as not telling anyone, well, she didn't see anyone very often, apart from the lodgers, that is. And Johnny was the only lodger who took much notice of her.

Summer slipped away and Ada stopped asking if she could go to school though she still hoped that some day she might. In the meantime Johnny brought her a slate and chalk and tried to teach her to write her name. The trouble was that they only had snatched moments together so Ada's progress was slow.

Johnny's birthday approached and Ada managed to slip out to the newsagent in Bondgate and buy him a tuppenny notebook. Carefully she wrapped it in the paper she had saved from the ribbons and early on the morning of his birthday she was in the dining room waiting for him. Johnny was always the first lodger down.

'Happy birthday, Johnny.' Ada felt suddenly shy as he came through the door. Hesitantly she handed over her