

One

1863

‘Mammy!’

Lottie woke suddenly, panic flooding through her whole body. She sat up in bed and stared across the large dormitory filled with beds and sleeping children. The child in the bed only 12 inches from hers began to cry, and a couple more followed suit.

‘Quiet!’ shouted a stout woman standing in the doorway holding a lantern. ‘Any more noise and I’ll bray the lot of you.’ The room quietened at once until only an odd muffled sob could be heard.

Lottie sank down in the bed, feeling the lumps in the hard mattress against her backbone and skinny shoulders. The bed was wet, she realized with a shiver of foreboding. She would be smacked, or brayed as Matron called it, anyway. Well, she thought, she was used to that. Ever since her mammy had gone to heaven she had been smacked most days.

Matron closed the dormitory door and the room was dark again but for the moonlight filtering in through the high windows. Lottie stared at the bits of sky she could see through the panes. There were stars shining between small clouds. Her mammy was there, she told herself, and she was happy and watching over her little girl.

Lottie couldn't remember very much about her mammy. But she comforted herself with holding on to the small scraps she could remember and added to them in her imagination. She hugged her pillow as her heart slowed back to normal after her nightmare. She couldn't remember what the dream had been about even, only that she needed her mammy. Mammy would look after her; she would make the unnamed thing go away. Even if Lottie couldn't see her, she knew Mammy was there in the sky just like one of those stars.

Suddenly aware that the tiny girl in the next bed was sobbing and the noise was getting louder, Lottie sat up and leaned over towards her.

'Ssh,' she said softly. 'Whisht now, whisht, don't cry, pet. If Matron hears you she'll come back and we'll both get wrong, we'll be smacked.'

'Lottie? Can I come into your bed? Please can I?'

'Howay then, come on,' Lottie replied and a small body climbed in and snuggled under the blanket, not minding the dampness of the sheet. She put her arms around Lottie's neck and Lottie cuddled her skinny

little frame to her. Betty had only come into the workhouse a day or two ago and she was only two years old or maybe three. Even the matron couldn't say for sure how old she was, because she had been a foundling. One of the Guardians, Mr Robson, who had a greengrocer's shop, had caught her biting into a plum she had taken from the stall at the front of the shop and had chased her into Newgate Street before catching her.

'You little imp!' he had shouted and she had dropped the plum and begun to tremble and wail in fright.

'Shame on you!' a woman shouted at him. 'What do you want frightening a little bairn like that for?'

A few late shoppers, for it was eight o'clock on a Saturday evening, stopped and stared at the woman, the child and Mr Robson.

Mr Robson's face was as red as a beetroot with the injustice of it, for the remarks they made about him were uncomplimentary, to say the least.

'She was stealing my fruit!' he said and then wished he hadn't, for he certainly didn't want to bandy words with people like that. After all, late shoppers were usually folk in from the mining villages and just looking for bargains as the shops closed for the weekend. After something for nothing, they were.

'The lass must be hungry,' another woman observed. 'What's a mouldy old plum to you?'

'Nevertheless . . .' Mr Robson began, then stopped. 'As

a matter of fact, I was looking for her mother,' he said stiffly. 'But as there is no sign of her, I'll take her up to the workhouse for the night. Not that I have to explain to any of you. I am a Poor Law Guardian and it is my duty.'

'Oh aye,' said the woman, favouring him with a scornful glance. 'Of course it is.'

He turned away, remembering he wasn't going to talk to these people. Instead, still hanging on to the little girl, he called to his assistant to close the shop while he went up to the workhouse, with its adjacent orphanage.

'It's an infernal nuisance, that's what it is,' he grumbled to Matron when he brought the child in. 'I have better things to do on a Saturday night. But what else was I to do? There was no sign of her mother, or father either. If she has one, that is.'

He handed the child over to Matron, holding her away from him with some distaste, for there was a nasty, dirty smell about her.

Lottie happened to be walking along the corridor at the time, trying not to be noticed, but the woman had a sharp eye. She too held Betty away from her clean apron as she called to Lottie.

'You there! Lottie Lonsdale! Take her and see she is washed and gets a uniform. And mind, I'm putting you in charge of her. Oversee her properly or you'll feel the edge of my belt.'

'Yes, Matron.'

Matron and Mr Robson watched as Lottie took the child and went on down the corridor. 'I'll enter her into the record, Mr Robson,' Matron said. 'There's no need for you to bother. You get off home to your wife and family, they'll be wondering why you're out so late.'

