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The Misbegotten

Written by Katherine Webb

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The Misbegotten

Katherine Webb



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1803

The day the child walked in from the marsh was one of deadening cold. A north wind had blown steadily all day, making ears and chests and bones ache; the child's bare feet crackled through a crust of ice on the watery ground. She came slowly towards the farmhouse from the west, with the swollen river sliding silently beside her and the sun hanging low over her shoulder, baleful and milky as a blind eye. A young woman quit the farmhouse and crossed the yard towards the chicken coop. She didn't see the child at first, as she wrapped her shawl tightly around her shoulders and turned her face to the sky, to watch a vast murmuration of starlings that was coming to roost in the horse chestnut tree. The birds chattered and squealed to one another, shifting in flight like a single amorphous being, like smoke, before they vanished as one into the naked branches.

The child kept walking, right through the gate and into the yard. She faltered when the young woman did notice her and call out – not hearing the words, just the sound, which startled her. She stopped, and swayed on her feet. The farmhouse was large, built of pale stone. Smoke scattered from its chimneys, and through the windows of the lower floor a warm yellow light shone out onto the muddy ground. That light pulled irresistibly at the child, as it would a moth. It spoke of heat, of shelter; the possibility of food. With jagged little steps she continued towards it. The yard ran slightly uphill towards the house and the effort of the climb caused her to zigzag, stumbling left and right. She was so close, so nearly able to put out her hand and soak it in that golden

glow. But then she fell, and did not rise again. She heard the young woman cry out in alarm, and felt herself handled, gathered up. Then she felt nothing more for a time.

The child woke later because of the pain in her hands and feet. The unfamiliar warmth of her blood caused them to itch and throb and tingle unbearably. She tried to fidget, but was held too tightly. She opened her eyes. The young woman from the yard now held her on her lap, wrapped in a blanket. Beside them, a fire roared in a cavernous fireplace. The heat and light were staggering. There was a beamed ceiling over her head, and lambent candles on a nearby shelf, and it seemed like another world.

'You cannot mean to put her out – not with it so cold!' said the young woman. Her voice was soft, but passionate. The child looked up at her and saw a face of such loveliness that she thought it might be an angel that held her. The angel's hair was very, very pale, the colour of fresh cream. Her eyes were huge and soft, and very blue, fringed with long lashes like tiny golden feathers; she had high cheek-bones, an angular jaw, and a pointed chin gentled by the hint of a dimple in it.

'She's a vagabond, make no mistake about it.' This was an older voice, grim in tone.

'What does that matter? She's a child, and she'll surely die if she spends another night without shelter, and food. Look – look at her! Nothing but bones, like some poor chick cast out of the nest.' The young woman looked down, saw that the child was awake, and smiled.

'She'll be unlatching the door for her people in the night – you mark my words. She'll let them in and they'll carry off everything we have, including your virtue!'

'Oh, Bridget! Don't be so frightened, always! You're a

slave to your suspicions. She will do no such thing – she's just a child! An innocent.'

'There's none so innocent in this house as you, Miss Alice,' Bridget muttered. 'I speak from prudence, not from fear. Which way did she come?'

'I don't know. One moment she was not there, the next, she was.' The young woman pulled a feather from the child's hair with her fingertips. 'It was like the starlings brought her.'

'That's naught but fancy. She'll be crawling with lice and vermin – don't hold her so close to you! Can't you smell the rot on her?'

'How can you speak like that about a child, Bridget? Have you no heart?' Alice cradled the child closer to her, protectively. The child pressed her ear to Alice's chest, and heard the way her heart raced, even though she seemed calm. It raced and it faltered and it stumbled over itself. She felt the rapid rise and fall of breath beneath her saviour's ribs. 'To put her out would be tantamount to murder. Infanticide! I will not do it. And neither will you.'

For a moment, the two women glared at one another. Then Bridget got up from her chair and folded her scrawny arms.

'So be it, and on your head the consequences, miss,' she said.

