

Harriet ran home as fast as her young legs could carry her.

Alarmed – but without reason.

Embarrassed – but not knowing why.

Fearful of the vicar, because what she had done might have been sinful.

Scoldings from Mam were always over before the sun went down. ‘Sleep not on thy wrath.’

Punishments from Pa could be worked off in extra chores, or, ‘Sing to me my little throstle and we’ll call it quits.’

But sinning?

God dealt out punishments for that, and not until you were dead.

She didn’t believe that she had sinned too much, not yet, but by the time she was dead, she might be weighed down with sins.

She might end up at the left hand of Jesus, with the goats.

The coin that was clutched in her hand became hot and sweaty. Perhaps if she threw it away then the sin would go with it. No. It was money, and money was fair short at home. For the life of her, the seven-year-old couldn't decide. 'Tell the truth and shame the Devil.'

So, when she reached home, she opened her palm to her mam.

'Oh, and where'd y' get that, me girl?'

'Gaffer gid it me.'

Her mother turned. She was making flour and water 'floaters' to put into knuckle-bone broth, flour hanging like rags from her fingers. 'Is that so then?'

Mam's look was enough. She was trying to be like always, but by Mam's straight face Harriet knew that something serious had happened. Money was always trouble with Mam and Jesus. He didn't like rich men, He turned over the money-lenders' tables in the temple, and He was sold out by Judas for pieces of silver. There hadn't seemed to be anything wrong about standing on a stool in Gaffer's workshop and taking a ha'penny for singing a song.

But, clearly, even if she wasn't sure what, she had committed a sin, and she did not want to confess it to her mam. She fed a few coals into the fire under the stewpot as a good deed.

'And why'd he give ya a whole ha'penny then? Has he give you money before?'

'Naw, Mam.'

Mam turned her back on her child and plunged her hands into the flour and water, gathering it into a ball. 'Well then?'

'I sang to him.'

'Oh.' Her mam chopped the ball of dough into little 'floaters' and put them aside to dry out a bit. 'Is that all?'

'Yes, Mam, I sang him the Easter song, just that one, no more.'

'Oh. Well, my pet. It's true that you have a sweet voice, but it's as well not to get paid for a gift of God. And don't go inside Gaffer's door if y're on y'r own self. You understand that?'

'Yes, Mam.'

'No harm done. Put the ha'penny in the jar and it'll add to fair money when time comes round.'

The coin was dealt with, but Harriet Burton knew that she had sinned. The greater sin was not in letting Gaffer touch her, but telling her mam a barefaced lie, and the day would come when she would pay for it.

Harriet placated people; that was how she made her way in the world.

Like me, please.

Like me, I'm not really a bad girl.

Nor was she.

Josephine Thomson, the other young woman involved in this story, also, as a child, had an experience that would follow her into womanhood.

Only she of her entire family had survived the ravages of a contagious fever that spread like wildfire.

She was saved by a visit to Hani's remote home village – Hani being the Thomsons' living-in help and friend, and teacher to the children. But saved for what? To succeed? To live up to the belief her father had had that women were as capable as men of making 'something of themselves'? But what was this Something? She was almost twenty before a talent was revealed; unfortunately it was not a talent that English provincial society expected women to possess.

Josephine Thomson's early years living far from England, with parents who hardly differentiated in the upbringing of herself and her twin brother, had given her a liberal view of what women should expect for themselves. This view was confirmed when tragedy forced her to come to live in England under the care of an intelligent and powerful uncle and his wealthy high-society wife; she also held quite advanced views on the capability of her own gender. Even so, Josephine's aunt believed that women's lives were improved by marriage to a loving man, as her own had been.

Josephine grew into blooming, ambitious womanhood with cobwebs of guilt clinging to her subconscious.