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November 1847

Gwynna Jones stared at herself in the mirror. Brand new, the clothes were, the first she'd ever owned that hadn't belonged to someone else first. But the solemn lass she saw there looked like a stranger. Even her hair looked different today, with every single wavy strand pulled back tightly into a bun.

"That navy blue suits you." Essie walked round her, nodding approvingly. "It looks neat and trim."

"I look like what *they* will want," Gwynna said slowly, still trying to get used to her new self, "but if they knew . . . they wouldn't want to employ a girl like me . . ."

"None of that talk, lass. You're as good as anyone else. My friend Flora has trusted my recommendation enough to see you. She hasn't promised you the position, but it gives you a chance, at least. You're good with babies and you'll make a fine nursery maid."

Gwynna nodded. She kept telling herself that, but she still felt terrified of the step she was about to take: getting a job in a big country house.

"Flora and I have known one another for a long time," Essie went on, "since we were both young maids together, and she might have risen in the world to be housekeeper to

a rich family but she has a kind heart and that won't have changed. She'll make sure you learn your job properly, so that later you can go on to even better things."

"If she takes me on."

The two women stared at one another solemnly.

"It's all in the past now, love," Essie said softly. "If Flora doesn't give you a position, someone else will."

Gwynna didn't answer, could only manage a tiny nod and swallow hard to keep her emotions under control. She'd been so happy living with Nev and Essie Linney, who'd treated her more like one of the family than a servant, providing her with good food three times a day, her very own bed and clean, warm clothes to wear. She was a different person now from the unhappy waif they'd taken in. There were plenty of mirrors to show her that. But was she different enough?

Once she'd seen how decent families lived, she'd craved the same sort of life for herself, wanting others to respect her, as they did Nev's family. And at least if she got away from Hedderby she wouldn't be embarrassed by the sight of her parents reeling about the streets drunk, wouldn't have to hide till they'd passed because they always pestered her for money. Once, a few weeks ago, her father had taken the shopping money from her forcibly. Nev had had to go round and warn him that it was *his* money and if Mr Jones did that again, Nev would call in the town's new police and have him arrested for theft.

Gwynna never took her own money with her when she went out—well, she was saving her wages not spending them. In the privacy of her bedroom she sometimes made piles of the coins, counting and recounting them, marvelling that they were all hers.

But the Linneys didn't need her help any more and she was determined not to be a burden on them, so she'd asked Essie to help her find a new job. Today she was going to

be considered for a position as nursery maid to the Hungerton family. *Position*, they called it, not a job. The family lived on a big country estate fifteen miles away from the little town of Hedderby, with twelve indoor servants and men working for them outdoors as well. Gwynna found it hard to imagine needing so many people to run one house, let alone having a governess, a Head Nurse and two nursemaids to look after three small children.

Taking a deep breath, she checked that her bonnet was straight and reached for her cloak. "We'll miss the train if we don't get a move on."

At the entrance to the railway station she hesitated, glancing at Essie for reassurance. She'd never ridden on a train before and was both excited and anxious about boarding one of the noisy monsters. She'd seen them thundering through the countryside near Hedderby, travelling so quickly it fair made you blink as they thundered past.

Not seeming to notice her young friend's nervousness, Essie went to buy two tickets then led the way on to the platform. "We're going second-class. I'm too old to stand up in one of those open, third-class carriages, and anyway, we want to arrive looking neatly turned out."

Within a few minutes the ground began trembling beneath their feet and they heard a clackety-clack in the distance, which got louder as the train chugged into the station. White steam swirled around them as it came to a halt. A few people got out and Essie led the way forward confidently towards a second-class carriage, grumbling about the hardness of the wooden benches as she took a corner seat and gestured to her companion to sit opposite her.

As the train began to move, slowly at first then faster and faster, Gwynna stared entranced out of the window. She'd expected travelling like this to be frightening but it wasn't. A young horse ran alongside them in a field for a few seconds but was soon left

behind. It was as if they were flying.

Four stations down the line in the direction of Manchester, the train stopped in the village of Sutherclough. Gwynna could now recognise the S that began the word and the U that followed, though she couldn't fit the rest of the letters together easily. It was such a long word and she'd only mastered short ones so far. One day she'd be able to read properly though, she was determined about that. She hated being so ignorant.

Essie fumbled with the carriage door. Heaving herself ponderously down on to the platform, she waited for Gwynna to follow, then they made their way out of the station arm in arm.

