

Pauper's Gold

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Extract

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One

May, 1854

'We'll get rid of her. That girl's been nothing but trouble since she came in here.' Cedric Goodbody belied his name for there was nothing 'good' about the man. He was thin and wiry with a rat-like face. His grey eyes, sharp and piercing, missed nothing. His frown deepened. 'If I'd known what I know now, I'd never have admitted her. Her or her mother. The woman had the gall to refuse to pick oakum, on the grounds that she's a silk worker and the rough work might injure her hands.'

He drummed his fingers impatiently on the desk in front of him. The room around him was cluttered with files and ledgers. Papers were strewn over the surface of his desk and piled in untidy heaps on the floor. He was sitting in the only chair in the room. Any visitor – even his wife, Matilda – was obliged to stand. Hands folded in front of her, she was facing him now across his desk. She was no better than her husband. Thin and gaunt with a waspish tongue, she took a malicious delight in the misfortunes of others. Together – as master and matron – they ran the Macclesfield workhouse just within the rules laid down by the Board of Guardians, and outside them if they were sure they would not be found out.

'The girl's got spirit,' Matilda admitted grudgingly. 'I'll give her that. Nothing seems to depress her for long.'

'Can't you try punishing her? I'm sure you can find a reason,' Cedric growled. 'She's too pretty for her own good. That long, blonde hair and those bright blue eyes—'

'My word, Cedric, I've never known you to be so observant.' Matilda pursed her mouth.

Cedric ignored her sarcasm. 'But it's her singing all the time that gets on my nerves. I can't abide cheerful inmates. In all my years running workhouses, I've never known an inmate to *sing*!'

Matilda shrugged. 'There's no stopping her even when she's locked in the punishment room on bread and water.'

Cedric smiled cruelly. 'Well, I've an idea that'll put a stop to it. Critchlow's sent word he wants four more paupers. She can be one of them.'

Matilda raised her eyebrows. 'Is he *still* managing to keep that system going? I thought all the cotton mills'd given up having pauper apprentices.'

'Most of them have. With all the new laws about the employment of children, it was becoming uneconomic. But not for the Critchlows. Tucked away in that Derbyshire dale, they don't get many visits from the authorities. They just ignore any law that doesn't suit them. I'm just thankful they have carried it on. They've always been fair in their dealings with me.' He cast her a shrewd glance. He'd never actually told his wife about the money he received from the Critchlows in exchange for a steady supply of strong, healthy orphans to work long hours in their cotton mill. But he was sure she had guessed.

It seemed she had, for, 'You want to mind the Board don't find out,' was her tart reply.

'They won't as long as you don't tell 'em.' His eyes narrowed. 'There's only you 'n' me know about it. So watch that tongue of yours, woman.'

'But I thought Nathaniel Critchlow—'

'Oh, Nathaniel!' Cedric was scathing. 'I don't deal with him any more. He's getting past it. Going soft in his old age. No, it's Edmund—his son—I need to keep in with.'

'Well, you'll be sending him a barrel of trouble with that girl. Besides, I don't reckon the mother'll let you send young Hannah all the way into Derbyshire.' Matilda smirked. 'Whatever fine tales you tell her about how wonderfully her daughter will be looked after and taught a trade that'll be the making of her.'

'The mother'll have nothing to do with it. If I say the girl goes . . . ' Cedric banged his clenched fist on the desk and papers fluttered to the floor, 'then she goes. She's young and strong. Just the sort Critchlow wants.' He ran his tongue around his thin lips, greedily anticipating another generous payment.

'Maybe,' Matilda murmured. 'But she's not bid-dable. She's a mite too much to say for herself.'

'Edmund Critchlow's got his methods of taming the wilful ones. He's got a punishment room just like us.'

Matilda sniffed. 'Well then, young Hannah will likely be spending most of her time there.'

The subject of their conversation was at that moment working in the laundry. Little light penetrated the filthy windows, and the huge room was filled with steam and the sharp smell of disinfectant. Three other girls and two older women besides Hannah toiled over the wash tubs. Their hands were wrinkled from the

hot water, their faces red and their clothes drenched with sweat. Hannah was hanging dripping clothes onto the slats of a wooden rack, which she then hoisted to the ceiling for the clothes to dry. Above the noise of the sloshing water, Hannah's voice trilled pure and clear. 'How sweet the name of Jesus sounds . . .'