'Good. Thank you, Bridget. Will you kindly fetch her some soup? She must be hungry.' Only once the older woman had left the room did Alice relax a little, and press her spare hand to her chest. She looked down at the child and smiled again. 'Arguing with Bridget always sets my heart stammering,' she said breathlessly. 'What's your name, little one?' But the child could not reply. Her tongue felt frozen in her mouth, and her mind was too crowded with the sensations of heat and tingling. 'You need have no fear now. You will be safe and warm here, and you will have food. Oh, look

– here's another!' Alice said, teasing a second feather from the child's hair. 'We shall call you Starling for now.' Starling gazed at this angel and in that instant forgot everything – where she had been, who she belonged to, her name before, and the hunger raking at her insides. She forgot everything but that she loved Alice, and would stay with her always, and do everything to please her. Then she slept.

1821

The day of the wedding was one of signs and portents. Rachel tried not to see them, since the higher half of her mind knew better than to believe in them, but still they kept coming. She could well imagine her mother scolding such frailty of thought, but with a smile to soften the words. *Nerves, my dear. 'Tis nothing but a touch of nerves*. Nevertheless, Rachel kept seeing them, and the signs seemed like warnings, one and all. A solitary magpie, strutting on the lawn; a mistle thrush singing on the gatepost. She stepped on her petticoat as she put it on, and tore it along the waistband; as she unwound the rags from her hair, every curl fell flat immediately. But it was the first dry day in over a week – that was surely a good sign. Early September, and the weather had turned stormy during the last days of August, with heavy rain and strong winds that tore down the still-green leaves. Rachel had hoped it would still be summer when she wed, but it was definitely autumn. Another sign. Arms aching, she gave up on her hair and went to the window. There was sunshine, but it was low and brittle – the kind of sun that got into your eyes and was blinding instead of warming. *This will be the last time I stand at a window of Hartford Hall, wishing I was somewhere else*, she reminded herself, and this thought trumped all the warning signs. In the morning she would wake up to a new life, in a new home, as a new person. A wife; no longer a spinster, a nobody.

Rachel's mother would have brushed away these supposed signs, for sure, and reassured her daughter that the match was a fair one, given the circumstances. Anne Crofton had been a

practical woman; kind and affectionate but wholly pragmatic. She hadn't married Rachel's father for love, but out of good sense; though love later grew between them. She would have approved of the cautious way in which Rachel had considered Richard Weekes's proposal before accepting. He was lower than her in birth, to be sure, but his prospects were good, his business flourishing. His income was more than enough to keep a wife in modest comfort. His manners were a little coarse but there was no doubting his charm; and with innate charm, Rachel could work to shape the rest. A rough diamond, to which she could bring a shine. And however more rarefied her birth had been, the fact remained that her current status was lowly. All these things she could hear her mother say, when she shut her eyes at night and missed her parents with a feeling like a terrible ache in her bones. And in her father's voice . . . well, he would have said less. Instead, she would have seen the misgiving in his eyes, because John Crofton had married for love, and always said it had made him the happiest man alive.

But Rachel had an argument ready for him, as well: she knew that Richard Weekes loved her. Thus she entered into the match on much the same footing as her parents had, and hoped to be as happy as they had been. Rachel hadn't believed in love at first sight – not until she'd met Richard for the first time in June, and watched it hit him like a thunderbolt. He'd come to Hartford Hall with a selection of Bordeaux wines for Sir Arthur Trevelyan to sample, and was waiting for the gentleman in the small parlour when Rachel came into the room to find a deck of cards. Outside a summer storm gathered, brought on by a week of torpid heat; the sky had gone dark and odd flickers of lightning came and went like fireflies. Trapped indoors, her two younger charges were restless and bad tempered, and she'd hoped to distract them with whist. She hadn't known that anybody was in the room

so she entered with unladylike haste, and frowning. Richard leapt up from the chair and tugged his coat straight, and Rachel halted abruptly. They faced each other for a suspended, silent moment, and in the next second Rachel saw it happen.

Richard's eyes widened, and words that had formed in his mouth were never spoken. He went rather pale at first, and then coloured a deep red. He stared at her with an intensity that seemed to border on awe. For her part, Rachel was too taken aback to say anything, and her murmured apology at intruding also died on her lips. Even in the wan light from outside, which made his burning face look a little sickly, Richard was arrestingly handsome. Tall and broad at the shoulder, even if he did not stand up as straight as he should. He had light brown hair the colour of umber, blue eyes and a square jaw. In spite of herself, in the face of such scrutiny, Rachel blushed. She knew she wasn't beautiful enough to have caused such upset with her face or figure alone – she was too tall, her body too flat and narrow. Her hair was the palest of blonds, but it was fine and wouldn't curl; her eyes were large, heavy-lidded, but her mouth was too small. So what else could it have been but realisation? The realisation that here was the person he'd been looking for, without even knowing it; here was his soul's counterpoint, the one who would bring harmony.

