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## *HETTONBY - 1825 to 1829*

Two old women stood at the door of Granny Todd's cottage and watched the child go skipping across the green, on her own as usual and the last to leave the little dame school because she had been helping put the other children's knitting away.

'That Cissie Burton never seems to get as dirty as the rest,' the visitor commented.

The little girl's starched pinafore did indeed look relatively clean and fresh over her dark blue dress, even after a day's wear. But her russet hair tossed defiantly behind her like a banner in the wind, and her bonnet was swinging from one hand in a way that would have earned her a slap from her mother.

'Well, she may be a tidy little soul, but she's going to be a real handful, that one is!' Granny Todd nodded her head wisely.

'Cissie Burton? But she seems such a nice lass,' protested her neighbour.

'Nice, aye. Nice enough for anyone, she is. Clever, too. But obstinate with it. She'll go her own way in life. You can see it in her eyes. Those eyes'll never stay quietly at home in a cottage. Destined for a life of adventure, that child is, you mark my words!'

'Well, I never!' The neighbour stared down the lane with renewed interest. Granny Todd had taught generations of the poorer children from Hettonby their letters and she had an uncanny knack of predicting the future of her charges.

The parsonage lay at the narrow end of the green, next to the red-sandstone church built long ago by the Garthorpe family, who used to live in the old house beyond the village before it

crumbled in on itself. The bones of the last Garthorpes were mouldering quietly away under a fretted stone monument at the side of the churchyard and the living of that same church now lay in the gift of Lord Morrisham, a latecomer to the nobility, whose father had first made a fortune in the India trade, then purchased himself a title. After that, he took up an option on some land near Great Sutton and built a huge mansion, which he passed on to his only son. This generation of Morrishams worshipped in the smaller and more modern church there, whose living was also in their gift, but Clarence Morrisham still liked to keep an eye on what was happening in the other two villages on his estate.

When Cissie got home from school, she went round to the back entrance of the parsonage and entered by the kitchen, where her mother gave her a glass of milk and a scone, and asked as usual, 'How did your day go?'

The child pulled a face. 'We didn't do much reading. Granny wanted the knitting finished.'

Agnes's lips pulled into a tight, angry line. She didn't send Cissie to school to learn how to knit, or just to be kept out of mischief, either. She sent her there to be educated. Her frown deepened at the next question, which she had not been expecting.

'Mother - what was my father like?' Cissie knew he was dead but very little else, and although she had asked her mother about him several times, she had learned very little. But still, every now and then, something drove her to ask again.

'He was a fool,' declared Agnes, shaking her duster out of the back door with unnecessary vigour.

'You always say that. Why was he a fool? Why won't you talk about him? At least tell me what he looked like!'

'He was tall, with broad shoulders.' She sniffed. 'A fine figure of a man, folk always said. That's why he was a footman. They like their footmen to look good, the gentry do. He had hair the same colour as yours, like a ripe chestnut, but you've got my eyes. Blue. His were green.'

She looked blindly into the kitchen fire for a moment, then decided to reveal a little more.

Cissie had asked about Frank a few times now and the child had to learn what life was really like. She had to grow up sensible. 'He was a bad provider, your father was, and sometimes we went hungry. When I complained about him spending what little we did have on ale, he used to hit me.'

Cissie's mouth wobbled and tears filled her eyes. She knew about men who beat their wives. There were one or two in the village and they were not well thought of. She didn't like to think of her own father behaving like them.

Agnes Burton patted her daughter's hand, a rare touch, for she was not a demonstrative woman. She found she could not, after all, tell her daughter everything. 'And that's all I'm going to say about your father. Go and cut me some rhubarb for tea.'

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In that same year, with Cissie coming up for nine, Agnes Burton saw her opportunity to do something about getting her daughter a proper education and seized it with both hands.

'Did you hear what His Lordship's doing now?' Granny Todd asked her one day at the market.

Agnes shook her head, but lingered to listen to the gossip, for once.

'He's to build two new schools. One here in Hettonby and another over in Great Sutton.'