'Ah, bless 'er,' one of the women at the tubs murmured. 'That was me mother's favourite. Eh, but it brings back the memories.'

Rebecca, Hannah's mother, looked up worriedly. 'I'm sorry if it upsets you. I'll tell her to stop—'

'Don't you dare. You let your little girl sing,' Alice answered. 'I might shed a tear or two, but me memories're happy ones. I'll tell you summat, Rebecca. She brightens our days with her sunny smile and her merry singing. Come on,' she raised her voice. 'Let's all sing. Let's show 'em . . .'

And in a raucous, tuneless voice she joined in the words of the hymn.

Rebecca shook her head in wonderment and smiled softly, marvelling at the way her twelve-year-old daughter could spread even the smallest spark of joy in this cheerless place. There were few occasions in the workhouse when the inmates felt like smiling – some had almost forgotten how. But since Rebecca and her daughter had arrived, there'd been more smiles and fond shaking of heads than ever before, as they heard Hannah's piping voice echoing through the vast building. She led the other youngsters in games in the women's exercise yard and, for a few minutes each day, she made them forget the drudgery and misery of their lives. With her blue eyes full of mischief and daring, the young girl had become the darling of all the inmates. For, though the men and boys were strictly segregated from the women and girls, they

could still hear her over the wall from their yard, could hear the sound of playful laughter.

The women in the laundry room were startled into silence by a loud banging and only Hannah was left singing at the top of her voice.

'That's enough, girl,' the matron snapped, grasping Hannah's arm in a painful grip. 'The master wants to see you.'

'Why?' Hannah ceased her singing and dropped the rough blanket she was washing back into the tub. It splashed soapy suds onto the matron's pristine apron. Matilda shook the girl roughly. 'Now look what you've done. My word, I'll be glad to see the back of you.'

Hannah's eyes shone. 'We're leaving? Mam,' she called, 'we're getting out. We—'

'Not your mother, just you.'

Hannah's eyes widened. 'Oh no, I'm not going without me mam.'

'You'll do as you're told.'

Drying her hands on a piece of rough cloth, Rebecca came towards them. 'What is it, Matron?' she asked in her soft, gentle voice.

Before Matilda could reply, Hannah said, 'She says the master wants to see me. I'm leaving. Just me, not you. But I'm not going without you, Mam, I—'

The matron gave an exasperated sigh. 'You'd better both come along to his office. He can deal with the pair of you.'

Moments later, mother and daughter stood before the master's desk, but it was the young girl who fired the questions. 'Has someone come for us? Is it me Uncle Bill?'

Cedric smiled cynically. 'And which uncle might

that be?' He leered at Rebecca, standing quietly beside her daughter. 'I expect you had a lot of them, didn't you?'

The older woman blushed and hung her head, but Hannah's clear, innocent gaze darted between them. 'No,' she retorted. 'I've only one uncle. He's not me real uncle—'

'I bet he isn't,' Cedric muttered.

'He lived next door to us. He and me Auntie Bessie—'

'Hush, Hannah dear,' Rebecca said softly, touching the girl's arm. 'Let the master tell us.'

Hannah pressed her lips together, but her blue eyes still sparkled with indignation.

Cedric shuffled some papers in front of him. 'I've found the girl a position working in a cotton mill in Derbyshire. A lot of the youngsters go from here.' He stared hard at Rebecca, daring her to argue. 'She'll be well looked after, I assure you.'

Hannah spoke up again. 'What about me mam? Is she coming an' all?'

'No, there's no place for an older woman. At least, not ones with no experience.' He glanced at Rebecca again. 'You haven't worked in a mill before, have you?'

'Only in a silk mill here.'

'That'd be near enough, wouldn't it?' Hannah put in before the master could answer.

Cedric glowered. 'No, it wouldn't. Not the same thing at all.'

She opened her mouth to retort but Cedric held up his hand. 'I don't want to hear another word from you, girl. And if you take my advice, you'll learn to curb that runaway tongue of yours. It'll get you into a

lot of trouble where you're going, if you're not careful.'

For once, Rebecca dared to question the master. 'I thought you said she'd be well treated?'

'She will – if she behaves herself. Mr Critchlow, the owner of the mill, is a good master, but he expects loyalty and obedience from *all* his workers.'

Rebecca bit her lip. 'I don't want her to go. She's too young to go all that way.'

