



# I

*Wapping, London, June 1934*

'No, Dad!' Amy Carter dug her heels in and skidded on the path as her father dragged her along, the defiance earning her a sharp clip around the ear, which made her head ring.

'I ain't got time for your nonsense,' he growled, giving her another tug. 'My ship sails in three hours and your mum needs you.'

Tears of frustration filled her eyes as she stumbled. 'But, Dad, we was going to have reading and writing. I'm the only one who can't read well. I want to read and write like all the others.'

'You'll be fifteen in December. You'll never do that now.' He continued to pull her along, his grip biting into her thin arm. 'You're too bloody stupid.'

'I'm not stupid,' she muttered under her breath and stopped struggling as the familiar pain ran through her. 'Everyone calls me that, but I'm not! I just can't read or write proper.'

'Course you are. I found you in a class with the eight-year-olds.' Her father glared down at her in disgust. 'Where's your shame?'

'I don't care what they think of me.' That was a

lie, of course. She did care so very much, but she'd do anything to read and write properly, even suffer being put in the little class for this lesson. 'I'm not stupid,' she whispered again, close to tears.

She walked along now, a picture of dejection, clutching the piece of paper from class. Why couldn't she read? Everyone else did it easily enough, but the letters all looked funny to her and when she tried to write them they came out muddled up – or so they told her. She tried so hard until sheer frustration made her beat her hands on the desk and cry out in fury. That always got her a caning, but she couldn't help it. She wasn't stupid! She *wasn't*, but it didn't matter how many times she told herself this, the hurt and humiliation were still there. But when the others called her names she didn't let them see how their taunts wounded her. They weren't going to get that satisfaction.

'What's the matter with Mum now?' They'd reached their house in Farthing Street. It was a modest place near the docks, and four families shared the three floors. Amy and her mum had three rooms on the ground floor. There was one toilet out at the back and that was for everyone. It was enough for them because her dad was hardly ever home.

'She's sick again.' He pushed her through the door, slung his kit bag over his shoulder and stared down at her for a moment. 'I didn't mean to call you names, Amy. You have enough of that from everyone else, but you mustn't get so upset about not being able to read. You'll get through life fine without it.'

‘I can write, Dad, look.’ She held out the scrap of paper for him to see. ‘I was doing better today.’

Her father took a quick glance and shook his head sadly. ‘Your spelling’s worse than your granddad’s was.’ Then he turned and strode off.

Kicking the door shut, she fumed as she stared down at the writing she had been so proud of a while ago. Tears welled up in her eyes and threatened to spill over. It was all right him saying she’d get along without it; he didn’t know how it upset her. She had this awful hollow place inside her, and what with looking after her mum a lot of the time, she didn’t have much of a life. She had missed so much school it was no wonder she couldn’t blasted well read! Dad was never here long enough to see how bad it was for her. Being a merchant seaman he just sailed away, calm as you please, leaving her to ride the storm at home.

She wandered into her mother’s room, knowing full well what she would see. Her mother was propped up in bed looking pale and exhausted. Amy hadn’t been able to find out what was the matter with her. She would be all right for a while, and then take to her bed again, coughing and not being able to eat.

‘Your dad gone?’ Dolly Carter asked as soon as her daughter came in.

‘Yes, he came and took me out of school and then left.’ Amy looked carefully at the woman in the bed. Her left eye was swollen. ‘What you done to your face?’

‘I had a fainting fit and hit my head as I fell.’ Her mother touched her sore face. ‘I told him not to fetch you from school. I could’ve managed until you finished your lessons.’

Amy wasn’t too sure she believed this story, because her dad had a short temper, but she’d never seen him hit her mum. ‘You ought to see the doc if you’re that bad.’

‘They can’t do nothing for me.’ Her mother sat up straight. ‘Now, get me a nice cup of tea, there’s a good girl.’

Apart from the two bedrooms, the only other room they had was a scullery. It was large enough to have a table and chairs in there, and by the old black-leaded stove there was a shabby but comfortable armchair. Amy filled the kettle with water and put it on to boil, then gazed in the larder, grunting with satisfaction. When her father had been home there was always plenty of grub in the place. She made some cheese sandwiches while she was at it.

Loading it all on a tin tray she took it to her mother. What she saw made her stop in fury. Her mother was dressed and peering in the mirror as she tried to hide the bruise with heavy make-up. ‘What you doing?’

‘Trying to make myself look presentable.’ She eyed the tray Amy had plonked on the dressing table. ‘Good girl, you’ve made me a bite to eat. Don’t want to drink on an empty stomach.’

‘You’re not going out?’ Amy spluttered. ‘Dad

got me because he said you were too sick to be on your own.'

'He shouldn't have done that. I know how much school means to you. But I feel better now, and a night out will do me good.'

Amy could have screamed in frustration, but there was no point getting in a rage about it. Her dad had been worried, that's all. 'That a new frock you're wearing?'

'Do you like it?' Her mother preened. 'Got it off the tallyman. Not bad, is it?'

'Nice.' Amy might not be able to read, but she was no slouch when it came to money, and she knew her mother would have some to spare. Dolly always did when Dad came home flush from a long trip at sea. 'I need a new one myself, and shoes; these let in the wet. Don't know what the neighbours must think when they see me walking around looking like a rag bag.'

That made Dolly stare at her daughter, eyeing her up and down critically. 'You're quite right. You could do with some new things. The tallyman'll be here soon, so you'd better choose something then. Can't have everyone saying you're scruffy as well as . . .'

Clenching her hands behind her back, Amy forced out a smile. 'I know what everyone says about me, Mum.'

'I'm sorry, Amy.' Her mother looked upset. 'I know you can't help what's wrong with you. People say such nasty things, but I know you're not daft.'

Amy knew that's what everyone thought and it

distressed her so much. She had seen people who weren't right in the head, and she wasn't like them. She wasn't! Her mum and dad got impatient when she couldn't get things right, and they said things they were sorry about after. But she wasn't lazy like the teachers thought; she tried so hard.

She plonked herself in the old armchair and buried her head in her hands. She wouldn't cry. She wouldn't!

When the tallyman arrived ten minutes later she looked through his book and picked out a pretty summer dress in green with tiny flowers around the neck and short sleeves, and a pair of shoes with a bar across the instep. She didn't have any trouble making out pictures, and although she couldn't read how much they cost, they looked good.

'Right, I'll bring them the day after tomorrow. That will be an extra one and six a week, Mrs Carter.'

Amy watched carefully as the tallyman wrote the order in his book, fascinated to see him do it with such ease. Her heart ached to be able to do that.

When he'd gone, her mum shut the front door. Business was always done on the doorstep. The tallyman was never asked in.

'Why don't you forget about school?' Her mother spoke gently. 'Most kids are working by fourteen.'

'But, Mum, I can't get a job if I can't read or write my name.'