'I will, thank you, Matron,' Mr Robson replied. 'But it was my Christian duty to fetch the lass. Duty comes first, Matron.'

'Indeed, Mr Robson.' She smiled archly at him and the bow beneath her chin wobbled. She shouldn't have mentioned his wife and children, she thought as he turned away. He may have joined her in a cup of tea in her cosy sitting room. Sometimes she could do with a little company in the evenings.

Meanwhile, Lottie had taken the new little girl to the kitchens, where Susan Dunn was washing up the supper bowls at the enormous stone sink. Though Susan was twelve years old, old enough to have recently joined the inmates on the women's ward, she had to stand on a stool to reach the tap. It was just a cold water tap, but there was a large copper boiler to the side of the range and hot water had to be ladled from there.

'Who's this then?' she asked Lottie, as she eyed the little girl. 'I'm not seeing to her mind, I'm done for the day. Just as soon as I finish off these pots.'

'Matron said I had to see to her,' said Lottie. 'Is there any panacklty left? I reckon she's hungry.'

‘A bit. You’re lucky, I haven’t washed the pan out yet. I was just going to put the panacklty in a bowl and put it in the pantry. The night porter likes a snack when he comes on.’

Lottie looked at the child. She was gazing at the bowl with undisguised hunger. She would have to be fed before she was bathed.

‘I think the bairn’s need is more important than the night porter’s,’ Lottie opined and Susan nodded agreement as she put the bowl of potatoes, onions and a few scraps of fat bacon on the table and Lottie sat the girl in front of it.

‘What’s your name, any road?’ she asked.

‘Betty,’ the girl said, through a mouthful of the food she was stuffing into her mouth with her hands rather than the spoon Susan had given her. Lottie brought in the tin bath and ladled hot water into it from the copper boiler and added cold from the tap.

‘Well, hurry up and eat your supper. Then you can have a bath and I’ll fetch you a uniform from the linen cupboard.’

It was the policy of the Guardians for the inmates of the workhouse to do all the cooking and cleaning for themselves and that included looking after the little ones. In addition, the children had to be taught how to take over all the tasks as soon as they were old enough. After all, they were there at the expense of

the ratepayers, and should show their gratitude for their board and lodging by paying some of it back.

And they got a free education too, didn't they? It was not so long ago that poor children got no education at all, and even now most scholars at the National Schools had to take their threepence every Monday morning to be taught their letters and figuring.

Lottie knew all about this, because the children were reminded of it every single day.

Lying in bed a short time after being assigned to Betty, her arms around Betty as the little girl's breathing slowed into a sleeping rhythm interrupted only by the occasional snuffle, Lottie was having difficulty in getting back to sleep herself. Her thoughts were going over her nightmare and the unnamed dread that was always in the back of her mind.

It was still dark when she heard the shuffling and occasional cough as the male inmates walked along by the end of the corridor on their way to the stone yard. That meant it must be half past five in the morning already and they were starting their working day. They broke stone with picks and shovelled it into huge barrows, ready to be taken away to be used to mend the roads across the county and even up to Weardale, where roads were being built which stretched right across the dale as far as Tynedale in places where there had been no roads before, just cart tracks or donkey trails.

Betty had settled down at last and was fast asleep, her thumb stuck firmly in her mouth. Poor little soul, thought Lottie, did she remember her mother at all? Did she miss her, as she herself had missed her mother when she came into the workhouse? The tears were dried on to the tiny girl's cheeks and her lashes sparkled in the dawning light. Soon she would have to wake the child up and return her to her own bed or there would be another reason they would both be smacked. Still, it was very quiet at this hour and if she sneaked to the linen cupboard she could get dry and clean bedclothes and change the bed. If she hid the wet sheets in the dirty laundry basket, then neither of them would be smacked.

Carefully, Lottie drew herself out of the bed and ran off down the ward to the linen cupboard at the bottom. As she had thought, the woman responsible for it the night before had left the key hanging in a concealed niche near the door.

Betty reminded her so much of herself when she had been left on the step of the workhouse, not because her mother had deserted her as Betty's had done, but because she had been taken away to the women's ward and Lottie had never seen her again. That terrible night was the earliest memory Lottie had. The figure of her mother had become shadowy after the six or seven intervening years, but the feelings were as sharp as ever.