'You have no say in the matter.' Cedric's lip curled. 'If you and your – er – offspring . . .' he laid insulting emphasis on the word, implying so much more, 'allow yourselves to become a burden on the parish, you have to pay the price. You're no longer free to decide your own future. You'll do what the Board of Guardians tells you. And they always take my recommendations.'

Again, Rebecca hung her head.

Cedric turned to Hannah. 'You're to be ready to leave tomorrow morning. You'll be going on the carrier's cart as far as Buxton and then he'll arrange for you and the others to be taken on to Wyedale Mill.'

It was an arrangement that had worked well for Cedric in the past. For a few coins the carrier would take the orphans part of the way and then pay a local carter to take them the few extra miles.

'Others?' Hannah piped up again. 'Who else is going?'

Cedric stood up, dismissing them curtly. 'You'll see in the morning. Just you mind you're ready and waiting.'

Two

It irritated Cedric Goodbody that he knew little more about Rebecca Francis and her daughter than he had on the day they'd knocked on the door of the workhouse and begged admittance. Rebecca was a quiet, reserved young woman, well liked by the other inmates and staff yet not forthcoming about her life before that day.

It was shame that stilled Rebecca's tongue. The humiliation of entering the workhouse lay heavily on her. Once, she too had laughed and sung – just like her lively, innocent daughter did now – but then she'd made the mistake of falling in love and everything had changed.

Rebecca had been born in a street of garret houses, three storeys high, occupied by weavers. Her father, Matthew, had his workroom in the top storey, its long window giving him light to carry on the trade of his father before him. Her mother, Grace, had worked in a silk mill. Though the family – like every other family around them – had suffered the ups and downs of the silk trade, Rebecca's young life had been a happy one. When her parents had married they'd lived with Matthew's widowed mother, and when Rebecca was born one year later Grandma Francis had looked after the infant whilst Grace returned to work in the mill.

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At ten years old, Rebecca went to work eight hours a day in the mill.

'Hello there, young 'un,' James Gregory, the man who was the supervisor over the workforce of women and children, had greeted her. 'Going to be as good a worker as your mother, are yer?'

Rebecca, with her shy, brown eyes, her soft dark hair hidden beneath her bonnet, had nodded, gazing up at him in awe. James had bent down and touched her cheek. 'Don't be afraid of me, young 'un.' Gently he'd traced his finger round the outline of her face. 'You're far too pretty to be afraid of anyone.'

From that moment, Rebecca had been James Gregory's willing slave. She idolized him. Through the years as she grew, the other women teased her. 'Mr Gregory's little sweetheart, ain'tcha? But just remember, girl, he's got a wife at home and there's a little 'un on the way.'

By the time Rebecca was fifteen she had the shape and demeanour of a woman. Working alongside adults all day long – women who talked and laughed and joked, and who didn't trouble to curb their raucous tongues before the youngsters in their midst – Rebecca could not be ignorant of the facts of life. She knew full well that it was wrong to meet James Gregory in secret, knew it was dangerous to give herself to him.

But Rebecca was hopelessly, helplessly in love with James's blond, curling hair and merry blue eyes. He was tall and broad shouldered, with slim hips, and he carried himself proudly as if he truly believed he was destined for better things. Rebecca was utterly, selflessly loyal to him and when, inevitably, she found herself carrying his child, she refused to name him as the father. Gossip was rife through the mill, but Rebecca stubbornly refused to blame anyone but

herself. When her daughter, Hannah, screamed her arrival into the cramped bedroom of the terraced house, there was no loving father present to welcome her, only a reluctant grandmother. Even the grandfather had disappeared to the nearest pub to be with his cronies and to try to blot out all thought of his daughter's shame. Tactfully, his friends asked no questions. What was going on in Matthew's home at that moment was women's business.

Overcrowded and at times a hotbed of gossip though the houses in their street might be, there was nevertheless a deep sense of neighbourliness, of protecting their own. As news of her arrival spread quickly, there was soon a constant stream of visitors at the door. Some bore gifts, others came just to see the child and the young mother, yet more with an excuse to wet the baby's head.

'She's a bonny 'un,' was the unanimous verdict. But, tactfully, they made no comment on the child's wispy blonde hair and bright blue eyes. Only amongst themselves, they nodded their heads and said, 'No mistaking whose kid she is.'

