

CUSTARD TARTS

Nellie tried not to look up at the clock. She'd checked it not more than a minute ago and knew there was only half an hour till the end of her shift. But the temptation to check again was overwhelming. She looked up at the large white-faced clock hanging on the brick wall between two tall factory windows. The clock had a two-inch-thick coating of pale golden powder over its rim and the square panes in the windows were edged with the same substance, as if a yellow snowstorm had blown through the factory floor, dusting every nook and cranny with a fine powder. But it wasn't snowing. It was high summer and the room was filled with choking custard powder. Albert, the foreman, had gone round earlier with a long pole, pulling open the top windowpanes and letting some air in to alleviate the oppressive heat of the long room. But to Nellie it felt as though the air must be the only thing that wasn't moving in the powder-packing department of Pearce Duff's custard factory.

Nellie had been standing at the bench for almost eleven hours now, filling packet after packet with custard powder, and her calf muscles, thighs and back all screamed as though they'd been stretched on a rack. She shifted continually from one foot to the other in search of momentary relief. Any minute now the hooter would sound, a jarring high-pitched scream, which was nevertheless always welcome. Quickly glancing from the clock back to her best friend Lily, she checked to see if her friend's hands were idle. Lily had stood beside her all day, folding and pasting the filled packets of custard Nellie passed to her. They had to make

sure their hands were always moving. Albert constantly prowled between the rows of filling machines, checking on the girls' every movement. He could spot an idle hand from the other end of the factory floor. A pause in the filling, folding or packing procedure was considered the cardinal sin in the powder-packing department. Nothing was ever allowed to be still. She nudged her friend to let her know Albert was approaching and handed her the next packet for pasting.

'Not long now, Lil,' she muttered.

Lily raised her eyes, and without pause shoved the next packet to Maggie Tyrell for loading on to the trolley.

Suddenly a high-pitched screeching noise came keening up from the factory yard below and through the open windows. Nellie and Lily exchanged glances. It was not the welcome sound of the factory hooter sounding the end of their day, but the unmistakable wail of a baby. Instantly Nellie saw Maggie Tyrell freeze. She was a frazzled-looking woman with six children.

'That's my little Lenny!' Maggie darted a look at the clock. 'Me daughter's brought him too early!'

Albert was approaching at a steady pace and Nellie saw panic written on Maggie's face. Ethel Brown, a large woman working at the next machine who had also heard the baby's cry, leaned over to Maggie.

'Ask to go early, Mag,' she suggested.

But Maggie shook her head. 'He'll dock me half hour.'

More and more women became aware of the baby's insistent screaming, shooting quick looks at Maggie to see what she would do, some making gestures for her to go. Only Albert seemed not to hear the cries coming through the high windows as he passed behind their backs, adding up the quantities of packets on each trolley.

Maggie was becoming more and more agitated. 'Oh, poor little bugger, I can't stand much more of this. He's hungry, that's all.'

She fumbled with a packet, dropping it on the floor, its contents

spilling out in an accusing golden stream. Nellie quickly kicked the broken packet under the bench.

‘Mag, he’s coming back, ask him for a toilet break, quick!’

Maggie smoothed her worried features into a placating smile and looked over her shoulder, catching Albert’s attention with her raised hand.

‘I need to go to the lav, Albert,’ she whispered.

‘Can’t you wait?’ Albert said irritably. ‘There’s only ten minutes to go!’

Maggie crossed her legs and made a face. ‘I’m afraid I’ll have an accident...’

‘Oh, go on then.’

Maggie scuttled off towards the double doors.

‘You women drink too much tea, that’s your trouble!’ he called after her as Ethel Brown waved two fingers behind his back, which set Lily and Nellie giggling.

Soon the sounds of the baby’s cries faded away as Maggie fed him at the factory gates, and not long after the scream of the factory hooter sounded their release.

