The Keepsake

Sheelagh Kelly

Published by HarperCollins

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HarperCollins*Publishers*
77–85 Fulham Palace Road,
Hammersmith, London W6 8JB

www.harpercollins.co.uk

This paperback edition 2006
1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

First published in Great Britain by
HarperCollins*Publishers* 2006

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A catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library

ISBN 13 978 0 00 721155 5
ISBN 10 0 00 721155 4

Typeset in Sabon by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
Polmont, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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1

Marty Lanegan was skylarking his way along a corridor of the grandest hotel in York, lolloping like an ape for the entertainment of a workmate to have him double up in laughter, when his antics were stalled by a furious argument. Abandoning his audience, he paused to listen and to grin at the choice insults which jarred with this Edwardian elegance, that were hurled like clubs between father and daughter. He knew this to be the relationship for he had witnessed the arrival of the scowling but very handsome young lady and her papa late yesterday afternoon, and had opined to the rest of the staff that she looked a proper handful.

'You mean you'd like a handful,' the page had leered.

Well, that was no lie. She was the most stunning girl Marty had ever seen: hence his unusual keenness for work this morning. He was about to put his eye to the keyhole when the door opened, forcing him to leap back or be bullocked aside by the angry gentleman on the point of exit.

The boot boy sought to explain his proximity. 'I've just come to check if there's any shoes need cleaning, sir!'

This was met by suspicion, the man's cane held at a threatening angle. 'Somewhat late in the day for that, isn't it?' It was well after breakfast.

Marty's reply displayed just the right blend of courtesy

and helpfulness, delivered with the faintest lilt of Irish brogue. 'Some guests forget to leave them out, sir, so I make constant trips up here. I like to provide good service.'

'If it was that good you'd be aware that you've already done ours,' growled the man, who, with his bearded face, corpulent build and eyes that bulged with rage, was the spitting image of the King, though his manner was anything but royal. Ramming on his bowler and shoving the cane under his arm, he turned his back on the servant, locked the door and marched to the stairs, but not before both he and Marty heard the sound of a heavy object hitting wood.

Struggling to contain his mirth, the boot boy appeared to go obediently on his way. But a crafty glance over his shoulder told him that the other had descended and, upon hearing noisy sobs, he crept back to employ the keyhole. Maybe he could be the one to comfort her . . .

They were not the feeble kind of tears but loud wails interspersed with frustrated yelps and thuds, as if she were punching some substitute for the one who had angered her. He was still bent over trying to catch a glimpse of anything other than the bedroom wallpaper, when someone nipped his trim, uniformed buttock, shocking him upright.

The culprit stifled a giggle as her victim swivelled in dread. 'What're you up to, Bootsie?'

'Ye daft mare!' He scolded the chambermaid in a forced whisper, and then grabbed her to tussle and tickle her, chuckling good-naturedly. 'I thought 'twas her daddy come back.'

Annoyed to learn that his attention was for another woman, Joanna's laughter dissipated in a blunt Yorkshire response. 'You lecher! Spying on that swanky lass – I might have known!'

'I'm just checking she's all right, that's all!' The tone was innocent, but the cheeky sparkle in Marty's eyes showed otherwise. 'They were going hammer and tongs at each other and then he left in a hurry and locked her in.' Keeping

his voice low, and oblivious to Joanna's jealousy, he shoved his cap to the back of his head and bent to the keyhole again. 'Maybe he hit her – she's still bawlin'.'

Smarting over his ignorance of her own feelings, Joanna hissed, 'Why don't you just knock and find out?' And with that she rapped briskly on the door before hastening away with her trolley, leaving him to panic.

He was set to run but the occupant was already at the door, her crying stopped and her voice eager with enquiry. 'Who's there?'

Still unnerved by Joanna's action, Marty gave rapid apology through the barrier. 'Sorry, miss, I didn't mean to distur—'

'Don't go!' Her entreaty was swift but polite, its melodic tone permeating the wood to spellbind him. 'Could you possibly help? My father's gone out and taken the key in error. I'm locked in.'

Marty knew it was no error. He would be in deep trouble if he got involved in this. 'I'm only the boots, Miss er –' He broke off, not privy to her name. But her voice sounded lovely, stroked him persuasively as she begged again.

'Oh please! Couldn't you find a spare key and let me out?'

Wanting to assist, his face contorted with indecision, he glanced along the corridor to where a bad-tempered Joanna was darting in and out of a room changing the bed linen. She would have a key. Still, he dithered for a second, playing with his chin. Why had the girl's father locked her in? It was too impertinent to ask, but he did not like the man who, gentlemanly attire or no, looked an arrogant brute. Thus decided, he straightened his cap and said, 'Hang on, miss, I'll just go see what I can do.'

Hurrying to accost the maid he explained the situation. 'We have to help her, Jo.'

'I don't *have* to do anything!' Edging her way past him to gather dirty linen, Joanna remained cross, white petticoats

frothing under the sober dress as she marched to and fro.

Marty tried to cajole sympathy, leaning his attractive head close to her plain one and nudging her arm suggestively. 'I always took you for a kind soul. How would you feel if your da locked you in against your will? Bet you'd want me to come and rescue you.'

For once his rough-diamond charm was lost. Ignoring the smell of buttermilk soap, those kind eyes, the winning smile, Joanna condemned him as a faithless friend. 'It's not my dad, it's hers, and we shouldn't get involved unless we want to lose our jobs!' She stamped off with her bundle of sheets.

Thwarted, Marty grimaced and returned to apologise to the prisoner. 'Sorry, miss, I tried to get a key off the maid but she wouldn't be involved.'

