

# VAL WOOD

*The Doorstep Girls*



*Can two friends  
find hope in  
hard times?*



## About the Book

Ruby and Grace had grown up in the slums of Middle Court, the poorest place in Hull. Friends since early childhood, they had supported each other in bad times and good. Ruby's ma, Bess, addicted to the opium which dulled the pain of her miserable existence, tried hard to be a good mother, but without too much success, while Grace's parents, Bob and Lizzie, looked after the girl - as well as their own family - as best they could. But the two families were bound together by more than friendship, and secrets from the past threatened to make their hard lives even more difficult.

The local cotton mill had provided work for Ruby and Grace since they were nine years old, but with the decline of the industry they, like many others, were cast off. Both girls found themselves the object of attention from the mill owner's sons, but as times grew harder and money became ever scarcer, Grace became involved in a militant campaign against poverty and injustice, while Ruby was tempted into prostitution. Both girls were searching for something which would take them far away from the slums they had always known.

# Contents

Cover

About the Book

Title Page

Dedication

Acknowledgements

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  
Chapter Thirty-Five  
Chapter Thirty-Six  
Chapter Thirty-Seven  
Chapter Thirty-Eight  
Chapter Thirty-Nine  
Chapter Forty  
Chapter Forty-One  
Chapter Forty-Two  
Chapter Forty-Three  
Chapter Forty-Four  
Chapter Forty-Five  
Chapter Forty-Six

More About Val  
About the Author

Also by Val Wood  
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# THE DOORSTEP GIRLS

Val Wood



**CORGI BOOKS**

*To my family with love*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My thanks to Catherine for reading the manuscript and to Peter and Ruth for their support and encouragement.

Books for general reading:

*Confessions of an English Opium Eater*, Thomas De Quincey, 1822.

*History of the Town and Port of Hull*, James Joseph Sheehan, 1866.

*Victorian Women*, Joan Perkin, 1993. John Murray Ltd.

*Living and Dying: a picture of Hull in the Nineteenth Century*, Bernard Foster.

## CHAPTER ONE

The two girls sat side by side on the doorstep, their knees drawn up and chins resting in their hands. They both stared vacantly into space without speaking. It was midsummer in 1848, and the dank and narrow court was humid and sticky. It stank of putrid decay, sewage, and of seed oil and blubber drifting in from the mills situated close by along the river Hull. The ground beneath their bare feet was unpaved and muddy yet they chose to sit outside on the stone slab, with their cotton skirts tucked under them, rather than be indoors; they had both been inside mill walls since six o'clock that morning and it was now seven o'clock in the evening.

'I'm hungry,' Ruby muttered. 'I've had nowt to eat since this morning and that was onny a bit o' bread.' Her face was pinched and white, and made more colourless by the contrast of her dark hair, which strayed from beneath her cotton cap and across her forehead.

'Did you take no dinner to work?' Grace asked, and when Ruby shook her head, said anxiously, 'Shall I ask Ma if she's got any broth to spare?' She knew that although there was little food in her own house, there would be none at all at Ruby's.

They both looked up and turned their heads as they heard a rumble of cartwheels coming down the narrow alley into the court. 'Who's this then?' Grace murmured.

'Dunno, but they'll have a job getting that cart down here,' Ruby said as a wooden cart, piled high with odd pieces of furniture, came into view and scraped against the

walls of the alley in an attempt to push itself through. 'Watch out for that brickwork,' she called out. 'You'll have 'landlord after you if you damage it.'

They heard a snort of derision and they both laughed as, with a grinding and grating, the cart was sent with a violent shove into the court. A man and a youth of about eighteen manhandled the contents in a valiant attempt to keep the furniture, a table, three chairs and a pendulum clock, from crashing to the ground. A woman walking behind the cart screeched at them to be careful and although the man glared at Ruby and Grace as if it was their fault that the furniture was falling, the youth winked and smiled, and the two girls turned to each other and raised their eyebrows.

'You moving in opposite?' Ruby asked. 'To Mrs Roger's old place?' The house across from where they were sitting had the door and both downstairs and upstairs windows boarded up.

'Well, just look at that,' the woman complained, ignoring Ruby's question and staring at the boarded door. 'They said it would be open! How are we supposed to get in?'

'Don't worry, Ma,' the youth said. 'I've got a crowbar about me somewhere.'

'No need,' Grace interrupted. 'My ma's got a key.'

