RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

Golden Girls

Elvi Rhodes

About the Book

She was twenty-three when her husband died, leaving her with three small daughters and nothing else. The day came when she was so hungry, so tired and worried, that she was reduced to going to Akersfield market and asking Dick Fletcher for help – Dick who had loved her years ago, who was now running his own successful market garden – and who was engaged to someone else.

It was Dick who took her back home to her village in the dales, gave her a job, helped her to gain her self-respect again.

But the time came when she knew she must stand on her own – make a life for herself and her daughters without him, and use all her courage and determination to become successful.

It was to take many years, and all the tragedy of the 1914 war before Eleanor was able to repay Dick Fletcher for the great debt she owed him.

Contents

THE GOLDEN GIRLS

Elvi Rhodes

CORGI BOOKS

FOR ANTHONY, WITH MY LOVE

PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

THROWING POTATOES INTO the big scale, Dick Fletcher silently cursed the sharp March wind which whipped around the corner of his market stall. His pitch in the Akersfield market was not an ideal one. Apart from the fact that when the wind was in the east it tore at him all day long, the position was too far to the outside, away from the heart of things, so that sometimes he had to sell his produce a ha'penny a pound cheaper, thus cutting his profits. He had complained to the council and would do so again, claiming that when they dealt with the tenders it was his turn to have a spot in the centre. Apart from the better trade, he thought as a fresh gust of wind sneaked between his cap and his scarf, it would be a sight warmer, hemmed in by other stalls and with more shoppers around.

'There you are, missus,' he said, tipping the potatoes into the large straw bag which the woman held open for him. 'That'll be twopence. And you won't find better quality in the whole of the West Riding.'

He could say that with confidence. He was fussy about quality, using only the best seed in his market garden and, when he had to buy in, taking only the best from the wholesalers. Apart from his own pride, he hoped that if the quality was good his customers would return. If it were not, if the produce was bad in the middle, then they'd come back to throw it at him! Akersfield housewives were sharp, fussy. They wouldn't put up with being cheated.

'How about a few cut flowers?' he said persuasively. He picked up a small bunch of daffodil buds, posing them in his

outstretched hand for the best effect. ‘Brighten up the house for the weekend!’

‘I’ve no brass for flowers,’ the woman said. ‘Times is hard. A nice joint of beef would brighten *my* house best!’

‘I’m sorry, missus,’ Dick said. ‘Perhaps things will look up.’ But she had already moved on. He was truly sorry. He saw too many women with pinched, harassed faces. He’d have liked to have given them all a bunch of flowers apiece.

He might as well begin to pack up. It was nearing the end of the afternoon and there’d not be much more trade now. Not that he’d done all that badly. He could tell by the feel of his jacket pockets, weighted with coins. Coppers mostly, but amongst the pennies and ha’pennies, some sixpences and shillings, even a few half-crowns. People didn’t shop for vegetables with sovereigns. He usually did all right in the Akersfield market on a Friday. And what he didn’t sell there he’d get rid of in Skipton on the Saturday morning.

He sold in three markets most weeks; Akersfield, Otley and Skipton, travelling from his home in Felldale early in the morning. Three markets was as much as the horse could manage, for, though she was willing, she was getting old, and a bit slow. Besides, he had to have time to grow the stuff, didn’t he? Growing was what he liked best; planting the seeds in the dark earth, seeing the first, pale green shoots appear, nursing the plant right through to harvest. But if you wanted to get on you couldn’t just grow. You had to sell.

Bending down to the boxes at the back of the trestle tables he didn’t see the next customer approach. When he straightened up again she was there, at the far end of the stall, standing with her back to him as she sifted through the produce. He recognised her at once, though he had scarcely seen her since she left Felldale five years ago. Indeed on the few occasions when she came back there he had avoided her. He knew she lived in Akersfield now,

though she had never visited his stall. Once, when he was serving a customer, he had seen her hurrying past and, on an impulse, had called out to her. She didn't answer, and by the time he'd finished serving she was out of sight.

She was still easily recognisable, standing there, even though her face was hidden. For a start she was tall for a woman. Five feet seven or eight. And then, though she was dressed in black from head to foot – shabby black at that, he thought – she had style. She wore her fringed woollen shawl as if it were a sable cape. Oh, she had style all right!

You could tell that by the angle at which her wide-brimmed hat was perched on the top of her head. It was far too fashionable a hat for one of her station, though he guessed she had made it herself. And from beneath her hat, if further proof were needed, her hair – a rich dark gold – escaped in tendrils down the back of her neck and over the top of her shawl. No-one else had hair so vibrant, so singing with colour. A swift arrow of longing went through him like a sharp pain. He knew, as really he had known all along, that he should never have let her go.