There came a snort of frustration that condemned him as useless and the sound of a body slumping to the carpet. Squinting through the keyhole he caught a wisp of dark hair against the backdrop of pastel wallpaper. 'Maybe your father won't be long.'

Her reply was dull. 'He'll be out all morning.'

Upon learning this, Marty relaxed somewhat to enjoy the romantic notion that he was helping a damsel in distress. He was intrigued to know why she had been locked in, and difference in status had not prevented him from flirting with female guests before, given the encouragement. Some ladies found him attractive, though heaven knew why; personally he saw a gypsy when he looked in the mirror, a face that lacked the finely chiselled features he himself admired, with eyes that were somewhere between grey and green. When he was happy they appeared green, when sad they were grey – that was, if one could see them under those heavy lids. His hair was of a nondescript colour too; one might be kind and call it brown but it was the insipid brown of dried winter undergrowth and its texture similarly wiry, so that whenever he removed his hat it sprang back into place like trampled

grass, no amount of oil able to control it. He disliked everything about his looks. Still, to his favour he had decent teeth and was taller than average, and he had learned that charm compensated for any other lack of attribute.

Leaning against the door, he voiced a bold and teasing statement. 'Your father took the key on purpose, didn't he?'

There was a pregnant pause, then the glint of an eye as she tried to assess her impudent Samaritan through the aperture.

Marty felt no need to apologise, but did offer an explanation as to how he had guessed. 'I saw him leave. He seemed quite aggrieved.'

She fixed her glittering dark eye to his green one.

Concerned that he might have overstepped the mark, he added quickly. 'I hung around 'cause I felt worried about you.'

'Did you, really?' She sounded grateful.

Encouraged, Marty prolonged the bizarre method of conversation. 'It's remiss of me to have to ask, miss, but could you tell me whom I have the pleasure of addressing?'

'I'm Henrietta Ibbetson.'

When he did not automatically introduce himself in return, she prompted, 'So, who are you?'

'Oh, like I said, I'm only the boots, miss.' The quality of her voice had him glued to the keyhole. If the hotel manager himself had come round the corner Marty could not have torn himself away.

'You must have a name.'

'I'm flattered you're even interested, miss.' Marty grinned to himself – that's right, lay it on thick.

'Why, naturally I am!'

'Thank you, miss. It's Martin Lanegan.'

'Martin, I'd love to see you, but even with this unyielding timber between us I can tell by your voice that you're a very kind person, very likeable.'

His belly tightened at the artlessly seductive tone.

'And that's why I feel confident in throwing myself upon your mercy.'

I'd like to throw myself on you, thought Marty, imagining the gorgeous creature on the other side of the door, but he said, throatily polite, 'I'll do what I can.'

'Might you perhaps find a key at the reception desk?'

The lascivious thoughts vanished. He gasped at the very suggestion. 'That's more than my life's worth, miss! If you're not here when your father comes back –'

'But I will be! I *swear* it. It's not that I wish to run away, but that I don't care to be caged like an animal.'

He endured mental argument, desperate to ingratiate himself but not so keen as to risk dismissal. 'I know it's none of my affair, Miss Ibbetson, but why did he lock you up?'

There was a slight pause whilst Henrietta wondered how much to divulge. He was, after all, just a lowly employee. But it was essential that she lure him to her side. How else was she to keep the arranged rendezvous with her beau at King's Cross?

Keeping this latter part to herself, she injected her sigh with feeling and made a half-confession. 'My father plans to marry me off to an individual of his choosing, a man I find utterly loathsome.' Her tone endorsed this revulsion. 'Two days ago I ran away to my aunt's in London . . .' It had been during her escapade that she had met a more promising match, one who, upon hearing her story, had vowed to help. She should have gone with him there and then but had thought it wiser to go to her aunt's and to meet him in a few days' time. '. . . but she betrayed me and Father came to take me home. We arrived too late in York to continue our journey so he booked us in here. He hasn't let me out of his sight other than to sleep and to breakfast. He's killing two birds with one stone by attending some business whilst in the city. We're to catch the afternoon train home. At which point I shall be condemned.'

But if this dolt would only comply she could be well on her way to her assignation at King's Cross before her father even returned. 'I'd be eternally grateful, Martin, if you could find it in your heart to assist.'

Enthralled that his name had never sounded so wonderful than on these lips, Marty came alive to make a bold decision. 'I'll be quick as I can!'

A gleeful Henrietta gave herself a congratulatory squeeze.

It was no small task Marty had set himself, for the sentinel on the desk was as keen as Cerberus at guarding his post. Much subterfuge and the assistance of another colleague was required to lure him away and for the boot boy to make his daring foray, knowing that if he were caught with the key he would be sacked without reference. The reward, however, was immeasurable.

The brief preview he had had of Miss Ibbetson could not have prepared him for the full magnificence. Upon his excited entrance to the suite he was dealt a vision of pink candy-striped organdie, a tantalising glimpse of bare skin through a diaphanous sleeve, a figure as sumptuously upholstered as the room that was normally forbidden to him . . . Yet it was not any rich accoutrement that so enchanted. The eyes that had been but a glint through a keyhole now totally impaled him, transfixed him to the expensive carpet that his feet were not permitted to sully, as glittering and radiant as lighted coals in a face that brimmed with intelligence – even though at this minute she was gawping at him like some yokel.

Henrietta caught her breath. She had been poised, hat in hand, ready to flee, but upon seeing Martin there came a surge of every corpuscle in her veins, like a spring tide, which swept away all the repressive debris of her previous existence and brought her so overwhelmingly alive that she feared she might choke upon this ecstasy. All reason suspended, utterly immobile with shock, she let the hat fall,

unable to perform any task other than to stare at him, totally oblivious that her jaw was hanging open.

