



The Poor Relation

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Chapter One

Town Hall, Manchester, May 1908

Annoyance rushed through Mary, followed by a twist of surprise. It wasn't like her to flare up, even if it was only on the inside. As Mr Treadgold left the office, she smoothed her skirt and touched the pen and pencils in the groove on her desk, as if they needed lining up. Bright sunshine poured through the windows. Earlier, this had felt like a promise of good things to come, but now golden darts lay strewn in a jagged pattern across the floor. Earlier, she had run her fingers over her desk, picturing the sit-up-and-beg desks in Accounts, imagining herself perched at one of those, writing in a ledger, imagining what she hoped would be her future.

More fool her.

Her hands clenched. She hadn't felt this way the first time, nor the second, but this was the sixth time – the sixth! – in five years, and dismay and disappointment had long since evaporated. Heaven help her, that first time she had questioned whether it was her own fault for trying too soon. She had even worried that Mr Treadgold might think her uppity. Huh!

‘I say, Miss Maitland,’ said Spotty Ronnie, the proud beam dropping from his face. ‘Are you all right?’

No, she jolly well wasn’t. Her skin felt tight. Rising, she shook hands. Spotty Ronnie’s paw was moist; she held her smile in place. Mustn’t look like a bad sport.

The beam reappeared. ‘I thought for a moment you were about to be a sore loser, but then I thought, no, not our Miss Maitland. Far too sensible.’

Sensible. Oh yes, she was that, all right. Not one to make a fuss. A good girl. Hadn’t she always been a good girl?

‘You’re a good girl,’ Dadda had said after Mam died, when Mary was ten. ‘It’s your job to take care of baby Emma now.’

And ‘You’re a good girl,’ he said, when he married again and she didn’t kick up a fuss, unlike Granny, who had created an almighty stink.

Well, for once in her life Mary Margaret Maitland was going to kick up a fuss. Not in front of Spotty Ronnie, though.

‘Congratulations, Mr Dearden.’

‘Ta very much. The best man won, and all that.’

The best man? The only man. Not even that. A boy, a youth. Was she supposed not to mind losing out to a young shaver?

The town hall clock struck midday. How proud the sound had made her when she first worked here. The chimes had rung out to reinforce her position, first as office junior, then as a lady-clerk. She was twenty-three now and the chimes had marked ten years of her life.

The door opened to reveal the grinning face of one of Ronnie’s cronies. Ronnie snatched his bowler and scarppered. Whoops of delight floated back to her. The thought of Spotty Ronnie sharing his triumph brought heat to her face.

The moment had come.

She could get carpeted. Mr Treadgold might puff his way up to the fourth floor and complain to Dadda, and then she would get carpeted at home too. But if she didn't speak out, she would wish she had. It was a question of self-respect.

She marched to Mr Treadgold's office, her shoes tap-tapping along the tiled corridor. The door stood open, just as Mr Treadgold liked it. He sat bent over his work, thinning hair glistening with oil. He finished writing and applied blotting paper.

Making sure her toes hadn't committed the cardinal sin of crossing the threshold uninvited, she knocked.

'Please may I have a word?'

'Can't it wait?'

Normally she would have withdrawn at that point. 'It's important.'

'Very well.' Mr Treadgold waved her into the chair opposite his own. He added the blotted sheet to a pile of papers, touching the sides to bring everything into alignment. 'What can I do for you, Miss Maitland?'

Folding her hands in her lap, she composed her features into a pleasant, if serious, expression. Kicking up a fuss was no reason not to be professional.

'I'd like to know why I didn't get the promotion.'

Mr Treadgold blinked slowly, as if, by the time he opened his eyes, she would have withdrawn the question.

'I've always understood you found my work satisfactory.'

'More than, more than.'

'Then why haven't I achieved promotion? I've applied . . . several times,' she fudged, ashamed to put a number to it.

'And jolly good applications they were, too.'

She was in no mood to be fobbed off with a compliment. 'Then why wasn't I successful? Was I considered less competent than other applicants?'

‘Gracious me, no. Quite the contrary. You’re an excellent member of staff.’

‘But those lads who were given the posts . . .’

Lads. Yes, lads, a mere sixteen or seventeen years of age.

‘You trained them perfectly. When young Mr Dearden takes up his position in Parks and Cemeteries, I’ll receive a flood of compliments on the quality of his work. I know, because it’s what happened when Mr Chatham went to Schools and Mr Dent went to Transport, and it happened with the others as well. You’re a marvel, Miss Maitland. You have our working practices down to a tee.’

Her fingers tightened. ‘But if I trained them effectively, surely that means I also am suitable for advancement.’

Mr Treadgold smiled complacently; his cheeks bunched under his eyes. ‘My dear Miss Maitland, you could run the Lord Mayor’s office with one hand tied behind your back.’ He chuckled. ‘But I could never part with you, as my colleagues are well aware.’

‘You told them not to select me?’

‘It’s a great compliment, Miss Maitland. You’re too valuable here.’

‘Training up the youngsters.’

‘Precisely. Such a weight off my shoulders.’

‘So they then get promoted.’

‘Of course. Young men have to get on.’

‘And young women don’t?’

‘Not in the same way.’ His tone dripped with kindness. Good grief, was he comforting her? ‘A young man must one day support a wife and family, whereas a young lady who works is simply saving towards being married.’

‘Suppose she doesn’t get married?’

‘There, there, my dear, you’ll meet somebody.’

Humiliation chilled her. It was bad enough having Granny

waving Aunt Miriam's single state under her nose, but to be pitied by Mr Treadgold was intolerable.

