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Belle

Written by Lesley Pearse

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Belle

LESLEY PEARSE



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Chapter One
London 1910

'You must be a whore. You live in a brothel!'

Fifteen-year-old Belle took a step back from the red-haired, freckled-faced boy and looked at him in consternation. He'd run after her down the street to return her hair ribbon which had fallen off. That in itself was unusual enough around the teeming streets of Seven Dials, where practically everyone would pocket anything not nailed down. But then he'd introduced himself as Jimmy Reilly, the recently arrived nephew of Garth Franklin who owned the Ram's Head. They chatted for a while and Jimmy asked if he could be her friend. Belle was thrilled; she liked the look of him and she guessed he was close in age to her. But then he had to spoil it by asking if she minded being a whore.

'If I lived in a palace I wouldn't necessarily be a queen,' she retorted angrily. 'It's true enough that I live in Annie's Place, but I'm not a whore. Annie's my mother!'

Jimmy looked hard at Belle, his tawny eyes repentant. 'I'm sorry if I got it wrong. My uncle told me Annie's was a brothel, so when I saw you come out of there . . .' He broke off in embarrassment. 'I really didn't mean to hurt your feelings.'

Belle was even more confused then. She didn't think she'd ever met anyone before who cared whether they hurt her feelings. Her mother certainly didn't, or any of the girls in the house. 'It's all right,' she replied somewhat uncertainly. 'You weren't to know, you haven't lived around here long enough. Is your uncle treating you well?'

Jimmy shrugged.

'He's a bully,' Belle stated, guessing that Jimmy had already

been introduced to his uncle's fists, for it was common knowledge Garth Franklin was hot-tempered. 'Do you have to stay with him?'

'My mother always said I was to go to him if anything happened to her. She died last month and Uncle paid for her funeral and said I was to come here to learn the trade.'

Belle surmised by his gloomy tone that he felt obligated to stay. 'I'm sorry about your mother,' she said. 'How old are you?'

'Nearly seventeen. My uncle said I've got to do some boxing to build up muscle,' Jimmy responded with a cheeky grin. 'Ma always said it were better for a man to have brains than muscle, but maybe I can have both.'

'Just don't assume all girls are whores or you won't live to build up muscle,' Belle said teasingly. She was warming to him; he had a lovely smile and a softness to him which was very different to all the other boys around the area.

Seven Dials wasn't far from the smart shops of Oxford Street, the theatres of Shaftesbury Avenue or even the grandness of Trafalgar Square, but it was a million miles from gentility. Great swathes of its higgledy-piggledy tenements and rookeries might have been demolished in the last twenty years, but with Covent Garden fruit and vegetable market still at its heart, and so many narrow lanes, courts and alleys all around, the newer buildings had soon become just as shabby as the old. Its residents were in the main the underbelly of society – thieves, prostitutes, beggars, rogues and thugs – living alongside the poor who worked in the very lowliest of jobs – street sweepers, scavengers and labourers. On a grey, frosty January day, with many people bundled up against the cold in little more than rags, it was a depressing sight.

'Next time I rescue a pretty girl's hair ribbon I'll be really careful what I say to her,' Jimmy said. 'Your hair is lovely, I've never seen such shiny black curls before, and you've got pretty eyes too.'

Belle smiled because she knew her long, curly hair was her best feature. Most people thought she must curl it up nightly and put oil on it to make it shine, but that was the way it was naturally – all she did was brush it. Her blue eyes had come from Annie, but Belle had to assume she had her father to thank for her hair for her mother's was just light brown.

'Well, thank you, Jimmy,' she said. 'Go on flattering girls like that and you'll be a huge success around here.'

'Back in Islington, where I come from, girls wouldn't talk to someone like me.'

Belle had barely been out of Seven Dials, but she knew Islington was where the respectable, middling sort lived. She assumed by his last remark, and what he had said about his uncle paying for the funeral, that his mother had been in service there.

'Was your mother a cook or housekeeper?' she asked.

'No, she were a dressmaker, and she made a good living at it till she got sick,' he said.

'And your father?'

Jimmy shrugged. 'He cleared off around when I was born. Ma said he were an artist. Uncle Garth called him an arse-wipe. Anyways, I don't know him and don't want to. Ma always said it was lucky she were a skilled seamstress.'

'Or she might have had to come and work at Annie's Place?' Belle said impishly.

Jimmy laughed. 'You're quick, I like that,' he said. 'So can we be friends?'