'Course you can, factories don't care about that sort of thing. All you got to do is put a cross for your name. If you haven't learnt to read by now you'll

never do it, and I see how upset you are sometimes when you come home. Think about it, Amy.’ With that Dolly left the house, heading for the Lord Nelson just down the road.

Amy knew her mother wouldn’t be back until chucking-out time. Her dad had dragged her out of school for nothing this time. It wasn’t always so, because at times her mum was terribly sick and Amy couldn’t leave her side, but she’d recovered quickly today.

Wandering back to the scullery she set about making herself a huge doorstep of bread and cheese, and it went down well with a glass of milk. Nicely full, she sat at the table, cupped her chin in her hands and stared moodily at nothing. Perhaps it would be better if she went out to work. She was desperate to learn to read, but the teachers didn’t seem to have time for her. All they kept doing was putting her in younger and younger classes. The other children all sniggered at her, calling her beastly names, but she kept her head up defiantly, and if they ganged up and punched her, she walked away as if she didn’t care. Well, her mum was right, she wouldn’t go back again, because tomorrow she’d get herself a job. But there was no way she was going to put a cross for her name.

She went to her bedroom and brought back the sheets of paper her gran had done for her about five years ago. They were dog-eared from constant use, but she treasured them. Her gran had died three years

ago and that had been a terrible blow, because she had been the only one who had had any patience with Amy, and tried to help.

Smoothing out the first page she gazed at it. Granny had drawn pictures and written underneath what they were. There were animals, fruit and all sorts of things. The pictures were really good, but the cat was her favourite. It had a cheeky face and looked as if it was smiling. Her granny had been so clever. Why hadn't she taken after her?

She traced her finger over the letters, trying to fix the shapes in her mind, but when she copied them, they didn't look the same, no matter how hard she tried.

Half an hour later she gave up and decided it would be better if she concentrated on her signature. Her initials were AC, so she sorted through the sheets until she found a large A for apple, and C for cat. She had seen lots of people sign things, because she always watched very carefully, and they just scribbled. The tallyman's name just looked like a wiggly line. With tongue sticking out in determination, she began to practise.

After quite a while she gave a satisfied grunt. She had managed to make the same marks over and over again. Whether it was anything like her name, she didn't know, but it was better than a cross!

Now she was hungry again, and stood up to rifle through the larder to see what she could find. There was a tin almost full of biscuits, so she made tea and

dunked them until nearly half of them had disappeared. Then she practised her signature again, just to be sure she could still do it. It took a great deal of concentration, but it looked something like those she had done earlier – at least she thought so. She would just act as if she knew what she was doing if there was something to sign.

It was only eight o'clock and the sun was still shining. Amy knew her mother wouldn't be back for ages yet, so, slipping the spare key into her pocket, she left the house. She would wander down to the docks and see if her dad had sailed yet. But she'd been so upset about being taken out of class that she hadn't asked him the name of his ship. It was always in big letters, and if she already knew the name she could sometimes pick out the right one when she got close enough. Some days she *could* make out words, but other days were hopeless and she couldn't read at all. That usually happened if she panicked or was feeling miserable. Then everything was just jumbled up.

Her heart missed a beat when she saw a gang of boys at the end of the road, and they jeered as she got near them.

'Barmy Amy can't read. She can't read,' they chanted. 'She ain't got no brains.'

Her step didn't falter. Walking through the middle of them and ignoring their grinning faces, she moved unhurriedly until she was past them.

Once round the corner and out of their sight, her bottom lip trembled, but she refused to let the tears

of self-pity flow. She was always being picked on, both in and out of school. Why did they have to be rotten to her? She'd never done anything to hurt them. No one wanted to be her friend. Why? She was always on her own, and very lonely.

There were three girls she knew across the road, laughing and walking arm-in-arm. Amy watched, longing to be with them, but they ignored her, just like always. Her mouth set in a determined line. They were too soppy and giggly for her, anyway. She didn't need them.

Running the rest of the way to reach her vantage spot, she saw a ship setting out, its horn blasting. Oh, it was lovely. Was her dad on that one? If only she were a boy, she'd be able to go to sea like him and visit all the lovely places he told them about. It had crossed her mind to cut her hair short and try to pass herself off as a boy, but it wouldn't work: she was already sprouting breasts. Looking down at her chest she grimaced; they were quite big and she wouldn't be able to hide them for long. Her dad said she was going to be pretty like her mum, but she couldn't see it. Her hair was long, dark and much too curly, her eyes were green with a strange upward tilt at the corners, and her mouth was too big. No, she didn't think she was going to be attractive, but she certainly wouldn't pass for a boy. She giggled when she thought what fun it would be to try, but with her dad away so much she couldn't leave her mum. When Dolly was bad she could hardly lift her head off the

pillow. That's when there was no time for school as Amy's days were taken up with cooking, shopping and cleaning.

How she wished her life was different. How she longed to be like the other children. But she wasn't. It was no good trying to kid herself about that. Her eyes filled with tears and she brushed them away before they could spill over. Her granny had told her she was special, but she couldn't believe that. She just didn't fit. If only she could sail away like her dad.

Amy watched the ship until it was out of sight, sighing wistfully. It was nice to dream though.

On her way back to the house she was relieved to see the boys were no longer there. The older she got the more the vicious comments hurt. She wanted to cry and bash their grinning faces, but the boys were always in a crowd and they were a rough lot. The girls weren't much better. None of them would hesitate to beat her up, she knew, because a few times she hadn't been able to stop herself from lashing out at the boys and girls after school. She always got the worst of it as they ganged up on her, and others would rush over to join in the fun. Then she would have to hide somewhere out of sight and sob in misery and pain, not understanding why they wanted to be horrible to her. She had tried to be friends – she really had – but just because she was different, they tormented her.

Letting herself into the house, she went straight to the scullery and picked up her papers, gazing at her granny's careful letters and drawings. These were

Amy's most precious possessions and she took them carefully back to her bedroom, tucking them in the chest of drawers under her knickers, wishing Gran were still alive. She was sure Gran would have found out why she couldn't read. Her granny had said she wasn't daft in the head; she just didn't see things the same as everyone else.

Amy sat on the edge of her bed, head bowed now she was alone and didn't need to keep up the pretence, and raged inside. Why didn't she see the words properly? There wasn't anything wrong with her eyes; she could see clearly for miles, and close to as well.

Her mum came back then, so Amy quickly undressed and slipped into bed. Dolly had others with her, and Amy heard the clink of bottles as they put them on the table. Their laughter was loud and she knew they wouldn't leave until all the booze was gone.

'Let's have a cuppa, Dolly,' someone shouted.

Amy stuck her fingers in her ears to shut out their racket. Her mum would be in a sorry state in the morning.

She hoped that lot didn't eat all the biscuits.