The woman turned to her. 'Then let's be having it. We can't stand here all night!'

'Landlord boarded it up,' Ruby disclosed as Grace rose to her feet and went inside her door. 'Vagrants kept moving in. Let down 'tone of neighbourhood, you know!' but, as the woman didn't smile or comment, added cheerfully, 'Not that they stayed long. 'Place was overrun wi' rats and mice.'

The woman grimaced in distaste, but then turned as Lizzie Sheppard, Grace's mother, came out holding an iron key in her hand. 'Tek no notice of her,' she said. 'Sanitary

men have been and put poison down. There'll be none there now, onny dead ones anyway.'

She pursed her lips as the woman shuddered and pulled her shawl closer around her shoulders. Lizzie said sharply, 'Been used to summat better, have you? Well, you'll have to put up wi' it till your fortune turns.'

She handed over the key. The woman took it without a word and moved away, but the youth came towards them. 'Thanks.' He touched his cap. 'I'm Daniel Hanson and they're my ma and da. They're a bit put out.' He lowered his voice. 'This is 'third move we've had in six months.'

'How come? Didn't you pay 'rent?' Ruby asked, looking up at him from the doorstep, whilst Grace leaned in the doorway, her fair head on one side as she scrutinized the newcomer.

He shook his head. 'No, it wasn't that. But my da's lost his job and Ma can't settle.' He grimaced. 'He's a joiner and he's lost his fingers on his right hand.'

'That was careless.' Grace's mother folded her arms across her thin chest. She wore a large sacking apron over her dark skirt and a man's cap on her head. Like her daughter, she was fair, but her hair, scraped back into a bun, was intermingled with strands of white. 'How did he manage that?'

'He was showing an apprentice how to saw a piece of timber and was holding it steady for him. He was distracted for a minute and 'lad sawed right over his hand.'

'Didn't 'company pay him owt? If it wasn't his fault?' Ruby asked boldly. 'Sometimes they do.'

Daniel was interrupted in his answer by his mother calling to him. 'Daniel! Don't stand there gossiping like an old woman. Come and help your da with this furniture.'

'Nosy beggars,' she muttered as Daniel came across and lifted one end of the table. He and his father manoeuvred it through the door. 'I hope you didn't tell 'em all our business?'

'Course I didn't. Anyway, what's there to tell? Everybody round here is down on their luck, we're no different from anybody else!'

'Huh! Don't class me with 'likes of folk round here!' His mother's mouth turned down. 'And if they get a whiff that your da got some benefit from his accident, we'll have all 'beggars from Hull after us.'

Daniel's father spoke for the first time. 'In another couple o' months there'll be nowt of it left anyway,' he muttered. 'So we shan't have to worry about folks knowing owt.'

'I'll be earning soon, Da,' Daniel assured him. 'Then we'll be all right. We'll soon be set up again. We just have to hang on till then.'

His mother looked around the small dark room. 'What a comedown. I never thought I'd be brought to this. When I think of my nice little house!'

'Shut up will you, woman,' her husband bellowed in a sudden burst of frustration. 'It wasn't my fault, it was that stupid lad's.'

'I never said it was your fault!' his wife retaliated. 'But you should have been watching him.'

'Think I did this on purpose?' He shook his injured hand at her. Only his thumb and swollen stumps of fingers below the knuckles were left, and she turned away.

'Can you get 'board off 'window?' she muttered. 'Let's get some light in here.'

'I'll do it. Will you help me, Da?' Daniel reached for his tool bag and crowbar inside it.

'Aye.' His father's voice was low and despondent. 'From craftsman to labourer in ten seconds. That's all it teks.'

'We'll be all right,' Daniel again assured him as they forced the board off the window. 'You teach me all you know and as soon as I'm out of my time I'll be earning good money. Then,' he wrenched at the board over the broken door, 'as soon as I've made a bit o' money, we'll get set up

in business. You can talk to 'customers and look after accounts and I'll do 'woodwork.'

He spoke with such confidence that his father was almost reassured, until he returned indoors and saw his wife staring out of the window with a look of horror on her face. 'Just look! I don't believe what I'm seeing!'

Her husband and son gazed past her through the cracked and dirty glass.

'It's a pig,' she croaked. 'A filthy stinking pig.'

'She's let that blasted pig out again.' Ruby scrambled to her feet as the snuffling sow came towards them. 'I swear I'll kill it and have it for breakfast.'