Belle just looked at him for a minute. He was an inch or two taller than her, with fine features and a good way of speaking. Not posh like a gentleman exactly, but he didn't have the rough speech peppered with London slang that most lads around Seven Dials adopted. She guessed he'd been close to his mother, and had been protected from the kind of excesses of drinking, violence and vice which went

on around here. She liked him, and she was as much in need of a friend as he was.

'I'd like that,' she said, and held out her little finger in the way that Millie back at Annie's Place always did when offering friendship. 'You have to give me your little finger too,' she said with a smile, and as his little finger wound round hers, she shook his hand. 'Make friends, make friends, never, ever break friends,' she chanted.

Jimmy responded with a soppy-looking grin which told her he liked what she'd said. 'Let's go somewhere,' he suggested. 'Do you like St James's Park?'

'I've never been there,' she replied. 'But I should get back really.'

It was just after nine in the morning, and Belle had done as she often did, slipped out for some fresh air while everyone else in the house was still sleeping.

Maybe he sensed that she wasn't anxious to go home and was tempted by an outing because he caught hold of her hand and tucked it into his arm, then started walking. 'It's really early still, we won't be missed,' he said. 'The park's got a lake and ducks and it will be good to have some fresh air. It isn't far.'

A little bubble of excitement welled up in Belle. All that was waiting for her at home was emptying slop buckets and hauling coal for the fires. She didn't need any further persuading to go with Jimmy, but she wished she'd put on her best royal blue cape with the fur-trimmed hood. She felt so dowdy in her old grey one.

As they hurried through the back alleys to Charing Cross Road, then down to Trafalgar Square, Jimmy told her more about his mother, and made her laugh with little stories about some of the wealthy women she made dresses for.

'Mrs Colefax was the one that used to make Ma really mad. She was colossal, hips like a hippopotamus, but she made out

Ma charged her for too much material and used the leftovers to make something for herself. One day Ma couldn't hold back any longer and she said, "Mrs Colefax, it takes all my ingenuity to make a dress for you out of six yards of crêpe. What's left over wouldn't make a jacket for a grasshopper."'

Belle giggled, imagining the fat woman standing there in her corset being fitted for a dress. 'What did she say to that?'

'"I've never been so insulted."' Jimmy imitated Mrs Colefax by speaking in a high, breathless voice. '"You would do well to remember who I am."'

They paused to look at the fountains in Trafalgar Square, then hurried across the road towards the Mall.

'Isn't the Palace grand?' Jimmy said as they walked through Admiralty Arch and saw Buckingham Palace in all its pale splendour ahead of them at the far end of the Mall. 'I love to get away from the Ram's Head and see beautiful places. It makes me believe I'm worth something more than being my uncle's errand boy.'

Until that moment Belle had never considered that beautiful places might inspire anyone, but as they walked into St James's Park and she saw how the frost had turned bare branches, bushes and grass into a glittering spectacle, she understood what Jimmy meant. Weak sunshine was breaking through the thick cloud, and the swans, geese and ducks on the lake were gliding effortlessly through the water. It was a different world to Seven Dials.

'I want to be a milliner,' she admitted. 'I spend all my spare time drawing hats. I daydream of having a little shop in the Strand, but I've never told anyone that before.'

He took her two hands in his and drew her closer to him. His breath was like smoke in the frosty air, warm on her cold face. 'Ma always said that if you want something hard enough you can have it,' he said. 'All you have to do is work out how you'll achieve it.'

Belle looked at his smiling, freckled face, and wondered if he wanted to kiss her. She had no experience of such things; boys were something of a mystery to her as she'd grown up with only women. But she had such an odd feeling inside her, like she was melting, and that was ridiculous as she was freezing cold.

'Let's just whizz round the park, then I really must go home. Mog will be wondering where I am,' she said quickly, for the strange feeling was making her nervous.

They began to walk fast across the bridge over the lake. 'Who's Mog?' he asked.

'I suppose you'd call her the maid or the housekeeper, but she's more than that to me,' Belle replied. 'She feels like mother, aunt, older sister all rolled into one. She's always been the one who took care of me.'

As they walked briskly round the park, Jimmy talked about how nice it would be in summer, about books he'd read and about the school he went to in Islington. He didn't ask Belle anything about her home; she guessed he was afraid to, for fear of saying the wrong thing.

All too soon they were back in grimy Seven Dials, and Jimmy said his first task when he got in would be to wake his uncle with a cup of tea, and then scrub the cellar floor.

'Can we meet again?' he asked, looking anxious as if he expected her to refuse.

'I can get out most mornings at this time,' Belle replied. 'And usually about four in the afternoons too.'

'I'll look out for you then,' he said with a smile. 'It's been nice today. I'm really glad your ribbon fell off.'