A burly young man wearing a heavy overcoat with two shoulder capes, came forward and tipped his hat to them. "Mrs Linney?"

Essie nodded.

"We've a carriage here to take you to Hungerton House. This way, if you please." An older man with a weather-beaten face was sitting on the driving bench holding the reins. He nodded politely to them as they were helped inside.

The vehicle began moving and Gwynna stared round, awed by this elegant means of transport. "I've never rid in a carriage afore—I mean *before*."

"It's an old one, this." Essie flicked her gloved fingers scornfully at the worn upholstery. "Likely they keep it for the servants. Gentry as rich as these wouldn't ride in such a shabby thing."

The vehicle seemed very grand to Gwynna, who had never before gone anywhere except on her own two feet, and had now ridden in both a train and a private carriage in the same day.

They drove up and down some gentle hills, taking so many turns at unmarked crossroads that Gwynna quite lost her sense of direction. It seemed strange not to have

the moors looming to the east and the countryside here was much gentler than round Hedderby.

Eventually the carriage slowed down to turn left between two wrought-iron gates. The well-raked gravel drive was bordered by trees and a building stood at the end of it. Gwynna gasped. She had never seen such a huge house before. Why, it was as big as the mill in Hedderby! How could any family, even a rich one, possibly need so many rooms?

They turned right halfway along the drive, going slowly round the side and coming to a halt at the rear. When Gwynna would have opened the door, Essie reached out to stop her. "It's the groom's job to do that."

Sure enough, the door opened and the young man stood there, one arm outstretched to help them down. "This way, please." But once he'd helped Essie down, his polite smile vanished and he scowled at Gwynna. Then his face quickly became expressionless again and as the carriage moved slowly away, he led them to a door at the rear of the house, handing them over to a maid.

Why had he scowled at her? Gwynna wondered. He'd never even met her before.

The young woman took them along a corridor and pointed to a bench. "Mrs Finch wants to see Mrs Linney first, if you please, so you're to sit here, miss."

She sat down, feeling even more nervous at being left alone, and watched the maid lead the way down the corridor and knock on a door.

After Essie had disappeared through it, the maid came back, slowing down to stare openly at the newcomer as she passed, but saying nothing.

Everyone else who passed by during the next few minutes—and there seemed to be a lot of them—stared hard at Gwynna. And none of them spoke to her, not even a nod, let alone a 'Good afternoon'. But at least they didn't scowl at her. She hadn't liked that young man. He had mean, piggy eyes and thick lips.

Inside the comfortable sitting room Flora Finch came forward to clasp Essie's hands and hold them for a minute. "You look well, love. Marriage must agree with you."

"It does. My goodness, you're looking very grand these days, Flora!"

The housekeeper smiled and smoothed her full skirt. "In my position I need to dress well. Real silk, this is. It doesn't seem all that long ago since we were young maids, does it, and thankful for a cotton print dress in those days?"

Both women sighed and stared into the distance for a moment or two.

"What am I thinking of? Sit down, Essie, and tell me about your protégée. It's the first time you've ever asked such a favour of me. You must think a rare lot of this Gwynna."

"I do."

"Tell me more about her—and her family."

Essie hesitated, then said, "She's from a poor family, her parents are both drunkards and she wants to get away from them."

"Brothers and sisters?"

"Two older brothers, three younger sisters. The brothers ran away to be navvies. The sisters are just children. They're not the problem, it's the parents. But our Gwynna's not like them. She's a hard worker and was a great help to my Nev when his first wife died. She looked after his daughter beautifully. She's really good with babies and little children."

"I wonder you don't keep her on yourself, then, with a step-daughter to raise."

"We don't need her help now that Sylvie is nearly one. We have a scrubbing woman and there are several grown girls in the house who are my husband's step-children by his first wife. Anyway, Nev and I both think it'll do Gwynna good to get out into the

world. She'd never even left Hedderby before today."

"I presume she's able to read and write?"

"A little. She's started learning her letters and knows some of the simpler words. She's got a good brain on her."

"Hmm. What about young men?"

"She had a fellow, nice lad too, but he was killed in an accident at the mill."

Flora pursed her lips. "Well, I'll tell you frankly, I wouldn't normally employ someone with her background, let alone she can't read and write. But the last girl came highly recommended and turned out to be a lazy young madam who ran off with one of the local farm hands." She patted her stomach suggestively. "If she hadn't left when she did, we'd have had to dismiss her. So when I got your letter, I decided that since I trust your judgement, I'd meet your girl and if she looked at all capable, give her a trial."