'You don't seem upset about that,' Agnes commented, feeling the breast of a chicken tied to one leg of a stall and slapping its pecking beak away from her hand.

'Bless you, no! Them schools are only for the children of farmers and tradespeople. They won't affect *my* little scholars.'

Founding schools was the fashionable thing to do, now that the government was beginning to take an interest in education, Agnes Burton knew, for she read all the Parson's newspapers once he'd finished with them. It was her treat of an evening when the day's work was done. Lord Morrisham would no doubt enjoy feeling philanthropic. That was fashionable, too. 'Are the schools for both girls and boys, or just boys?' she asked, trying to sound casual.

'Both.' Granny chortled. 'Though they're to sit on different sides of the room. I heard tell His Lordship thinks everyone should learn their letters. He won't let his housekeeper take on a maid at the Hall 'less she can read an' write.'

Agnes felt a brief spurt of nostalgia. Mrs Prudhom had taught her to read and write properly, saying if a maid wanted to get on, she needed such skills. The former housekeeper was Mrs Butterfield now, of course, for she had married the Squire a year after his wife died. But Martha was not too proud to write to her old maid, a long newsy letter every Christmas, always with an invitation to spend a week at the Priory come the summer, an invitation that Agnes inevitably turned down. There was no going back. You made your bed and you lay in it without complaining. But you did better for your children, if you could.

Granny was still talking. 'And the schools are to have proper schoolmasters, too, though folks'll have to pay for their children to attend. He don't believe in giving things away for nothing, His Lordship don't.'

Agnes seized the chicken by its legs, nodded to the stallkeeper and waited until the neck had been wrung, a job she detested. Then she said goodbye to Granny and walked briskly home, feeling full of energy. A new school in Hettonby. Yes, she saw her chance now.

She approached her employer that very evening about getting a place in the school for Cissie.

'Ah. Yes. Well.' John Marley stared at his housekeeper in dismay. He knew that His Lordship's new school was not intended for the offspring of servants. 'Um - is she old enough?' he asked, cautiously feeling his way. The only time he really saw the child who lived under his roof was when she accompanied her mother to church every Sunday morning or played out in the back garden with her dolls, and he thought her a neat, well-behaved little thing.

'Oh yes, sir. She's definitely old enough. She turns nine in October.'

'Oh, well . . . ' He sought desperately for a tactful way to put Agnes off. 'His Lordship was thinking more of catering for the children of - of farmers and - and people who can afford to pay

for proper schooling.'

'How much will it cost?'

'A guinea a term.'

'I can afford that for a year or two. I've got a bit of money put by for my Cissie's education.'

'Oh.' Another silence for a while, then, 'But isn't - doesn't she go to Granny Todd's school already?'

'Yes, sir. And has learned all that Mrs Todd can teach her.' Which was leading to mischief from Cissie and complaints from Granny lately.

'I see.' But even a man as gentle and easy-going as John Marley could not help being aware that the farming classes were as rigid believers in knowing your place as Lord Morrisham himself. They would not take kindly to a servant's brat going to the same school as their own children. He hummed and hawed a bit. 'Well, I'll have to think about it and - and consult His Lordship. It is his school, after all.'

Sensing a put-off, Agnes staked all her precious security on a desperate gamble. 'In that case, sir,' her voice was as quiet and respectful as ever, but steely in its determination, 'if she can't attend, I'm afraid I shall have to give notice and ask you to start looking for a new housekeeper.'

Mr Marley's face fell visibly. It was a minute before he could speak, so horrified was he at the prospect. 'But - but I thought you were happy here! You've been with me a long time now.'

'Yes, sir. I'm very happy in my job. But I've been worrying for a while about how I can get some proper schooling for my Cissie. Granny Todd does her best, but she's not a real teacher, is she? I'm afraid I shall have to look for a position in a town, somewhere my Cissie can attend a proper school. I don't want to leave you, sir. I've been very happy here. But there you are. I have to think of the child's future. She must get some good education.'