## 2

Before Amy could have some breakfast she had to clear up the mess from last night. There were bottles in the sink, on the floor and tipped over on the table, spilling out the dregs. That would have to be scrubbed before it was fit for use again. The smell of stale beer was disgusting. With a resigned sigh she filled a bucket with soapy water and set about cleaning up, not caring how much noise she made. Her mum wouldn't stagger out of bed until about lunchtime after the night she'd had.

When the place was spick and span again she put the kettle on and went to her mother's room, pulling back the curtains to let in the light.

A groan came from the bed. 'Shut those bloody curtains. My head's splitting.'

Amy ignored the order and ground her teeth. 'Why'd you drink so much, Mum? You know it makes you feel bad the next day.'

Her mother shielded her eyes from the sunlight streaming into the room. She looked a mess. She was still wearing her make-up and it was all smudged, leaving the sheets covered in orange powder. As soon as Amy could get her mother up those sheets would have to be washed. This was not her favourite job,

but the weather was good so they could be hung across the back yard. In the winter it was a nightmare trying to get things dry. Her mother didn't seem to care if things weren't too clean, and was quite happy to leave everything to her daughter, who couldn't stand living in dirt. A bucket of soapy water and a scrubbing brush worked wonders.

'You want a cup of tea, Mum, and something to eat?'

'Just tea.' Dolly opened one eye. 'Did we leave the place in a pickle?'

Amy nodded. 'I've cleaned it up.'

The eye closed and her mother groaned. 'You're a good girl. Don't know what I'd do without you. Get me that tea. My mouth feels like the inside of a bird cage.'

Grimacing, Amy returned to the scullery and found the kettle boiling away nicely. She was never going to drink like that. They were all happy while they were doing it, but the next day was awful. It was hard to understand why they did it. Her dad was the same; he liked his booze, and when he was home her mother got into the habit of spending hours in the pub. Once he'd gone back to sea her mum usually settled down to a quieter life.

She made the tea and took a cup in to her mother. Dolly gulped it down, although it was boiling hot.

'Ah, that's better.' After a coughing fit, her mother wiped her eyes. 'You going to school today?'

'No, you told me to get a job, and that's what I'm gonna do.'

‘Oh yes, I forgot that. It’d be a big help if you could. Your dad won’t be back for ages. He’s gone to the other side of the world to a place called Australia.’

Lucky devil, Amy thought, but didn’t say it out loud. ‘We won’t see him for months then.’

Her mother shook her head – carefully. ‘But he’ll turn up loaded with money, so we’ll have a good time. One thing about him, he don’t gamble away his earnings like some of them. But in the meantime, anything you can earn will help. Where you going to try?’

‘Don’t know.’ Amy hunched her shoulders. She didn’t want to do this, but what choice did she have? School wasn’t doing her any good, and she was fed up with the others jeering at her all the time. She wouldn’t tell anyone she couldn’t read. She’d had enough of people making fun of her.

‘There’s all those buildings by the river where they make clothes and things. You might get something there.’

‘I’ll try. Will you be all right for a while?’

‘Yes, I’m just going to have a little sleep, then I’ll get up.’ Dolly closed her eyes. ‘Don’t slam the door when you go out.’

Amy pulled the curtains across again to cut out the light, and went back to the scullery. Her stomach was churning about finding a job, so she poured herself a cup of tea and had a slice of bread. That was all she could manage. Then she dragged a brush through her hair, trying to make it look tidy, but it just

shot back to its usual springy mass. There was so much of it: perhaps she should cut some off, but her dad said she mustn't do that because it was pretty hair.

Slipping a key into her pocket, she left the house quietly and headed for the river.

The buildings here were drab, run down and probably damp inside from the river lapping at their doors. The first thing she noticed was some women standing outside one place, talking and waving their arms about. Amy hurried up to see what they were doing.

The women were reading a notice stuck on the door. She stood behind them, unable to decipher the writing. This was going to be harder than she'd thought if she couldn't even make out what the notice said.

'You don't wanna work here, Flossy,' one woman said. 'Heard bad things about the place. Marshall's work you like a slave.'

The woman who'd been addressed as Flossy stared at the notice. 'But it says here they need workers, pay and conditions good.'

Another woman snorted in disgust. 'Don't believe that. My girl tried it last year and didn't stay more than two weeks. Said the work was terrible hard.'

'Ah, well, your girl's no weakling.' Flossy turned away from the notice. 'Let's try somewhere else. I got to get something cos my Sid's been laid off again. He's never been able to hold down a job.'

Another woman looked gloomy. 'It's getting bloody hard to find work. We've all got to try and get jobs today.'

As they walked away, Amy hesitated for only a second before opening the door and slipping inside.

The place was huge, like a warehouse, and that was probably what it had been at one time, Amy figured. There were long benches where girls sat sewing by hand or by machine; other girls were running around with arms full of clothing. Along the entire length of one wall were racks loaded with finished garments. Amy had never seen so many clothes in her life.

‘What do you want?’ a short, balding man asked, looking rather harassed.

‘Um, the notice on the door said you need workers. Good pay and conditions,’ she added.

The man sighed. ‘You don’t want to believe everything you read. But come with me and I’ll take you to the boss.’

Amy was pleased with that bit of deception. The man believed she could read the notice. Bit of luck those women being there. She followed him, hoping her luck was going to hold.

‘Young girl to see you about the notice you put outside.’

The man behind the desk continued to frown and mutter over something he was reading. He was a gaunt man, quite old, Amy thought. He must be at least forty. His black hair was peppered with grey and he was wearing thick glasses. He didn’t look too friendly and she clenched her hands in front of her to stop them shaking.

‘Boss.’

He looked up then, his dark brown eyes unfocused for a moment. ‘Sorry, Jim. The price of material’s going up again. How the hell are we supposed to make a profit?’

Jim shrugged. ‘Perhaps you don’t want to take on more workers after all.’

At those words Amy’s hopes were dashed. ‘Your notice outside said you do,’ she blurted out.

The boss turned his gaze to her for the first time. ‘You’re a bit young, aren’t you?’

‘I look younger than I am because I’m short. I’m fifteen.’ Squaring her shoulders she held his gaze. It wasn’t much of a lie. She’d be fifteen in December.

He didn’t seem to believe her, but he nodded to Jim. ‘We’ve got to have workers or we’ll never meet our targets. I’ll see to this.’

When Jim had gone back to work, the boss said, ‘Sit down. What’s your name?’

‘Amy Carter, sir.’ She perched on the edge of the seat while he sorted through a drawer in his desk until he found what he was looking for.

‘That’s your hours and pay. Read it and if you want the job sign your name at the bottom and write down your address.’ He pushed the paper and a pen towards her.

