



The Sewing Room Girl

SUSANNA BAVIN

Allison & Busby Limited
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Chapter One

Clough, Lancashire, 1892

Why did Mother have to be dramatic? Everyone was shocked and sorry on her behalf. Why couldn't that be enough? It was Pop who should be the focus of all thoughts today, but, oh no, Mother had to be the one in the middle, with her showy, quivering gesture.

Juliet's flesh prickled as the compassion that had swelled among the mourners when Mr Dancy proffered the small wooden box of soil turned to a flutter of disapproval and impatience as Mother, ignoring the box, held out the white rose she had clutched all through the service and let it drop onto Pop's coffin. Agnes Harper, being different: that was what everyone was thinking. Juliet knew it as surely as if it had been bellowed in chorus.

What sort of daughter was she to criticise her mother at a moment like this? If it gave Mother comfort to use a rose from the climber that Pop had planted by their cottage door, where was the harm? Mrs Grove nudged her: Mr Dancy was offering the soil. It was crumbly and moist, the rich earth that characterised

his lordship's land. She stepped forward and dropped it into the grave, not looking at the coffin.

A few more minutes, more handfuls of earth, some closing words, and it was over. There was some shuffling of feet. Were they waiting for Mother? Or should Mr Nugent make the first move, since he represented no less a person than his lordship? It was an honour to have Mr Nugent at your funeral, but his lordship was good like that.

In his grey wool suit and black tie, with a black silk handkerchief peeping from his top pocket, Mr Nugent stood out among the simply dressed villagers and estate workers, with their black shawls and black armbands. He shook Mother's hand, murmuring condolences. The August afternoon was warm with approval, even gratitude. It was no small thing to have Mr Nugent pay his respects in public. Not only was he his lordship's agent, he was a real gentleman. Everybody knew the story. For all that he was plain 'mister', Harry Nugent came from the younger branch of a family of nobs, and if enough people died, he would come into the title and be a lord or a sir or something in his own right.

'Well, young lady, you've been brave today, a credit to your mother.' He cupped Juliet's chin in his hand, the warm leather of his glove as soft as butter against her skin. 'A pretty little thing.' He released her and glanced about, a benevolent look that encompassed everybody, before raising his bowler with its recent trimming of a black petersham band. He departed, leaving a flurry of admiring remarks behind him.

'Did you see that? He raised his hat to us, actually raised it, not just touched it.'

'Shall we make a move, Agnes?' said Mrs Grove. 'You can come back later if you feel the need, but just now, you've got to make ready for your guests.'

Typical Mrs Grove. It must be nice to be in charge. Juliet seemed to have spent her entire fifteen years doing what others expected. Like now. Was she meant to arrange for old Mrs Dancy to be conveyed to their cottage? Heavens, was she supposed to shove that vast old bath chair contraption, on loan for the occasion, through the village, with old Mrs Dancy complaining bitterly every bumpy step of the way?

‘Shall we walk together, chick?’ Ella Dancy was beside her, smiling her upside-down smile, lips together, edges turned down. It was an unusual smile and ought not to have been pretty, but it was impossible for Ella to be anything other than beautiful. ‘Don’t fret yourself over Granny. The men will bring her.’

They left the churchyard and walked through the straggling village, with its mix of tiled and thatched roofs. You could always tell the tile-dwellers, because they said how lovely the thatches were: they didn’t have to live with spiders the size of soup plates that scuttled from the thatch into the cottage every time the rain clouds dumped their wares on the moors.

Turning into Old Lane, with its row of thatches on one side and gentle upward slope of rough greensward on the other, Juliet breathed in the sweet aroma of grass. The cinder path crunched beneath her feet. When she was little, she used to fly along the lane, the air filling with joyful cinder crackle, to meet Pop on his way home and be swept up in an earth-scented hug.

At home, the fly nets were off and the kettle was boiling. She passed plates and cups and saucers, most of which had been borrowed from up and down the row. From outside came the sound of creaking basketwork and a barrage of crotchety orders from old Mrs Dancy as she was hoisted from the bath chair and assisted into the cottage, bringing a flutter of white petals with her as she brushed against the climbing rose.

Soon the parlour was filled with neighbours.

Someone said, 'Delicious ham, Agnes.'

'I wanted a good send-off.'

'Course you did, love.'

'He deserved it.'

'It must have set you back a bob or two,' said old Mrs Dancy.

'Granny!' Ella exclaimed.

'I speak as I find,' retorted the old woman. 'How are you off for money now?'

