The Kitchen Maid

Valerie Wood

CHAPTER ONE

The door clanged behind her, heavy, solid and final. Jenny grasped the bars at the top, standing on tiptoe to see through them. 'Fetch me paper and pencil, will you?' Her voice broke into a dry sob as she shouted to the retreating warder. 'Please.'

'Want to write a confession, do you?' his muffled voice called back.

She sank down onto the wooden bench and put her head in her hands, her shoulders shaking. How have I come to this? Christy! What have we done?

At midday the door was unlocked and she was handed several sheets of thin paper and a stub of pencil, and a tin bowl of lukewarm soup that she tasted and then poured away into a metal pail, which stank of other people's urine. She gazed at the blank paper, scribbled on a corner of it with the blunt pencil then scraped the tip against the brick wall to sharpen it. There's not a great deal to write, she pondered. But I must write everything down just as I've always done, in case I forget; or I'm sent on elsewhere and don't ever come out, which is more than likely, as it seems as if everything and everyone is against me. So this is for me, not for them.

She put the tip of her tongue between her teeth and began.

'They said that I'd killed him. They stared at me and pointed an accusing finger. They wanted me to say, yes, I did. It would have made it easier for them. But I didn't say it. I said, why would I do that? I loved him.

He laughed, the constable, I mean. Christy's mother didn't laugh. She screamed at me that I was a whore. A jezebel. The sort of language that I never expected to hear from a lady's lips. Well of course she was upset, who wouldn't be, seeing your only son lying in a pool of blood with a great hole in his chest?

It looks bad for me, I realize that. I was holding the gun. It was in my hand when the master rushed in. He had to prise it from my fingers to take it from me. I didn't speak at first. Couldn't speak. All I could do was stare at Christy, with his neck stretched back and his handsome face so still. I hardly remember what happened next, only that they brought me here and locked me up, even though I swore that I hadn't done it. But of course I can't tell them everything. I'll have to give them a story and stick to it.

I saw him for the first time at the kitchen door. I was new. It was my very first place of work and everything was confusing. Everybody was above me, of course. I was the lowest of the low. But my ma told me that I was very lucky to get such a position, especially coming from Hull when usually Beverley folk would normally only

Copyright © 2004 Valerie Wood

employ Beverley girls. I don't know how my ma knew that, seeing as she had never in her whole life set foot outside the town of Hull, but that was what she said. She was a bit jealous, I suspect, because I was leaving to go somewhere fresh and somewhere she had never been.

I was dead set on working in Beverley. I wanted to get out of Hull. Not because I didn't like it, but because I wanted to see other places and I'd heard about Beverley with its racecourse and a pleasant bit of countryside round about. So I set off one day; I was thirteen and I'd found sixpence in the Market Place and instead of giving it to Ma as I should have done, to help out with the groceries, I kept it, and as soon as I was able to get away I cadged a lift from the carrier who was going to Beverley. I'd like to have travelled on the train but I didn't have enough money and I would have had to wait a long time before I found another sixpence. I didn't tell Ma where I was going and I knew I would get a leathering when I got home, because she had sent me out on an errand and expected me back within the hour.

It was grand travelling with the carrier. He was a real friendly fellow and when I told him that I only had sixpence and was going to look for a place of work, he said he would take me there and back for that price, as long as I wasn't late for the pick up near the King's Head. I sat up at the front with him and he told me what he knew about Beverley, about the big houses in New Walk and about the Beverley beck where the barges were and which ran through to the river Hull; and about the tannery, which stank something rotten sometimes. No worse than the blubber yards or the oil mills in Hull, I bet, I said to him and he agreed that it wasn't. He told me there was even a place called Paradise, and I laughed and didn't believe him, but I found out later that it was true.