A brief awkwardness ensued, arising not from difference in rank but from the palpable desire that exuded from both, each embarrassed at having been caught so unawares.

Normally self-assured, Henrietta fought the constriction in her throat and tried to thank him for liberating her, but found herself stricken dumb. The way he was looking at her, his eyelids droopy as if on the verge of slumber, but the look within them tugging at her abdomen, igniting all manner of extraordinary feelings . . .

Marty noted that she seemed in no hurry to escape now; her eyes still adhered to his face. Something had occurred to change her mind. He could only hope that she felt the same thrilling emotions that bound him captive. What in God's name was happening here?

Eventually breaking free of his trance, suddenly self-conscious under her probing gaze, only now did he think to whip off his cap before enquiring, 'What will you do now, miss?'

Henrietta watched the masculine fingers remove the cap, the springy hair beneath, her eyes fixed to the sensual bow of his mouth though barely hearing the words it uttered, whilst her own murmured vaguely, 'What?' Then, suddenly aware she had been holding her breath, she exhaled on a note of laughter, a happy sound that rippled his belly with its exquisiteness. 'Oh . . . I haven't the slightest idea!' Her plan abandoned, she had forgotten all about the one she had promised to meet, indeed could not even recall what he looked like – certainly not so desirable as this green-eyed young man before her. Oh, he was lovely. *Lovely!* Ignoring the uniform that labelled him minion, her gaze pored over him, constantly lured back to those eyes, which promised kindness yet at the same time danger.

Marty echoed her affectionate laughter and the two stood admiring each other for a while, before she said with a

smiling shrug by way of explanation, 'I'm just desperate to escape.'

Until these words, both of them had forgotten her irate father. Misreading her companion's hasty grab for the doorknob and his expression as one of self-concern, she prompted him, though not without a tinge of disappointment. 'Yes, it's unwise to let him find you here! I'm truly grateful for your assistance but I should hate for you to lose your job.'

But instead of running away as she had feared, Marty shut the door from the inside and leaned with his back to it, a triumphant twinkle in his eye. Secure that his feelings were reciprocated, his reply was gallant. 'It'd be worth it. I'm not worried for meself, but for you.'

Her beam was so radiantly affectionate that he wanted to snatch her in his arms, to press the whole length of his body against hers. But that would have been just too brazen. Besides, enough was happening in his trousers already. If that was what she could do to him merely by looking . . .

He mirrored her smile then strolled over to the window, tapping his cap against his leg and appearing to take an interest in the view, though his thoughts were still consumed by the girl behind him. 'It's inhuman to treat anyone in such a fashion – outdated too.' For heaven's sake, they were four years into the twentieth century. 'Most fathers are very particular when it comes to the one who marries their daughter,' briefly, he pictured his own wedded sisters, 'but they usually take account of her feelings on the matter.'

Henrietta wandered over to stand beside the tall figure, her eyes staring out across the beautifully laid-out grounds in full flower, and beyond the river to the Minster that dominated the city, its ancient pinnacles etched against a summer sky. Considering the hotel's juxtaposition with the railway this room was very quiet. She wondered if Martin could hear the rapid thudding of her heart. 'There my father differs, I'm afraid.' Her face was less vibrant now, her tone

hollow. 'For he sets his entire store on my brother, John; he places no value on my opinions at all.'

Electrified by her proximity, angry on her behalf, Marty tightened his grip on the cap, whacked it against a piece of furniture. 'Then the man's not only cruel but blind and stupid.' That was audacious indeed.

But Henrietta did not appear to judge it thus, merely dealing him a smile that was both sad and happy at the same time, and saying with feeling, 'It's the worst thing in the world to be bullied, don't you feel? Not that someone of your physical stature would be troubled by that, of course.'

Marty bared his white teeth with a rueful chuckle. 'You don't know my superior.'

Dazzled by his smile, she matched it. Henrietta had never made any distinction between the ranks. Just because someone was forced to do menial work did not lower them in her estimation. 'I suppose we all have someone above us. May one ask how old you are?'

Considering her own mature appearance, Marty added fifteen months to his age. 'I'm twenty-one.'

She looked wistful. 'So in all things that count you are your own man. You could walk out and find employment elsewhere, go wherever you choose. There are four more years before I come of age – not that it would matter, I should still be at that despot's command.'

Shamed by her truthfulness, he admitted, 'Well, as a matter of fact I've a few months to go yet – but it wouldn't make a difference what age I was either, Mr Wilkinson would still dub me a shirker.' He grinned impishly. 'Maybe I am or I wouldn't be up here dallying with you.'

'Well, I'm very glad you are – here, I mean.' Now perched on a dressing stool, her eyes having abandoned the landscape in favour of her attractive companion, Henrietta marvelled at how easily she could converse with him. 'Tell me more about yourself.'

'I'd hate to delay your escape.'

'We've ages yet. Have you always been a boots?'

'God forbid!' He was delighted by the fact that she had said *we*, as if they were going together. 'I've only been here a year or so. It was a drop in station from my last job, but I'd had that since leaving school at fourteen and was going nowhere, so I decided there was a better chance of promotion in a hotel. It's hard to put your heart into cleaning boots but I intend to work my way up. I was joking about being a shirker by the way.'

'Of course,' affirmed Henrietta. 'But you must have enjoyed your last job if you had it for five, six years?'

He was about to correct her then remembered he had already said he was nearly twenty-one and fobbed her off with a quick, 'Thereabouts – but these are lovelier surroundings. York's a grand place, isn't it? I wasn't born here ye know.'

'I'd never have guessed.' Her eyes teased.

'That obvious, eh?' Marty pretended to be crushed. 'And here's me thinking I'd got rid of the accent.'