Two

‘You’ll be all right if you are a good girl, Lottie,’ her mother had said when she brought her to the Big House. That’s what Mammy had called it, the Big House, and Lottie, who was only three, had looked up at the forbidding stone frontage of the place. It was a dark night and she and her mammy had been walking all day and Mammy was breathing with a funny rasp, which frightened Lottie more than the fear of the house. By the time a man came to open the door and let them in, her mammy was slumped against the stone at the side of the door and when she tried to walk over the step she slid gently down in a heap.

Lottie was crying by then and the man caught her roughly by the arm and dragged her into the entrance.

‘Shut your noise and sit down there,’ he said sharply. And she did, for he was a big man and she was fright-

ened of him. She watched with large, frightened eyes as a woman came and was seeing to her mammy and taking her away, and Lottie never saw her again except in her dreams.

‘Your mother has gone to heaven,’ Matron said on the day Minnie Lonsdale was laid to rest in a pauper’s grave beside all the other paupers. Lottie was taken to the committal and she saw the box in which her mother was, but she comprehended very little of it. But when she went to church in the crocodile of girls dressed in checked dresses and black stockings and boots, the big girl who held her hand and walked alongside her whispered that her mother had not been in the box really, she had gone to heaven. The big girl’s name was Edna and it was her job to look after Lottie and take her to the earth closet and stop her messing herself. Mostly she was kind but sometimes she lost her temper and smacked Lottie. ‘You do what I tell you or I’ll smack you in the gob,’ she would say and Lottie would shrink back, for everything in the Big House was bewildering and frightened her, but mostly she didn’t like being smacked.

Lottie talked to her mammy at night, whispering of what had happened to her during the day, and she gleaned some comfort from that. After a while, the picture of her mother she carried around in her head began to fade until it had gone altogether and there was

nothing left but the memory of her presence and the feelings it aroused in her.

By the time Lottie was ten, she was working in the linen room of the workhouse at Crossgate. She could sew a neat seam and patch and mend the clothes of the inmates of the workhouse. She also still had the job of looking after the waif who went by the name of Betty Bates, just as she herself had been allotted to the girl called Edna when she first entered the place. Not that Betty's name was really Bates, but she had come to the workhouse as a foundling and the matron, who had the naming of little girl paupers, chose it. The one before that had been called Allen.

'Betty, you'll get into trouble if Matron finds you here. You're not supposed to be in the corridors,' said Lottie as she came out of the sewing room one day and found the tiny girl standing by the door, thumb in mouth. The one o'clock bell had rung for dinner and everyone was looking forward to it, because today it was to be a special dinner, provided by the ladies of the town.

'Don't tell,' said Betty, looking fearfully over her shoulder.

'I won't tell,' Lottie reassured her. She took Betty's hand in hers and fell into her correct place in the hierarchy of the sewing room, behind the grown-up women and in front of the younger ones. 'There will be brawn,

maybe, and even cake,' she whispered to the little girl and Betty's eyes brightened. She could say very little as yet, being only three and a bit slow, but she could say Lottie's name and small phrases like 'don't tell', a phrase she used a lot as she wet her bloomers so often still, even through the day.

The orderly lines of children in their blue-checked dresses and black stockings and older women in rough grey serge and their hair knotted back and covered with large caps that came over their foreheads almost to the eyes, were swelled by others from the laundry and scrubbing maids with swollen red hands. The women were to eat in the same room as the men today because it was a special day. Women looked forward to seeing their men and children for the first time in weeks. Of course, the men would be at tables on one side of the refectory and the women at the other with the children in between, but messages could and would be passed along the lines of narrow tables.

It was one of the days that stood out in Lottie's memories of the workhouse at the junction of Allergate and Crossgate when later, as she turned thirteen, she was sent to Sherburn Hill to Place. All the children thought of Place with a capital 'P', for it meant they would be free of the workhouse and even be earning money for themselves. Place meant a job and lodging outside, where

they did not have to answer to Matron or Master or even to the Poor Law Guardians, those men and sometimes women who were the absolute monarchs of the paupers.

‘I don’t want you to go,’ sobbed Betty on the day Lottie carried her bundle out to the door where Mr Green was waiting to take her to his house in Sherburn Hill. It was the longest sentence Lottie had ever heard the girl, who was now five years old, say.

‘Betty Bates, you come in now and go to your class,’ Matron’s voice came from inside. She opened a window to the side of the front door and leaned out to speak to Lottie. ‘Be a good girl now, Lottie Lonsdale, don’t you be giving our lasses a bad name,’ she said and Lottie nodded silently. She might have spoken, but if she did she might have been rude to Matron and she wasn’t sure if the woman could bar her going, even now.