Panic surged through her. What was she going to do? She pretended to read it while trying to stop her heart from thumping erratically. After what she thought was a reasonable amount of time for anyone to read the form, she picked up the pen and signed

her name, just as she had practised last night. She gripped the pen hard, trying not to stick her tongue out between her teeth with the effort. He wasn't watching so she pushed it back and stood up.

'Be here by seven-thirty on Monday. I don't tolerate lateness.'

'I won't be late, sir.' She made it to the door before he called her back.

'You haven't put your address down.'

'Oh, sorry.' She smiled apologetically, still holding on to the door handle. 'It's twenty-three Farthing Street, Wapping.'

To her immense relief he picked up the pen and wrote it down for her.

She shot out of the building as fast as her legs would carry her, elated that she had got away with it. The only trouble was she didn't know what she had to do when she started there in the morning, or what the pay was, or how long her hours were. Still, she had got the job, and all she would have to do was watch the others. She would soon get the hang of it.

Eager to tell her mum the news, she ran home and tumbled into the scullery, out of breath. Her smile was even wider when she saw her mum up, dressed, and drinking tea, looking much better.

'I've got a job at Marshall's, Mum. I start on Monday and they don't know I can't read. I fooled them easy.' She then explained what had happened.

'That was smart of you, Amy.' Her mother poured her a cup of tea. 'How much you going to get?'

‘It was all on the bit of paper, but I couldn’t make it out.’

‘Well, from what I’ve heard of that place, it won’t be much, but it’ll be a help.’

Amy toyed with her cup, her excitement melting away when she noticed her mother’s drawn face. ‘Are you going to be all right? It’s not like school. I won’t be able to stay home or they’ll throw me out.’

‘I know that.’ Dolly gave a determined nod. ‘I’ll manage. I’m glad you’ll be earning because you need to be able to look after yourself. I might not be with you for too long.’

There was something in her mother’s voice that made Amy glance up sharply. ‘Aw, Mum, don’t talk like that. You’ll be fine if you look after yourself and don’t drink quite so much.’

‘I won’t from now on. Your dad’s going to be away for months and I’ve got to look after you. He worries about you.’

‘Does he?’ That was news to Amy. She really didn’t know him all that well. He was just the man who turned up for a while occasionally and then disappeared again. And when he came home he was a stranger to her; he certainly never showed his feelings.

‘Oh, yes. He wasn’t going to take this ship, but I made him, because he can’t go turning down work. I told him I’m not going to die for a year or two.’

Amy was alarmed by this talk of dying. Her mother had said things like this before, but only in a joking way. She was serious this time. ‘Why don’t you see a

doctor and find out why you cough so much at times?’

Dolly shook her head. ‘I know what’s wrong with me and there’s nothing they can do. If they get their hands on me they’ll send me away, and what would happen to you then? Of course, living by the docks don’t help much.’

‘We could move.’

Her mother patted her hand. ‘It’s too late. Nothing will help now.’

Amy chewed her lip anxiously. ‘What’s wrong with you?’

‘It’s to do with the lungs. It’s got some funny name but I can’t remember it now.’ Dolly smiled brightly. ‘Anyway, there’s nothing to worry about yet. You start your new job and try to save a few pennies each week, just so you’ve got a little put aside for a rainy day.’

‘I’ll do that.’ Apart from looking tired and rather thin, her mother was quite cheerful today, so Amy put the worrying conversation behind her.

‘I know I haven’t always been patient with you, Amy. Watching you struggle to read has been painful, and we can’t help wondering if it’s our fault somehow. But we do love you, and you mustn’t worry so much about it, lots of people can’t read or write.’ Her mother stood up. ‘I’ll go shopping and see if I can get something tasty for our dinner.’

When Dolly had left, Amy slumped into the old armchair by the fireplace; it was cold now because it was summer, but in the winter it was a lovely warm spot. She thought back over the talk she’d had with

her mother and couldn't help worrying about the future. It would be a stormy passage if what her mother feared was true. But it couldn't be. She shook her head in denial. Her mother was just being gloomy cos Dad had gone back to sea. She was always a bit down then, and she had a hangover from last night's binge. Yes, that's all it was.

She jumped up and hunted through the larder for the biscuits. There was one left, so she sat down again and munched thoughtfully. It was no good her mum telling her not to worry that she couldn't read or write, because she did. It made her feel ashamed and worthless. She had struggled, fretted and lashed out in frustration and disappointment. But nothing did any good.

The 'something tasty' her mother brought back was a couple of meaty lamb chops, and with mashed spuds and greens they made a filling meal.

After Amy had cleared up and made them a pot of tea, it was still only two o'clock.

Her mother drank her tea and sighed. 'I'll just go and have a little rest this afternoon. What are you going to do this afternoon?'

'Amy grinned. 'The weather's nice so I thought I'd go for a walk.'

'You ought to have friends to go out with.' Dolly frowned at her daughter. 'You're always on your own.'

'They don't want nothing to do with me.' When her mother's frown deepened, she said airily, 'Any-

way, I don't need them. They think they're so good, but they're not. Gran always said I was special, and I'm going to do something special in my life, then I'll be able to laugh at them!

'That's the way. Don't let them upset you.' Her mother hauled herself to her feet, holding on to the table for a moment, then turned and headed for the bedroom.

'Mum, are you going out tonight?'

'No, Amy.' She glanced over her shoulder. 'I'll stay in and read to you, shall I?'

'Oh, please.' Amy's smile was as wide as it could get. 'I'd like that.'

Once her mother was asleep, she slipped out of the house, still smiling. She loved her mum reading to her. She had this wonderful book called *Pride and Prejudice* all about the upper classes, and Amy never got tired of hearing it. How she would love to be able to read it for herself.

There was a bounce in her step as she headed for the river. If the jeering boys had been on the corner of the street, she wouldn't have cared. She'd got herself a job, and that was more than they'd done. Her mother had promised not to drink so much, and Amy was sure she'd be strong again if she did that. Dad had a good ship this time and would come home with loads of money after such a long trip.

The sun was warm on her face and arms, and she sang to herself as she walked along.

\*

For once she didn't make for the docks, but instead found a quieter stretch of the Thames. It had been a long walk to get there, but worth it.

Sitting down on a tuft of grass she tucked her knees up and pulled her frock over to cover them. The sun was brilliant and it looked as if little diamonds were glistening on the water. She gazed into the river and laughed out loud when she saw ducks upending to feed.

'Lovely, aren't they?'

Amy jumped at the sound of a man's voice, shading her eyes to look up at him.

'Mind if I sit here as well?'

She shrugged. 'The river don't belong to me.'

'I'll take that as a yes, shall I?' He eased himself down beside her, stretched out his long legs, opened a large book and began to make pencil marks on the paper.

She watched in fascination as a picture began to take shape, not daring to speak because he seemed lost in what he was doing. He was a young man, about twenty she guessed. He had brown hair and light brown eyes. Studying him carefully she noted the highly polished shoes, good clothes, and hands that looked as if they hadn't done a day's work in their life. He spoke real proper, too.