'Oh, don't ever lose it!' she begged him. 'It's so pleasant on the ear.'

'Some folk would disagree. There's many can't stand the Irish.' He paused to weigh his words before adding a confession. 'Especially if they're tinkers to boot. Ach, now I've told ye. We only came to live in a house after me grandparents died.'

'How romantic!'

Comforted by her reaction, he chuckled. 'Not what some would say. The insults I've suffered . . .'

Her face oozed sympathy, then she turned slightly sober. 'Well, that's something we share, although I doubt the insults come from your own father.'

Marty was about to make a joke but saw it was not the time. 'I'd like to think you get on better with your mother.'

'Hardly – well, that's a lie, we are really quite at ease when we are permitted to be on our own. Unfortunately

that's a rare occurrence. *He* is always there to spoil it.' She looked wistful. 'The trouble is, Mother's a very weak person. That might sound harsh, but it's something I learned very early in life from studying the way she bent to his will, even to the detriment of her children – well, not so much John for he was Father's favourite, but in my case . . .' Henrietta moved her head slowly from side to side, then from her lips poured a torrent of information on her childhood, injustices she had suffered, her feelings on these and on her family, to which Marty listened mesmerised.

'Far from issuing words in my defence,' went on Henrietta, 'Mother saw me as the defiant one, begged me to take what she saw as the easy path instead of fighting his regime. Not once have I seen her stand up to him, not even when he dismissed dear old Nanny, the person who really was more of a mother to me, who raised me from a babe . . .' She scowled in memory of that awful crime. 'It's so long ago but his callousness infuriates me still. He said she wasn't required any more; sent her packing without a care that some of us might love –' Verging on tears, she broke off in mid-sentence to disguise her emotions with a giggle. 'I can't believe I'm confiding all this to a total stranger!'

'*You* can't?' One lithe buttock resting on the dressing table, Marty leaned towards her and laughed even more heartily, relaxing into his normal mode of speech. 'I can't believe I'm eejit enough to ruin me chances with the most beautiful girl I ever met by telling her I'm from a family of tinkers.'

'Oh, but surely they can't be classified as such!' Henrietta reached out quickly to press his arm, the gesture loaded with affection, before it was just as quickly withdrawn.

Wanting to grab her too, despite his enthralment Marty shrewdly divined that his comment on her beauty had gone undisputed, though there was no hint of arrogance in her

manner and, as one with no belief in his own attractiveness, he envied her that.

'You did say they live in a house these days,' she reminded him.

'Aye, for seven, eight years or so.' Might he have laid the romantic gypsy thing on a bit too thick? He spoke more truthfully now. 'I suppose we were never strictly part of that community anyway, we tended to travel alone, though I can't deny it was the rover's life. Back and forth twixt Ireland and Yorkshire. As a nipper ye kind o' get sick of it, moving round different schools and the like. I was glad when Da settled for the buffer's life.' Rubbing the edge of the dressing table, he studied the hand that rested temptingly close to his, then exclaimed, 'Eh, don't let on to anyone here, will you? I've never told a soul – man nor woman nor beast.'

'Then I shan't either. But even if they still dwelt in a caravan it wouldn't make any difference about the way I feel towards you.' She herself saw beyond the gypsy, detected some indescribable quality of spirit.

'Wouldn't it?' His green eyes shone and his question was superfluous; had he thought it would affect their miraculous rapport he would never have used the approach. Boldly, he grabbed her hand. 'That's such a relief. I just wanted you to know everything about me so's you're fully aware of what you're getting into.' It was a gross presumption but one that he was confident to make and that Henrietta would accept.

She shook her head in happy amazement, her little pearl earrings trembling. 'It's so strange but I feel as if I already know everything there is to know – as if we've been acquainted for years!'

'I feel like that too,' declared Marty, his eyes running over her dark tresses – the only coarse thing about her – that were swept up at the front and fastened in an elegant twist to frame pale symmetrical features. She reminded him

of a ballerina in a painting he had once seen. 'Or is it all my imagination? 'Cause I can't for the life of me believe a girl as lovely as you could bring herself even to talk to me.'

Something flickered over Henrietta's face. The light went out of her eyes as they retreated under dark lashes. 'You seem to set great store by my appearance –'

Not yet realising that her mood had changed, he laughed and butted in. 'Well, if you've been taking the ugly pills I can tell you they're not working.'

But she would not look up at him. '– because that's the second reference you've made to it.'

Taken aback at her sudden coolness, Marty cocked his head and studied her pose for a second, wondering why his intended praise had for some strange reason inflicted huge displeasure. 'Begging your pardon, but what's so wrong with that?' Having sisters, he was not inexperienced in the ways of females, was aware that their moods could turn from honey to vitriol at the drop of a hat, but never had he known one who eschewed compliments.

Eyes still downcast, Henrietta picked at her satin skirt and took a deep breath. 'I've just poured out my heart telling you of the lack of regard my father has for me, yet you –' She broke off, angry and hurt at having her joy ruined so quickly.

Still frowning and totally confused as to how a remark on her beauty could be so misconstrued, Marty was desperate to make things right but did not know how. What did her father have to do with this? Then, as he continued to stare at her forlorn figure, his heart plunging from its former heights to hang like a leaden pendulum in his chest, he was suddenly granted a deeper understanding of this beautiful creature. Confident she might be in her looks, but the years of parental neglect had left Henrietta with the assumption that she was worthless for anything other than to adorn the house of some magnate, to be used as bargaining power for her father's gain. His heart went out

to her and he cupped her hand gently in both of his. 'Of *course* I think you're gorgeous, and I can't deny that was the thing which first attracted me – but it's not the only thing – and I don't mean your clothes or your wealth.'

'My father's wealth,' she reminded him.