‘You be good now and learn your lessons, Betty. I will try to see you when I can,’ she said instead, her own eyes filling with tears. ‘I will, I promise. I’ll have a half-day off every month and I’ll come to see you if I can.’

She had exchanged one master for another, Lottie thought as she came down the stairs in the house on the end of a row in Sherburn Hill. It was half past five one morning a few weeks later. Mr Green was gruff and barely looked at her when he was barking his orders at her. He watched how much she ate as though she

were stealing it from the mouths of his children.

This morning as usual, she went into the kitchen at the back of the house and riddled the ashes in the grate and relaid the fire. Before she put a lucifer to it, she looked over her shoulder in case Mr Green should see her do it.

‘I’m not made of money, you know,’ he had said last time he saw her use a lucifer. ‘You should bank it on a night and then there’ll be a few embers to start the fire away.’ Lucifers were to buy from the grocer’s cart that came along twice a week, but as an overman at the pit Mr Green got a supply of coal every few weeks. It was tipped in the alley behind the house close to the coalhouse hatch and was to shovel in. The Green boys were too young to do the job: Noah, the eldest, was not yet ten and small for his age. There were always lads who would come and offer to ‘put in the coals’ for a penny but Mr Green would have none of it.

‘I’m not keeping a great lass like you and paying a lad to put in the coals,’ he said when she suggested it. So Lottie had to do it, getting the coal in before Mr Green came home from the pit, no matter what else she had to do that day.

Lottie put the kettle on to boil and cut bread and butter for Mrs Green’s breakfast. While she waited, she sat down for a few minutes in the rocking chair by the hearth, the one that had been Mrs Green’s before she became bed-bound. This was her favourite time of the day, when

she had a few precious moments before she had to make Mrs Green comfortable against her pillows and then prepare a meal for Mr Green coming in from fore shift or going out on back shift. Then the lads were to get up and feed with great bowls of porridge sweetened with sugar and with fresh milk poured over it.

She was just lifting the heavy iron kettle from the fire when there was a cry from the front room that had been turned into a sick room for Mrs Green. Placing the kettle on the hearth, she ran through to see Mrs Green half out of bed, hanging precariously, with only her legs anchored beneath the bedclothes. She seemed quite incapable of righting herself and was moaning pitifully.

‘Mrs Green, what are you doing?’ asked Lottie in alarm. She hurried around the bed and for all her small stature managed to lift the woman back to the safety of her pillows, where she flopped with her mouth open, her breathing fast and shallow. Lottie grabbed the extra pillow from the chair by the bedside and propped her up a little better so she could catch her breath. Oh, she looked badly, Lottie thought. Mrs Green’s skin was blue around the mouth but her cheeks were flushed and her skin was hot to the touch. She brought the woman a drink of water from the pail in the pantry and held it while she took some. Only a few sips, for even that seemed to exhaust her.

Then she wiped her face and arms with a cold flannel.

‘You’re a good lass,’ said Mrs Green.

‘Where’s my breakfast?’ asked Mr Green from the doorway. ‘Lottie? I don’t pay you to sit about on the wife’s bed.’

Lottie jumped up quickly, dropping the flannel and having to bend down to retrieve it. ‘I’m sorry,’ she said. ‘I’ll do it now. Only Mrs Green needed me.’

‘Aye, well, be quick about it,’ said he. ‘A man shouldn’t be coming in after ten hours in the pit to an empty table.’

‘Alfred, the lass is doing her best.’ The voice from the bed was weak and fluttering.

Mr Green regarded his wife, frowning. ‘Mind, you keep out of it, Laura,’ he said, but not roughly or unkindly. If he had a soft spot for anyone, it was his wife.

‘I’ll stay here, Lottie,’ he said, ‘while you get it ready. I picked some mushrooms on the way home; do them with a bit of bacon. Give us a shout when they’re ready.’

Lottie fled to the kitchen and did as she was bid. By the time she was calling the boys down to eat with their father before they went out to the National School, the house was filled with delicious smells. They came down the stairs in a rush: Noah, the eldest, who was nine; Freddie, who was eight; and Mattie, six. Mattie was grizzling again, she saw, his shirt hanging out where his braces met his trousers, his feet still bare.

‘Freddie hit me,’ he said pathetically to his father. ‘I want my mam.’