Essie hesitated, then said quietly, "There's something else you should know first." She explained about the trouble Gwynna had been in when they first employed her, knowing that she was risking everything by revealing this. "I wanted to tell you this face to face. I don't want there to be any secrets that could upset things for her later."

Flora shook her head disapprovingly. "I must confess I'd not even have sent for her if I'd known."

"Which is why I didn't tell you till now. Just meet her and if you like what you see, *please*, for old times' sake, give her a chance to show her worth. Everyone needs a helping hand sometime." Essie held her breath, praying that she hadn't ruined everything by being so open, only she wasn't one to deceive people, even in a good cause.

Flora sighed. "Well, it would be foolish not to see her now that she's here." She rang the bell and the same young maid came hurrying in. "Fetch Nurse Parker down, then

show the girl in.”

Nurse Parker was a stout, grey-haired lady, in charge of the two nurseries, one for the children of Mr Selwyn Hungerton, the heir, and the other for those of his younger brother Mr Robert, whose family also lived here. After she'd been introduced, she took a seat, studying Essie openly.

As Gwynna was ushered in, Essie's heart went out to the girl, she was looking so white and nervous. And from the way Flora was frowning at her, it seemed fairly likely this had been a wasted journey. No, never wasted. It had given Gwynna some new experiences, she reminded herself as she smiled across at the girl.

“Stand there, please.” Mrs Finch asked a series of sharp questions, before turning to Nurse, who asked more specific questions about the care of babies.

Essie was proud of the sensible way the girl answered, but her old friend's expression still did not lighten.

When they'd finished questioning Gwynna, Flora asked her to go outside again, then looked at Nurse. “Well?”

“The girl certainly sounds as if she knows what she's doing with young children, but we've never had a nursery maid who couldn't read properly before. I don't like that, I must admit.”

“She's started learning and will soon read as well as anyone else, given the chance,” Essie said quickly, sensing that Nurse was somewhat inclined in Gwynna's favour.

“Well, it's looking after Master Peter that matters most,” the other admitted. “We don't want someone who'll let us down like the last one did. It upsets young children to lose someone they know. He's been very fretful this week, poor lamb.”

Flora opened her mouth, caught her friend's pleading glance and shut it again, keeping the other information to herself.

“I’d like to see her with him before we decide anything,” Nurse added thoughtfully.

So they went outside and told Gwynna they were taking her to meet the baby.

As they drew near the nursery they heard someone screaming for help. All the woman began to run forward but Gwynna got there first. When she burst into the room she saw a baby choking, while the maid holding him didn’t seem to know what to do except scream. His face was already a bluish purple shade, so Gwynna snatched him from the other girl, put her foot up on the chair and laid him face down across her knee, pounding his back. Within seconds he had coughed up a mouthful of biscuit.

By that time Nurse was reaching out for him, but she stilled and drew her hands back as his colour returned to normal, watching the younger woman soothe him, pat his back and murmur softly to him.

It was a while before Gwynna noticed how closely she was being observed. “Did I do something wrong? I’m sorry. I just couldn’t bear to see the poor little thing choking like that.”

Mrs Parker smiled warmly at her. “He chokes easily, does Master Peter.” She turned to the other maid. “I thought I told you not to give him anything to eat, Mary.”

The maid was still sobbing. “It was Miss Jane. She came in—and before I knew it, she’d stuffed some biscuit into his mouth. She poked it right down his throat on purpose. You know what she’s like.”

“I do.” Nurse’s expression was grim as she gestured to the chair. “Sit down, Gwynna. You can hold him for a minute or two. If you come to work here, he’ll be your special charge.”

Flora gestured to Essie to come closer and murmured, “I’ll have to let Mrs Robert know what you told me, but when she hears how the girl dealt with this incident, I think she may be prepared to overlook the past. I like a girl who can think quickly in an

emergency, I must admit." She looked at the clock and raised her voice again. "I promised to introduce the new girl to Mrs Robert before hiring anyone. Wait here and I'll see if she's free."

Gwynna sat talking cheerfully to the little boy, who was about Sylvie's age, maybe ten or eleven months old. He gurgled happily back at her, waving his hands and acting as if he understood every word she was saying. When the door opened, she looked up to see a lady wearing a beautiful dress come in with Mrs Finch and stood up instinctively, cradling the baby against her shoulder.

"I'll take him now." Nurse moved forward.

The lady raised one forefinger imperatively. "No, leave him with the girl. I want to see them together." She watched the newcomer try to settle the baby, who was getting a bit restless.