'You can't.' Grace moved further back into the doorway. 'It's having piglets. Ma!' she called urgently into the house. 'Mrs Peck's pig is out again.'

Her mother appeared with a broom and brandishing it furiously she swept the grunting sow back to the high wall which enclosed the court, and towards a dilapidated wooden structure, barely big enough for a dog, let alone a pregnant sow. Against this wall and at one side of the pigpen was a water pump and at the other side was the privy which served the twelve houses in the court. The ground below the broken door of the privy seeped with foul and stagnant water and flies and mosquitoes hovered about it.

'Well at least she's not keeping it inside 'house any more,' she muttered, though her face showed no distaste, either for the grunting sow or for the stench emanating from the privy, so inured was she to her surroundings.

'No, but she's got chickens inside,' Ruby groused. 'They scratch about under her table and there's mess all over 'doorstep!' Ruby lived with her mother and younger brother in an upstairs room above the ground-floor room which housed Mrs Peck and her husband, six children, a

dog, chickens and the pregnant sow which had now been turned out to graze in the rubbish-strewn court.

'She should get back to 'countryside where she belongs if she wants to keep pigs and chickens,' Lizzie Sheppard grumbled. 'It's bad enough trying to keep 'place clean without 'mess of stinking livestock. And they attract vermin,' she added. 'I can hear rats scratching every night.'

'Her husband can't get work in 'country,' Grace volunteered. 'She told me so herself. You know, that day when she gave us an egg.'

'Aye,' her mother muttered as she went back indoors. 'I remember the egg, but do I have to be grateful for ever?'

'Hello, Jamie!' Ruby called to a youth appearing out of a house at the top end of the court. He was yawning and in his hand he had a slice of pie.

'Hello, Jamie,' Grace said hesitantly.

He came across to them, then sniffed at the aroma drifting from the Sheppards' doorway. 'Mm, your ma's cooking summat good, Gracie.'

'Fish stew. My da brought some fish heads from off 'dock.'

Ruby swallowed and licked her lips. 'What you eating, Jamie?'

'Beef pie.' He took a bite, then handed the remainder to her. 'Do you want it?'

'Thanks.' She tried not to appear too eager, but she was salivating so hard, and the sight of food and the savoury smell of fish and onions from Grace's house was almost too much to bear.

'What's happening over yonder?' He nodded towards the house where the Hansons had moved in. 'New folks?'

'Their name's Hanson.' Grace offered the information. 'Mr and Mrs, and their son Daniel. Mr Hanson's lost his fingers in an accident. He was a joiner.'

'Mm. How old is he? Daniel Hanson?'

'About 'same as you.' Ruby spoke with her mouth full. 'Not as handsome though!'

'Well, no. Of course not!' Jamie laughed as he spoke, but he sounded confident that what Ruby said in jest was true. He was tall and slimly built, fair-haired with pale blue eyes. He didn't have the pinched and hungry look of most people living in this area. These folk never had quite enough to eat and certainly wouldn't be inclined to give away a slice of beef pie. He was also quite well dressed and although the frock coat he wore was large on him, having come from a bigger man, it wasn't threadbare but only a little worn around the cuffs and collar.

'He's got a nice face, though,' Grace said. 'And he smiles a lot.'

'Must be a bit simple then,' Jamie said lazily. 'There's nowt much to smile about, is there?'

'No, I suppose not,' Grace agreed, downcast. 'Not for most people.'

'Except for them as is rich and not allus hungry.' Ruby licked her lips to catch the last crumb. 'Thanks for 'pie, Jamie.'

'It's all right,' he said. 'You can pay me back when you get your wages.'

Ruby's mouth dropped open. 'Are you joking?' she said huskily. 'My wages are spoken for - I owe -'

'He's joking, Ruby. You are, aren't you, Jamie?' Grace pleaded. 'Say that you are!'

He gave a sudden laugh. 'Aye.' He slouched against the window sill and gazed at her in a way which made her feel vaguely uncomfortable, and then from her to Ruby. 'Course I am. But I might call in 'debt one day.'

Ruby let out a sigh of relief. 'If ever you're desperate for a piece o' pie, Jamie,' she grinned, 'just you call on me.'

'Supper's ready, Grace. Come on in.' Grace's mother called from inside the house.