Should he let her go again? Should he busy himself with the boxes, pretend not to see her, hope that she'd pass by? She wasn't for him. She was a married woman. But in the second that it took the thoughts to go through his head she turned and faced him.

'Why, it's Dick! Dick Fletcher!'

There was pleased amazement in her voice, but her face was more honest than her words and he knew at once that she had been certain she would see him there. Her eyes – those amazing green eyes, thickly fringed with lashes of a darker gold than her hair – told the truth. Her eyes spoke apprehension, unhappiness, fear; as if the brightness in them might be that of tears ready to fall.

'Eleanor! This *is* a surprise! What brings you here?' He was at a loss for the right thing to say.

‘Absolutely nothing!’ she said lightly. ‘Sheer coincidence! I was walking past the market when I remembered I needed vegetables. This was the first stall I came to.’

She was all innocence, but he didn’t believe her. He saw the chalky whiteness of her face, the fine lines of worry developing on her broad forehead. Her hands were clenched so tightly around the handle of the basket that the knuckles showed white. He knew trouble when he saw it. But he knew pride too; heard it in her chirpy voice, saw it in the smile which widened her mouth but did not reach her eyes. And, seen closer to, she was so painfully thin.

‘It’s nice to see you. It’s been a long time.’ It wasn’t what he wanted to say. He was shocked by her appearance. She was twenty-three and looked ten years older, though she was still as beautiful as ever. And would be if she lived to be a hundred, he thought. It was in her bones, those high, rounded cheekbones, the long, clean lines of her jaw, the delicately moulded chin. Now, though, what had been the slightest of hollows beneath her cheekbones were too deep and the skin was stretched too tight over her jaws. Gaunt was how he would describe her now. It was not the look she had had when she’d left Felldale at the age of eighteen.

‘Have you been keeping well, then?’ he asked.

‘Very well, thank you,’ Eleanor said brightly. ‘And you?’

‘The same.’

‘Good!’

They stood looking at each other, Eleanor with a fixed smile on her face, neither of them knowing what to say next.

‘Well now … Let me see. I don’t need much. Carrots, an onion; perhaps a small turnip.’

He weighed them out, dropped them in the empty basket she handed to him.

‘A nice stick of celery?’ he suggested. ‘Crisp. Picked with the frost on it.’

She hesitated. ‘I don’t think so, thank you. But … perhaps two apples … no, three. Small ones. Red ones.’

‘Jonathans,’ Dick said. ‘Can’t beat ’em. You choose.’

As she picked out three red apples Dick watched her tongue lick over her lips, saw the eager look on her face. She was hungry! He was looking at sheer, naked, deep-down hunger and the sight shocked and disturbed him. But it would never do for him to show his feelings.

‘Try one,’ he said. ‘Go on, try one. See if they’re to your taste.’

There was only the slightest pause before she bit into the apple. She took a large bite, chewed rapidly, swallowed, bit again. Her eyelids drooped as if she was in ecstasy. She ignored the tiny trickle of juice which ran from the corner of her mouth. She bit and chewed with amazing speed, until in no time at all the apple, core and all, was gone, swallowed. Then she licked her fingers, opened her eyes, looked Dick straight in the face.

‘Very good! Really very good. I can recommend them. Now how much is all that – including the apple I’ve eaten?’

‘No charge for tastings,’ Dick said. ‘That’ll be elevenpence altogether.’

She put her hand into her pocket and an expression of horror spread over the face.

‘My purse! I’ve lost my purse!’ She looked quickly around where she was standing, then felt again in her pocket. ‘It’s gone! Do you think it’s been stolen? There are pickpockets in the market. Everyone says so!’

She was so transparent, Dick thought. Of course there was no purse, and never had been. Watching her eat the apple he had guessed the truth. She was on her uppers.

‘Perhaps you left it at home,’ he said gently. ‘Perhaps you never brought it with you?’

She clutched eagerly at his explanation.

‘You’re right! I know now! I left it on the sideboard! Oh, what a silly fool I am!’

‘Easily done, easily remedied,’ Dick consoled her.

‘But I can’t pay you. I couldn’t get home and back before you left – and I really need the things!’

I’ll bet you do, Dick thought. He would willingly have given her the contents of his entire stall, but there was the matter of her pride.’

‘That’s all right,’ he said. ‘You can come back next Friday, pay me then. Any Friday. I’m always here.’