'That's as may be, but it doesn't count. It wouldn't matter who or what y'are, I'd still like you . . . more than like.' His voice was tenderly coaxing. 'I thought, I *hoped* you felt the same.'

She forced her woebegone eyes up to meet his droopy-lidded gaze, her belly performing a somersault as she admitted in a little voice, 'I do.'

'And what was it attracted you?' he asked gently.

'Well, the way you –' She broke off, her pink lips curling in a half-smile of self-mockery.

'The way I look,' provided Marty, smiling too now as he gave her hand an accusing but playful shake. 'So it's not just me that's guilty, is it?'

'No.' Under his teasing, Henrietta melted, fighting back the tears.

'I mean, it stands to reason that it's a person's physical appearance that first attracts someone, doesn't it? Though what the devil you see in me is anyone's guess,' he added incredulously.

She rose then. Tapered little fingers stroked him, as did her voice. 'I'm sorry, Martin, I didn't mean to sound harsh or arrogant or ungrateful, it's just that –'

'I know,' he told her kindly, going so far as to caress her cheek with his knuckle, wanting to go much further and pull the pins from her hair and the clothes from her body, forgetting that he should not even be there at all. 'It might be the first thing that attracted us but we both know it goes far beyond that, don't we?'

She nodded, blinking away the moisture of emotion. Their eyes held each other adoringly for a while, both still reeling from the impact of their meeting, trying to understand what

had happened to them but unable to voice it, until the magnetic charge between them became too strong to resist and they finally pressed their lips together, tentatively at first, but quickly yielding to such fierce passion that it terrified them into breaking away, although not completely.

Marty swallowed, took a deep breath and emitted a delighted laugh. His hands gripping her waist, his eyes unable to tear themselves from hers, he pondered on their glittering depths. 'So what now, Miss Ibbetson? Or should I say Henrietta?'

Equally ecstatic, she said, 'I think you should, especially after *that*. But call me Etta, I much prefer it.' Then she sighed and laid her head against his warm chest, leaving it there even though one of his metal buttons hurt her ear. 'You know, I really do wish you had a caravan, then you could spirit me away.'

He rubbed his chin atop her head, breathing in her scent and smiling. 'Ah, now don't go making rash statements like that or I might.'

'I'm serious.'

'You are?' He pushed her gently away so that he could read her face.

'Completely! Caravan or no, I can't wait here for Father to get back. I'm desperate to leave . . . but not without you. I never want to leave you, Martin, *ever*.' She squeezed him tightly.

Marty let out a happy roar. 'To think when I came to work this morning the only thing I had in mind to tackle was boots! Little did I know I'd be kissing me future wife.'

'And I my future husband!' Etta laughed emotionally, and they hugged again amorously.

Marty was on the verge of announcing that he would run away with her there and then, but how could he do this with no funds? He was lucky if he earned nine bob a week. He wondered if she had any money, but was not

about to appear so mercenary for that would indeed ruin his case. Still wondering how to broach the subject, he was forestalled by Etta who urged excitedly, 'Let's leave this minute!'

'Oh, that'd be really bright, us walking through the hotel lobby together. The manager'd be delighted.' He grinned to show he was ribbing. 'Isn't it enough that you're about to sacrifice everything, without me losing my job too?'

'There's nothing for me to sacrifice but wealth, and that means absolutely nothing.'

'It might when you've nothing to eat. If I walk out of here I've lost my income. How would I support you?'

'You could get another job! I'd help.'

'Etta, I'd love nothing more than to run away with you right now, but one of us has to be sensible. I can't promise to keep you in the manner to which you're accustomed but I can at least hang on to the job I have. Now, we must think of a plan. Where are we to go? Where are we to live? I couldn't raise enough for a month's rent so quickly, not to mention what it'd cost even to secure the key.'

'But you won't allow these stumbling blocks to come between us, will you?' she implored him with little kisses.

Marty closed his eyes in ecstasy, fighting carnal urges. 'Do I look as if I'd give up so easily? I'm going to have to enlist help, that's all.'

'From your parents?'

He sobered. 'Ah, no, I certainly couldn't take you home just like that.' Nor could he allow her to think this was some jolly jape. 'It might be that your father's not the only one who doesn't take kindly to this. I don't mean any insult, I'm sure Ma and Da'll be fine once they get used to the idea of me marrying a lady – if the shock doesn't kill them first – but I can't just spring it on them. Besides, what kind of a man would I be if I expected my parents to look after us? No, but I have quite a few friends I can turn to.'

'I knew you'd be popular!' She hugged him.

'Thanks, but nobody's that popular when he's asking for cash.' He tried to clear his mind but it was difficult with her pressed so close. His eye caught the carriage clock on the bedside table. 'God in heaven, I've been in here almost an hour!' How the time had flown. 'I'll have to get this key back. Now, sweetheart, nice as it is we've got to stop all this cuddling and be practical. How long before himself returns?'

'I should think at least another hour.'

'Then I'll have to make a start on our relief fund.' He attempted to disentangle himself.

'I have a few coins hidden!' An adoring Etta made a grab for her portmanteau, hurling clothes right, left and centre before pressing the money into his hand. 'Sorry there's so little but I spent the rest on my last escapade.'

Marty accepted the few shillings with grace. 'Never mind, this'll be a big help, though we'll need just a bit more.' He gave her a quick kiss. 'So let me go about getting it, and the moment I do I'll be back to whisk you away.'

Overjoyed, she clung to him all the way to the door. 'Oh, surely I must be dreaming!'

'And I must be crazy!' Loath to drag himself away, Marty kissed her heartily, dealt her one last adoring look, then, peeking into the corridor to check that it was clear, rushed back to his proper quarters.