Nellie Clark walked out of Pearce Duff’s factory, arm in arm with Lily Boshier. A crowd of women and girls shuffled around them, many linking arms, some laughing, others looking about them. Nellie herself was searching the small crowd of young men who hung about the factory gates, for one special face.

One of the bolder boys took his hands from his pockets and whistled. ‘Aye aye, boys, here come the custard tarts!’

More whistles followed and some called out girls’ names. Nellie peered over the heads of the crowd as she heard someone call hers. Sam, one of the delivery boys, was seated up on a cart, holding the horse’s reins steady.

She pretended not to hear him. Every day he offered to give her a lift on the cart back to her home in Vauban Street, next door to the carter’s stables, where he worked with her father.

‘He’s not bad-looking,’ whispered her friend Lily, ‘*and* he’s here, regular as clockwork.’

Nellie shook her head and shushed her friend.

‘Leave off, Lily, I’m not getting up on that cart! Anyway, he’s such a soppy ’apporth, I’m not givin’ him the time of day.’

Nellie, at sixteen, was a fresh-faced girl with bright blue eyes and a sweep of chestnut hair, which she attempted in vain to keep contained in a loose roll, framing her face. She couldn’t say why his attentions irritated her so much, but they did.

You’re not for me, Sam Gilbie, she thought, as they swept on past the young man with his carefully brushed, wavy dark hair. Undeterred, he jumped down and called after them.

‘I was wondering, Nellie—’

‘Not interested!’ Lily called back as the two girls leaned into one another, their wide flat caps touching, to form a shield against the young man’s advances. But after they had passed, another young man detached himself from the crowd and ran to catch up with Lily and Nellie.

‘Hang on, girls!’

At the sound of his voice, Nellie tightened her grip on her friend’s arm. He was a tall, lithe fellow of about twenty, and as he caught up with them he joined his palms, swimming between them, like a sinuous eel. They parted to allow him in, and he draped an arm over each of their shoulders.

‘All set for tonight, you two?’ He kissed Lily on the cheek and attempted to do the same to Nellie.

‘Get off, you saucy sod.’ She jerked her head back, but blushed all the same. Nellie had spotted Lily’s brother, Ted, in the crowd and now found herself angry at the rising blush, which she was unable to disguise. He was a head taller than the two girls and wore a flat cap and a white choker, tied around his neck. His clothes, though obviously a docker’s, always looked dashing on his long-limbed figure and Nellie found herself noticing the jaunty angle of his cap.

‘I told you, we’ll be there,’ said Lily. ‘Don’t keep on about it.’

‘I’m not sure I can come,’ Nellie said. ‘My dad’s not too keen on me going out on my own at night.’

‘Well, tell him you’re going to me mum’s house.’ Ted smiled down at her and squeezed her shoulder. ‘It’s true enough, it’s where I’m meeting you, so you are going there... *first!*’

He broke away, laughing, calling over his shoulder, ‘Make sure you come, I want you to meet someone special!’

Nellie’s father, George Clark, was a large barrel-chested man with a drooping moustache and a stern manner. He worked as a carman for Wicks, the carter whose stables were next door, delivering grain, foodstuffs or timber to and from the nearby docks. Years of driving a horse and cart, in all weathers, had given him a ruddy, lined complexion and a powerful physique. A man of few words, when he did speak his children made sure they took notice. Nellie tried not to defy him. Growing up, she and her two brothers and sister had learned to fear his anger and, even more, the leather belt he produced when family discipline demanded it. Tonight, he was sitting in his favourite chair as usual, pipe in hand, shirtsleeves rolled up and braces undone.