Eleanor gave a great sigh of relief. He believed her. For one moment she’d thought he’d seen through her – and small wonder after the way she’d gone at the apple. Oh, but it had been good. She hadn’t been able to resist it. And tonight, after the vegetable stew she’d make the minute she got home, they’d all feel better. And of course she would pay him back, though right now she didn’t know how. It was true that she had left her purse at home, but it was also true that it was empty.

‘As a matter of fact we might have missed each other,’ Dick said. ‘I was just packing up to go home. A cup of tea and a bite to eat in the cafe around the corner, and then I’ll be away.’

‘Lucky for me you hadn’t gone,’ Eleanor told him. ‘Who else would have trusted me?’ But there was no chance that he would have left. She’d been watching, waiting until the coast was clear. She knew he had his stall here. She’d been tempted more than once to stop, especially that time when he’d called after her and she’d pretended not to hear. But she’d had her pride, still had. She hadn’t wanted him to know everything, carry the news back to her family. Her mother was the only one who wouldn’t have said ‘I told you so,’ but her mother was under Clara’s thumb.

‘I’m sure anyone would have trusted you,’ Dick said. ‘You’d only have to …’ Open those big green eyes was what he nearly said.

‘… Yes?’

‘Explain. You’d only have to explain.’

‘Well I’m glad it was you, Dick.’

‘Perhaps you’ll come with me for a cup of tea and a bite to eat? It’ll not take me a minute to pack the boxes and I can leave them behind the stall. Nobody’ll touch ’em.’

Eleanor hesitated.

‘For old times’ sake,’ Dick said.

She smiled – her swift, bright smile, though this time open and honest.

‘Why not?’ she agreed. ‘Like you said, for old times’ sake.’ ‘Then if you’ll just wait on a minute or two,’ Dick said.

He busied himself packing the boxes, wondering how he could fill up her basket without offending her.

‘I’ll not get everything in,’ he lied. ‘I hate throwing stuff away unless there’s no help for it.’ It was a feeble excuse. Common sense would tell her that as he’d brought everything on the cart from Felldale, there was bags of room for the return journey. But if she wanted to accept a few things he’d made the opening for her.

‘Ma always told us it was wicked to waste food,’ Eleanor said seriously. ‘A sin against the Holy Ghost or some such. I wouldn’t like to think of you doing that.’

‘Well, if I could put a bit in your basket,’ Dick suggested. ‘Maybe I wouldn’t waste too much.’

She watched with eagerly parted lips while he filled her large basket. Carrots, onions, leeks, oranges, apples. It looked for all the world like a harvest thanksgiving. When it was full to the brim he said, ‘I’ll just lay this bunch of daffodil buds over the top. They’ll come out nicely in a vase of water.’

When the stall was emptied and packed, and he had called out to a neighbouring stallholder to keep an eye on his boxes, Dick picked up Eleanor’s basket and led the way out of the market. That was another thing about Dick Fletcher, Eleanor thought. Men in the West Riding never carried shopping baskets, that was women’s work, but Dick

didn’t seem to mind. With his long strides he forged ahead through the Friday shopping crowds, past the meat and fish stalls which always caused Eleanor to hold her breath. She realised they were heading for the covered market in Church Street. Though her own strides were long, she was tired and found it difficult to keep up with him. There was certainly no breath left for speaking and nothing was said between them until they had climbed the steps into the market – everything was hilly in Akersfield, even the market entrance – and made their way to the far aisle which was lined with small open-fronted cafés for almost its whole length. Delicious smells floated out from every café and there were tantalising glimpses of steaming steak-and-kidney pies, and legs of pork encased in golden crackling. It was almost unbearable. Eleanor’s stomach contracted and she could hardly stem the flow of digestive juices in her mouth.

‘Butterfields. That’s the one I always go to,’ Dick said. ‘They do the best hot pies in Akersfield, and that’s what I’m going to have after a day’s work. I hope you’ll keep me company, Eleanor.’

‘Well, a cup of tea would do me nicely,’ Eleanor said.

‘Oh no, we can’t have that! How am I going to sit here eating hot pie if you’re doing no more than sip at a cup of tea? I’d not be comfortable.’

And how could I possibly watch you doing it, Eleanor thought. ‘Very well then,’ she conceded. ‘If you’d rather I did.’

‘I couldn’t eat otherwise,’ Dick assured her. ‘So is it to be a hot meat pie?’

‘Yes please.’

‘Mushy peas and gravy?’

‘Oh yes please!’

She could no longer keep the enthusiasm out of her voice and when the food came – juicy pork encased in crisp brown pastry, flanked by green marrowfat peas, with a

generous amount of rich thick gravy poured over – she fell to without even waiting for Dick to start. Afterwards they had apple pudding with custard and a cup of strong, milky tea. No meal she had ever eaten in her life had tasted so good. King Edward in his palace could not have wished for more.