'Is there enough to spare for Ruby, Ma?' Though Grace asked her mother, she glanced at her father, who was sitting by the low fire.

Bob Sheppard looked up. 'Lass is earning money, same as you. Can't she buy her own food?' He spoke brusquely but Grace knew very well that he wouldn't turn Ruby away.

'She pays 'rent out of her wages, Da, you know that she does. And she keeps young Freddie as well as her ma.'

Her father grunted, but her mother called out through the open door. 'See if you've a bit o' bread at home, Ruby, and you can have a bowl o' soup to dip it in.'

Ruby appeared in the doorway. 'I know we haven't, Aunt Lizzie. I ate 'last piece this morning afore I went out.'

'So what's Freddie had to eat all day?' Lizzie paused with the iron saucepan in her hand. The pan was heavy, but Lizzie, who hired herself out as a washerwoman to the people in the big houses in the town, was strong, with muscular arms.

Ruby knew that Freddie wouldn't have had anything to eat, but she didn't answer and watched as Grace's mother poured the thin soup into three bowls which were already on the table. Ruby eyed them. 'I'm not tekking yours, am I?'

'No.' Lizzie shook her head. 'I've had my dinner already. 'Cook at High Street where I've been today, she allus does plenty of food on washday. Now tomorrow, when I go to 'house in Albion Street, 'cook there is that mean she onny gives enough to feed a sparrow. Go on, sit down. There's not much but it'll fill a corner.'

'I don't know what I'd do without you and Mr Sheppard,' Ruby said gratefully. 'Ma just can't seem to manage.'

Bob Sheppard slurped his soup and dipped a thick slice of bread into it. 'If she didn't spend money on 'poppy and her pipe, she'd be able to,' he muttered, glancing at his wife who raised her eyebrows at him, and Ruby nodded in agreement. It was acknowledged by everyone who knew Ruby's mother, Bessie, that she was totally dependent on

the opium which she bought raw and grated, and then mixed with herbs or leaves if she had no money for tobacco. She was never seen without her short clay pipe in her mouth. If she couldn't afford to buy the raw, she dosed herself with laudanum bought from the grocer which was ready mixed with wine or spirits.

'Somebody's been to your house today.' Lizzie stooped to place a small piece of wood on the fire. Being on the ground floor they had the luxury of a hearth, unlike the upstairs room where Ruby and her family lived. Although they could say they were lucky to have a roof over their heads, the ceiling above them was so rotten that a gaping hole showed through to the attic.

'Who?' Ruby was startled. 'Not 'debt collector?'

'A family,' she replied. 'A man, wife and three bairns. I saw them come this afternoon, but I didn't see them go out again.' She gave Ruby an intense glance. 'Mebbe they're still there.'

Ruby pushed her chair back. 'Thanks for 'soup, Aunt Lizzie. I'd better go and see what's going on.'

Although Lizzie Sheppard wasn't her real aunt, Ruby had always called her such. She had known the Sheppards most of her young life and she and Grace were inseparable. Once, so she had been told, Grace's mother and her own mother, Bessie Robson, had been good friends too. But they no longer spoke, and no-one knew why.

The house in which they lived was at the end of the court, and nearest to the wall which separated this court from the one beyond. The wall was almost as high as the houses, thus blocking out any light or air. Sunshine never reached down here and although today, being summer, the sun had been bright in the sky, the residents of Middle Court had not been aware of it.

Ruby climbed the broken stairs, and, when she came to their small landing, saw that a rickety wooden ladder had been placed against the wall. Attached to the ladder was a

piece of rope which had been pushed through the partially open trapdoor in the ceiling. She looked up and thought that she could hear whispering.

She opened the door of their room. 'Ma! Why's that ladder here?'

Her mother was sitting on a ragged mattress with her shawl and a thin blanket wrapped around her. The room felt cold and damp in spite of the heat outside. She gave Ruby a nervous smile which showed that several front teeth were missing but where the gap perfectly accommodated her clay pipe.

'I've made us some money,' she wheezed, and tapped the side of her nose. 'You'll be pleased wi' me, Ruby.'

'What have you done now, Ma? What have you sold? Not that we've owt left to sell!'

Her mother crooked her finger for Ruby to come nearer. When Ruby was near enough to hear a whisper, Bessie pointed up at the ceiling. 'I've got us some lodgers,' she croaked. 'They're living upstairs.'

