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Velvet

Written by

Mary Hooper

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'There are more things in heaven and earth' quote on p156:
Hamlet by William Shakespeare, Act 1 Scene 5

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Chapter One

In Which Velvet Faints, and Gains a New Position in the Laundry

Velvet had fainted too many times, according to Mrs Sloane, and was liable to be dismissed from Ruffold's Steam Laundry.

'It's the rules,' said Mrs Sloane, the laundry supervisor, following Velvet out to the yard and waving a bottle of smelling salts under her nose. 'Anyone who can't discipline themselves not to swoon has no place here. You've already gone down twice today.'

Leaning against the wall to try and gain some relief from her aching back, Velvet turned to face her. 'But it's stifling inside today, ma'am,' she said as politely as she could, 'and I've been working right beside a boiler.' Saturday was the worst possible day to be standing next to any of the boilers – everyone knew that. All the giant water heaters in the laundry were turned off on Sundays, so at the beginning of the week conditions in the laundry weren't too bad. As the week went on,

however, the heat in the vast room became worse and worse; condensation ran in rivers down the walls, whilst sweat beaded the girls' faces, dripped into their eyes and trickled between their shoulder blades. Every breath they took was a gasp of exhaustion.

Mrs Sloane pursed her lips and looked at Velvet over the wire-rimmed glasses which were almost permanently steamed up. 'Rules is rules,' she said. 'You know that. If anyone makes a habit of fainting then they're deemed incapable of carrying out a proper day's work.' She nodded towards the raggletaggle group of girls standing just outside the yard by the curved iron sign that said, *RUFFOLD'S STEAM LAUNDRY*. 'Look at all those girls – they're waiting for a job here and *they're* willing to work for a shilling less a week.'

Velvet glanced over at the girls. Tiny, thin, shoeless and mostly with neither jacket nor mantle on this first really cold day of the winter of 1900, none looked older than nine. 'But they wouldn't be able to work nearly as quickly or as skilfully as me,' she said to the supervisor, who was known to be softer than she looked. 'They're as scrawny as day-old rabbits. They could never manage to carry a pile of bed sheets on their own.'

Mrs Sloane pushed her glasses back up her nose and frowned. Velvet was right, of course. It took at least six months to train a girl and Velvet – apart

from her fainting – was a fast and diligent worker, able to switch between the washers, mangles, box pressers and flat irons as required.

‘Please, Mrs Sloane.’ Velvet filled her lungs with cold air and closed her eyes briefly, thinking of what could happen if she lost her job. ‘If I could just work a little further away from the boilers.’

‘Girls can’t pick and choose where they work! You knew that rule before you started here.’

Velvet shivered. Her dark hair had congealed into a mass of damp frizz which stuck to her cheeks, and her eyes itched with tiredness. Her skin had been hot, her blouse and smock wet with sweat when she’d fainted, but now she felt clammy and cold. ‘Could I, perhaps, go into packing and folding?’

‘There’s no vacancies there. Besides, I keep those jobs for my older ladies.’

‘Then please, Mrs Sloane. I’ll try really hard not to faint again.’ Velvet hung her head. ‘It’s my time of the month, you see – that and being on my feet so long. I shall be fine on Monday!’

Mrs Sloane rolled her eyes. ‘You girls!’

God knew she wasn’t a hard woman, but there were schedules to maintain, bosses to keep happy and customers to placate, and every day a mountain of sheets, pillowcases, towels and tablecloths arriving from every boarding house and hospital in the area. At Ruffold’s everything was soaked, washed, boiled and blued, rinsed three times (‘We rinse

them 'Thrice to make them Nice' was their motto), put through a box mangle, dried, pressed and finally folded into cardboard boxes ready to go back from whence it came. If too many girls fainted, the schedules would go awry.

'One girl going down too often can lead to the others playing copycat,' Mrs Sloane admonished. 'It can spread faster than scarlet fever. Why, I remember once when the girls went down in fainting fits one after the other right across the room. Fell like skittles, they did!'

'I'll work an hour next week without pay,' Velvet said desperately. She straightened up, trying to look bright and alert. If she lost this job it would be near impossible to get another, and without a regular wage she couldn't pay for her room, buy food, coal or anything else. And then what would happen? She always kept a silver shilling hidden in her shoe for an emergency, but that was all that stood between her and the workhouse. The workhouse . . . that fearful institution where the destitute were made to live and work under harsh, prison-like conditions. 'You've always been most fair to me.' As she spoke, Velvet's eyes suddenly filled with tears. 'Please, Mrs Sloane . . .'