Nellie thought now would be as good a time as any. Her father was always most amenable after a good dinner and she had obliged by cooking his favourite: boiled bacon and pease pudding. When her mother died two years earlier, she’d found herself the surrogate mother of the whole family. With the help of her younger sister, Alice, she cooked and cleaned and took care of her two little brothers, Bobby and Freddie. Bobby, who’d been six when their mother died, had needed her constant care. For a year he’d clung to Nellie’s skirts, burrowing in like some little lost animal. She often felt she was missing out on her own youth, leaping from childhood to motherhood with no preparation, but one look at Bobby’s mournful little face, peering up from the folds of her skirt, told her she had no choice. Sometimes an unaccountable sadness would overtake her and for a long time she thought she was simply missing her mother, but lately, as she saw other girls her age launching forward into independence and even the promise of romance, she realized she had been mourning her lost girlhood.

After she and Alice had cleared away the tea things, she determined that she *would* go out that night. In the scullery as they washed and dried the plates she leaned over to whisper to Alice.

‘Can you get the boys ready for bed tonight? I don’t want to give him,’ she nodded towards the kitchen, where her father sat, ‘any excuse to stop me going out.’

Eleven-year-old Alice was Nellie’s confidante and staunchly loyal. When their mother died, it had been Nellie who’d taken the children into her arms and comforted them. Their father believed in managing grief, as he managed his family, with an iron rod. She couldn’t remember him shedding a tear. He’d just seemed to grow more stern, surrounding himself with armour plating. His upright, tight, buttoned-up figure, walking behind the hearse, had never bent or faltered and, as they’d stood sobbing at their mother’s grave, his only words had been, ‘Control yourselves, you’re showing me up.’ Sometimes Nellie thought he showed more affection to the horses he drove than he did to his own children.

Alice readily agreed to help with the boys and Nellie went upstairs to change. She dressed with some care, in her best blue skirt, cinched in at the waist with a wide belt, and her frilly white blouse with the leg o’ mutton sleeves. Not her absolute best, but she didn’t want any awkward questions.

‘I’m just popping out to Lily’s for an hour, Dad. The boys are in bed.’ She leaned down to kiss his cheek. He nodded and carried on picking at his pipe. He let her get to the kitchen door.

‘Make sure you’re back by ten and don’t let that Ted turn your head.’

Nellie raised her eyes, before turning back to him. ‘I don’t expect Ted’ll be there.’

Her father began plugging the pipe with tobacco; he didn’t look up. ‘Oh, he’ll be there all right, don’t worry your head about that,’ he said impassively. ‘And remember what I said, no later ’n ten!’

Nellie sighed, then carefully closed the door behind her and pulled her little blue cape off the peg in the passage. Her sister was there, to see her off.

‘Don’t talk to no strangers.’

‘Oh, Al, there *are* no strangers in Bermondsey!’ Nellie laughed at the very idea that their world of poor streets, bounded by the Thames, girdled by docks, stuffed with factories, permeated by smoke, and plagued with noxious smells, should contain anything so unexpected as a stranger. Bermondsey might be situated at the heart of a great metropolis, but for those who lived there it had the familiarity of a village, a soot-covered one made of London brick and slate roofs, but a village none the less, where everyone knew each other and where no one had to face life’s trials alone. Nellie reflected that, in Bermondsey, a street was as good as a family. Her real family, at times, felt a little diminished, despite her efforts.

Nellie threw her arms round her sister and kissed her.

‘Well, just look after yourself. You look a treat,’ Alice said.

‘Thanks, Al.’ Nellie did not consider herself a great beauty, but her complexion was peachy and her bright blue eyes always drew attention. And this evening she’d spent a while on her glory, her long chestnut hair. But as she closed the door behind her, she found herself musing that tonight Ted would no doubt be far more interested in his important guest than in Nellie Clark from Vauban Street.