On the way down, however, he encountered the pageboy, whom he knew received plenty of tips, and, without preamble, demanded excitedly, 'Joe, me old mucker, lend us some cash. I'll pay it back soon as I can.'

The trusting youngster fished a couple of silver threepences out of his trouser pocket. 'No rush.'

'Thanks, but I meant a bit more than this.' Needing to shout it from the rooftops, Marty grinned and in an excited whisper revealed his intentions. 'You'll never believe this. You know the stunner? She wants me to run away with her!'

Joe gave an impassive nod and made to move on. 'Right . . . sorry, Bootsie, can't stop, that lady in room one-two-five's just rang down to ask if I'll go slip her a length. She can't get enough of –'

'I'm not codding ye!' Marty pressed a delaying hand to his friend's chest, hissing with bright-eyed enthusiasm, 'We've really clicked. Her dad locked her in and –'

'Oh aye, Joanna's just been ranting on about that!' Joe rolled his eyes in amused exasperation. 'Proper disgruntled she was.'

'Will you stop bloody wittering on!' Marty displayed urgency. 'I have to think of a way to get her out o' here before he comes back.'

Joe laughed aloud then. 'You soft article! A lady like her's not really interested in the likes of us. She only spun you a line to get you to unlock the door. Joanna told u—'

'Ach, I haven't time to sod about!' Marty rushed away, muttering that he had to get some money together.

Watching the other retreat, the little pageboy shook his head knowingly, dismissing Marty's outpouring as fantasy. 'She'll be vanished by the time you get back!' he called after him.

'Don't bet on it!'

But down in the basement Marty was to be shown equal disrespect. Having been reliably informed by Joanna, everyone was of the opinion that he had taken leave of his senses.

'I know she's lovely,' said a motherly chambermaid, 'because she asked me to do up her corsets and gave me sixpence for my troubles –'

'Blimey, I'd've done 'em for nowt,' interjected one of the boys.

'– but I rather think she's teasing you, dear,' finished the maid.

'Aye, she's having you for a mug, Bootsie,' sneered a waiter.

'But will you lend us something, please, *please*?'

Clutching his cap to his breast, Marty dropped to his knees, shuffling in this fashion around the workers and making them all laugh.

'Here you are then, I'm happy to bet on a certainty.' Casually, one of the porters dropped a florin into the outstretched cap.

Others gasped at the munificent gesture. 'Bloody hell, I'll have some if you're chucking it about!'

The contributor's face creased in mockery. 'Nah – I'll be getting it back in ten minutes when Bootsie finds out she's done a flit!'

Ignoring the ridicule, Marty lauded his benefactor. And as others good-naturedly followed suit he blessed these too, even knowing it was done out of jest, for they would soon be laughing on the other side of their faces.

'Eh, we'll look daft if he runs off to Timbuktu with her,' joked one of the boys, nudging his neighbour.

'We won't be running that far.' Marty got to his feet, looking smug.

'She might not be but you will! When her dad comes back you'll find yourself travelling to Timbuktu on the end of his foot.'

Marty remained smiling and chinked the coins now in his hand. 'Mock if you will! But Etta and myself will be using this for a deposit on a home.'

Alas, this drew more than raucous guffaws.

'What's this infernal racket? Boots!' Marty jumped and shoved the coins in his pocket as his superior appeared and everyone hurried about their work. 'I might have known you'd be at the centre of it!'

'Sorry, Mr Wilkinson.'

'You will be! The gentleman in room one-twenty has made a complaint that his dirty shoes are still in the corridor.'

Marty retreated quickly with an apologetic bow. 'I must have missed them, sir. I'll go fetch them now.'

'Jump to it, boy – and return those whilst you're at it!' Wilkinson pointed to a lone pair of ladies' shoes, which Marty quickly seized.

'Yes, sir, I'll see to it immediately!' The errand gave him just the excuse he needed to go upstairs again.

On the way his luck increased, for not only was he able to replace the key but he met Joe struggling under the weight of two cases and whispered urgently to him, 'When you've done that will you keep watch for me? I need to know if that Ibbetson gadger comes back – he hasn't been past already, has he?'

Joe said not that he knew of, adding that he would act as lookout so long as he was not needed. 'You'll get me hung, you will!'

'Hanged!' corrected Marty with a grin, and, thanking him, he galloped off to Etta's room.

Yet at the point of entering he stalled – not simply because her father might be there but more because he feared his friends could be right. Had he indeed been fooling himself, caught up in the moment? What could a ravishing, wealthy young lady like her see in him? Moreover, how could he be idiot enough to expect her to give it all up?

But the doubt was transitory. Once inside, everything was all right again. More than all right. In her relief Etta threw herself at him, sparking off a feverish bout of kissing.

Reinvigorated, Marty said cheerfully, 'Right, get your hat on, missus! We're off.'

Giggling and giddy with happiness, she ran to where the hat still lay on the carpet. It was whilst she was picking it up that her father's voice intruded, startling the elopers.

'What the deuce are you doing in here?' It emerged as through a megaphone.

Wheeling to face the imposing presence, Marty blanched – the wretch must have passed Joe on the way. Under threat, he thought quickly, seizing and brandishing the kid slippers that he had thrown aside on entry. 'Just returning the lady's

shoes, sir!' He hoped the father did not recognize the lie.

But ownership of the shoes was of no concern to Ibbetson. 'The door was locked – you must have let yourself in!' Stick raised, the man advanced upon the slender youth.

Alarmed that her newfound romance was to be spoiled before it had chance to flourish, Etta butted in whilst trying to appear calm. 'There's nothing untoward, Father, he was passing the room and I commanded him to fetch me something to drink, which involved him also fetching a key. It was stifling in here, I almost passed out.'