Juliet willed Mother not to answer. 'Ham and gossip – them's why I go to funerals,' old Mrs Dancy had told her yesterday, as she sat on her wooden pail, straining her bowels.

'Well, even though the accident was on Monday and he died on Tuesday,' Mother said, her voice catching, 'he was paid to the end of this week.'

There was the usual chorus of 'his lordship's good like that'.

'But next week—' Mother began. Her face went white and she pushed her plate away.

Ella pushed it back. 'You must keep your strength up.'

'You'll still have your sewing money,' Mrs Grove pointed out, ever practical. 'But it'll be your job from now on instead of something you do on't side.'

'I've always done all the work Mrs Naseby put my way,' said Mother.

'Have you?' Mrs Hope from next door sounded surprised, as well she might: Mother had cultivated the idea that she dabbled in needlework as a favour to others. 'I thought you picked and chose.'

'No.' Mother's face flushed.

Juliet's did too. Heat started at the back of her neck and crept round to her cheeks, frying the fragile skin beneath her eyes,

already tender from the tears she had shed for Pop. ‘Eh, we’re reet lucky to have such a special person, me and thee, Juliet,’ Pop used to say. ‘She could have been summat important in Manchester, but she chose us instead. In’t that grand?’ And as a young child, she had believed it was, but now that she was older and she was aware of the way the other women regarded her mother, the adoration had faded. Or maybe looking after old Mrs Dancy had turned her cynical.

Presently the visitors departed, leaving Mrs Grove and Ella. Mrs Grove exclaimed from the kitchen, ‘There’s another plate of sandwiches out here! Blood and sand, Agnes, how many folk did you think you were feeding?’

‘We can eat them for supper,’ Mother said defensively.

‘Not this many, you can’t. There’s enough ham to see you and Juliet into next week. Ella, rescue the ham and put it in the meat safe. The bread will do for bread and butter pudding, Juliet, carry the crockery into the scullery. You wash and I’ll dry.’

Soon the borrowed crockery was stacked in two wicker baskets, ready to be returned.

‘I’m sorry I can’t stay to help,’ said Ella. ‘I must get home to Granny.’

‘Juliet can do that,’ said Mother. ‘It’s what you pay her for.’

Ella turned her upside-down smile on Juliet. ‘Not today.’

‘You get along,’ said Mrs Grove. ‘Juliet, you can take the crockery back. I want a word with your mother.’

With her shoulder muscles pulling under the weight of the basket on each arm, Juliet stepped outside into the golden glow of early evening. The sky, which had been the blue of hyacinths this afternoon for Pop, had deepened to royal blue. Taking back the borrowed cups and saucers was the very last piece of his funeral, and when she had handed over the last things, it should be time

to hide away and come to terms with this new life without Pop in it, but there wasn't time for that when you lived in a tied cottage. No matter how good and generous his lordship was, there wasn't time for that.

Returning home, she slipped round the back, dropped the baskets on the grass beside Pop's vegetable patch and pushed hard on the water pump handle. Cold water shot out and she caught some in one cupped palm, using it to splash away the threat of tears. Gathering the baskets, she slipped inside through the scullery. The door to the parlour was ajar. She crept across the flagged floor on cat feet, holding her breath as she listened.

Mother was saying, 'I don't know where we'll go, let alone how I'll pay for it.' She wailed softly – who would have thought you could wail in a whisper?

'What about that sister o' yours?' Mrs Grove asked.

'We haven't seen one another in years. Just a few lines at Christmas.'

'You've always talked about that fancy shop she's got,' said Mrs Grove. 'She can't be short of a few bob. Does she know about the accident?'

'I wrote to her and had one by return, saying how sorry she was.'

'But not saying to go and live with her?'

'I never asked.'

'Happen you should. Mind, I notice she was conspicuous today by her absence.'

'It's a fair way from Manchester.' Mother sounded defensive, though why she was defending Auntie Clara was anybody's guess. Normally she didn't have a good word to say for her.

'That's why the railways were invented,' said Mrs Grove. 'And your mother? Does she know?'

'Clara will tell her.'

Mrs Grove snorted. ‘This is no time for stubborn pride, Agnes. You and the lass need somewhere to live.’

‘It isn’t pride. It’s . . . the way it is. Mother would never let me go back and I wouldn’t want to.’

‘Well, if that isn’t stubborn pride, I don’t know what is – on both sides. Deaths are like births. They soften folk. It’s a time for making amends. Your mother has never met her own granddaughter: think of that. Happen you could help her run that factory of hers. Who else is there to help her? Not your sister: she’s got her posh dressmaking place to run.’