The little room at the back of the Labour Institute was full. About two dozen women, seated on rows of hard-backed chairs, filled the small space. In spite of the stiflingly warm night, they kept on their broad, decorated hats and wide capes, their leg o’ mutton sleeves alone seeming to fill the room, which buzzed with their high-pitched chatter. Ted and two other dockers were the only men there. Nellie and Lily sat in the front row, waiting for Ted to introduce his guest. He’d been excited on the way round to the institute, and had rushed them all off from the Boshers’ house so

that Nellie hadn't even had time to say hello to Lily's mum. But then Ted had been excited through all this sizzling summer of 1911; sometimes Nellie wondered if it was the ninety-degree heat that had got him into such a fervour. If the country was being set on fire, then it seemed Ted Boshier was in the middle of it, stoking the flames. She had read the newspaper headlines – the 'Summer of Unrest' they were calling it, and Ted was certainly restless. Every day, for weeks, he had been on at her and Lily to join the union, full of tales of workers striking all over the country. Eventually he'd worn them down and tonight they'd agreed to hear this mystery speaker, for he'd refused to tell them who she was.

'She's important in the movement,' was all he would say. 'Wait till you hear her, she's a bloody inspiration, she is.'

Nellie noticed that his eyes were sparkling and felt a wave of disappointment wash over her that the light in them wasn't for her.

'Oh, the *movement*,' she'd said in mockery and then regretted it when he turned on her.

'It's the likes of you that keep us lot under the thumb. Just listen tonight as though you were a grown-up, that's all I ask.'

Now, looking up at the lady standing next to Ted, she felt tired and irritated. She had no patience with do-gooders who came to improve their lot. A woman sitting next to them leaned over and whispered, 'Looks like the big guns are out tonight!'

'Who is she?' Nellie whispered back.

'It's "Madam Mecklenburgh"!'.

When Nellie looked unimpressed, the woman went on, 'Well, that's what we call her behind her back. Her real name's Eliza James, and, speak as you find, she's done a lot for us girls.' The woman nodded in approval. 'She's high up in the NFWW.'

Nellie didn't like to show her ignorance by asking what the NFWW was, so instead she asked, 'Why do you call her Madam Mecklenburgh?'

'Only 'cause she lives in Mecklenburgh Square, that's where the name come from, I reckon.'

‘So she’s not a proper lady then?’ Nellie was rather disappointed. ‘Well, she might *act* like one...’ The woman looked at her as though she would like to say more, but just then Eliza James moved forward to speak.

To Nellie’s eyes, she certainly looked like a proper lady, with her chiffon scarf, wide-brimmed hat and her velvet-trimmed pale grey suit; all very tasteful and not cheap. She had a long face, wavy auburn hair and deep-set dark, almost black eyes. She looked to Nellie vaguely familiar, but a woman like her would not be from Bermondsey. Nellie could tell; it was the clothes. But the voice, when it came, told a different story. It wasn’t the cut-glass accent Nellie had been expecting, and the vowels spoke of origins much humbler than Mecklenburgh Square. She could tell that the woman had smoothed out the rougher edges of her accent, carefully sounding her aitches. *No*, Nellie concluded to herself, *if you was born a lady, then I’m the Duchess of Duffs!*

But just as Ted had promised, she was an inspiration. She introduced herself as a leader in the National Federation of Women Workers and then took a long look around the room, as though taking the measure of her audience. Then she launched into a powerful, passionate condemnation of the poor wages and inhuman conditions in the Bermondsey food factories, which soon had the little room full of clapping women. She drew Nellie in and made her feel as if she was the most important person in the room. Three-quarters of the way through her talk, she asked them each to say which factories they worked for.

‘Duff’s,’ shouted Nellie, and the others followed with calls of ‘Pink’s Jam’ and ‘Crosse & Blackwell’, ‘Shuttleworth’s’, ‘Peek Frean’s’. Most of the factories mentioned had large numbers of women workers and paid the lowest wages. Lady or not, Madam Mecklenburgh certainly knew what she was talking about, for when each of the factory names were called, she came back straight away with the exact wages paid.

‘Pink’s? Six shillings a week for you, double for the men.’

Then she pointed at Nellie. ‘How old are you, young lady?’
‘Sixteen, madam.’

The woman smiled, as though at some secret joke. ‘You work eleven hours a day, the same as boys your age, but you only get half the wage, five shillings a week. And that doesn’t pay the rent, does it?’