The Parson looked at her face, the tight strong lines of it, read the determination in every inch of her lean body, and knew he was beaten. 'Now, don't be so hasty, Agnes! I haven't said

it's impossible, just that I wasn't sure. I'll speak to His Lordship myself about your daughter - the very next time I see him. I shall be going over for a game of chess soon, I dare say.' When His Lordship had nothing better to do and wanted an hour filling. For John Marley was the only person who dared win against him, and he knew that his patron cherished a secret desire to best him. Well, let him if he could. John wasn't going to pretend or cheat. In anything.

When the door had closed behind her, he sat lost in thought. Agnes had not asked any other favour of him in all the years she had worked for him. She was never ill and she did not even take time off, as she was entitled to do, because she said she had no family left to visit in Yorkshire and would rather stay and see things done properly at the parsonage than spend her money traipsing around the countryside. She did take a day off to go to Leeds market every now and then, and that was all. Every Christmas, though, she got a letter from Yorkshire, on fine cream notepaper, so there must be someone left from her family. But she never talked about them. And he did not feel he had the right to ask her.

She was, he decided that night over a piece of tangy apple pie smothered under fluffy cream, a wonderful cook and housekeeper. The best he had ever had. And he did not want to lose her. He rang for a second piece of pie and murmured a compliment when it was brought. As he popped the last spoonful into his mouth, he came to the conclusion that he would help Agnes get proper schooling for her daughter. That was a laudable ambition, surely? But he would interview the child himself before putting the matter to His Lordship. It didn't hurt to be well prepared when you had an argument to win.

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Cissie was summoned to the study the next afternoon, a great matter, this. 'But *why* does Parson want to see me?' she asked as her mother ruthlessly dragged a brush through her hair and plaited it so tightly that her daughter's eyes watered.

'It's about His Lordship's school. You do want to go to a proper school, don't you?' Agnes retied the bow on the frilled Sunday pinafore, before turning Cissie round to face her. 'You know

how you like reading and writing and doing your sums.'

'I've read all Granny Todd's books,' Cissie agreed wistfully.

'Well, if you go to His Lordship's school, you'll be able to read lots more books,' Agnes promised recklessly. 'And no more knitting.'

Cissie's eyes lit up.

'Now, off with you and mind your manners.'

The child went along to the front of the house and knocked on the door of the parson's comfortable study, entering quietly when a voice called, 'Come!' As usual, the place smelled of leather and books and pipe smoke. She loved the smell there and often helped her mother dust the study before Parson got up.

'Mother said you wanted to see me, sir.' She clasped her hands behind her as she waited for him to speak. Her mother said that was the tidy thing to do with your hands when someone grown-up was speaking to you.

John Marley stared across his desk. She was tall for her age, but even so, she was dwarfed by the massively comfortable furnishings of his study. He had never, now he came to think of it, interviewed the child before without her mother being present. He studied the vivid face, immediately captivated by a pair of sparkling blue eyes, fringed in long dark lashes. Hair of a burnished russet colour haloed the face, highlighted by golden glints where the sunlight touched it. Already stray curls had escaped from Agnes's ruthless plaiting, as they always escaped their bonds, do what she might.

If Mr Marley studied the child gravely, she returned his stare just as gravely, for her mother was not there to poke a bony finger in her side and hiss a reminder about good manners.

'Well, Cissie. So you'd like to go to a proper school, would you?'

'Oh yes, sir, please, sir!'

'Why?'

Head on one side, she thought over her answer. 'Well, you can learn to read properly at a

proper school, can't you, sir? All the long words. Granny Todd doesn't know the long words. I can make some of them out, but the others puzzle me. I don't know how to say them and I don't know what they mean.' She spoke clearly, with her mother's accent, learned long ago at the big house, not the flatter vowels of the villagers.

'I've read all Granny's books,' she added wistfully. 'Lots of times.'

'Have you, indeed?'

'Yes, sir. They're very easy. And besides . . . ' Cissie hesitated and peeped up at him through her lashes.

'Yes, go on. Besides . . . '

'Well, your books here,' she gestured round them, 'I help my mother to dust them sometimes - for a treat, you know - and they're so beautiful that they must surely be full of wonderful things.'