‘Leave your mam alone,’ Mr Green ordered. ‘Sit down and eat your porridge.’ For the boys and Lottie had porridge for breakfast rather than bacon and mushrooms. But it was good porridge, made with real, fresh milk. The two older boys set to with a will and the only sounds were the occasional slurp and that of Mr Green’s knife against the plate.

When he finished, he sat back in his chair and looked at Lottie. ‘I want you to go and get the doctor when you’ve got the lads away to school,’ he said. ‘Tell him the wife’s badly.’

Lottie looked back at him in some alarm. He must think Mrs Green was very bad if he wanted the doctor to come back. He had only been to see her a few days before and Mr Green grumbled at the expense every time the doctor came.

‘Don’t look so gormless, lass,’ he said. ‘Hurry yourself and get on with it.’

‘Is Mam badly?’ asked Noah. ‘Can I go in to see her?’

‘Leave her alone, lad, she wants some peace. If I hear you bothering her I’ll take the belt to you. Now, away to school with the lot of you.’

Lottie ate the last spoonful of porridge made with the skimmed milk left after taking off the cream for Mrs Green, for the boys had used up all the fresh milk. ‘I’ll go straight away,’ she replied. Grabbing her shawl from the back of the kitchen door, she ran off down the

yard, thankful for the chance to get out into the fresh air before starting the clearing and cleaning in the house.

‘I think you should ask the Nightingale nurse to call and see your wife,’ said Dr Gray to Alf Green when he had returned with Lottie and had examined Mrs Green. ‘Sister Mitchell-Howe, her name is. Here, I’ll write it down for you.’

‘How much will that cost?’ Alfred Green asked. ‘I don’t begrudge it mind, but I’ve a lot of expense already what with having to have a lass to keep an eye on the lads as well as the wife. Will she not do? She’s good with Laura, I’ll say that for her.’

Dr Gray looked at the pitman before him and sighed. The fellow was an overman and as such must be earning more than most miners. He was fond of his wife too, he could see that.

‘A trained nurse can see to your wife better than a young girl can,’ he said. ‘In any case, she will keep an eye on her if she visits every day until Mrs Green is over the crisis.’

They were outside in the narrow passage that led from the front door past the room where Mrs Green lay to the kitchen at the back. It was Laura Green’s voice that decided the issue.

‘Lottie,’ she said, her voice too weak to penetrate to the kitchen where Lottie was scouring the porridge pan. ‘Lottie!’

‘Lottie!’ Mr Green shouted and the girl appeared in the passage, looking anxious. She had managed to get the boys off to school before the bell rang and ran to call the doctor and washed and changed Mrs Green before he came and now she was trying to catch up on her work. She was already thinking about the task after the next one and that was to prepare something filling for the lads’ dinner when they arrived back at twelve o’clock.

‘See to her, can you not hear her calling?’

Lottie hurried into the sitting room where the patient, in trying to reach for a drink, had overturned the cup and spilt water on the bed sheet, which was a clean one, having been changed for the doctor’s visit.

When Lottie tried to change her nightgown and sheets, Laura let out an involuntary cry of pain and both men in the passageway heard it.

‘I’ll help you in a minute, Lottie,’ said Mr Green and turned back to the doctor. ‘Why then,’ he said. ‘I reckon we’d best give that newfangled nurse a try. How much do you reckon it will cost me?’

‘You’ll have to ask her that,’ the doctor replied. ‘But I think Sister Mitchell-Howe is reasonable. If you just have her coming in twice a day until your wife is over the worst it will do.’

‘Mitchell-Howe, what sort of a daft name is that? Well, we’ll see what she charges,’ Mr Green muttered as he showed the doctor to the door.

Three

‘Dr Gray asked me to call to see Mrs Green,’ said the woman who was standing on the doorstep when Lottie answered a knock at the door. She was dressed in a funny hat with ribbons that tied under her chin and an all-enveloping cloak. She carried a bag something like the one the doctor carried but made of some cheap material, not leather. ‘My name is Sister Mitchell,’ she went on and smiled. She had a lovely, kind smile and Lottie warmed to her, for in her young life she had learned to differentiate between sincere and insincere smiles.

‘Sister Mitchell-Howe?’ asked Lottie, for that was what Dr Gray had said. She peered up at the woman a little fearfully despite her smile, for the way she was dressed reminded her of the matron at the Big House.

‘You can call me Sister Mitchell,’ the woman said, smiling again and Lottie forgot her small trepidations,

for she had a very pleasant face when she smiled, this newfangled nurse.