Nellie flushed, but was determined not to be over-awed. ‘No, it don’t even keep me dad in tobacco!’

The girls around her laughed in sympathy. She was not the only one who handed over all her pay packet on pay day and counted herself lucky to get sixpence back to spend on herself. When Eliza James laughed too, Nellie noticed Ted joining in. But the thought of her father suddenly gripped Nellie with a stab of fear. He would never condone what this woman was suggesting.

She remembered the day, two years earlier, when she’d been taken on at Duff’s. She’d considered herself lucky to get a job there, as a powder packer. It was one of hundreds of food factories clustered in Bermondsey – ‘London’s Larder’. As well as the famous custard powder, Duff’s turned out blancmanges, baking powders, sherberts and jellies. She’d known it would be hard work, but nothing had prepared her for the excruciating back pain, after eleven hours standing at her bench, or the monotony of filling and folding custard packets, hour after hour. But the thing she’d learned to hate most was that pervasive custard powder, invading every pore of her skin, seeping into the seams of her clothes, clogging up her lovely chestnut hair with its sticky matt coating. But Nellie’s father wasn’t interested in her likes and dislikes. For him, it was purely a matter of economics.

‘It’s a good job and we need that five shilling,’ he told her. ‘Work hard and don’t you dare come back home, one day, and tell me you’ve been laid off.’

What they had planned tonight was disapproved of by many working men, her father included.

‘Lily, what time is it, do you think?’ she whispered. ‘I can’t be late back. Dad’ll skin me.’

When Lily pointed to the clock at the back of the room, Nellie leaped from her seat and dashed out, without even saying goodbye to Ted. It was gone ten o'clock and she was in all sorts of trouble.

GOING HOME

Ernest James had insisted on sending his car to take her to Bermondsey. Eliza James had wanted to take the omnibus from Mecklenburgh Square that afternoon, and she would have enjoyed the ride. Surely the best place to be on yet another fiercely hot day, in this unending furnace of a summer, was sitting on the top deck of a London omnibus. But Ernest wouldn't hear of it, so instead, she had made do with rolling down the window. At least, that way, she could enjoy the delicious breeze as she was driven across London Bridge. The south London streets had been eerily quiet. Normally, they would have been full of traffic: horse and carts delivering to and from the docks, jostling for road space with hansoms and the ever-increasing number of motor taxis and cars. But with the dockers on strike and the wharves all closed, the dockside streets had a dead, dull, aimless air about them. The factories had not yet turned out and those pedestrians who had braved the searing summer heat were visibly wilting; men and boys sweated in thick wool jackets, totally unsuited to the weather. Dockers were hanging around in jovial gangs, holding up placards, engaging any passer-by who showed an interest in their demands in conversation. As the car cruised smoothly along Tooley Street, she had breathed in the Bermondsey air, made more pungent by the heat bouncing off the tar-block roads. It was an odd mixture of horse dung, petrol fumes, old bones from the glue works, leather from the tanneries and the all-pervading spice: cinnamon and ginger drifting up from the spice wharves on the river, mingling with

sweet raspberry and vanilla from the jam and biscuit factories. It was the smell of home.

Now, at the end of a long day of planning and meetings, Ernest's driver was waiting at a respectful distance while she said her goodbyes. This evening's meeting had gone better than she'd hoped for and she didn't doubt that the cells of women they'd persuaded, in each of the fifteen factories, would be enough to carry the rest with them. All it would take was a single spark and, in this tinder dry Summer of Unrest as it was being called, a spark was all that was needed. The factory women were burning with a suppressed rage that seemed to have no outlet. They knew it was wrong that they worked the same hours as a man, for half the wage; they knew it was wrong that they worked in unsanitary conditions, for hours on end, with no breaks. Tonight, she'd heard the story of one mother so frightened of losing her position that she had her baby brought to her by one of her own young children, nursed the baby at the factory gates, then went back in to work. There were no concessions made for mothers, or children, come to that. And what enraged Eliza James most was that the men resented their women's presence in the factories anyway. A woman deprived a man of a job, or that was their short-sighted way of thinking.

