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Friday's Girl

Charlotte Bingham

Chapter One

Just because you are poor does not mean that you are dirty, although it has to be said, soap never having been cheap, that you might have a bit of trouble keeping clean. Certainly no one could have felt the impact of dirt more than Edith that morning, and no one could have looked poorer. Indeed her skirt and blouse, her apron and cap, could not have felt more depressing to their wearer had they been prison clothing decorated with small distinguishing arrows. What was more, after the weekend the floor of that particular part of the Stag and Crown seemed to be inches thick in dirt from the street and spilled beer from the bar, not to mention pieces of dropped food; and at the edges of the tables and chairs lurked that worst of all worsts for the dedicated cleaner - grime.

Grime is not dust, not light and grey, but dark and slimy, and it is shifted with difficulty, as anyone who has tried to remove it knows. Luckily Edith had strong arms. They might not be thick and round like those of her stepmother, the second Mrs Hanson, and she might not have short, stubby fingers like hers, but since the time of her father's remarriage she had been set to work as a general dogsbody at the old coaching inn whose gardens bordered the rolling acres of Richmond Park. This meant that from the age of ten Edith's slender arms had been toughened year by year, until now, at the ripe old age of sixteen and a half, she found, perhaps unsurprisingly, that she could lift and shift with the best of them.

Not that she did not still always feel sickened by the state of the inn floor every Monday morning, not that she did not sometimes feel that she would like never to see a scrubbing brush or a pail of water ever again, of course not. A shining floor may be life-enhancing for those who tread across it, but it is rather less so for those who have the duty of cleaning it.

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This particular Monday morning, however, she felt even brighter than the piece of floor she had just scrubbed so dutifully. The reason for her inner exuberance was that she had risen an hour before the rest of the maids, and several hours before her stepmother, in order to steal out, all alone, into the royal park to enjoy the sight of the blossom, to embrace the air and to admire the deer moving stealthily between the old trees and across the carefully tended acres of what she considered to be a little piece of heaven, before bolting back to her duties.

'You're looking like the cat that got the cream. What you been up to, then?'

Edith had pretended not to hear the brewery man, and had run down the kitchen stairs with her bucket to fetch more clean water before she would be forced to tell the truth. For it was true, she knew that she did look happy. After all, who would not look happy after escaping into the park of a fine May morning, enjoying an hour away from the smell of stale ale and the heat of the cooking, not to mention the ever-present dread of hearing her stepmother's sharp voice?

The kitchens were alive with activity and steam, with large joints of meat being brought in on bare shoulders and huge pots being stirred, and maids running in and out with dishes from the dining rooms; and that was all before the hall boy started getting under everyone's feet because he was waiting for his well-earned rind of crispy bacon, and his cup of milk.

Edith ran to the scullery and then back through the kitchen, hoping that when she reached the upper rooms again the dreaded brewery man would be gone. None of the young maids liked the brewery man, for the good reason that he was notorious for taking more than a passing fancy to anyone who stood in his way for more than a few seconds.

Happily, as she walked cautiously into the main thoroughfare of the public rooms Edith saw at once that he was gone, and she had resumed her scrubbing before she heard something else: not the uneven gait of the departing brewery man, but the quick light step of someone she instinctively knew was different.

It was an iron rule at the Stag and Crown that none of the female servants were allowed to look customers in the face. This was because Edith's

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stepmother was quite sure that it led to nonsense, and Mrs Hanson always said that any nonsense from Edith, or anyone else, and they would all end up in the workhouse along with a great many of the others who had been dismissed from her service.

The continuous threat of the workhouse hung over the Stag and Crown in the same way as an early summer haze had hung over the park that morning, except that unlike the summer haze it never lifted to reveal beauty or serenity, only fear and panic. Nor was Edith, despite being the only daughter of the owner, able to escape it. She too felt the shadow of it, the fact of it, its cold welcome always waiting, almost a certainty, almost a reality, to those who did not work hard enough or long enough, who were impertinent, or did not realise their good fortune in being employed by Mrs Hanson at the Stag and Crown.

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