Halfpenny Field

Iris Gower

CHAPTER ONE

Jessie Price pushed back her dark auburn hair and gazed at the wild, windblown landscape of Wales, the country she was leaving to travel to Smithfield market in London. It was 1833, nearly a year since she'd fled from London's cholera outbreak, and now she was taking the trail back again - but she had to make a living and cattle droving was all she knew.

She'd tried working in service for a time but the indoor life didn't suit her. Then she'd found work as a milkmaid and she was happy - until the aged farmer had tried to force his attentions on her. But now she wondered if taking to the road again had been a mistake.

Ahead, the long narrow lane wound uphill and she wished herself anywhere but on the drovers' roads with Jed Lambert, whose dark looks and blazing eyes frightened her.

Jessie glanced back and saw her friend Flora still knitting as she walked steadily along. Flora caught her eye and smiled. 'I'll have plenty of stockings made by the time we get to London. Good sales for hose in them London shops. Come now, cheer up, Jess. London's not so far.'

Jessie's heart was warmed: Flora could always be relied upon for a comforting word when anyone was downhearted. She hung back until she was shoulder to shoulder with her friend. 'I'm weary of this journey already,' she said. 'I've never been good at knitting, and for all Jed's nagging I know I'll never make any money on socks.' She glanced at Flora. 'Thank goodness you're here - you can help me when I drop my stitches.'

'So that's all I'm good for, is it?' Flora's words sounded cross but she was smiling. 'In any case, you're better than me at weeding - bending over in the fields all day makes my back ache.'

'I don't know why I came on this drove,' Jessie murmured, staring at Jed Lambert on his horse, like a king on his throne. 'I don't like Jed. He gives me the evil eye whenever he looks at me.'

'I feel the same, I'd rather be with Caradoc Jones's team any day,' Flora said. 'Fair man, he is, good with his people and the animals - but beggars can't be choosers, see. We needed work and Mr Jones's drove wasn't ready to travel. I've one bit of good news, mind. Morgan the smithy's joining us soon. I haven't seen him since last year's droves. He's a lovely man, and so handsome I wouldn't mind a tumble in the hay with him.'

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'For shame on you, Flora!' Jessie said. 'Morgan's heart is somewhere else. He's still daft about Non Jenkins. We all thought they'd get together some day.'

'Ah, but Non was a cut above the rest of us, clever too. That's how she came to marry into the Jones family,' Flora said.

Jessie fell silent, thinking about the good old times. She'd made some real friends in those early days - look at her and Flora, as close as sisters. Jessie was suddenly startled by one of the men calling a warning, 'Look up there!' He was pointing to the top of the hill. 'There's a highwayman hiding behind the trees waiting to pounce on us. Can't he see who he's up against?'

Jessie smiled to herself. The highwayman, if there was one, was a fool if he thought he could force Jed Lambert to part with his money. Jed was a hard man, used to striking out with his fists. The other men on the drove were afraid of him but they followed his lead, caring little about their cattle and less about the women who walked the drovers' roads behind them.

The roadway was opening out now and sloped up to the top of the hill. This was where the highwayman would attack. Jessie looked up a little nervously, but there was no sign of a rider on the hill. She took out her knitting and stared at the tangle of wool. She'd never been any good at it and, despite what Flora had said, she was little better at weeding, both tasks expected of a woman on a drove.

She heard a sharp cry, and then the sound of hoofs beating a tattoo against the land. 'He's coming,' Jed cried, 'but I'm ready for him.' He guided his horse to Jessie's side. 'Here, Jessie, take him the bag and leave the rest to us.'

'Why me?' The bag was heavy and Jessie clutched it in horror. 'Why can't one of the men go?'

'Just do as you're told,' Jed said harshly, 'and leave the rest to us. Keep him talking a bit.'

Jessie lifted her skirts and made her way unsteadily to the highwayman, who gazed down at her. He had wide shoulders and his face was half hidden by a scarf. His eyes, though, were kind as they rested on her. 'Sent a woman to do a man's job, eh? Shows what weaklings they are.'

'I don't mind.' Jessie searched frantically for a few words to keep him with her. She had no idea what Jed was planning but she knew it would be something horrible. 'Look, take the gold and get away,' she said urgently. 'Jed Lambert is a cruel man and he'll have no mercy on you.'

Then she saw that one of the drovers was behind the cattle with a catapult in his hand. He would have lead bullets in his pocket and he knew how to use them to kill man or animal. She opened her mouth to shout a warning but she was too late. The

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highwayman leaned over to take the bag and a bullet grazed his ear. The next came from a different direction and caught him in the neck.

Jessie screamed and dropped the bag, whose contents spilled out on the ground. It had contained not gold but bits of metallic ores.

The highwayman looked at her with blank eyes, then fell slowly from the saddle to land with a thud on the dry earth.

Jed came up beside her. 'That'll teach the bastard to rob an honest man,' he shouted. One of the drovers came out into the open and picked up the highwayman's pistol. Slowly, he began to undress him. Jessie watched him, sickened, as he put on the dead man's clothes.

Jed shrugged and took the highwayman's horse by the reins. 'Come on, men, let's get on with it,' he called. 'We've a long road to cover before nightfall. You.' He pointed to Jessie. 'Pick up the bag and the metal. We might need them again.'

Jessie did as she was told. It didn't do to provoke Jed into one of his rages. A few minutes later, she was back with the other women and cast a glance at the dead man lying on the ground with nothing to cover his nakedness. She took off her shawl and, averting her eyes, spread it over the body and said a prayer for the poor man's soul. Then she picked up her pace. Soon she would be in London, and Jed Lambert would be nothing but a bad memory.

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