But not all the men were of that opinion and with the dockers' support, the women's courage had got the final boost it needed. Ted Boshier was a useful man to have on the ground. He understood the women's grievances. His own sister was working all hours as a powder packer, for a few shillings and grateful for it, by all accounts. Eliza was also conscious of the power of his undoubted charms, which he used to good effect, she had noticed, to draw in even the most apathetic of the women workers. That bold little thing, sitting next to his sister, certainly couldn't take her eyes off him. His face had been aglow all evening, though whether that was a result of young Nellie's attentions, or her own, she couldn't be sure.

'We'll have them all out in August, I guarantee it,' Ted Boshier

said at the end of the meeting. 'This lot will carry them. After that speech of yours, you've turned them into the firebrands that'll light the fire!'

He had a pleasant voice, and an easy manner, but his eyes had an intensity that Eliza James had grown to recognize in her years as a union activist. Such burning anger as she had seen in them could be as much of a danger to their own cause as it could be to their adversaries. She preferred a more measured approach.

'I hope they've seen the sense in my arguments too. Fifteen thousand women, walking out on one day, has got to make their bosses sit up and take notice. But I know it's going to be hard for the women. They'll get opposition at home, especially the younger ones.'

Ted brushed her misgivings aside. 'It'll be worth it, what's a bit of family upset? The struggle's worth it.'

'Yes,' she said, bristling slightly, 'I wouldn't be here, if I didn't think it was worth it.'

At the door she shook hands with the other two dockers, and Ernest's driver showed her to the waiting car. He opened the back door for her, got in to the front himself and set off towards London Bridge. They had been driving for several minutes, when she leaned forward to tap on the sliding window between her and the driver.

'Simmons, could you turn round? I'd like to take a different route home.'

She gave him instructions, and a puzzled look passed across his young face. But he merely turned the car round, with a nod of his head, and drove towards Rotherhithe as she had asked. The gas lamps along Southwark Park Road were still blazing, but their cheerful glow soon receded. The lamps grew sparser as they skirted the entrance to Brunel's tunnel and moved into the area of docks and wharves strung along the great loop of the river at Rotherhithe. The driver followed her occasional instructions and then stopped when she tapped on the window again. They had come to a street that fronted on to the Thames.

A sign pointed to Globe Stairs, down on the foreshore. The little row of terraced houses was squashed between the wide blackness of the Thames on one side and the square, silent basin of Globe Dock behind. Here and there, the indigo skyline was pierced by the black bows and masts of ships, many of them marooned and still unencumbered of their cargos, while they waited for the dockers' strike to end.

'I won't be long, Simmons.'

She peered at the door numbers as she walked down the dimly lit street, and hesitated before eventually stopping at the last house in the little terrace. She knocked, a weak knock; certainly it seemed less loud than the pounding of her own heart. The door was opened by a young man with dark wavy hair. He didn't smile, just swung the door wide open and stepped to one side.

'Hello, Sam,' Eliza said.

Nellie's lungs burned and she was gulping in painful breaths by the time she arrived at the front door of their terraced house in Vauban Street. A gas lamp hissed and flickered halfway down the street and a few of the houses still had lights in the downstairs windows, but her own home was in darkness, with the shutters closed. She banged on the front door and when no one answered, stooped to call, in a half whisper, through the letterbox.

'Alice, it's Nellie, let me in!'

She heard footsteps on the stairs and, for a moment, was relieved that her sister had heard her. Then she heard her father's voice booming.

'Get back to bed, girl. I told her ten!'

Her sister's muffled, pleading voice floated down to her and Nellie put her ear to the letterbox.

'Please, Dad, she can't stay out all night.'

She heard no reply, just her father's footsteps, thumping down the stairs.