## CHAPTER TWO

'Living upstairs! What do you mean, living upstairs? There's no floor upstairs!' Ruby stared at her mother and then up at the broken ceiling. 'Besides, what's 'landlord going to say?'

'He'll not find out, 'rent man never comes up here. He's too scared o' tummelling down 'steps.' Her mother gave a satisfied grin and chewed on her unlit pipe. 'And 'chap up yonder - Mr Blake - he's found a bit o' planking and put that down for them to walk and lie down on.'

'Somebody'll see that ladder!' Ruby insisted. 'You'll have us turned out, then what'll we do?'

'Nobody'll see it. I'll keep 'front door shut, and folks upstairs won't say owt. They've nowhere else to go.'

There was no reasoning with her, and Ruby sank onto the mattress and put her hands to her head. 'Front door won't shut, Ma,' she said, even though knowing she was defeated. 'Hinge is hanging off.'

Ruby never ever left the rent money with her mother, for she knew she would rush to spend it on her addiction as soon as Ruby had left the house to go to work. The rent collector called on a Sunday when Ruby was at home, and if there was any money left after buying bread and potatoes and paying off some of the debts which they owed, he took it. They were always in arrears, and, try as she might, she could never catch up with the payments.

'I'm charging a shilling a week,' her mother wheedled. 'They're ever so grateful.' She looked at her daughter pleadingly and held out her hand. There were a few

coppers in her palm. 'You can have these, Ruby. I saved 'em for you.'

Ruby took the coins. I can buy bread, she wavered, and short of climbing the ladder and telling the people to leave, I can't think what else to do. Ma will have spent the rest of the shilling, so we can't give it back. And they must be desperate, she decided, to be grateful to live in a cold damp loft with rotten beams and gaping holes in the roof.

'Where's Freddie? Has he eaten today?'

Her mother dropped her gaze. 'He's out. He might have got a job.'

'How can he get a job? He's onny just eight.' In spite of her lack of education Ruby knew the factory law. When her brother was nine, then he could apply for a job just as she had done when she had reached that age. 'Anyway, he's skin and bone. Who'd tek him on?'

Her mother had a shifty look about her. What was she up to? She glanced up at Ruby. 'I do my best, Ruby,' she whined. 'I do my best for all of us. I can't help it if I'm not well enough to work myself.'

'Freddie!' Ruby persisted. She had heard her mother's story of ill health so often that it no longer raised any sympathy. 'Where is he?'

'A man came to 'house this morning. He'd seen Freddie out in 'street and said that he was just 'sort of bright lad that a friend of his was looking for. So Freddie's gone with him, and if this man's friend teks to him then he'll bind him as an apprentice. He said he was old enough at eight.'

'But who was he? You let him go wi' a stranger! To do what, Ma?'

'He'll get fed and clothed and looked after, though he won't be able to come home.' Her mother shuffled around on her bed of old rags and coats. 'We shan't have to buy so much food if he's not here.'

'Ma!' Ruby screeched. 'Doing what?'

‘Didn’t I say?’ Her mother’s mouth worked nervously. ‘As a chimney sweep’s lad!’

Ruby lay down and curled herself into a ball with her head on her knees. She was so tired and weary, and now this. ‘Ma! How could you? You know he’s not strong. He could get stuck up a chimney and never get out!’

‘No,’ her mother said eagerly. ‘That’s what I said to this man that came, and he said that because Freddie was so small there was no fear o’ that. That’s why he would be just perfect for this job. And he said he would be working in ‘countryside in big houses so he’ll get plenty o’ fresh air.’

She waited a moment before adding, ‘And he said that if his friend took him on, then he’d pay us ten shillings.’

Ruby lifted her head and gazed at her mother. ‘You’d sell Freddie for ten shillings?’

‘What else can I do?’ Her mother took her pipe out of her mouth and laid it on the bed. She took hold of Ruby’s hand. ‘Don’t be angry wi’ me, Ruby. I’m doing my best. If we’d a man about we’d manage better. If you’d onny find some nice young fella in work who’d look after us.’

‘Like my da, you mean, who went off with a fancy piece? And like our Josh who you sent off to sea as an apprentice and we’ve never seen since. Oh, yes.’ Ruby nodded her head vigorously. ‘That’s just what we need, a man about the place to keep us in little luxuries, like hot dinners now and again or a pair of boots that don’t leak, and mebbe a room with a fire so’s we could keep warm.’