‘Howay in.’ Lottie opened the door wider and the nurse followed her into the house and through to the front room. Her voice was little more than a whisper, for Mr Green had gone to bed and he could get very angry if he was woken. Even little Mattie never spoke above a whisper when his da was in bed.

Lottie was impressed with the nurse’s treatment of her mistress. Sister Mitchell took off her cloak and laid it over a chair before donning a large white apron. All her movements were careful and controlled and she managed to change the bed sheets and sponge Mrs Green down causing the minimum of discomfort to her patient.

‘Watch now,’ Sister said, ‘be as gentle as if you were washing a new baby.’

Lottie watched and helped where she could but she was hesitant and fearful of hurting Laura Green, whereas Sister Mitchell was deft and sure in all her movements.

‘Bring Mrs Green some beef tea if you have any,’ Sister said, when at last she was satisfied that her patient was as comfortable as possible. Lottie ran to do her bidding. By, she thought as she watched over the pan of brown liquid heating on the bar, she would like to be a nurse when she grew up. A proper Nightingale nurse like Sister Mitchell, that was what she would be.

Could you be a Nightingale nurse if you were a skivvy from a workhouse and only 4 foot 10? She glanced into the mahogany-framed looking glass, which hung over the mantel shelf. Her skin was thin and white and her brown eyes peered back at her because she couldn't see a great deal more than a blur from a few feet away and she was small and the looking glass high up. Her cap had slipped down on her forehead and she pushed it up over her unruly hair. Hair so fine and soft that no amount of hairpins would hold it.

The beef tea began to bubble and she hastily lifted it from the bar and poured it into a cup. Her hand trembled and she spilt a few drops on the saucer and had to fetch a clean one and wipe the side of the cup.

'You couldn't be a nurse, you're too clumsy,' she berated herself aloud.

'Is it ready?'

Sister Mitchell had come through and was standing in the doorway watching her. 'Only I have to be getting on and I want to show you how to support a patient so she can take a drink with the least possible distress to her before I go. I'll come back about teatime.'

When Lottie peeped into Laura Green's room, half an hour later, she found her mistress sleeping peacefully. Poor woman, she thought as she gazed at Laura's face. Her skin had a translucent look, though her cheeks were flushed. A pulse beat erratically on the temple Lottie

could see. It was hot in the room and the air smelled stale. She hesitated before deciding to open a window for a short while. The window was stiff and resisted her attempts at first, but in the end she managed to open it a couple of inches. Satisfied, Lottie tiptoed out of the room and closed the door quietly.

The whole house was quiet with both master and mistress in bed asleep. Lottie had tidied the kitchen and now had little that she could do without making a noise until the boys came home and she gave them their dinners. Today she had a pan of mutton broth ready and she had baked bread the day before so there was little preparation to the meal. She opened the back door and slipped out into the yard for a breath of fresh air.

She leaned against the yard wall for a few moments, closing her eyes and breathing deeply. Though there was the all-pervading smell of coal and soot in the air, it was cool and there was a slight breeze blowing. After a while she picked up the broom, which stood upended against the wall where the tin bath hung, and started to sweep the yard. It wouldn't do for Mr Green to look out of the bedroom window and see her lazing about. As she swept, she dreamed of becoming a Nightingale nurse like Sister Mitchell. She would grow taller, she would, and she would learn not to be clumsy and she would save up her money and buy spectacles so she could see properly.

(How much would they cost? She would have to find out.) But then the colliery hooter blew and returned her to the present. It must be twelve o'clock and the lads would be on their way back from school and the broth wasn't even on the fire to warm yet.

Besides, she thought dismally as she went inside, her thoughts returning to her ambition to be a nurse like Sister Mitchell, she would have to learn to read and write and spell better; subjects the school in the workhouse hadn't bothered a lot with. No, they had concentrated on teaching her to sew a fine seam and clean up after folk. After all, what did skivvies want with reading and writing? They would be sitting in a corner reading when they would never be good for anything but scrubbing floors.

'Where's me dinner?' demanded Noah as he came through the door, closely followed by the two younger ones, Freddie and Matthew.

'It'll only be a minute,' Lottie replied, stirring the broth in the pan to prevent it sticking as she heated it. She lifted the heavy iron pan with both hands and put it down on the iron stand on the table.

'It should have been ready, I want to play with the lads,' grumbled Noah. 'You're supposed to have it ready.'