Almost nothing was said between the two of them while they ate. Without seeming to, Dick watched Eleanor, marvelling at her appetite, though he was concerned at the degree of hunger which caused her to fall on the food almost with the speed of an animal. What was her husband doing that she went so hungry? And what about the children?

'Another cup of tea?' he said presently.

Eleanor shook her head. 'I couldn't take another thing. It was … delicious! Thank you very much.' Her thanks were genuine. She had shed her pretence of not having been hungry.'

'You're welcome. And now how about catching up on each other. How's everything with you, Eleanor?'

The mask came over her face again, the withdrawn look into her eyes. But he had no intention of letting her get away with it.

'How's your husband?' he asked.

At Dick's question the colour which had come into her face as a result of the warmth of the little cafe, and the food she had eaten, drained away again. Her eyes swam with tears.

'Ben's dead!'

'Oh no! I'm sorry. I didn't know!' It was unbelievable, Dick thought. No-one in Felldale, where news spread like a forest fire, had said a word. It must have happened in the last few days. He had not been into the village since Monday. And yet, curiously, though Eleanor was clearly upset, she did not have the manner of someone very

recently bereaved – and so closely. She was distressed, but he doubted that she was suffering from shock.

‘When? How? Was it an accident?’ The tears were spilling down her face now. She looked in vain for a handkerchief, and he passed her his.

‘Thank you,’ Eleanor said. ‘No, it wasn’t an accident. He had a chest cold and it turned to pneumonia. He only lived ten days after. It was in January. He was buried the same day as Queen Victoria.’

But there, Eleanor thought, all similarity between the Queen and her subject had ended. The elaborate preparations for the Queen’s all-white funeral, with its pomp and circumstance – the bands, the muffled drums, the daily accounts in the newspapers, the crowned heads of Europe flocking to the scene – had culminated in the long procession through streets lined with sorrowing, weeping people. Ben had been buried with only Eleanor and two neighbours to follow him. But not in a pauper’s grave. They had paid their burial club dues every week, so there was enough. In Akersfield, and in the West Riding generally, the snow had been heavy in January, so that even if she had let her family know, she doubted if they’d have been able to get down from Felldale. She had never felt so alone in all her life as in the hours after the neighbours had gone home and she had put the children to bed.

‘But … I never heard anything. I haven’t seen your ma lately, but I’ve seen Albert. I’ve been in the shop. He never said a word.’

‘He doesn’t know. I never told them.’ she was calmer now. She handed Dick’s handkerchief back, determined she wasn’t going to cry again. Crying would get her nowhere. Her situation was too bad to be remedied by tears.

‘You never told them? Why ever not? I don’t understand.’

She looked across the table at Dick. He was so kind. Yet he was kind without being weak, which was why there was a note of censure in his voice. He believed in families

sticking together – well, it was what most Yorkshire people believed in. He didn't approve of what she'd done – or rather, what she'd failed to do. Not to let your family know of a birth or a death, even if you were estranged from them, as she was to a certain extent since she'd left Akersfield, was not right.

The waitress came to give Dick the bill.

'Bring us two more cups of tea, Polly,' he said.

'Right you are, Mr Fletcher.' He was one of her favourite customers; so handsome and well set-up; so polite. And not without a bob or two, she wouldn't wonder. It was the first time she'd seen him bring a lady in here, though she couldn't believe he didn't have one somewhere. And this lady was in trouble. One woman to another, she could tell that at a glance.

'I don't understand,' Dick said to Eleanor when the waitress had gone. 'They're your kith and kind. They'd have wanted to help you, stick by you.'

How could he understand, Eleanor thought. Sometimes she didn't understand herself, didn't know why for five years she'd let pride cut her off. And now here she was, sitting in this little café booth, just the two of them and his eyes, sympathetic and caring, inviting her to tell. But it was when his hand reached across the table and covered hers that she melted inside. Everything that she had endured welled up in her. She bowed her head, leaned her face against his hand, and, in spite of her resolve not to do so, wept. She was still weeping when the waitress brought the tea.

'Here, love,' Polly said. 'Drink it while it's hot. There's nowt like a cup of tea!' She was a pretty little thing, Polly thought; too much sorrow on her for her years.

When the waitress had left Eleanor raised her head. 'The truth is …' she began hesitantly.

'Have a drink of tea,' Dick said. 'Here, put plenty of sugar in it. Now come on, out with it, love. You'll feel better

after.’