We passed through some lovely country, proper country, I mean, with open fields and cows and sheep in them and bushes and trees. Real pretty it was, and I got a good feeling inside me and thought how much I'd like to live here. When we arrived in Beverley, I fell silent. I was overwhelmed. I could see the big church, which the carrier told me was called the Minster, and I could hear the bells ringing, a right din they were making, and then we drove through one market place which he said was called Wednesday Market and had an obelisk in the middle of it, and then into another, which he said was called Saturday Market. There was a great hustle and bustle there with waggons and carriers and men on horseback and folks milling about on their business. It wasn't quite square, and it had cobbles underfoot, and around it old buildings and shops still with the little glass windows, which hadn't yet been gutted and improved like they have been in Hull. There were inns and shops and a fish shambles, and a splendid monument with columns and the Beverley coat of arms above it, which the carrier told me was the Market Cross and was used for proclamations.

He dropped me off and said I should be back in good time because he wouldn't be able to wait, and then he pointed up the road and said I should go up to New Walk and take a chance that somebody there might take me on, even though I didn't have a reference which he said they would ask for. I didn't know what a reference was, but I reckoned that I could manage to do a job of work without one.

Copyright © 2004 Valerie Wood

It didn't take me long to walk up there; it was only a small town and I passed another lovely church called St Mary's, and some more shops and inns and alehouses, and several pumps where I took a drink of good water, and I reckoned that Beverley folk were as well catered for in their bodily and spiritual needs as they were in the town of Hull.

As I went out of the town I went through an archway which when I looked up I saw had a house on either side of it. I'd never seen anything like it before and haven't since, but I learnt later that it was called North Bar and the inside of it is called Within and the outside of it Without. It has a gate and is one of the ancient entrances to the town. I've often wondered since what the people living upstairs thought about folks coming and going underneath their house.

I felt as if I was in the countryside as I went up New Walk. It was very pretty and lined with shady trees and hedges and there were wooden seats for folks to sit on, so I could only guess that it was a place where those who had the time and leisure used to walk. The houses were only few and what I would call substantial. Most of them had gardens and some had stables and paddocks where horses were grazing. Well, Jenny, I thought. Nothing venture, nothing gain, so I smoothed down my hair and went down the first path to a house of three storeys and made my way round to the back.

My mother calls me a plain girl. You weren't in the front row when they were giving out beauty, she was always reminding me, but then nobody will ever think you're flighty for you look very sensible, even though you're not. I'm not very tall, my nose is small and straight, and my mouth is quite wide; my father says my smile fills my face. My eyes are good, though, hazel-coloured with long lashes, but my hair is straight and dark brown and I generally wear it in a plait as I am doing now and did on that day. So I thought that my plain looks might stand me in good stead at gaining employment and that beauty would possibly be a disadvantage.

It was not to be, however, for the first kitchen door was simply closed in my face as I made my request, and when I knocked at the second one the girl who answered it said I couldn't be seen without a reference. When I owned that I hadn't one, she shook her head and said it was of no use even asking. She did, though, as if taking pity on me, suggest I walked on a little further to try a house owned by Mr Ingram, who was a gentleman. I supposed her to mean by that that he didn't have to work for a living, which must be a very nice position to be in. The girl said that she had heard that their kitchen maid had just left, so I might be lucky if they weren't too particular. I hoped that the significance of her remark was that I didn't possess a reference and not anything to do with my character or appearance, and I decided to try my luck there.

It was an imposing dwelling and I thought that I would be very lucky indeed if I were able to work there. I knocked boldly on the kitchen door and asked the girl who opened it if Mrs Ingram was requiring any kitchen staff. I thought it wouldn't do any harm to use her name, as if I had heard of her. I was asked in and the girl called out for the cook.

Copyright © 2004 Valerie Wood

I gave her a neat bob of my knee, because I guessed that she was quite important in the household, and immediately informed her, in my best manner, that I didn't have a reference and hoped that it didn't matter.

"I'm a good worker," I told her. "Clean and honest." I thought it best not to mention that I had come to Beverley with a found sixpence, though that hardly qualifies as dishonesty.

"Where have you worked before?" she demanded quite fiercely. "Are you from Beverley? Cos I can soon find out about you."

I confessed that I was a stranger to the town and that my birthplace was Hull and that I had only worked at home for my mother who had taught me about housekeeping. That was the real reason for my wanting to come to Beverley, though I didn't tell her that. I'm one of ten children, you see, fourth from youngest with three boys below me. Of the six others, three boys and three girls, one boy and one girl had left to get married, the others were employed but still lived at home, and being the only girl left without a job of work I knew that I would never get away, because I was too useful.