'I wasn't referring to myself. I was speaking in general terms. But I am talking about myself when I say it's unfair to keep me here while offering promotion to those spotty herberts simply because they're male.'

'Miss Maitland!'

She was into her stride now. 'Am I to understand I'll never be considered for advancement?'

'That's an impertinent question.'

'Because if it is the case, and if I'm valuable because I teach others the ropes, shouldn't I be paid more than they are in recognition of my expertise?'

'Miss Maitland, you forget yourself.'

'It seems a reasonable request.'

'Reasonable? To demand two wage rises in one go?'

Cold enveloped her. 'Two?'

'One to bring you up to the young men's salary, another to take you higher still.'

She stared. 'You mean – I earn less than they do? Less than Ronnie Dearden? Even though I'm over twenty-one, not to mention considerably more experienced?'

'The two of you do the same job, so of course he earns more. That's only right and natural.'

She hardly knew which objection to express first.

'Why was I interviewed for those other posts, if it was known you wanted to keep me here?'

'You're excellent in interviews and it's good for the young men to have competition. We can't have them thinking it's being handed to them on a plate, can we? I suggest you return to your desk. I'm surprised and disappointed by your remarks, which suggest

an unexpected tendency to the hysterical, and not at all what I expect from such a good little worker. The process of application and interview has evidently taken its toll, so you'd do better not to put yourself forward again.' He awarded her another complacent smile. 'After all, you're well suited where you are.'

'She says not, but she's taken it pretty badly.'

Spotty Ronnie's words carried through the half-open door. In the corridor, Mary froze, clutching the box of papers to her chest.

'Poor old love, she's been sighing her heart out all afternoon.'

Poor old love? Her heart beat an indignant tattoo. She felt like walloping young Mr Dearden round the ear. And she hadn't been sighing – had she? Ah. Not sighs, but huffs of outrage. If only she could write her resignation and slap it on Mr Treadgold's desk, right under his patronising nose. But Dadda worked upstairs, and the thought that Mr Treadgold would fetch him to drum sense into her was too humiliating for words.

Balancing the box of papers with one arm, she thrust open the door and marched in. She wanted to stick her nose in the air and not so much as glance at Spotty Ronnie and whoever he was blabbing to, but that would be tantamount to wearing a sign round her neck proclaiming, *I was listening*. She smiled at Ronnie and at—oh, dear heaven, not Billy Arbuckle from the post room. That young blabbermouth would scatter news of her suffering all along his route as he collected letters for the evening post, blast him.

Dumping the box on her desk, she slipped her hand into the pocket of her navy serge skirt. There it was: the precious advertisement. In her dinner hour, she had purchased the early edition of the *Manchester Evening News* to search the job vacancies. She had no reason to scan the column headed AGENCY WORK – FEMALE, because that was for women in service, but a boxed

advertisement halfway down had caught her eye. It was headed *Employment Agency for Educated Women*. Underneath, it stated the opening hours and an address on Wilbraham Road, not far from where her family lived near to the recreation ground in Chorlton: an opportunity practically on her doorstep. The mere thought made her heart bump.

Today was Tuesday. If she wrote a letter this evening and posted it first thing tomorrow, the agency would receive it tomorrow afternoon, so it was reasonable to request an appointment on Thursday evening, when, according to their advertisement, they stayed open until seven. Perfect.

No, it wasn't. Her parents would never agree. 'You're fine where you are,' would be their attitude, and 'What would the Kimbers say?' But she couldn't stay where she was just so as not to run the risk of being frowned upon by their grand relations.

There was nothing else for it. She would have to do this behind her parents' backs. They would be disappointed and upset, but this was something she had to do.

As six o'clock approached, she tidied up and changed into her outdoor shoes before sitting at her desk to wait for Mr Treadgold to walk through the row of offices over which he held sway. He appeared, bowler-hatted and carrying a rolled umbrella, bade them good evening in the manner of one conferring a blessing, touched his hat to her and went on his lordly way.

Spotty Ronnie made a dive for the hatstand, but it didn't matter how quick off the mark he was, he was obliged to do the gentlemanly thing by holding the door for her. Sometimes she made him wait, just to see the agony on his features, but not today. Today she could have flattened him in her eagerness.

As often happened, she met Dadda on the stairs and they walked together across Albert Square to the tram stop. He offered his arm

and, as she took it, a couple of girls from Parks and Cemeteries passed them, chatting together. Her insides tightened with envy. Did they plan to meet up later? She always went straight home with Dadda. She loved and respected her parents and wanted to be a good daughter, she really did, but sometimes she felt . . . stifled.

Oh, that word. The first time it had flitted across her mind, guilt had thickened her throat, but now she recognised it as the simple truth. Now she dared wonder what it would be like not to be under the family thumb.

Was it possible to be a good daughter and also spread her wings?
'I didn't get the promotion.'

'I know.' Dadda didn't sound even the least bit upset. 'Mr Treadgold informed me yesterday.'

'Yesterday!' She bit her lip. Adopting a moderate tone, she asked, 'Did he tell you in advance those other times too?'

'Naturally. A courtesy to a colleague. He and I are both senior clerks.'

She felt a swell of vexation. 'You might have told me.'

'I beg your pardon?' It was said mildly enough, but that was Dadda for you. She had never heard him raise his voice, but that didn't mean he wasn't master in his own house.

'I'm sorry, Dadda. May I ask why you never told me?'

'By applying and being interviewed, you performed a service – and it's not as though you need advancement. It's my job to support you.'

There it was again, that question. Was it possible to be a good daughter and also spread her wings? Her pace quickened, then immediately slowed as she felt the pull against Dadda's arm.

Was it possible? She was about to find out.