‘The truth is,’ Eleanor said, ‘it never worked out with Ben. Well, I say never – I mean not after the first few months. The streets of Akersfield weren’t paved with gold, the sky wasn’t the limit. In fact, he couldn’t get a job. The most he had was part-time work with Mr Northrop, the undertaker. You’d never think you could come to being pleased if more people than usual died, would you? But I did, because it meant money in my purse, food on the table.’

‘And did you never say – when you wrote home, when you visited Felldale?’

‘No. We’d boasted so much when we’d left Felldale: what we were going to do, how much better off we were going to be. I couldn’t lower my pride. I pretended everything was fine. I gradually stopped writing, stopped visiting, made the excuse that it was difficult with the children. Then when things got much worse, when I wanted to ask for help, Ben forbade me.’

‘Forbade you?’

‘He said it had been my choice to cut myself off from my family and now I had to stick to it. He said they’d always been against him and my first loyalty was to him. I was to have no truck with them, he said.’

‘And you obeyed him?’ Dick asked. It was difficult to believe. All their lives he’d known her as a spirited person, someone with opinions of her own which she’d never failed to express. It had been one of her great attractions. And an hour ago, in the market there, the same spirit had shone out of her.

‘He was my husband,’ Eleanor said.

How could she explain that in the first year of their marriage she would have done anything for Ben? He was the sun, moon and stars for her. She would have swum an ocean for him. Still less could she say to anyone that in the marriage bed he had had her enthralled. She had entered a

new world. They could never have enough of each other. And that even when their love had died and most of her respect for him had gone, the sexual attraction was still there, as strong as ever.

'I feel the most guilt about my mother,' Eleanor said. 'Even when I stopped going to see her, she would have come to Akersfield to visit me. But I put her off. I always put her off. In the end she knew she wasn't wanted. And yet she was. I longed to see her, but I didn't want her to know how things were. It's too late now.'

'Too late?' Dick queried. 'But your mother's still in Felldale. And Albert and his wife. Of course it's not too late.'

Eleanor shook her head.

'When Ben died in January he left no money. But I was lucky. I got one or two jobs, cleaning, so we just managed. But I was pregnant, and just six weeks ago I had the baby. Our third daughter. After that I couldn't work. I sold Ben's tools – he had good tools and he looked after them – and one or two pieces of furniture he'd made. The money's all gone now and I owe two months' rent. It was true I left my purse at home today. I left it because it was empty. I don't have to tell you what will happen to us now.'

She didn't. He knew well enough. Except for the kindness of friends or family, or the occasional handout from a charity, there was no help for those who were destitute.

'It's the workhouse, that's all.' Her lips were stiff. She tried to keep all emotion out of her voice, not to show any. But the thought was too much for her. She cried out in agony. 'Oh, I could bear it for myself! They'd give me a roof over my head and let me work for my keep – but they'd separate me from the children! I'd never see my children. I'd die without my children!' She was wild, frenzied, and then as she saw the customers in the opposite booth raise their heads, she was quiet again.

'I'm sorry! I'm showing you up!'

Dick shook his head. ‘You don’t have to apologise to me.’

He wanted to put his arms around her, comfort her. He wanted to take her and her children home with him, care for them, give her a new life. And it was totally impossible. There was Jane Lawrence. He and Jane had a firm understanding. Under no circumstances could he, or would he, ever let her down. He was fond of Jane and he had looked forward to their marriage as much as he knew she did.

‘There’s only one thing for it,’ he said. ‘Eleanor you’ve got to go back to Felldale!’

‘Do you think I haven’t thought about it?’ Eleanor replied ‘Of course I have. But how could they keep us? How could Albert keep me and mine?’

‘But he’s your brother,’ Dick said. ‘He wouldn’t see you want.’

‘He’s got a wife, and children of his own. And my mother living with him. How could he do it? The shop doesn’t make much – a village store, that’s all.’

‘Nevertheless, you should give him the chance,’ Dick persisted. ‘How would he feel if he learned that his sister had been taken into the workhouse?’

‘He wouldn’t hear it from me,’ Eleanor said. ‘I’d never tell. Oh, if it weren’t for the children … !’

Dick took her hand. ‘Listen, Eleanor. For the sake of the children you *must* go to Felldale. There’s no other way.’

She fell silent, the thoughts whirling in her head until she felt she must burst.

‘Very well,’ she said sharply. ‘I’ll do it. But how? Do I just turn up on the doorstep? Is that what you suggest?’

‘Well, if you did, they could hardly turn you away. But no, that’s not what I suggest. I reckon that I should go around and see Albert and Clara, and your mother. Tell them the circumstances. Then when they agree to have you …’

‘You mean *if*.’