Nellie's face was wet with sweat from her run in the sticky warm night, but now she shivered on the doorstep. She wasn't

sure which terrified her more, a night out here on the streets or a confrontation with her father. The front door was flung open and his large figure filled the passageway. He was dressed only in long johns and a hastily donned pair of trousers, baggy at the waist and held up by a pair of braces. He looked faintly ridiculous, but she wasn't going to laugh, not now.

'I'm sorry, Dad, I lost track of—'

'What's it to be?' Her father held up the thick leather belt that he usually wore as well as his braces.

'This, or a night on the streets?'

His voice was quiet and controlled, but his face was even redder than usual and thin spittle had collected at the corners of his mouth. She knew there was nothing George Clark hated more than to be crossed, especially by his children. Nellie avoided looking directly at him.

'I'll come in then.' She knew what was coming.

He took her by the elbow and marched her into the little kitchen. She shot a glance up the stairs, to see her pale-faced sister hovering at the top. Alice shook her head, in a resigned way, that told Nellie she had tried on her sister's behalf and failed. Nellie managed a weak smile, before being pulled into the kitchen. There her father grabbed her hand and administered his usual six smart slaps of the belt.

'You dare defy me again and you'll get more than that, next time!'

His large red nose glowed with exertion and what Nellie guessed was the effect of a drop too much of his favourite tippie. She wanted to grab the belt and strike him back. Images of red welts across his cheek flashed into her mind. But it was useless, then she really would be on the streets. One thing she wouldn't give him was a tear. The bloody big bully could wait till kingdom come for that, she thought, in silent rebellion.

'Get up to bed and don't think you're going out again of a night. And you dare lie to me again! I know it was a barefaced lie, about that Boshier boy being there tonight. You listen to me,

girl, him and his Bolshy friends are trouble. Always stirring up people to be discontented with what they've got. Prancing about on soapboxes, telling me I'm hard done by. I can look after me own, and I don't need some jumped-up docker's son telling me different. I don't want you having nothing more to do with them union lot. D'yer hear?'

Now he was shouting. Of course she heard, the whole bloody street could hear. She nodded, longing to get away, and then he let her go. She followed him upstairs and crept into the front bedroom, where, as expected, three heads shot up. The two boys, Freddie and Bobby, sat up in their bed, looking at her expectantly, and Alice jumped out of the bed she shared with Nellie, to put her arm round her.

'Did the old git hurt you, Nell?' she whispered.

'Nah,' Nellie lied, 'he's getting old and soft.' But her palm stung as if a hot poker had been laid across it.

'Gawd, you're shaking, though.'

'It's temper, Al. I'm only shaking 'cause I can't have a go back at the old sod.'

'Come on, love, let me help you get changed,' said Alice, starting to unbutton the back of her blouse.

But Nellie noticed that the two wide-eyed boys were still staring at her. Bobby, especially, looked close to tears. She knew his soft heart would not be able to manage seeing her vulnerable or in pain.

'Go on, boys, back to kip,' she said encouragingly. 'I'm a tough old boot!' She reached down to tickle Bobby and give Freddie a hug, before pulling the little curtain that separated their half of the room from the boys' beds.

'It's so unfair, Al,' she went on in a whisper. 'He treats me like I'm still a child, but if it weren't for me he'd have no one to cook and clean for him, or to look after the boys.'

She was seething as Alice tried to calm her.

'Don't leave us, Nell, will you? He's harder on you than the rest of us and I know it's not fair, but we'd be lost without you.'

When Nellie saw her sister's lip trembling, she forgot her own injuries. It was easy to forget Alice was little more than a child herself.

'Shhh, love, 'course I'm not leaving you, it's just I think he could let me have a bit of a life.'

They didn't dare light the lamp, so in the darkness, Alice helped Nellie out of her blouse and skirt. And when they were in bed, the sisters put their arms round each other, till they had both stopped shaking.