Mother laughed, a brief, bitter sound. ‘I assure you, my mother is the last person to require assistance.’

Opening the door, Juliet walked in, carrying Mrs Grove’s wicker basket.

‘I didn’t hear you come back,’ said Mother. ‘I hope you weren’t earwiggling.’

Resentment flared. Far too often, Mother spoke to her as if she was a child. It was bad enough in the ordinary way, but in front of someone else, it was humiliating.

There was a knock at the front door. When it remained shut, Mrs Grove marched across, throwing it open. When she closed it and turned round, she had a letter in her hand.

‘Oh no.’ Mother pressed splayed fingers against her chest. ‘They’ve never served notice to quit, not today of all days. Oh, Beatrice, who’d have thought?’ Mrs Grove tried to give her the letter, but she batted it away. ‘You open it.’

‘It’s from Mrs Whicker. She wants to see you tomorrow afternoon.’

‘What for?’ Mother whispered.

‘She doesn’t say why,’ Mrs Grove answered drily, ‘just when.’

* * *

Saturday morning, not long after six and already the dew had burnt off. The sky was the soft blue of harebells and there was a brightness in the air, though it would be hot again before long. Just like last Saturday morning – and not in the slightest bit like it, because back then, when Juliet set off for the Dancys' cottage, Pop had headed in the opposite direction to work on the drystone walls at the home farm. How could they not have known? Last Saturday, how could they not have known that by this Saturday . . . ?

She let herself into the Dancys' cottage, where Mr Dancy sat in the rocking chair, pulling his boots on. Ella popped her head round the kitchen door.

'Morning, chick.' She didn't ask impossible questions like 'How are you?' but her soft eyes and rueful upside-down smile revealed her concern. It was a shame she would never be free to marry because of looking after her father and grandmother – not that she looked after old Mrs Dancy much. That was Juliet's job and had been since the morning after she left school.

She went upstairs, the soles of her ankle boots tapping on the wooden treads. The instant she opened the bedroom door, the stench slapped her. Old Mrs Dancy might be no bigger than a corn dolly but, by crikey, she produced enough motions to fertilise the top field and still have some left for her ladyship's rose beds.

'There you are, girl.'

Some folk said 'Good morning'. Some said 'How are you today?' Old Mrs Dancy said 'There you are, girl.' Every morning for the past three years.

'Morning, Mrs Dancy.'

Holding her breath, Juliet dug out the chamber pot from under the bed. Her scalp prickled as the tang swarmed round her.

She hurried downstairs – but not too fast: it would be infinitely worse if she spilt it – and out the back door to the earth closet, chucking the pungent contents through the hole in the seat. For one head-spinning moment, it seemed the contents of her stomach might follow, but she retreated into the patch of garden and her nausea settled.

Dumping the chamber pot on the grass, she returned to lug the wooden pail downstairs. The pail into which old Mrs Dancy evacuated her bowels had a worse smell, but at least today it was just stools inside. Sometimes she peed in it as well and the pee seeped through a tiny crack, then Juliet would have to mop the floor.

She rinsed the chamber pot and pail under the water pump, then carried them back in.

Ella was about to put on the straw hat she wore in summer. She was lucky because she could dress her hat with flowers without the village busybodies calling it inappropriate, because her job was with flowers. She stopped with the hat halfway to her head.

‘Thank you.’

She always said thank you, unlike her grandmother, who was more likely to say ‘Now rub ointment into me bunions.’

Upstairs, Juliet slid the chamber pot under the bed and positioned the pail so that old Mrs Dancy would be able to slither off the mattress and hang onto her bedside table while Juliet helped her wriggle her nightdress up her scrawny thighs, before she plonked herself down on the pail for one of her noisy bowel movements.

Hearing the door shut downstairs, Juliet went to the window to watch Ella on her way. When she had started here, she had been happy to help the beautiful Ella. Now her ribs tightened in envy of Ella’s job down the hill. Ella worked for a florist and

came home smelling of petals and greenery. Oh, for a proper job! But, as Mother, Mrs Grove, the vicar and Uncle Tom Copley were fond of pointing out: ‘We all help one another in Clough’ – so there was no hope of it. Juliet spent long days filing toenails as thick as piano keys, removing earwax with a funnel of oil, applying pennies to warts and feeling the back of old Mrs Dancy’s hairbrush across her knuckles when the old lady’s wisps of hair refused to stay put in a meagre bun. Every hour, she read verses from the Bible because, as old Mrs Dancy said, ‘You never know when you’ll gasp your last.’