"I think he's hungry," Gwynna said at last. "Is there something for him to eat?"

"You take him now, Nurse." Margaret Hungerton turned to Essie and studied her just as shrewdly as she had been studying Gwynna a moment before. "We'll give your young friend a trial, Mrs Linney. Three months."

Essie let out a long sigh of relief. "I'm sure you'll not be disappointed, ma'am."

Margaret nodded, then caught sight of the clock. "I must go. My sister-in-law is expecting callers. Bring Peter to me at the usual time, Parker."

"Yes, ma'am."

Nurse turned to Gwynna. "Well, young woman, it looks like you've got yourself hired. You'd better go back and fetch your things. We need you to start straight away. Can you come to us tomorrow?"

"Her outfit isn't finished," Essie said. "It'll take us at least a week to do the rest of the sewing, I'm afraid. This has all happened so quickly."

“We can send the things out to be finished by the sewing woman in the village. I need help with Master Peter as soon as possible. You’ll be working for Mrs Robert, the lady you just met, not for Mrs Selwyn.” She could see that this information meant nothing to Gwynna, so explained. “The lady you just met is the wife of the second son, not the son who’ll inherit this house one day. There are three families living here. Old Mr Hungerton and his wife, but she’s an invalid, poor lady, Mr Selwyn, the oldest son, and Mr Robert the middle son. The third son is serving in the Army in India.”

As they walked back down to the housekeeper’s room, Mrs Finch didn’t speak but when they were inside, she said very firmly to Gwynna. “You’ll behave yourself here or you’ll be out on your ear. No flirting with young men, let alone walking out with anyone.”

“No, Mrs Finch.” Gwynna guessed then that Essie had said something about her past and straightened her spine, stung by the housekeeper’s tone.

When she and Essie were alone on the train going back to Hedderby, she said in a flat voice, “You told them.”

“Just Mrs Finch and she told Mrs Robert. Such things have a way of coming out, so it’s better to start honestly, don’t you think?”

“They didn’t tell Nurse?”

“No. The fewer people know the better. It’s in the past now, love. You have to carry on.”

“So they won’t tell the rest of the servants?”

“No. Definitely not.”

Gwynna stared out of the window, not seeing the scenery this time, but reliving her visit to a grand person’s house, trying to make sense of all she had seen there. “They must be very rich.”

“They are. Old money too, not gained from trade.”

“Is that better?”

“They think it is. Consider themselves a cut above mill owners and lawyers and such.”

“It doesn’t seem fair to have so much money when some people are clemming for lack of food.” Gwynna could remember being hungry many a time.

“That’s what the world’s like—unfair.”

She nodded, accepting this because it was her own experience too. But she’d been lucky. Essie and Nev had helped her. Determination filled her to do well so that the Hungertons would want to keep her on. She owed it to Essie and Nev not to waste the chance they’d given her, but most of all she owed it to herself.

Then her face softened into a smile. Eh, but he was a bonny little lad, Master Peter was. It’d be a pleasure to look after him.

Lucas Kemp waited behind after work because Mr Hungerton’s land agent had sent a message that he wanted to see him. He put away the tools which belonged to the estate, setting them carefully in the big racks, and slid his own tools into the canvas pouch his mother had made for him when he first started his apprenticeship, rolling it up carefully and tying the strings. He never left his tools here, not even when he knew he’d be coming in early the next day. Some of them had been his grandfather’s and he was proud of them, didn’t want to risk losing them.

The foreman nodded to him. “Better go and see Mr Lester now.”

So Lucas picked up his pouch and walked across the yard, whistling under his breath, hardly feeling the cold that had other men wrapping sacks round their shoulders. He had to duck his head to enter the outer room where you waited to see the land agent.

“Is that you, Kemp?” Mr Lester called from the office before Lucas had time to sit on

the hard wooden bench. “Come straight in.”

He did as bidden, wondering why he’d been summoned.

“Put your tools over there then pull up a chair.”

Lucas studied the older man’s face as he sat down on the hard wooden chair. The land agent’s mouth was screwed up in that tight way he had when about to discuss something unpleasant, which was puzzling because Lucas knew he hadn’t done anything wrong. On the contrary, his work had recently drawn praise from old Mr Hungerton, because he could not only do the carpentry but the carving that was sometimes needed when they replaced rotten woodwork in the huge old house.