There was a mist of sweat on Richard's top lip when at last Sir Arthur's footsteps were heard, and they were released from the spell. Rachel dipped him a graceless curtsy and turned to leave, without the deck of cards, and Richard called out:

'Miss . . . forgive me,' as she walked away. His voice was deep, and smooth, and it intrigued her. She went back upstairs to the children's rooms feeling oddly breathless and distracted. Eliza, the eldest daughter of the house, was curled

up in a window seat reading a book. She looked up and scowled.

'What's the matter with you?' she said, loading the question with scorn. It was lucky for Eliza that she was dark and delicate and pretty. A plainer girl would not have got away with such a waspish personality, but at fifteen Eliza already had a great many admirers.

'Nothing at all to concern you,' Rachel replied coolly. There had been times during the six years that Rachel had been governess at Hartford Hall, more times than there ought to have been, when her fingers had itched to close Eliza's mouth with the flat of her hand.

For a few weeks after that, Richard Weekes appeared here and there, unexpectedly, claiming to be on business in the area. Outside church; near the grocer's shop in the village; on the green on a Sunday afternoon, where people gathered to gossip and plot. He came to Hartford a number of times, ostensibly to ask after the latest wines he'd delivered, and how they were drinking. He came so often that Sir Arthur grew irritable, and dealt with him brusquely. But still Richard Weekes came, and he lingered, and when he caught sight of Rachel he always found a way to speak to her. And then he asked for her permission to write to her, and Rachel's stomach gave a peculiar little jolt, because there could be no mistaking his intentions from that moment on. He wrote in a crabbed hand, each character stubbornly refusing to join up with the next. The prose was coloured by quirks in spelling and grammar, but the messages within it were sweet and ardent.

She'd had only one proposal of marriage before, even though, in the days before their disgrace, her family had been wealthy and well respected. Rachel was never beautiful, but attractive and well spoken enough to arouse interest in more

than one young gentleman. But she never gave them any cause to hope, or encouraged them at all, so only one ever plucked up the courage to ask for her hand – James Beale, the son of a close neighbour, on his way up to Oxford to read philosophy. She'd turned him down as kindly as she could, feeling that she ought to wait – wait for what, she couldn't say. There was loss in her family already, by then, but it was not grief that stopped her; only the want of something she could hardly put her finger on – a degree of conviction, perhaps. She was not romantic by nature; she did not expect her soul to take flight when she met the man she would marry. But she did hope to feel *something*; something more. Some sense of completion, and certainty.

Richard Weekes fumbled his proposal when he came to it, tripping over the words with his cheeks flaming; and it might have been that sudden show of vulnerability that convinced Rachel, in the moment, to accept. They'd been out walking, with the children to chaperone them, on a warm afternoon in late July. The countryside around Hartford Hall, near the village of Marshfield to the north of Bath, was more golden than green, drowsy with warmth and light. It had been a hot year, the wheat ripening early and the hay fields rife with wild flowers – poppies and cornflowers and tufted vetch. They came to the top corner of a sloping cattle field, where the air was scented with earth and fresh dung, and stopped in the shade of a beech tree while the children ran ahead through the long grass, like little ships on a waterless sea – all but Eliza, who seated herself on the low stone wall some distance away, opened a book and turned her back to them conspicuously.

'This is a beautiful spot, is it not?' said Richard, standing beside her with his hands linked behind his back. He had stripped off his coat and rolled up the sleeves of his shirt, and Rachel noticed the solid build of his arms, the scuffed

and weathered look of his hands. A working man's hands, not those of a gentleman. He wore long, well-worn leather boots over snuff-coloured breeches, and a blue waistcoat just slightly too big for him. *Bought second-hand and never altered. That does not make the man any less worthy*, Rachel thought.

'This is one of my favourite views,' Rachel agreed. Beyond a line of birches and willow pollards at the bottom of the slope, the land rose again, sweeping up, chequered with fields. High above them a young buzzard was calling to its parent across the cloudless sky, its voice still whistling and babyish, though it soared half a thousand feet over their heads. The skin felt tight over Rachel's nose, and she hoped it wasn't sunburned. Her straw hat was making her forehead itch.