Finished with her detailed inspection of him, she turned her attention back to the drawing, gasping in delight. 'That's here! That's the swan over there. It looks just like it.' She swivelled round until she was kneeling; she'd never seen anyone do that before.

He turned his head and smiled at her. 'I hope it does.' Tearing the page out he proffered it. 'Would you like it?'

Her fingers itched to take it, but hesitated. 'I couldn't. It's yours.'

'I can do more. Tell you what, I'll sign it and when I'm famous you can sell it for a lot of money.'

His eyes were full of mischief, making her laugh. 'You sure you're gonna be famous?'

'Of course. You've got to have belief in yourself or you'll never succeed in life.' He signed the drawing at the bottom and held it out for her. 'There you are, that's my name.'

She peered at it. 'What's it say?'

'I didn't think my signature was that bad!' He laughed. 'My name's Benjamin Scott. What's yours?'

She sat back again, rather bashful, but not before she had taken the precious drawing and placed it carefully beside her on the grass. 'Amy Carter.'

'Nice to meet you, Amy Carter, and where do you live?'

'Near the docks, Farthing Street. My dad's in the merchant navy. He's gone to Australia.'

'Ah, an adventurous life, eh?'

She nodded, and hugged her knees again.

'Do you mind if I draw you?'

'What you want to do that for?' She couldn't help giggling at the idea.

'Because you look pretty sitting like this beside the river.'

‘Go on – don’t be daft. I’m not pretty.’

‘I mean it, Amy.’ His pencil began to move over the page. ‘Sit still and look across the river.’

There was silence for a while as he sketched away, then he said, ‘Turn and face me now, Amy.’

What a laugh, she thought, having someone draw her picture. Bet those children who taunted her had never had their face in a picture. The customary hurt flooded back as she remembered all the nasty things they said to her, but then she banished it. She refused to think about them. This was fun.

It seemed no time at all before he was standing up.

‘Thank you, that was perfect.’

She scrambled to her feet. ‘Can I see it?’

Tucking the pad under his arm he smiled down at her. ‘I’ll let you see it one day.’

Amy watched him stride away, disappointed. He’d had kind eyes, and she didn’t think she had ever seen anyone as tall as that. Still, she had one of his pictures. She picked it up, careful not to crease it, then started back for home.

Mum was just getting the tea ready when Amy arrived, and while she buttered a slice of bread, Amy told Dolly all about the nice man who had drawn her picture.

‘He wouldn’t let me see it,’ Amy explained, ‘but he gave me this.’ She spread the picture out for her mother to see.

‘That’s really good.’ Her mother looked con-

cerned. 'But you shouldn't talk to strange men when you're out on your own.'

'He was all right, Mum. A proper gent.' Amy went into her bedroom and put the lovely picture in her drawer where it would be safe, and then went back to the scullery. Once they'd had their tea her mother would read to her.

This was one of the best days she'd ever had!

Benjamin couldn't get home quickly enough, breaking into a trot to reach his car parked further along the river. He had come to Wapping looking for something different to sketch, and he had certainly found it!

Excitement raced through him as he swung the starting handle on his Austin, a present from his father after he had left university. When the engine burst into life, he jumped in and headed for Chelsea. His parents had been disappointed when he had left Oxford, but once they had realized that he really wasn't the academic type and the only thing he wanted to do was paint, they had accepted his decision.

The feeling of guilt rose, as it always did when he thought of the sacrifices they had made to give him a good education. They were by no means poor, but helping a son through university had been a financial drain on the three draper's shops they owned. They were getting back on their feet again now he insisted on paying his own way.

One day he would make it up to them, to thank them for their faith in him. His painting was improving all the time and he was even beginning to sell a few canvases. All he needed was something exceptional to catch the critics' and gallery owners' eyes. And today

he was sure he had found it. What a face that young girl had, and her eyes were like nothing he had ever seen. He would have to get them right, for they said so much about her.

Pulling up outside the house where he was renting the top floor, he leapt out of the car and loped up the stairs, taking them two at a time.

Once in the attic studio he shrugged out of his coat, tossing it over a chair in the corner of the room. Without bothering to change into the old clothes he used for painting, he put a new canvas on the easel, opened his sketchbook and set to work.

Time no longer existed for Benjamin. The picture of Amy sitting by the river was roughed out, and that canvas replaced with another. This was for the full-face picture of her, and the one he was the most excited about. He had to get it down while he could still see her clearly in his mind's eye. God, he wished he had her here!

'Ben!'

His only comment was a muttered curse as he heard his friend running up the stairs.

'What the devil are you doing? We're supposed to be going to Sheila Watkins' birthday party and you're covered in paint, as usual.'

'Go away, Howard!'

There was silence as his friend studied the two pictures, perching on the edge of a tall stool to watch the portrait take shape. He spoke softly, never taking

his eyes off the canvas. 'I hate to disturb you, Ben, but we did promise to go tonight.'

'Damn!' Ben tossed down his brush, his concentration gone. Wiping his hands, he said, 'I'll have to leave it until tomorrow now.'

His friend's smile was wry and full of sympathy. 'Where did you find her?'

'Sitting by the river.' Ben stepped back to study his work. He had always considered himself a landscape painter, but not any more.

'Phew, Ben, I knew you were good, but...?' Howard waved his hand at both paintings. '... these are fabulous.'

'They will be when they're finished.' Ben gazed at the portrait critically, pleased with his friend's reaction. He trusted Howard, who had a marvellous eye for what was right. 'I haven't captured the eyes yet. There was so much in them. Youth, innocence and a deep, deep hurt that went to her very soul. Even when she smiled it was still there.'

Howard shot his friend a speculative look. 'You're getting poetic. Did you ask the girl about her life?'

'No, if I'd tried that she would have run away, and I didn't want to lose her until I'd finished the sketches. I knew that sitting beside me was something special. Someone special.'

Continuing to study the paintings, Howard pursed his lips in concentration. 'Got a bit of a gypsy look about her, but she isn't conventionally beautiful.'

'I agree.' Ben didn't look up from cleaning his

hands with white spirit. ‘But what a fascinating face.’

‘I know this is only the first laying down of paint, but are the eyes really that colour?’

Ben squinted, visualizing the young girl when she had looked at him. ‘Slightly darker, but I haven’t finished yet.’

Excitement lighting his face, Howard shoved his hands in his pockets and began pacing. ‘I think you’ve really got something here. I’ll ask Thomas from the Summerfield Gallery to come and have a look.’

‘No.’ Ben spoke sharply, making Howard frown. ‘That’s kind of you, but I don’t want anyone to see these until they’re finished.’

‘All right, if that’s how you feel.’