My father has always had a steady job - he's a foreman down at the docks - and my mother works three days a week at the washhouse. She took our dirty washing every fortnight and had it done for free, and sometimes boiled a suet pudding there, so she wasn't keen to give up work and stay at home to do the jobs that she said I could do.

I could quite see that my life was planned out. I would look after the younger boys until they were old enough to work, and I would do the cooking, shopping and cleaning for the others, and I didn't care for the prospect. Not one bit.

"How old are you?" the cook asked.

"Nearly fourteen," I replied and reckoned that eight months off my birthday was near enough.

"And never worked?"

She sounded scandalized and I hastily explained that my mother preferred me to be at home to help her, but that I wanted to be independent and earn my own living.

"Well," she said. "It just so happens that I need a kitchen maid." She ran her fingers over one of her chins as she gazed at me. "I prefer a country girl really. They know how to work. And I've never taken anybody on without a reference before."

"Where would I get one?" I asked, seeing the job slipping away from me and thinking that if it meant buying one, I could ask my father who was much more generous than my mother.

She frowned from under her eyebrows, which were grey and shaggy, and said, "Well, from anybody who knows you to be of good character."

Copyright © 2004 Valerie Wood

"That's all right then," I said. "I can get that all right. When can I start?"

She told me that I could start straight away as long as I brought the reference with me. I was to get ten pounds a year, but could have an advance of two shillings when I had been there a month and proved satisfactory. I would get two sets of clothing, plain dresses and aprons, and four caps, the price of which would be taken out of my wages, and which I must keep clean, washed and ironed at all times.

Now all I had to do was go home and face my mother and obtain a reference.

I told the carrier about it on the way home. "I'll give you a reference," he said. "You seem a bright cheerful girl to me," and so he did. When we arrived back in Hull, he pulled out a sheet of paper from a box under the seat. "What's your name?" he asked, and when I told him it was Jenny Graham, he wrote it down, Jenny Graham is a bright cheerful girl, then he signed it. The paper had his name on it. I suppose he used it for his customers as a receipt like our grocer did for his better-off customers.

I passed the grocer on my way home so I popped in and asked him if he could give me a reference and he did, which said I was sharp with figures and knew a bargain when I saw one.

By the time I arrived home, I had another from the butcher, one from the apothecary, one from a friend of mine who said if I wrote it as I was better at spelling and had a better hand than she had, then she would sign it, and by a stroke of luck I had met Miss Smithers who had taught me for the short time I was at school, and remembered me, and said she would write one that evening if I would care to call round at her lodgings to collect it.

Another stroke of luck was that my da was at home when I got back, but not my mother, who, he said, had gone out looking for me. "You've been gone all day," he said. "She was beginning to think you'd run off."

"I didn't run off, Da," I told him. "I've been out to get a job. And I've got one, as a kitchen maid in a big house in Beverley. Will Ma be mad at me, do you think?"

"She might." He pondered. "Is it what you want, our Jenny? Do you want to leave home?"

I nodded. Yes, I did. My sisters worked at the mills and they all came home after work too worn out to help with anything like housework, but not too tired to brush their hair and go out to meet the lads at the inns in town.

"All right," he said. "I'll speak up for you."

He'd always had a soft spot for me, had Da. He never leathered me as Ma did if I did something wrong, and I knew I'd miss him.

Copyright © 2004 Valerie Wood

This will be the last time I ever get the strap, I thought, wincing with pain, and when Ma put her arm back to give another blow I put my hand behind my back. "I'll not be able to work tomorrow if my hands are swollen, Ma, and I shan't want to tell Cook why."

"That's enough," my father said. "She deserves 'strap for not telling where she was going, but she doesn't merit a leathering for getting a job. She's done well there, going all 'way to Beverley by herself."

Ma was silenced then, for although my da was a quiet man, once he had made a stand he always stuck to it, and that was when she said how lucky I was. I gave a bit of a smile inside then, for I knew that my mother would boast to all the folk she knew about her youngest daughter who had obtained a position of work in Beverley.

Copyright © 2004 Valerie Wood