“I’ve—um—been speaking to Mr Hungerton. We’re all very pleased with your recent work, Kemp. Very pleased. You have a real feel for wood.” Mr Lester paused, seeming to have trouble finding words, then went on, “You’re twenty-four now, I believe?”

Lucas nodded, beginning to guess what this was about.

“Not married yet?”

“You know I’m not. I live with my parents.”

“Not walking out with a young woman, either, or I’d have heard about it.”

Silence. Lucas could feel the anger starting to build. They weren’t going to go on about that again, surely? He’d marry when he saw fit and not until.

“Mr Hungerton prefers the estate workers to be settled. He thinks family men are more reliable. We’ve spoken about this before.”

“And with respect, I’ll say again what I said then: I’ll get wed when I find someone I want to live with, not to suit my employer’s convenience.”

“It’s—um—not as easy as that. Mr Hungerton has strong views about this matter of young men marrying, very strong indeed. He’s given you extra time to settle down because you’re a good workman, but he feels you’re not playing fair by him. After all,

there are several unmarried lasses on the estate and . . . ”

“None of whom I fancy marrying, any more than I did when we last spoke.” What his employer really wanted, Lucas knew, was to bind him to the estate for ever. And he wasn’t having that.

Another silence, then Mr Lester said curtly, “In that case, you’d better find someone else to wed because I’ve been instructed to tell you that you must marry by the end of the second quarter if you wish to keep your job. There’s a cottage coming free at that time, which you can have. It’s a good one, three bedrooms, so you’ll be well set up.”

“Thank Mr Hungerton for his kind offer,” you had to say that sort of thing, Lucas thought, even though you’d like to toss the offer back in his face, “but I’m not marrying just for the sake of it.”

“I’m afraid he insists.”

“I’d better give my notice then, so that he won’t be upset by the sight or thought of me. Four weeks’ notice, isn’t it?” Lucas had the satisfaction then of seeing Mr Lester lost for words.

“But what will you do, where will you go? You won’t be able to stay on with your parents if you’ve upset Mr Hungerton, you surely realise that, Kemp.”

“I’ll have no trouble finding a job elsewhere. There’s always work for a good carpenter.” He saw the land agent look at him unhappily, open his mouth then shut it again. The silence seemed to go on for a long time, but Lucas didn’t give in, just waited him out.

“Not without references,” Mr Lester said at last, “and I’m afraid I’ve been instructed not to give you any if you refuse to do as he wishes.”

“I see.” Rage filled Lucas at this petty behaviour. “Then I shall have to manage without them, shan’t I?” He had his papers, showing he’d completed his apprenticeship.

No one could take those away from him. And if it took some time for him to find another job, then so be it. He'd always been careful with his money so he wouldn't starve.

"You won't find another job round here. You can be sure of that."

Because Mr Hungerton would spread the word not to hire him. Lucas shrugged, still managing to hold back his anger. "I'll go somewhere else then. I've always had a fancy to see a bit more of the world." He couldn't resist adding, "Even *he* can't blacken my name across the whole country."

"Kemp, *please* reconsider! Mr Hungerton is a very powerful man and he won't tolerate being defied."

Lucas knew then that he'd have trouble getting away. His master was indeed a generous employer, but only as long as you did exactly what he said and devoted your whole life to his service. If you defied him, he would use any trick in the book to get back at you, lawful or unlawful. Lucas had heard of another man accused of stealing, even when the goods he'd been arrested for were known to be his own. The man had received a light sentence from the local magistrate, who always did as Mr Hungerton wanted, and that had been enough to make the poor fellow toe the line from then on, grateful for his job and cottage.

Well, Lucas wouldn't bend on this matter, whatever they said or did to him. He'd no one depending on him and anyway, his mother always said he'd been born stubborn. They'd find out just how stubborn if they tried any of those tricks on him. He knew how unhappy his older brother was in his marriage—a marriage which had been strongly encouraged by the land agent. Every time he went round he heard his sister-in-law nagging and that had made him vow not to put his own head into parson's noose until he was good and ready.

“I shan’t change my mind, sir,” he said quietly but firmly, picked up his tool kit and left. As he looked down at it, he realised suddenly that even this could be used against him. The tools were of excellent quality, though old. They might have been his grandfather’s, but if Mr Hungerton said they belonged to the estate, who would contradict him?

He’d have to plan his escape very carefully, and escape wasn’t too strong a word to use. They would *not* make him stay here, let alone take a wife he didn’t want. But he hated the thought of having to sneak away like a thief in the night when he’d done nothing wrong.