‘I do.’ Ben smiled. ‘I’ll let you know when I’m happy with them. Now I suppose I’d better get ready for this damned party. How the hell did we get invited, anyway?’

‘They know our respective parents.’ Howard’s face broke into a grin. ‘You’re an unsociable devil when your mind’s on painting, which is nearly all the time. I hope you’ve remembered to get a present for Sheila?’

‘I did this for her.’ Ben picked up a small painting of a single yellow rose, holding it out for Howard to see.

‘Oh, very pretty.’ His friend’s tone was sarcastic. ‘Not your best work.’

‘Agreed, but it’s how I pay my rent. For some strange reason this kind of thing sells.’ Ben shoved

the painting in a bag. ‘I look forward to the day when I can just paint what I like, but that isn’t possible when we’re short of money.’

Howard nodded, perched back on the stool again and stared at the portrait. ‘Does rather stifle the artistic talent, doesn’t it? I’m making awful things like jam pots and biscuit barrels. God, how I hate it, but we’ve got to eat – sometimes.’

‘Can’t argue with that.’ Ben knew what a tough time Howard was having. He rented the basement of this house and it was often a struggle to find enough money to pay his rent. Ben helped when he could, but it wasn’t easy. The two of them never turned down an invitation, in the hope of getting a free meal. That showed just how bad things were at times.

Like Ben, Howard Palmer came from a middle-class family, but because he had chosen to become a sculptor, they had refused to give him any financial help – until he had come to his senses, as they put it. Howard was a brilliant sculptor and had been a good friend of Ben since childhood. They had both dropped out of university at the same time to pursue their dream of having a gallery of their own one day.

Ben realized they had both fallen silent, lost in thought as they stared at the portrait, dreaming of a successful future. ‘And what are you giving Sheila?’

Howard started. When he looked up his eyes were unfocused for a moment, then they gleamed in amusement. ‘I’ve made her a vase.’

‘I’m sure it’s very pretty.’

They burst into hoots of laughter, their introspective mood disappearing.

Howard stood up and slapped Ben on the back. 'She's going to get two unusual and unique presents. Get cleaned up. Hope there's plenty of food, because I haven't had a decent meal all week.'

Sheila Winslow lived in a charming house in Richmond, right by the river. The place was already crowded when Ben and Howard arrived, and as it was a lovely evening the guests had spilt out into the garden. They had been at university with quite a few of them, so they said hello before going to find Sheila.

She saw them and came over, arms open wide, to kiss them on the cheek, gushing enough to make everyone turn and watch her. 'Oh, good, you made it. I couldn't have a party without my two favourite artists.'

Ben groaned deep in his throat. For some peculiar reason Sheila seemed to think it was clever to be friends with two struggling artists. Not that he had ever considered her a friend, more of an acquaintance really.

Howard had managed to keep his smile in place as they gave her their presents.

Ripping open the packages she held each one up for everyone to see. 'How quaint. You are such clever boys,' she simpered. 'Do go and get yourselves a glass of champagne.'

Without a moment's hesitation they headed for the dining room and the food.

'I'd rather have a pint,' Howard said, still grinning. 'She's gone overboard with her dress tonight.'

Ben eyed her critically as she laughed with a group of her friends. 'Hmm.'

'It's the latest fashion. You don't approve?'

'A bit too glittery and revealing for my taste. I like a touch of mystery about a girl.'

'Like the girl you met today?'

'Yes.' Ben gazed into space, remembering, and wishing he were back in his studio. Then his stomach growled and reminded him why they were here. 'Let's get at the food.'

The large dining-room table was loaded with all kinds of tempting things, so they grabbed plates and piled them high. For several minutes they just munched away, not speaking.

When Howard's plate was nearly empty, he rolled his eyes in appreciation. 'Mrs Winslow certainly knows how to cater for a party.'

'Well, it is her daughter's twenty-first.' Ben eyed the table, trying to decide what to sample next.

'Is it?' Howard helped himself to another two slices of ham. 'This is wonderful.'

They were about to fill their plates again when Mrs Winslow sailed up to them, a tight smile on her face.

'You boys look as if you haven't had a decent meal for a week.'

'Longer than that, Mrs Winslow.' Ben smiled with good humour as the woman made a disapproving sound. The way they lived was a fact of life to them,

and as long as they could practise their art, then every sacrifice was worthwhile.

‘I don’t know what your parents were doing, allowing you to throw away your education and become starving artists.’

‘They’ll be proud of us when we’re famous and making lots of money.’ Ben studied his empty plate and thought a large slice of strawberry cake would look good on there.

‘You are both living in a dream.’ She almost snorted, but she was far too well brought up to do any such thing. ‘It will never happen. Howard, you come from an affluent family and yet you have cast it all away. And what for? So you can make pots and statues.’

‘But they are very good pots and statues.’ Howard was not at all put out by the criticism; he’d heard it all before.

‘And you, Benjamin.’ Mrs Winslow turned on him now. ‘What is your poor father going to do? You should be training to take over the family business, not wasting your time painting pictures no one will ever want. You are the only child, so what will happen when your father can no longer work?’

‘He said he would sell the shops.’

She tossed her head in disgust. ‘Neither of you has any sense of responsibility. Well, do carry on eating. I’ll get Cook to make you up a parcel of food to take away with you.’

As soon as she walked away Howard made a dive

for the food again. ‘That’s her act of charity for the day. Feeding two disobedient sons.’

A huge slice of strawberry cake slid on to Ben’s plate. ‘I’m not too proud to take it.’

‘Nor me.’

They grinned at each other, knowing full well that many people considered them mad. It didn’t bother them one tiny bit.

When they couldn’t eat another mouthful they went back to the party. Sheila made a great show of dancing with them, but she soon lost interest when she found they didn’t know all the latest dances.

As soon as it was polite to do so, they left, carrying a large parcel from the cook.

Ben didn’t give a damn what anyone thought or said about him. He was a good artist and one day his talent would be recognized. And one day, too, he and Howard would have their own gallery as a showcase for their work.

Curled up in the armchair like a contented kitten, Amy listened to her mother reading. Dolly often stumbled or hesitated over words, but Amy didn’t mind as she always lost herself in the story. One day she was going to be able to sit and read to herself. She was determined. Her mum was doing well this evening; she’d been reading for a long time.

‘That’s enough for tonight.’ Her mother closed the book. ‘I’m tired now and think I’ll go to bed.’

Amy stretched and stood up. It was only half past

eight, but her mum was pale, her hands shaking slightly. ‘Thanks for reading to me, Mum. Would you like a cup of cocoa or something? I’ll bring it in to you if you like?’

‘That would be nice. I’ll have tea please, Amy.’ Dolly stood up and began to cough, holding on to the table for support.

Filling a glass with water, Amy gave it to her, watching her sip it until the coughing stopped.

‘Shall I help you to bed, Mum?’