But it was Pop who had gasped his last. After his fall, he had been carried home on a door and put to bed, where he had lain motionless. The women who trooped in and out, providing cups of tea and unwanted food and much-needed company, said he looked like he was fast asleep. To start with, Juliet had taken comfort from it, then she realised that you moved in your sleep, even if it was just a little wriggle. Pop lay flat on his back, the way they had arranged him.

‘I’ll fetch your breakfast.’

She ran downstairs to make the thin grey gruel the old lady swore by.

‘Keeps me regular. You’ve got to be regular when you’re bedfast.’

It was the start of another interminable day, made heavier by grief and shock. Anxiety too. What was to become of them without Pop? Juliet balled her fist around the saucepan handle. It wasn’t right that they should have that worry. They should be allowed to concentrate on their loss.

And on top of all that, there was the boredom. No matter how often she swore to be cheerful, the irksome routine ground her down, leaving her brain sticky with tedium and her skin caked

in stale air. Thank heaven Ella came home more or less when the children were let out of school.

Often, when Ella returned and set her free, Juliet would stride off along the tops to fill her lungs with clean air, but today she went straight home. Heat bounced up from the path. Her feet were hot and tight inside her boots. Doors and windows stood open, not that there was any breeze to be caught that way.

In the cottage, Mother and Mrs Grove were huddled together looking inside the tall cupboard in the alcove beside the fireplace.

‘That’s heavy, so it’ll need to go at the bottom,’ said Mrs Grove.

‘I don’t need telling how to pack, Beatrice,’ said Mother.

‘Pack?’ Fear streamed through Juliet, which was daft, because she knew the rules about tied cottages.

Mother turned round. Her face, which had been drawn all week, was brighter. ‘It’s good news. Mrs Whicker wanted to see me because her ladyship has heard of my reputation with a needle and wants me to be her personal seamstress.’ She laughed and a couple of tears spurted from her eyes. ‘It’s a live-in position. Imagine that. There’s never been a resident seamstress at Moorside before.’

If Mother went to Moorside . . . ‘Will I have to move in with old Mrs Dancy?’

‘You’re coming with me. It’s a sign of how much they want me that they’re prepared to take you as well.’

Mrs Grove snorted. ‘It’s a sign of what a sensible body Mrs Whicker is, more like. Say what you like about her being a slave-driver, but she guards those housemaids more closely than their own mothers. She wouldn’t dream of setting you adrift, Juliet, not at your age.’

‘So I’m not going to work at Moorside?’

‘No, you’ll stop with old Mrs Dancy.’ Mrs Grove sounded

as knowledgeable as if the whole thing was her idea. She talked about everything that way. ‘Nowt will change for you, except for living in a different place.’

Nowt will change? It had already changed. Pop was dead, and she and Mother were to move out of the cottage Mother had moved into as a bride on the day Pop planted the climbing rose.

‘We have to pack and give the cottage a thorough spring clean,’ said Mother.

‘It’ll keep you busy,’ said Mrs Grove, ‘and that’s no bad thing.’

Whether it was good or bad was beside the point. There was no choice.

Lying awake long into the night, Juliet heard Mother crying. She crept next door to comfort her, slipping into bed and cuddling up.

‘It’s all my fault,’ wept Mother. ‘I never let him forget, not once. He was a good husband and a good provider, but I never let him forget.’

‘Forget what?’ Juliet whispered, but she already knew. There was only one thing, and Agnes Harper never let anyone forget it.

‘The life I could have had if I hadn’t married him. I would have had my own salon by now. The way Clara and I were brought up, all Mother’s plans for us, the way she worked us so hard . . . Goodness, if Clara can manage it . . . ! I was far more talented. And now I’m to be seamstress to the Drysdale ladies and it feels as if it’s my fault. The life I could have had, the career Mother planned for me, is going to happen, in a different sort of way, of course, but it feels as if I yearned for it for so long that I’ve made it come true. But what a price to pay.’

Juliet caught her breath. ‘What happened to Pop was an accident.’

‘I wish I hadn’t gone on about it so much.’

‘He didn’t mind. He was proud of you.’

‘He thought the sun shone out of my eyes. But I wish I hadn’t always said “I could have had this, I could have had that.” I wish sometimes I’d said “I’m glad I’ve got this.” But I never did.’

‘You must have.’

‘No, not once. I withheld it on purpose. Now I can never tell him.’