'You must never want to leave Hartford,' said Richard.

'There are plenty of places, I am sure, that I might come to love as much. And places left may always be visited again,' said Rachel.

'Yes. You might always return to visit.' After this, Richard Weekes seemed to sense that he had assumed too much. He looked down at his feet, shifting them slightly. 'You grew up near here, you said?'

'Yes. My family lived in the By Brook valley, not six miles from here. And I spent three seasons in Bath before . . . before my mother was taken from us.' *Before everything fell into pieces*, she did not say.

'Forgive me, I had no wish to summon sad memories.'

'No, you did not – they are happy memories, Mr Weekes.'

After a pause, Richard cleared his throat quietly and continued.

'I imagine you have some acquaintances then, in Bath and around? People you met during your seasons there?'

'Some, I suppose,' said Rachel awkwardly. He didn't seem to understand that all such society had ceased with her

father's disgrace; she found that she had no particular wish to enlighten him. She had spoken of losing her parents, and he'd seemed to accept that as reason enough for her to have taken a post as governess, without any connotations of shame or penury. 'But it has been a good many years since I was there.'

'Oh, you will not have been forgotten, Miss Crofton. I am entirely convinced of that. It would not be possible to forget you,' he said hurriedly.

'A good many people come and go from the city,' she demurred. 'Did you grow up there yourself?'

'No, indeed. I grew up out in the villages, as you did. My father was an ostler. But life in the city fits me far better. Bath suits me very well – I would not want to live anywhere else. Though there is sin and hardship there, of course, same as anywhere, and it's more visible, perhaps, where so many people live in close quarters.'

'Life can be cruel,' Rachel murmured, unsure why he would mention such things.

'Life, but also men. I once saw a man beating a small child – a starving, ragged boy no more than six years old. When I forestalled the man he told me that an apple had fallen from his cart, and that the child had filched it from the gutter. And for this he would beat the wretch with his stick.' Richard shook his head, and gazed out into the sunshine, and Rachel waited. 'In the end it came to blows. I fear I may have broken his jaw.' He turned to look at her again. 'Does that shock you? Are you appalled, Miss Crofton?'

'Does what shock me? That a cruel man might beat a child over an apple, or that you might step in and punish him?' she said severely. *He tries so hard to make me know he is brave, and just, and sensible*. Richard looked anxious, so she smiled. 'The cruelty to the child was by far the worse evil, Mr Weekes.'

Richard took her hand then, and suddenly Rachel was all too

aware of Eliza's rigid back and listening ears, and the distant laughter of the other children. A breeze trembled through the beech leaves and fluttered a strand of hair against her cheek. *Now it comes*.

'I have already told you how much I . . . admire you, Miss Crofton. How much I love you, as I have never loved another. You *must* marry me.' Richard's voice was so tense that this proposal came out as a clipped command, and his cheeks blazed with colour. He looked at his feet again, though he kept hold of her hand. It was almost like a bow, like supplication. 'It would be an advantageous match, I do believe, for both of us. Your gentility and your manners are . . . so admirable, Miss Crofton. Your acquaintances in Bath . . . our combined resources, I mean . . . can only . . . can only lead to a shared future of far greater – I mean to say, please marry me, I beg of you.' He coughed, regrouped. 'If you would do me the great honour of being my wife, then I swear that I will devote my life to your every comfort and care.' He was breathing deeply, looking up as if he hardly dared to. *Two proposals, near a decade apart; this one somewhat the less graceful, but doubtless will be the last*. Rachel did not feel certain, but the sky was the most brilliant blue, and his hand was as warm as his flushed cheeks, and his eyes were frantic as he waited for her answer to his clumsy words. The sun glanced from the sloping lines of his cheekbones and jaw. *A beautiful face, and all coloured up for the love of me*. She felt her heart swell, then, and crack open just a little bit; a glimmer of feeling that was unexpected, long absent, and brought tears to her eyes.

'Yes. I will marry you, Mr Weekes,' she said.

Rachel and Richard were to marry in the chapel next to Hartford Hall and then travel at once to Bath, to Richard's house, where they would live.