‘I’m all right now.’ She gave a tight smile. ‘Read for too long, I expect.’

‘Oh, that was my fault. I’m sorry.’ Amy felt guilty about asking her mother to read so much.

‘No it isn’t.’ She straightened up and faced her daughter. ‘Nothing’s your fault, Amy. You’ve been dealt some rotten cards in life and you’re not to blame for that. You did well today finding work when there’s so much unemployment around.’

Amy watched her mother go to the bedroom and glowed with pride over the rare compliment. She was glad now that she wasn’t going back to school and having to face the other children’s cruelty. Where she was going no one knew she couldn’t read properly, and they never would. It was going to be her carefully guarded secret from now on.

She made her mother the tea, pouring one for herself before she went to bed. She mustn’t be late on her first day.

After taking the tea in to her mother, she went

back to the scullery to drink her own, feeling happier than she had ever done. Her mum said she was going to look after herself now Amy wouldn't be able to spend so much time at home. If she ate properly and rested when she was tired, she would soon get better. And when her dad came home her mum would be happy again.

## 4

It was twenty minutes past seven when Amy arrived at the factory for her first day, but there was already a crowd of women and girls waiting for the boss to come and open the doors. Amy was nervous about starting work and hadn't been able to eat any breakfast. She had put extra in her lunch box though, knowing she would be starving by the time they had a break.

Hanging back shyly, not daring to speak to anyone, she waited, hoping she wasn't going to be sick with worry. If they wanted her to read something perhaps she could say her eyes were bad? That might work.

'You starting here today?'

The girl in front of her had turned and smiled. She was slightly older than Amy, had dark brown hair and hazel eyes. She was also about three inches taller than Amy, who was no more than five feet one. Her smile was bright though, making Amy smile back at her.

'Yes.' It had come as a shock to be spoken to in that friendly way, and she blushed uncomfortably.

'My name's Gladys.' The girl pointed to the lunch box Amy was clutching. 'Brought your own grub, I see. We can eat together. I know a nice spot.'

'Thank you.' Amy could hardly believe her ears.

This stranger was offering to spend time with her. Such a thing had never happened before. ‘My name’s Amy.’

All chance to talk stopped then, as the boss arrived and opened the door to let everyone in.

Gladys winked as they streamed in. ‘See you at one o’clock, Amy.’

Amy watched in amazement as the women rushed to their benches and began work immediately, heads bent and fingers flying as if their very life depended upon it.

‘Don’t just stand there, girl.’ The man who had taken her to see the boss yesterday glowered at her. ‘Come with me.’

Remembering his name was Jim, she followed, trotting to keep up with him as he made for a long bench in the middle, which was piled high with cut-out garments. Next to it was another table and standing around it were two men and three women with scissors in their hands, cutting around patterns at great speed. She couldn’t help wondering what all the rush was?

‘Right, now your job will be to keep all the workers supplied. They must not run out of sewing and have to wait while you bring them more.’

Her gaze swept around the room. The women appeared to be working in groups, and there were lots of them. Some were on machines and others sewing by hand. With eyes wide, she asked, ‘How will I know when they need more?’

‘I’ll tell you.’ He picked up a pile of cut-out items

from the table and thrust it into her hands. 'Take this to blouses.'

'Er . . . where are they?'

His irritated mutter showed that he had little patience. 'They've all got big notices on poles by the benches.' Spinning her round to the left he gave her a push. 'Move yourself!'

Her heart was thudding as she walked forward, scanning the signs above the benches. She was in a panic now, and when that happened words became meaningless squiggles. She continued walking, hoping she was going in the right direction. What was she going to do? They would see she couldn't read and throw her out.

'Amy,' Gladys whispered. 'They're for me.'

She stopped and nearly cried in relief, handing over the material with shaking hands. 'Sorry.'

'Don't look so worried. You'll soon get the hang of it.' Gladys carried on with her sewing.

*I can't do it.* Amy wanted to cry out in despair as she struggled to calm herself down. It was then she noticed that every bench was working on different material. On Gladys's they were all sewing identical white blouses; next to them the women had navy blue skirts. She let out a huge huff of relief. That's how she would be able to tell where to deliver the next lot of work.

Feeling a little calmer now she hurried back to the cutting table.

'You'll have to move quicker than this.' The foreman gave her a harassed glare as he thrust another

armful of material at her. 'Take this to the petticoats.'

The material this time was silky and pink, so Amy cast a wild look around. Pink, pink, she chanted to herself, running from bench to bench until she found the right one.

When she got back the foreman had disappeared so she fished in her pocket for a piece of paper and stub of pencil. She always carried these with her in case she needed them. And she certainly did now!

The sketch she made was rough, but the different workbenches were clear enough. Gladys's bench was right in the middle and she worked her way from there, drawing a picture of a blouse, then the petticoats and skirts on the other two she knew. By the end of the day she hoped to have a little picture over every bench to guide her.

By the time the dinner bell sounded she had over half the benches marked, and knew the system was working. It was a tricky business because she didn't want anyone to see what she was doing, but luckily they were all too busy to take notice of her. As long as they were kept supplied with work no one even bothered to look at her.

'Come on, Amy.' Gladys caught hold of her arm. 'We've only got three-quarters of an hour.'

Picking up her sandwiches, Amy left the factory with Gladys. Outside most of the workers were sitting on boxes or the ground, eating and talking.

'I like to get right away for a while if the weather's all right.' Gladys slipped her hand through Amy's

arm as they walked along, chatting away about how she wished she lived somewhere with green fields and hills.

Amy was content to listen, enjoying the novelty of being with someone who wasn't calling her rude names. It was nice, and she hoped Gladys was going to be a friend. She'd never had one before.

'This'll do.' Gladys stopped under a large oak tree. 'I sit here and look up at the branches. It's so beautiful, even in the winter.'

After settling down they began munching on their food. Amy was hungry now and very relieved to have survived the morning. She'd finish working out who was doing what by the end of the day, and tomorrow wouldn't be so frightening.

She cast Gladys a shy glance and noticed she had her head tipped back looking up at the tree. Amy did the same, watching the slight breeze rustle the leaves, making shimmering fingers of sunlight pierce the dense canopy. It was lovely, and very peaceful, if you ignored the noise from the docks not far away. Of course the spot she'd gone to yesterday was much better, but this was all right for today. Her mind drifted back to that place by the Thames, and she couldn't help wondering what that man would do with her picture. It would be lovely to see it one day, but she doubted she ever would. Still, she had one of his drawings. How she wished her gran were still alive. Gran would have loved it. Perhaps she'd be able to buy a frame for it sometime and put it

on her bedroom wall. She smiled to herself at that thought.

‘Lovely, ain’t it?’

‘Yes.’ Amy finished her food, wishing she’d brought a bit more with her. She must put in another sandwich for tomorrow. Feeling quite relaxed now, she asked, ‘Why do you all work so fast?’