Marty chipped in to endorse this. 'I didn't think you'd want me to ignore the lady's discomfort, sir.'

'You are impudent, boy! I shall have you dismissed!'

'For saving me?' Head erect, Etta glided forward, desperate to run but knowing that would ruin everything. As things stood, all was not completely lost. 'I should rather imagine the hotel owner would thank his employee for such quick thinking. He wasn't the one who locked me in.'

With her father's wrath successfully deflected from Martin, immediately she became humble, though it was against her nature. 'I beg your pardon, I didn't mean that to sound in any way defiant. I'm merely trying to explain that the young man was simply doing as he was bidden. Please, Father, you've never been unfair to our own servants.' Etta laid a steadying hand upon his arm, trying not to reveal her true anxiety. How were they to get away now?

Marty was thinking the same thing. Wisely, in the face of Ibbetson's fury he dropped his gaze to the carpet and stood meekly awaiting his fate, though under the surface his mind whirred like clockwork for a solution.

After what seemed like aeons, though his colour remained high, Ibbetson grudgingly decided, 'Very well, I'll give you the benefit of the doubt. You may keep your job – but only because we shall shortly be gone and I shan't

have to encounter your detestable face again. Now get out and send a porter to transport our bags immediately to the platform!'

With the man gesticulating for him to leave, Marty gave hasty thanks and obeyed. Henrietta's heart sank into despair as he dealt her not so much as a glance.

By now, though, thoroughly infatuated, Marty had no intention of abandoning his prize. Cursing his laxity at not seeking her precise address, he raced downstairs, and, after bewailing his luck to his colleagues and submitting to their friendly teasing, he threw himself on their mercy yet again. Scribbling on a crumpled bit of paper and electing the chambermaid as his go-between, he begged her, 'Jo, do us a favour! Slip her this message before she lea—'

'He must think I'm barmy!' Open-mouthed, she advertised her scorn to the laughing assembly.

'Ah, go on!' Fraught with desperation, he tried to cup her face. '*Please*! I have to get her address or she's lost to me forever!'

She craned her head out of reach. 'And you expect me to care?' Was he really so insensitive? Could he not tell how much she wanted him herself?

'I thought you were a pal?' he beseeched her, but she just pushed him bad-temperedly out of her way and left.

No one else seemed keen to take the risk, laughing off his frantic attempts as pure whimsy. After an infuriated pause there came a brainwave. Swearing and rummaging through a drawer he finally came up with a piece of chalk. Then, grabbing a tray he scrawled something on the underside and rushed from the side exit. Swearing and dodging his way through a collection of laundry hampers that were being off-loaded, he bounded around to the hotel's main lobby which opened onto the station platform, heading for a spot that Etta would have to pass.

But she was already well on her way, albeit unwillingly, being half dragged by her father after the porter who carried

their bags. Hovering anxiously with his tray, Marty silently urged her to turn around, but Etta marched onwards stiff-backed to the waiting train. Panic rose. He couldn't lose her, he couldn't! Almost at the point of risking everything, he was about to yell out for her not to leave, when, miracle of miracles, she turned crossly to take issue with her father for manhandling her into the carriage and at last spotted Marty. In this same instant he tilted the tray to reveal the chalked entreaty underneath: *IF YOU WANT ME TELL ME WHERE YOU LIVE.*

A joyous recognition came to her eyes, igniting a spark of optimism that regrettably was not to last, for at this same time her father spun round too and Marty was compelled to vanish. When he dared to poke his head out again, Etta was in the carriage, out of sight. He wondered miserably, as the train chugged away, if she had deciphered his message or if he would ever see her again.

Ignorant as to the extent of his agony, his colleagues told him mildly, 'Forget about her, Bootsie. The likes of her won't fret about thee – oh, and we'll have our money back if you don't mind.'

'Aw, don't be mean!' Now that the rival had been disposed of, Joanna allowed her compassionate nature to shine through and she gripped his arm. 'Cheer up, Bootsie, me and my friend are off to the theatre tonight, you can come with us if you like.'

Normally Marty would have accepted, but he was just too devastated and did not even acknowledge the invitation, much to his admirer's hurt. He emptied his pockets but, though glum, his tone showed he was not beaten. 'I wonder if her address is in the register.'

'Eh, don't let Wilko hear you!' They grouped round to recover their contributions.

Marty remained pensive. 'She mentioned her dad's a farmer . . .'

There was a cackle from the porter. 'Aye, but not just

some clod-hopping smallholder! Haven't you heard of him, you dummy? He owns half the Yorkshire Wolds!'

Unfazed, Marty declared. 'Well, he doesn't own me and I'm going to find her, you see.'

There was no time for the others to enquire how he was going to do this, for their superior came in then to give everyone a dressing down and to make sure the boot boy was kept busy for the rest of his shift.

But that didn't stop his mind being preoccupied, and this mood was to last long after Etta had gone.

It was still with him when he travelled home along Walmgate that evening, a different environment completely to the one he had just left. Abounding with public houses, the thoroughfare reeked of stale beer fumes and the effluvia of tanneries and skin-yards, alleviated only by the more appetising aroma of fish and chips. Ahead of him, a small boy clanked along with a bucket and shovel, stopping occasionally to scrape a pile of dog excreta from the pavement into his bucket. Two hatchet-faced, greasy-haired slatterns called insults at each other from opposite sides of the road, one threatening to, 'Tear the black heart out of yese!' Cringing from such unfeminine behaviour, Marty ducked into a side street and onwards to the tiny terraced house in Hope Street with its soot-engrained bricks, its dull bottle-green door and lopsided shutters, the feeling of discontent plain on his face.

His mother was quick to comment on this as he came through the door. 'Bad day, son?'