She started to weep. ‘I’m fifteen years old, Ma, and I feel like an old woman.’

But she wiped her eyes and with the few coins clutched in her hand went out to buy old bread from the baker. In the shop window was one small meat pie with a bluebottle buzzing round it. ‘I’ll give you a penny for that pie,’ she said, handing over a penny for the bread. ‘It’s got a fly on it.’

The baker flicked the fly away then wiped the top of the pie with his floury fingers. 'It would have been tuppence to anybody who hadn't seen it,' he said. 'Here, tek it.' He wrapped a piece of paper around the pie and handed it to her, waving away her offer of a penny. 'I saw your ma earlier,' he said, and gave a knowing nod. 'She was coming out of apothecary's yonder.'

Ruby's heart sank. 'Thanks,' she muttered and taking her purchases she hurried across the street to the chemist's shop. There was no-one else in the shop but the chemist in a loose brown coat with his back to her, lifting down a stone jar from the shelf. 'Mr Cooke,' she said diffidently. 'Mr Cooke, I'd be obliged if you didn't give my ma any more medication.'

He raised his eyebrows. 'If she asks for it and has the money to pay for it, then I'm obliged to sell it to her.' He shook his head at Ruby. 'If I don't, she'll go elsewhere and may be given something totally unsuitable.'

Ruby's mouth trembled. 'We've barely enough money for food,' she began.

'I know,' he murmured. 'I do understand. But it's too late, your mother has to have an opiate, she's taken it since she was a child. She can't give it up now.'

Ruby turned away, tears pricking her eyes, but the chemist called her back. 'I've only given her a small bottle of Black Drop. It's mild, just a solution in wine and won't hurt her, only calm her down. You could even take it yourself.' He reached across to a drawer and took out some coins. 'Here.' He handed her a sixpence and a penny. 'Your mother paid me too much. I was going to keep it until next time.'

She thanked him and left. Take it myself, she mused. Perhaps I should. It's supposed to reduce depression. Then she gave herself a mental shake. Don't be so stupid, Ruby. Don't start on that downward path. She knew that her mother had given her laudanum when she was a child, as

she had given it to Freddie when he was a baby. Most mothers gave it to their children to ensure that they slept all day whilst they were out at work. Then the mothers were often so tired themselves, after a long day at the factory or fish dock, that a cordial laced with laudanum was given to the children in the evening so that they would sleep, and the mothers could get some sleep themselves.

It was Grace's mother who had weaned Ruby off it. She had been seven and still remembered the quarrel between Aunt Lizzie and her mother, when Aunt Lizzie had snatched the bottle from Ruby's little hand and smashed it to the ground. 'You'll kill her,' she'd shouted. 'Just as you killed those other bairns.' And it was then that Ruby had discovered that there had been other children, brothers or sisters, who hadn't survived.

As she crossed the street towards home, she saw Freddie walking hand in hand with a stranger who was very well dressed for these parts. She called out and ran towards him.

'Ruby!' the child shouted excitedly. 'I'm starting work! I've had my dinner and - this is Mr Jonas. He's just given Ma ten shillings so's that I can start straight away.'

Ruby stared at the man in the frock coat. He inclined his head towards her, but didn't take off his top hat. So, whilst her back was turned the deed was done! Freddie had been sold and probably already her mother was smoking her pipe and taking an extra dose of Black Drop to celebrate her good fortune.

'How shall I know where to find Freddie?' she asked Mr Jonas. 'In case owt happens and we need to be in touch with him. And to know if he's all right,' she added, not liking the look of the man.

Mr Jonas looked surprised at the question, as if he hadn't ever been asked it before. He fished in his waistcoat pocket and brought out a card which he handed to her. 'Get in touch with me in the case of emergency or death and I

will contact Freddie's employer. Do not disturb me for anything trivial as I am an extremely busy man.'

Ruby looked at the card. It was grubby and bent at the edges as if it had been in his pocket a long time, and, as she glanced at Mr Jonas now, he didn't seem to be quite as prosperous as she had first thought. His hat was rather battered, his black frock coat had a tinge of green and was crumpled as if it had been slept in, and his fingernails were extremely dirty.

'It's not you, then?' she asked pertinently. 'You're not 'chimney sweep?'

'Certainly not,' he replied huffily. 'I am an agent. I search out suitable people for employment.'