‘I do not. It strikes me I know your family better than you do, Eleanor. When they agree, I’ll make arrangements to take you and the children up there. It will have to be next Friday because that’s the only day I can come to Akersfield. And we’ll have to travel on the cart, children and all. And whatever bits and pieces you want to bring with you, although I shouldn’t make it too many if I were you. Can you manage that?’

She leaned back, closed her eyes, drew a long breath. For the first time in many months she was no longer terrified of the future. She knew that in the next week, while she waited to hear from Dick, the fear would return, but for now, for this moment, it had left her. Someone else had taken a decision. All she need do was follow.

‘Oh yes,’ she said. ‘I can manage. I don’t have much to take, anyway. But will you put me a line in the penny post, tell me what happens? I’ll be anxious.’

‘Of course I will,’ Dick smiled. ‘Did you think I’d keep you in suspense?’ He felt in his pocket, brought out some money. ‘Here’s thirty shillings. Buy some food, and whatever else you need for the children until next Friday. Where are the children, by the way?’

‘With a neighbour,’ Eleanor said. ‘And I must go now and fetch them. Dick, I don’t know how to thank you. What would I have done if I hadn’t seen you today?’ But she knew that in her desperation she had planned to see him, and one day when she had the courage, perhaps next Friday, she would tell him the truth about that.

Dick fished in his pocket again. ‘Here, he said, ‘you’ll need a penny for your tramfare!’

CHAPTER TWO

IT WAS ALREADY dusk by the time Eleanor reached home. She had stopped at Hardy's, the butchers at the corner of Albert Street, for six pennyworth of scrag end of mutton, and Bert Hardy's eyes had nearly dropped out when she offered him a half-sovereign in payment. He knew her circumstances and would often let her have pie bits for fourpence if she went late enough on a Saturday night.

'Been backing the horses have we, Mrs Heaton?' he joked.

She smiled, and said nothing. He'd be even more surprised when she came back tomorrow. She might well buy a couple of nice chump chops, or some sausages, instead of the 'penny ducks' they usually had on a Saturday. Penny ducks were a sort of mish-mash of odds and ends of meat all minced up together and highly seasoned. Goodness knew what went into them – you could never tell what you were eating. Still, they were tasty, and many a time two of them had made a meal for herself and the two girls. But chops tomorrow, as a special treat, and after that she'd have to go easy on the money Dick had lent her, make it last.

Home was number fifty-two, Elliot Street, one of a long row of stone, smoke-blackened terrace houses a mile from the centre of Akersfield. It was an uphill mile, which would have seemed twice as long with the weight of her basket had not her new lightness of spirit given wings to her heels. Nothing was solved, she told herself firmly. There was

trouble ahead of one sort or another, that was for sure; but for the first time in weeks she had hope in her heart.

She turned the key in the lock and entered, lighting the gas at once, so that the small square room, once the mantle was hissing and glowing, was bathed in a soft, pale light. It was icy cold though, and since the evening was by way of a special one she would borrow a bucket of coal from Mrs Baxter and they would have a fire. A good mutton stew inside them, a fire in the grate and the blind drawn against the March chill, and they'd be as snug as bugs in a rug. Just for this evening she'd let the future take care of itself. She'd done all she could.

First off she must fetch the children. It was way past the baby's feed time, and if the alarm clock on the shelf hadn't said so she'd have known anyway by the fullness of her breasts. Right now she needed the baby as much as it needed her.

Mrs Baxter lived three doors down the street. She was a kind friend as well as a neighbour, always ready to do Eleanor a good turn as long as it didn't cost money. With a houseful of children and a husband on short time at the mill, she had none of that to spare.

'Of course you can borrow a bucket of coal,' she said to Eleanor. 'And welcome!'

'He comes in the morning. I'll get a bag and pay you back.'

'Why don't you leave the children here until you've got the roomed warmed?' Mrs Baxter suggested.

Eleanor hesitated. 'Well, it would be nice if Becky and Selina could stay a bit longer, though I'll have to take Jenny. She needs feeding. I can wrap her up warm in her shawl.'

The baby was already whimpering. It was a mewing, hungry sort of cry. When Eleanor picked her out of the cradle she nuzzled into her mother's breast, seeking the source of the food she so urgently desired.

‘I’ll not be long,’ Eleanor promised. ‘I’ll feed Jenny and get the fire going and then I’ll be back.’ She turned to her two older daughters who were playing on the floor with some of the Baxter children. ‘Be good until I get back,’ she cautioned them.