'It is ready,' said Lottie, as she ladled broth into a bowl and put it before him, then did the same for the

others. She started to cut slices from the loaf, giving them each a piece.

‘You’re not supposed to answer back. You’re not my mother, you’re just a maid. My da pays you to do it. You’re just a workhouse skivvy.’ Noah stared at her truculently, before stuffing bread in his mouth.

‘A workhouse skivvy,’ echoed Freddie and Matthew and they both giggled.

‘You have to do what I say or I’ll tell my da and he’ll send you back to the workhouse,’ said Noah. ‘Dirty clarty workhouse,’ he added.

‘Dirty, clarty workhouse,’ said Matthew.

‘Don’t say that, Mattie pet,’ Lottie said to Matthew.

‘You cannot tell us what to do, Noah says,’ said Freddie.

Lottie closed her eyes and bit her lip to stop her angry retort. After a moment she said, ‘I am looking after you while your mam is badly. I will have to speak to your da if you’re naughty.’

The three boys laughed uproariously. ‘My da calls you workhouse!’ Noah cried.

Lottie turned a fiery red, more from anger than anything else. But she did not reply for in the moment’s quiet after she heard the faint voice of Laura Green from the front room. She left her broth and hurried in to see her, to find that Laura had slipped down on her pillows and was unable to lift herself up.

‘I’m sorry, did they wake you?’ Lottie asked as she helped her back against the pillows. The woolly bedjacket she wore fell back and exposed her elbows, red and swollen with the disease. The sight filled Lottie with pity as she covered them back up.

‘No . . . yes, but I like to hear them,’ Mrs Green whispered as though she had no strength to speak louder. ‘Only, they’ll wake Alfred and he needs his sleep.’

‘I’ll remind them, they must have forgotten. You know what lads are like.’

‘Aye.’ Laura sank back on her pillows and closed her eyes, for the effort had exhausted her. ‘You see to them, pet, you’re a good lass.’

Alfred was already awake. As she came out of the front room he came downstairs in his bare feet, braces dangling by the side of his trousers and a collarless shirt open at the neck. He favoured Lottie with a furious glare before pushing past her to the kitchen. The boys were still laughing and making remarks about ‘workhouse lasses’ but they fell silent immediately they saw their father, no doubt suddenly remembering they were supposed to be keeping quiet. He belted all three around the ear, one after the other, and not varying the weight of the blow from the eldest to the youngest.

‘Hadaway back to school out of my sight!’ he snarled, not raising his voice but sounding just as threatening as if he had. Cringing and sniffing and with Mattie

holding his ear, the three scrambled for the back door and ran down the yard to the gate. Only when they were out of sight did he turn to Lottie.

‘You, you little bastard,’ he said. ‘You’re supposed to be keeping them quiet. You’d best mend your ways or you’ll be back in the workhouse along of all the other bastards.’ He suddenly thrust out a hand and smacked her across the ear too, so that her head rang and a sharp pain shot through from one side to another, making her teeth chatter. She staggered under the blow and grabbed hold of the chair just vacated by Noah. But it was the insult to her mother that hurt the most.

‘I’m not a bastard,’ she said as soon as she righted herself and could face him again. ‘My mam and dad were married but he died.’

‘Oh aye,’ Alfred Green sneered, ‘o’ course they were. You lot all say that. But it doesn’t signify, you’re still bastards’ scum, expecting hard-working folk to pay the poor rate to keep you in the Big House. Well, it’s time I got a bit back from you and you’ll do as I say or I’ll know the reason why. Now, if I hear another sound the day I’ll be down here and belt the living daylights out of you. Do you understand that?’

Lottie said nothing. A deep resentment burned in her chest but she controlled it, for she knew she couldn’t bear to go back to the workhouse and say she had been let go for talking back to the master of the house.

‘I said, do you understand?’ Alfred caught hold of her front and raised his hand to her, ready to strike again.

‘Aye,’ said Lottie.

‘I cannot hear you, what did you say?’

‘Aye, I said aye, Mr Green,’ Lottie replied. She burned with a resentment that was stronger than the pain from the blow but she kept her voice controlled and her face expressionless. She had learned to do this over the years in the workhouse when confronted by an unjust authority. But all the time her thoughts were racing. She had to get out of this house. But how could she? There was poor Mrs Green who needed her. And the lads. Young Mattie was not a bad lad, but he was influenced by his older brothers, of course he was. Besides, where would she go? Not back to the workhouse, which she had left with such high hopes. There would be no help for her there.