'Wouldn't you rather come back home, Freddie?' she asked her brother. 'You're too young to work.'

'Too late, young woman,' Jonas interrupted. 'The contract is signed and the money paid over to his mother. And he's not too young, he's had his eighth birthday I understand.' He took hold of Freddie's arm. 'He comes with me.'

'I'll be all right, Ruby,' Freddie called as he was marched away, though she thought she now saw doubt in his young eyes. 'Don't worry about me.'

Ruby was concerned, she was fond of her brother and didn't like to think of him going to live with strangers, but she ran as fast as she could back towards Middle Court and was just in time to catch her mother scurrying out of the alley and into the street. 'Come on, Ma,' she demanded. 'Hand it over.'

Her mother clutched her black shawl around her throat. She looks like a wizened old crow, Ruby thought. Her face, which Bessie always maintained had been beautiful in her youth, was wrinkled and pallid and her once dark hair was now mostly white. 'Hand what over?' she croaked. 'I haven't got a penny on me, honest to God, Ruby. I haven't.'

Ruby stood her ground and beckoned with her fingers for her mother to hand over the money she had taken from Mr Jonas. 'It's mine,' her mother whined. 'It's for my son. Nowt to do wi' you!'

'Give it here,' Ruby insisted. 'It can go towards 'rent and I can get my boots mended, my feet get soaked whenever it rains.' The last time it had rained, when the court was flooded with water, she had carried her boots in her hand until she reached the footpath out in the street. She had dried her toes on her skirt hem and, although her feet were cold, at least her boots were dry. There was nothing worse, she had reasoned, than wearing wet boots all day.

Her mother fished in her skirt pocket and took out five shillings and gave it to Ruby.

'And the rest, Ma. Another five!'

'I'm going to 'butcher's,' she muttered petulantly. 'I need some money.'

Ruby kept her hand out. 'And what will you buy at 'butcher's?' she asked. 'A nice joint o' meat? A mutton chop?'

Her mother nodded eagerly. 'Yes! Yes, that's it.'

'And where will you cook it, Ma? Seeing as we've no fire!'

Her mother looked confused for a moment, then said, 'Ah!' She gazed around her as if searching for inspiration. 'Well, I'll buy summat already cooked. That's it! That's what I'll do.'

'Give me 'rest of money, Ma,' Ruby said wearily. 'I've got a meat pie here that we can have for our supper. Come on, I'm tired, I want to go to bed.'

Reluctantly, Bessie handed over the remaining five shillings. Ruby took it, then, in a fit of pity for her mother, gave her the penny which the chemist had given back to her. 'Go get yourself a glass of ale,' she said. 'Then come home and we'll share 'pie.'

'You're not a bad lass, Ruby,' her mother said. 'Don't you want a glass?'

Ruby considered, then handed over the sixpence. 'Aye, why not! Borrow a jug from Tap and Barrel and we'll both have some.'

## CHAPTER THREE

'Come on, Jamie, get moving. Time you were on your way.'

'Yes. Yes. All right.' Jamie heard his mother's urging voice, but didn't hurry and continued to gaze at his reflection in the piece of broken mirror which hung by the door, then retied the yellow kerchief around his neck.

'That's mine!' his mother admonished. 'You little thief!'

'I'm onny borrowing it, Nell. Keep your hair on. Besides,' he added, 'it wasn't yours in 'first place.'

'Yes it was. Somebody give me it.'

'Instead of money? You were short-changed. It's onny a bit o' cheap cotton.'

His mother shrugged. 'I liked 'colour. Besides, it was that or nowt.'

'I keep telling you, you should tek money first, make sure they've got it.' He turned away from the mirror to look at his mother. 'You should leave 'bargaining to me, you're far too trusting, that's your trouble.'

'Not like you, eh, Jamie? Go on, get off. Drum up some business.'

Jamie laughed and left his mother to gaze in the mirror as he had just done. She saw a similar version of his face, the same light blue eyes and full mouth, but where his features were strong and angular, hers were rounded and feminine. 'He must tek after his father, whoever he was,' she murmured, brushing powdered rouge on her cheeks and carmine on her lips. 'A man o' business, I shouldn't wonder.'