She always enjoyed feeding the baby, trying, even when she was not alone as now, to create a little oasis of peace around the two of them as she did so. Jenny was a swift and hungry feeder. Sometimes Eleanor worried that because she herself went so short of food, her milk might dry up. But there was no sign of that yet. She hoped she’d be able to go on feeding her for months to come. And then, with the thought, came the awful dread which she had managed to put away for the last hour. It rushed back to fill her mind. Supposing the children were taken from her! Supposing Albert and Clara wouldn’t have her after all! Would the authorities take away a child at the breast? Would they be so inhuman? But even if they didn’t, they’d take Becky and Selina, put them in an orphanage. That was for sure.

The baby, sensing Eleanor’s distress, feeling the stiffening of her body, arched her back and drew away with a cry. Eleanor looked down at her.

‘I’m sorry,’ she said out loud. ‘No more thoughts like that this evening – especially when I’m feeding you. It’s going to be a good evening – and be damned to tomorrow!’

When the fire was burning and the pan of stew on the single gas ring was filling the room with delicious smells, and Jenny was sleeping the sleep of the deeply satisfied, Eleanor fetched the girls.

‘I’m going to get you washed, and into your nightshifts,’ she said. ‘And by the time you’re ready there’ll be a lovely supper ready. So come on, jump to it!’

She half filled the enamel bowl at the tap in the cellarhead, then set it on the table and warmed it up from the kettle, already singing over the fire.

‘Now who’s first?’

‘Becky first,’ Selina said. Selina didn’t like water, made a fuss every time her face was washed. Becky, on the other hand, loved it. She would have liked the big zinc bath out on the hearthrug every night of the week instead of only on Saturdays.

Her children were unlike each other, Eleanor thought, except that they were all fair-haired. Even then it was with different degrees of fairness. Becky’s hair was a gold which leaned towards copper; Selina’s was a much paler shade, like the outer petals of a daffodil. Jenny’s hair, what she had of it, was so fair as to be almost white. Ben, in one of his good moods, looking at Eleanor with Becky and Selina, had said, ‘You’re my golden girls. That’s what you are. My golden girls!’

‘How long will the supper be?’ Becky asked. ‘I’m hungry!’

‘I know you are, love,’ Eleanor said. ‘But it’ll be a while yet. It’s meat – and you can’t cook scrag end quickly, else you wouldn’t be able to chew it. I’ll tell you what – we’ll sing!’

It was a while since they’d had a sing-song. She’d been too down-hearted even for that, though it was one of the things she liked doing best of all and she knew that when she did make the effort it never failed to lift her spirits. It took her away from her troubles and into a sunnier world. It didn’t matter whether the songs were happy or sad, comic or tragic, it was the act of singing which made her feel better. It was simply making the effort to begin the first song which was difficult, but tonight she was stronger.

She sang ‘Daisy Bell’ and ‘Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay’, which the girls liked because it made them laugh and they could both – even Selina at only two and a half – join in the ‘boom’ with a great shout. She sang ‘Dolly Gray’ which the soldiers were singing in the Boer War, still being fought. Halfway through ‘Dolly Gray’ her voice wavered and she had to stop for a minute, remembering her brother David,

who had been killed crossing the Tugela river on the way to relieve Ladysmith less than eighteen months ago.

Becky tugged at her skirt.

‘Keep singing!’ she ordered.

‘What a bossy child you are!’ Eleanor said. But Becky was right. To keep singing was a good idea. How else would you get through life?

They sang ‘Jesus bids us shine’, which Becky knew from Sunday school, and then Eleanor struck up with her own favourite – ‘My love is like a red, red rose’.

Her voice rang out, clear, rich, powerful. ‘And I will love thee still, my love, though all the seas gang dry!’ She sang the words as though she meant them, yet there was no-one she loved like that. Once they could have been for Ben, but that was a long time ago. Even if he had lived, she could not truly have sung those words for him now. ‘And I will love thee still, my dear, while the sands o’ life shall run.’ She wished there was someone, some man who meant the whole world to her, and she to him. She brought the song to an end and said, ‘That’s all for tonight. Supper’s ready.’

It was Tuesday when the letter came. She had hoped it might be from Albert, welcoming her. It was short and to the point.

‘I will fetch you and the children Thursday, not Friday, so that we can travel in daylight. Will arrive about noon. Hope this suits.

Your mother is looking forward to seeing you.’

She read it twice through, looking for a sign that everything was all right, that they were going to be welcome. ‘You’re mother is looking forward to seeing you.’ Well, she was glad about that – but what about Albert, what about Clara? Her sister-in-law wasn’t the easiest person in the world. If only Dick had been more explicit! But it was no use trying to read things into the letter that weren’t

there. What really mattered was that they were leaving in two days, lock, stock and barrel.