He was totally won over. Any young child who appreciated the beauty of his beloved books and the value of learning deserved a decent education.

No, Lord Morrisham must agree to take the child, for John would, he realised in surprise, miss Agnes herself as much as he would miss her services. He enjoyed her astringent wit as she commented on the less capable of his parishioners, he appreciated the gentle reminders about some duty or other when he was lost in his books, and he relished the occasional shrewd comment on national affairs from her reading of his newspapers. No one's fool, his housekeeper. He'd never find anyone half as good to replace her, and he didn't intend to try.

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The very next day, John Marley hired the gig from the Crown and drove over to the Hall. It was the day Lord Morrisham dealt with estate matters and he was usually free by mid-afternoon.

When the request was put to him, his Lordship didn't mince his words. 'Dammit, man, you know this school isn't intended for servants' brats!'

'Cissie is an exceptional child. Extremely intelligent.'

'I don't care how intelligent she is. What will the other parents think about such as her

attending my new school?'

John Marley wavered, thought once again of his housekeeper and summoned up all his courage. He had defied His Lordship once or twice before, in his own quiet way, for Lord Morrisham occasionally made a decision which might hurt John Marley's flock in Hettonby and he couldn't allow that. 'If the school is to be closed to such a specially deserving case, then I don't think I shall be able to spare the time to teach in it, after all, Your Lordship, for it is obviously not truly concerned with the propagation of learning.'

Clarence stiffened in outrage, made a loud huffing noise that usually brought folk into line, then stared at his Parson in puzzlement when Marley's expression did not change. Not like the fellow to bestir himself over a servant's brat. Could she be his own by-blow? No. He did a quick calculation, then dismissed that idea. For a start, the man hadn't got it in him. Too much of a Holy Joe. And anyway, the housekeeper was from near Rotherham, not from round here, and had brought the brat with her. Lord Morrisham remembered her arrival distinctly, for he had advised against hiring a woman with a child and was somewhat annoyed that the Parson hadn't heeded him.

'Bit of a rum thing to ask,' he complained when the silence continued.

'All good schools have special scholarships for worthy cases, m'lord, and always have had, since medieval times.'

'Since medieval times, eh?' His Lordship hummed and hawed a bit, to save face, then gave in. He satisfied enough with his parson and he hated change - unless he instigated it.

John returned home glowing with triumph and rang at once for his housekeeper. 'I have arranged for Cissie is to attend the school, which will be held in the church hall until a proper school house can be built.'

Agnes murmured a thank you and clasped her hands together to hide their sudden shaking. She had been dreading leaving the Parsonage, absolutely dreading it. 'And how much will the fees be, sir?'

'Nothing!' The Parson could not hold back a chuckle.

'I can pay!' Her voice was sharp. She had vowed never to accept charity again as long as she was able to stand upright on her own feet.

'You won't have to pay. His Lordship has set up a special scholarship, open to any promising child, to be awarded at my discretion, and *it* pays the fees. Cissie is to be the first recipient.' He beamed at her.

Actually, he and His Lordship had decided over a bottle of port and one of their games of chess that this method of allowing Cissie into the school would give the least offence to the parents of the other pupils, and would also best demonstrate His Lordship's generosity. A few judicious repetitions of the term 'benefactor' had helped matters considerably.

Agnes stared at her employer, opened her mouth, then shut it again without speaking. Frugality warred with pride and frugality naturally won. If she did not have to pay fees, there would be even more money to save for Cissie's future, not to mention her own old age. 'Thank you, sir. We're both extremely grateful to you. More grateful than I can say.'

'Aha! But there's more.' He beamed at her. 'The scholarship pays for any books that are needed, as well.'

Her voice was sharp. 'I could have afforded them!'

'You won't have to! I am impressed by your daughter, my dear Agnes, and shall make it my business to keep a close eye on her progress from now on.'

After that he did indeed begin to take a slight avuncular interest in the child, or at least, in her scholastic achievements, which was all he really cared about. And he did not lose his paragon of a housekeeper, which was even more important to a plump, comfort-loving man.