He barely glanced at her as he went to wash his hands. 'I met the girl I want to marry, Ma.'

With two children helping her to lay the table and another smaller one using her leg as a support, Agnes Lanegan smiled, arched an eyebrow at her husband and replied facetiously, 'I'd better starch the best linen then, though you don't look too happy about it.'

'That's because her father doesn't want her to marry me,' revealed Marty, hanging up the towel. 'Thinks she's above us.'

'You weren't codding us then?' His mother bridled and pursed her lips.

His normally mild-mannered father showed indignation. 'The poltroon! My son's good enough for anyone . . . lessen 'tis the daughter of the hotel manager of course, now that would be taking expectations a bit too far.' His eyes told that it was meant as a jest. Then he noted his son's expression and his jaw dropped. 'Christ, she's not, is she?'

Marty paused and took a deep breath. 'No . . . but her father does have a bob or two.' Always able to confide in his parents, he was honest with them now, telling them everything that had occurred and rendering them dumb with such astonishment that he had to fill the gap himself. 'I still can't believe it happened so fast! Like an angel she is, an angel.'

His parents looked at each other, betraying dubiety, Agnes breaking the silence first. 'But she's left the hotel, ye say?' She plucked the loose, tanned skin of her throat, anxious that he might be courting trouble.

Marty nodded sadly and tugged down his shirt cuffs.

Somewhat relieved, Mrs Lanegan shared a look of sympathy with her husband, saying kindly to her son, 'There are finer fish in the sea than have ever been caught. Here, come sit down, I've some nice kippers – Uncle Mal, come for your tea now!'

Great Uncle Malachy cast a rheumy eye from his evening newspaper. 'Tea? I only just had breakfast.' But he ambled obediently to sit with the children at the table.

Pulling out a chair, Marty looked wan. 'I don't think I can manage anything.'

'Sure and you will!' Serving him directly after his father, Agnes patted his shoulder lovingly. 'Get that down ye, it'll make you forget about Miss High and Mighty.'

He looked up from his seat, slightly annoyed. 'No it won't.'

'Watch your tone, boy,' warned Redmond Lanegan, his eyes suddenly hard.

'Sorry, Mammy.' Marty was contrite whilst remaining obstinate in his ambition. 'But I couldn't forget about Etta even if I tried. She's the one for me and I'm the one for her.'

'Her father doesn't seem to agree,' Agnes reminded him.

'Then he can lump it.'

The parents glanced at each other in dismay over this all too familiar stance. Marty had always lived life like a terrier fighting the leash: he knew there was something better to be had just over there, if only he was allowed to get at it – and, God, help them, he had spotted something over there again.

'Martin, I'm warning you, put this out of your mind at once!' Grim-faced, Mrs Lanegan turned to her husband for backing, which was granted, though it did not the slightest to change their son's mind. Marty picked at his meal, not offering any further argument, but it was clearly evident in his posture.

Planting herself on the wobbly dining chair, Agnes damned him. 'Ever since you were a bit of a boy you've always wanted what you can't have! I'll never forget that time you set your heart on a great big cooking apple – pestered and pestered till I bought it for you, even after I'd warned that it wouldn't suit your taste. Then you took one bite, made a face and said you didn't want any more – after I'd emptied me purse to get it for you!'

'And you made me sit and eat it if I recall.' Marty cast a dour grin at his younger siblings. 'But this isn't the same at all, Ma.'

Seeing his wife open her mouth for another volley, Redmond commanded tiredly, 'For the love of Mike, leave it, woman!'

And knowing what tiresome repercussions even a tiny argument could bring, she complied, though with bad grace as she repeated primly, 'Always wanted what you can't damn well have!' before getting on with her tea.

Taking his father's raised voice as a signal to desist, Marty offered not another word, quarrel giving way to the brusque scraping of knives and forks.

Old Uncle Mal, searching for something to divert open warfare, ran his tongue around his gums and announced, 'You'll be pleased to hear my diarrhoea's cleared up, Marty.'

'We're overjoyed,' yawned Redmond, as there was a groan of disgust from his wife and sniggers from the youngsters.

But they were an affectionate family and the bad feeling did not last for more than a few hours, Mrs Lanegan clamping her son's shoulder as she served his usual supper of bread and tea, and, without resurrecting the topic, telling him quietly, 'Everything'll turn out for the best, you'll see.'

'Aye, lookit, Marty!' His face wreathed in ambition, Mr Lanegan displayed a picture of a motor car in the book he had been reading. 'How d'ye fancy driving along Walmgate in that? 'Twould get the neighbours talking sure enough. Aye,' he gazed longingly at the picture, 'we shall have one of those some day.'

Marty dealt him a fond but half-hearted smile, knowing it was just his father's way of taking his mind off Etta. As if it would.

Apparently this was to remain a concern to his parents, for as Marty finished his supper and was on his way to bed he overheard his mother trying to reassure her husband, 'Don't go fretting yourself about it, dear. 'Twill be just another of his passing desires. She's gone from the hotel, so there's not much he can do about it. You know what he's like. In a few days he'll have set his sights on something or somebody else and forgotten all about her.'

No I won't, thought her son grimly as he continued up

the stairs. I won't even be able to sleep for thinking about her. And he was right.

The next morning, exhausted and grumpy, Marty was ready to bite the head off the first person who crossed him. As this turned out to be the head porter he held his tongue and was glad he did, because after being upbraided for having his mail directed to the hotel, a letter was shoved into his fist.

Knowing immediately who it was from, he tore it open, receiving a jolt as he read the grand-sounding address of the correspondent: *Swanford Hall.* The note was brief and obviously scribbled in a hurry, but its content was wonderfully explicit. Etta wanted him.