The first thing was to get Mr Earnshaw, from the second-hand furniture shop, to come and put a price on her bits and pieces. There was no hope of taking furniture with her. Albert's house had been crowded with things even before their mother had moved in. Now she doubted there was room for one extra eggcup. All that was left, all her material possessions of five years' marriage would have to go, and she'd get very little for it. But as long as she could pay the back rent and have a little, just a little, in hand to pay Clara for a week or two's keep.

'Right, Becky, Selina, finish your breakfasts. We have to go out.'

'To the park?' Becky asked.

'Not today. We shan't have time.' Austen Park was fifteen minutes walk away and it wasn't much of a park at that. Still, it was the only green oasis in this part of Akersfield, even if the green was dark laurels and rhododendrons and a few areas of grass on which one was not allowed to set foot. Eleanor was country born and bred. When she had first come to Akersfield she had desperately missed the fields and trees of Felldale, the wide skyscapes and empty spaces. But she had grown used to it. You could get used to anything in time. And the people of Akersfield were warm and friendly. They'd never treated her as a stranger, even at the beginning.

She finished changing Jenny and put her back in the baby carriage which stood at one end of the living-room, taking up a lot of space, and was the baby's daytime bed.

'Selina, you'd better go in the pram this morning as we're in a hurry,' Eleanor said.

'*I* want to go in the pram!' Becky demanded.

'You're going to walk, like me,' Eleanor said. 'You can help me push.' Her eldest daughter was in an awkward

mood, which wasn't unusual if she couldn't have her own way.

'Why can't Selina walk?'

'Because she's too little. Besides, even if she did, you're too big for a baby carriage. There'd be no room for Jenny.'

She was lucky to have the carriage, Eleanor thought. Not every mother in these parts had one. Ben had made it for her when Becky was born, so that she could wheel the baby in the park. At that time he had sometimes even accompanied them – but never after Selina was born. He had fashioned the carriage from wood, and had made it well, as was his way. He had a talent for working in wood and dreamt always of making beautiful things: chairs, delicate tables, carved screens, intricate boxes. His dreams never materialised. It seemed the only way he could earn enough money was by making work benches, putting up kitchen shelves, helping the undertaker when the sharp northern winter took the frail and elderly and Mr Northrop was rushed off his feet. Perhaps, Eleanor thought, that was why Ben had turned so bitter, so morose. He was a man thwarted.

They set off; the two youngest in the carriage, Becky walking, tugging all the while at her mother's skirts because she was fed up. When they reached the second-hand shop Mr Earnshaw emerged from behind cupboards, chests, chairs with the stuffing bursting out of them. He gave the impression that he didn't actually want to sell anything, and when Eleanor told him the purpose of her visit he sounded equally reluctant to buy.

'I'll come and have a look' he said gloomily. 'Don't build up yer hopes, missus. There's not much call for owt second-hand.'

'You'll come today? It's urgent.' And that, Eleanor thought, would knock the price down still further – but there was no help for it.

'Aye. This afternoon. But don't expect much.'

Back home, she viewed the contents of the living-room. An armchair covered in horsehair, which had been Ben's. In the centre of the room a deal table, covered with a dark red plush tablecloth; three chairs around it, plus the high chair, first made for Becky. There were pots and pans, the copper kettle over the fire, the tabbed rug in front of the hearth. Standing in the window, in pride of place, was her beautiful plant stand. It was in polished mahogany, with turned legs. A crocheted mat protected the top, on which stood a flourishing aspidistra, fed with the occasional cup of tea, its leaves polished regularly with a drop of milk. Well, Mrs Baxter would give the aspidistra a good home. She had often cast envious eyes over it. But how can I part with the plant stand, Eleanor asked herself? Nevertheless she'd have to. It was probably worth more than all the rest put together, including the two beds upstairs, and she needed the money.

Mr Earnshaw looked in the bedroom first. It took him ten seconds flat before he clattered downstairs again. He took a gloomy look around the living-room. Eleanor felt everything in it diminished by his gaze.

'I'll give you eight pounds for the lot!' he said.

'Eight pounds!' She couldn't believe her ears. 'But the plant stand alone is worth five pounds! You mean not including the plant stand.'

'I mean including the plant stand,' he said dourly.

'But it's mahogany! It was one of my husband's best pieces …'

'It's nicely made, and well kept,' he said. 'I'll grant you that. But there's not much call for them. I'd get next to nothing for it. So eight pounds, missus, take it or leave it.'

But she had seen his beady eye light on the stand when he'd first looked around and she knew he was cheating her.

'Then I'll leave it,' she said firmly. 'I'll go elsewhere. Thank you for calling and I'm sorry we can't do business.' She moved towards the door and held it open.