‘Because we get paid for how much work we do. It’s bloody hard labour, but if you can’t keep up with what they want, they chuck you out. My dad was killed in an accident at the docks two years ago and my mum needs the money.’

‘Oh, I’m sorry.’

Gladys’s usually smiling mouth set in a straight line for a moment. ‘He was a good man and my mum’s never got over losing him.’ Then she smiled again. ‘You still got your dad?’

Amy nodded.

‘What’s he like?’

‘He’s all right, but we don’t see much of him. He’s in the merchant navy and he’s gone to the other side of the world this time. He won’t be back for ages.’

‘I’ll bet he has lots of tales to tell when he does come back.’ Gladys stood up and dusted down her skirt. ‘We’d better get back now.’

Amy did the same and fell into step beside Gladys, merely nodding. She changed the subject. ‘Perhaps your mum will marry again one day.’

‘I doubt that.’ Gladys grimaced. ‘Thought the world of him, she did, and hasn’t got eyes for anyone

else. She's still not bad-looking and ought to find someone to look after her. She's had plenty sniffing round her. Bloody stupid, if you ask me.'

'Oh.' Amy had never heard a woman swear so freely; her mum never did, and she found it a bit embarrassing. 'Er . . . do you mean your mum has men after her?'

'Amy, you are a funny one. Are you really as innocent as you look? You've gone all pink.'

The usual hurt was back. It hadn't taken long for the insults to come. 'I'm not daft!'

'I didn't mean that . . .' Gladys stopped, concerned. 'I wasn't being rude, Amy. You seem to live in a little world of your own, not taking much notice of what's going on around you, and I think it's nice.'

'Do you?' That was hard to believe.

'Yes.' Gladys smiled. 'I like you. Can we be friends? We could go to the pictures on Saturday evening. They've got *King Kong* showing.' This was announced with a wiggle of delight.

'Is it good?' Amy didn't know what to say, as she'd never heard of the film. In fact she'd never even been to the pictures. It was at that moment she realized just how lonely she had been since her gran died.

Gladys laughed. 'Just you wait and see. Will you come?'

'Yes please.'

They reached the factory with only two minutes to spare, and Amy walked in almost bursting with happiness. She had a friend and was going to the

pictures with her at the end of the week. She'd have her new dress and shoes by then.

Although the hours were long and the days hectic, Amy was happy. Her sketch of the worktables was a big help for the first couple of days, and as the week went on she had to refer to it less and less. It was easier to remember who was working on what by the feel and colour of the materials. No one was shouting at her, nor calling her beastly names and saying she was stupid, and her mum was getting better. Dolly was even talking about finding a job in a shop if she could.

Picking up the next batch of cut-out blouses, she hurried to the bench where Gladys was working.

'Pictures soon,' Gladys whispered. 'I'm looking forward to seeing *King Kong* again.'

'Have you seen it before?' Amy was surprised.

'Yes, twice. It's a real scary picture.'

Amy giggled at her friend's expression, but didn't linger; she hurried on to the next job. The tallyman had brought her dress and shoes round and she was looking forward to wearing them.

'Amy!'

She spun round to face the foreman as he strode towards her, praying she hadn't done anything wrong. 'Yes, sir?'

'Can you sew?'

'Yes, my gran showed me.'

He gave her the material he was holding. 'Do the hem on this and let me see what you can do. Careful

though. This is special and we don't want to have to unpick it.'

Amy took the garment and ran her fingers gently over the cream-coloured material. It was so soft and fine. She'd never seen anything like it.

'Er . . . I can't work quick like the others.'

'I don't want you to. Take your time and do tiny stitches. Sit over there by the window.'

For the next hour Amy concentrated on doing her best stitching. Her gran had always done such beautiful work, and she was determined to show the boss how well she had been taught.

'Let's have a look.' The foreman took the garment from her, frowning as he examined what she had done. After giving her a startled look he headed for the office without saying a word.

The confidence drained out of her. It wasn't good enough. She sat on the high stool for a few moments, swinging her legs, then sighed and stood up. It had been nice sitting here sewing, but she had better get on with keeping the women supplied with work.

She set off, not looking where she was going, and nearly cannoned into the boss. With a neat bit of foot-work she just managed to avoid him. 'Sorry, sir,' she gasped. She was desperate not to lose this job. It was a different world to her but she had found her place in it; she didn't want to go back to being alone again.

He put out a hand to stop her tearing away. 'Where did you learn to sew like this?'

'My gran taught me, sir.'

‘Can you embroider?’

Amy nodded. ‘My gran was really good and she showed me all the stitches.’

‘That’s a good find, Jim,’ the boss said to the foreman. ‘Give her the Richardson trousseau and I’ll arrange for her to have an extra shilling a week while she’s working on it. We haven’t got anyone else who can do such fine work.’

Amy’s mouth dropped open. An extra shilling a week. She’d be able to save that like her mum told her, she decided, hoping the special job would take a long time.

By the end of the week, Amy was humming to herself as she sewed. The boss was pleased with her work and his praise had made her blush with surprise. She was good at something!

On Saturdays they only worked until one o’clock and she was very excited as she queued up for her wages. When her time came she managed her much-practised signature with comparative ease. Again she reflected how it was strange that her mood affected her ability to read and write. If she was in a panic nothing made sense, but if calm and relaxed she could usually make out some words.

Gladys was waiting for her at the door. ‘Still coming to the pictures tonight?’

‘Yes.’ Amy nodded eagerly. ‘What time?’

‘Seven at the Regal. I’ll wait outside for you.’

‘All right, I’ll see you then.’

Amy ran home. She couldn't remember feeling this happy before. She had her first week's money in her pocket and, best of all, she had a friend!

'Mum!' She dashed indoors waving her wage packet. 'I got paid and I'm going to the pictures tonight. Gladys asked me.' Out of breath, her wide mouth turned up in a smile, she plonked herself down at the table and pushed the packet towards her mother. 'How much have I got?'

'My goodness, you are excited.' Her mother poured her a cup of tea, smiled, and then emptied the money on to the table.

'How much?' Amy rested her elbows on the table, beaming with pleasure as her mother counted the money. 'I couldn't read what it said in the book, but I signed my name all right.'

'There, I told you you'd manage, didn't I? You've got thirteen shillings.'

Amy's eyes opened wide and she bounced in her chair. 'They said I was to have an extra shilling because my sewing was good. Have I got that?'

'Yes, look, sixpence for half a week.' Her mother pointed to the figures on the front of the envelope. 'It says here: wage twelve shillings and sixpence, plus the bonus.'

Although she could often make out figures better than words, she was much too excited to do it now. It sounded like a fortune to her though. 'Can I have some to go out tonight?'

'Of course you can.' Dolly began to separate the