Nell had succumbed to the blandishments of an older man when she was fourteen. He had given her a bracelet and gifts of money to ensure her discretion, for he was a friend of her parents and didn't want them to find out about his liaison with their daughter. As she found the experience not unpleasant and the money very welcome, for she was fond of pretty clothes, she decided that it was an easy enough way of making a living and much more congenial than working in a factory or on the fish dock as she was doing. She found plenty of customers, for she was attractive and willing, and she told her parents that she had changed her job and was working night shifts at a seed mill.

Inevitably she fell pregnant, was discovered and turned out of the house by her father. She suffered great hardship for many years as she tried to make a living for herself and her child, Jamie. When he was a baby he slept all night with the help of laudanum, but as he grew older he had to fend for himself during the night hours when she was at work. She had a miscarriage when Jamie was two and bled profusely, but after that she never again became pregnant.

When Jamie reached thirteen, he confronted her. 'You're doing it all wrong, Ma,' he said. 'You should be more particular. Tradesmen and businessmen are the ones wi' regular money. Not seamen or common labouring types who onny spend on a Saturday night after they've got their wages.'

He was right of course, trade was generally slack during the week, but Sunday mornings she was always exhausted and spent the day in bed. But how would she attract businessmen? She was much thinner than she had been in her younger days and her clothes were shabby and torn. She looked what she was, a destitute street woman.

'Leave it to me,' Jamie had said before he went off to the Market Place. He came back a few hours later and shook her awake. Under his arm he had a black and red cotton

dress trimmed with lace at the neck and hem, an embroidered shawl, and a jacket for himself. She didn't ask how he had acquired them, for he often brought things home that he couldn't have obtained honestly.

'This is what you must do,' he'd said. 'Get dressed now, no - not in these,' as she'd reached for the new finery, 'and find a customer. Charge as much as you think he can afford. Then,' he'd shaken a finger at her, 'in 'morning you must go to 'public baths. It'll cost a penny but you'll get a clean towel and soap in with 'price of hot water. Wash your hair - you used to have lovely hair, Ma,' and she nodded, for she did, thick and fair and curly. He winked. 'Then we're in business.'

'What you talking about, Jamie?' she'd asked. 'How can we be in business?'

'I'm going to choose your customers,' he grinned. 'I've been observing folks coming and going and I know 'best places to catch 'em, and it's not walking up and down outside inns and public houses like a common drab.'

She was unsure to begin with, but she'd trusted him and it had worked. He approached, not single men walking alone, but groups of men, coming out from their banks or places of business, and in a sly whisper told them that he knew of a very presentable lady who was most obliging. There was much guffawing and loud banter as they refused his offer and walked away, but there was always one, or sometimes two, who would turn their heads and catch his eye. He would nod and place his finger on his lips to denote secrecy, and then sit on the nearest steps or wall and await their hurried return to arrange an assignation.

He was often given a copper for his trouble and when the time and place were arranged, he would race off to the nearest clean and private establishment where they were discreet about such matters, and book a room for an hour.

As time went on, his mother's customers became regular, her income was steady and they eventually were

able to afford a ground-floor room of their own instead of having to share with others. Although Middle Court was hardly luxurious, the rent was cheap and the neighbours minded their own business.

Jamie had no other regular job, but he carried messages about the town and was known to be discreet. He delivered packages and parcels and even joints of meat for the butcher and boxes of groceries for the grocer, both of whom also happened to be his mother's customers. He was his own master, beholden to no-one, and always had money in his pocket. But he was adamant about one thing, and that was that his mother should never bring men home.

He sat now on the steps of the bank in the warm summer evening and watched as people hurried home from their places of work. Through shop windows he saw shop girls with weary faces, and drapers folding rolls of cloth and rearranging their displays. Factory workers trudged along the street towards homes where there would be little comfort, and he was glad of his good fortune that he and his mother could choose their working hours. They didn't have to be up before dawn broke through the skies, but were usually just tumbling into their beds.

He saw Ruby come out of the chemist's shop and hurry across the street to a man with a small boy. Curiously he observed her as she spoke to the man. 'Surely!' he muttered. 'Not Ruby?' but then he saw that the small boy was her brother. He watched as Ruby herself watched the man walk away and Freddie constantly turn around to wave, and his natural inquisitiveness made him want to know what was happening. He followed Ruby as she raced towards home and greeted her mother as she came out from the alley, saw money change hands and her mother scurry off towards the Tap and Barrel.

They've come into money, he mused. I wonder how? And it was then that a process of thought began and he saw Ruby in a different light.