‘If I hear another sound from down here, I’ll take the belt to you,’ Alfred Green said, still in that quiet, menacing voice he was using so as not to disturb his wife. ‘Now, get on with your work.’ He stalked back up the stairs and Lottie watched his braces swinging his shirt tail, which was hanging out of his trousers.

Lottie turned back to the kitchen and her work. After a while she began to feel a little less despairing and even started to sing as she worked, though very, very

quietly. In her young life she had found that despair got her nowhere, she just had to get on with it. But she could dream, couldn't she? She cleaned the kitchen and washed the passage and sandstoned the front step, working energetically and with a thoroughness that had been drummed into her in the workhouse. But in her thoughts she had escaped into the world of her imagination and there she had gone to a proper school and learned to do things and she had friends like Sister Mitchell and she was making something of herself. Maybe not a Nightingale nurse but something else. Like working in a posh shop up by Castle Chare and all the nobs came in and asked for her to serve them.

'Miss Lonsdale is so good, so knowledgeable about the latest fashions,' the bishop's wife said to the manager of the shop, for Lottie had decided it would be a dress shop selling fine silk dresses and bombazines. Lottie wasn't sure what bombazines were, but she had heard them being admired by two ladies who were looking in the window of a shop in Silver Street. One day she might even become the manageress of the shop, even the owner. And she would take Betty on as an apprentice and they would live together in the rooms above the shop and they would have a red velvet-covered sofa and . . .

'Afternoon, Lottie, how is my patient?'

Lottie scrambled to her feet from where she had been

kneeling by the front step as she applied the sandstone to the sides. It was Sister Mitchell, back already!

‘G-Good day, Sister Mitchell,’ she said, feeling a pang of guilt, for she hadn’t looked in on Laura Green for at least an hour. ‘Em, she is asleep I think.’ She dropped the scouring stone into the bucket and followed the sister indoors, wondering if she should apologize for leaving the step scouring until so late in the day. It was a morning job but the morning had been *so* busy.

‘You see to that, Lottie, I’ll call if I need any help,’ Sister Mitchell said and watched as the diminutive figure in the oversized cap and apron hurried out to the back of the house. Poor Lottie, she thought, the lass reminded her so much of her friend Bertha when she was that age.

Mrs Green was awake and moaning softly to herself but when she saw the nurse she smiled slightly, a smile that transformed her worn face. ‘Sister,’ she whispered. Was her fever lessening? Or was this just the onset of the crisis?

Four

Lottie sat in the flickering light of a candle that stood in a holder on the bedside table. Outside, rain pattered at the windowpane and the wind blew down the chimney, making the small fire in the grate blow out sudden flurries of smoke. Lottie's head nodded and eventually her chin fell down on her chest as she succumbed to sleep. Her upper body slumped on to the bed and she slept until her usual getting-up time, which was five o'clock.

Her neck ached when she woke and her eyes felt as though there were cinders in them. It was cold in the room, as there was only a tiny red glow left in one corner of the grate; the rest was grey ashes.

'Mrs Green?'

Suddenly awake, Lottie jumped to her feet and leaned over the bed. The candle was gutted and only a pale shaft of moonlight came through the thin curtains.

She touched Laura's forehead with her fingertips: it was cold. Her temperature had broken, praise be.

It was only after she had mended the fire with some sticks from an offcut of pit prop and added a few pieces of small coal so that it flared up, crackling, that Lottie turned back to the bed and an awful suspicion entered her head. Mrs Green had not moved, though her eyes were open. Lottie fetched the candle from the kitchen mantelpiece and lit it at the fire and held it to Laura's face. Laura was gone, passed away, gone to live with the angels. The usual euphemisms raced through Lottie's head. Sometime during the night, she had died.

Her husband Alfred was at the pit and the boys were in bed. Only Lottie had stayed up beside her, in case she needed anything during the night; but Lottie had been exhausted by all she had had to do the day before, for it had been washing day. Still, she had sat on a chair by the bed and sponged Laura's face and hands at intervals. Her skin was hot and dry and Lottie had to be very gentle so as not to hurt her. But Mr Green had given Laura an extra dose of laudanum before going out and she had seemed to be sleeping fairly peacefully.

Lottie had seen dead people before in the workhouse. She had even helped the old woman who laid them out; had done so since she was eleven. She knew that Laura was dead. But she was only thirteen and she was nervous. She stood by the bed, filled with guilt besides