Kept in ignorance, Hannah's early life was happy. She lived in the close-knit community, was protected by it, too young to remember when her grandfather, Matthew, died only three years after her birth. Rebecca's wage now supported them, with a little help from the work Grace was able to do at home. Their landlord rented out Matthew's garret workroom to another weaver. For a while, Grace and Rebecca were terrified they would be turned out of their home. Thankfully, the weaver lived elsewhere and was happy to walk the couple of streets to his new workroom.

Of Hannah's father not a word was ever spoken.

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Not until she was old enough to play in the street with the other children did she begin to understand the circumstances of her birth. Slowly, it dawned on her why her surname was the same as her mother's and her grandmother's. Cruel names were hurled at her and sometimes she found herself excluded from the other children's games. Hannah would toss her bright curls and smile at those taunting her. And beneath her breath she would sing to comfort herself. Little by little, she won them over and when the day came that her mother and grandmother insisted she should attend school, it was now the children from her own street who defended her against curious strangers.

The first really harsh blow to disturb her childhood came when Hannah was eight years old. Her grandmother, Grace, was taken ill with distressing sickness and diarrhoea and terrible leg cramps. Rebecca stayed at home from work to nurse her mother but after only three days Grace died. After a simple funeral attended by their neighbours, Rebecca and Hannah returned to the home that now seemed empty and soulless without the old lady who had been its centre.

'I'll have to go back to work,' Rebecca said in her soft voice. 'I'll see if Auntie Bessie next door will take care of you.'

'I can take care of meself, Mam,' Hannah had declared stoutly, but Rebecca had shaken her head. 'No, no, I won't have you left alone. Bessie won't mind.' Rebecca had smiled gently. 'She'll never notice another one amongst her brood.'

So Hannah had become a daily visitor to the overcrowded house next door where Bill and Bessie Morgan, their three sons and two daughters lived. The Morgan children were all older than Hannah but

they took the lonely child in and treated her as if she were another sister. Peggy, the youngest at twelve, was the closest in age, but even she was already working at the mill. Bill and two of his sons worked in the top floor garret of the house and Bessie had her hands full caring for them all.

‘‘Course she can come to us. She can ’elp me with me washing,’ Bessie had said at once when Rebecca tentatively broached the subject. It was from Bessie Morgan, who sang all day long in her loud, tuneless voice, that Hannah, amongst the soap suds and steam of the back yard wash house, was to learn the words of all the hymns.

‘We’ll mind her,’ Bessie had promised. ‘You get back to your work, Rebecca, while you’ve still got a job to go to.’ She had cast a knowing look at Rebecca, and the younger woman had felt the flush of embarrassment creep up her neck.

In the uncertain silk industry, Rebecca had kept her place at the mill even through hard times when many had been laid off. She was well aware it was whispered that it was only because she was James Gregory’s mistress that she had kept her job. And, in a way, Rebecca had to admit that it was true. Whilst he’d never openly admitted to being the father of her child – and Rebecca maintained her steadfast silence – James Gregory had always made sure she’d a job at the mill. And though she was no longer his mistress – hadn’t been from the day he’d learned she was pregnant – he still favoured her, much to the irritation of the other workers. If she was feeling tired or unwell, he’d find her easier work. He allowed her time off – with no questions asked – if Hannah was ill. The other women grumbled, but there was little they could do about it

other than to ostracize Rebecca. It was a lonely time for the young woman but she stuck it out. She'd no choice – hers was the only income her family had.

Hannah's time with the Morgan family was short lived. Life swiftly dealt Rebecca another harsh blow. In less than a year, James Gregory had left the mill. She had heard the news from the gossip that rippled amongst the mill workers.

'Ave you 'eard, 'ee's got himself another fancy piece. Daughter of a mill owner, no less. And her father's made him manager of one of his mills.'

'What about his wife and family? Gregory's married, ain't he?'

'Oh, didn't you know? His wife and kiddie died with the cholera last year. So he's fancy-free.'

'Is 'ee, by God! So, he's not marrying that girl – what's 'er name?'

'Rebecca Francis. Oh no. 'Ee's set his sights higher than 'er. And let me tell you something else. Once 'ee's gone from here, that little madam 'ad better watch out.'

And soon after James's departure, Rebecca was told that her 'services were no longer required at the mill'.

For a few months, she managed to pay the rent, though she grew thinner from worry and tramping the streets in search of work. By the January of 1851 there was no food in the house, no fuel to keep them warm, their winter clothes had been pawned, and she was hiding when the rent man called. Two months later, Rebecca and her young daughter were evicted from their home.

The workhouse was the only place they could go.