Mrs Sloane hesitated, looked at the unhappy girl again and sighed. She knew Velvet had no family to support her, and besides she was a quick and intelligent girl who could read and write well

– certainly better than the others, most of whom had only had a year or two's intermittent education at a ragged school.

After thinking for a moment, Mrs Sloane decided on the course of action which was to seal Velvet's fate.

'Well, I'll probably live to regret it, but there's a vacancy in Personal Laundry, if you think you're up to it,' she said. As Velvet gasped and said she could do it – *of course* she could do it – and would be most grateful for the opportunity, Mrs Sloane continued, 'It needs the utmost care and attention to detail, mind; a meticulous awareness of a fashionable lady's adornment and decoration.' She took off her glasses, polished them on her apron and looked at what Velvet was wearing under her regulation white smock: a dark skirt made of hard-wearing gabardine and a plain, high-necked blouse. Mrs Sloane looked doubtful. 'Usually, a more mature lady fills this sort of position, someone who's worked as a haberdasher or seamstress.'

'I'd be suitable, I'm sure! What would I have to do?' Velvet asked, thinking that whatever Mrs Sloane said, she would certainly say she was capable of it.

'It means taking responsibility for our most valued clients' personal garments,' said Mrs Sloane. She paused for these portentous words to take root and Velvet nodded at her, wide-eyed. 'It means you would work at the top table and take charge of a

laundry box containing a particular customer's laundry. You would remove any delicate buttons, lace or precious embroidery, deal with stains, then wash each garment by hand and see to its drying. Once dry, you'd replace whatever fine detailing you'd removed, then press everything into shape, reform any frills, ruffles or pleats, and return the garments to their box ready to be delivered to the customer.'

Velvet nodded eagerly. 'I can do all that!'

'I need hardly add that the good name of our laundry rests on this particular exceptional service that we provide for our wealthiest clients,' Mrs Sloane went on, although she was not being perfectly truthful here, for the reputation of Ruffold's had actually been based more on the fact that they used washing water hot enough to kill bedbugs.

'I know how to look after fancy things, ma'am,' Velvet said. 'My ma was a laundress – and before that, a governess,' she added proudly. 'When I was small I used to watch her. I learned how to do buttonholes and make repairs, too.' This, at least, was true. Necessity demanded that all working-class girls knew how to repair, mend and make do with whatever materials they could lay their hands on.

'It's exacting, finicky work,' said Mrs Sloane. 'Our private customers tend to be *very* fussy.'

'Then I'll be just as fussy,' Velvet said eagerly. 'I'll take care of their precious garments, Mrs Sloane – I'll look after them like they're babies!'

‘It must be understood, mind, that any less than perfect results, any little mishaps that might befall these most treasured garments, will result in your instant dismissal.’

‘Of course, ma’am,’ Velvet agreed hurriedly. ‘I wouldn’t expect otherwise.’

‘Very well,’ said Mrs Sloane. ‘That’s all settled, then.’

‘Thank you, ma’am.’ Velvet bobbed a grateful curtsey. Her aching back, her swollen ankles, the cramps in her stomach and her sore, chapped hands – she could bear all these just as long as she kept her job.

‘Missus! Oh, missus!’ one of the little girls waiting in the yard called over to Mrs Sloane as they turned to go in. ‘Begging your pardon, but is there any casual work today?’

‘No, none at all, I’m afraid,’ said the supervisor.

‘If you please, missus! Me ma says I’m not to come home with me pockets empty!’

‘Then I’m sorry for it,’ said Mrs Sloane, ‘but there’s still no work. If I do have any, you’ll be the first to know.’

The girl looked across at Mrs Sloane and Velvet, then turned away without another word. She lifted one bare foot and held it in her hand for a moment to try and rub some life into her blue-tinged toes, then exchanged it for her other foot.

‘Ask again on Monday,’ Mrs Sloane called over to

her, relenting slightly, 'but I can't promise, mind.' She said to Velvet that she hoped there would be no more fainting from her that day, and that she should report to the laundry's upper table the following Monday at seven thirty in the morning.

Returning to the vast space that was the laundry, the wall of heat and noise hit Velvet so that she recoiled instinctively. The steam billowing from the huge washers, the hissing jets of the gas irons, the scorching heat of the ironing machines and the damp reek of sweat pervading from the massed lines of one hundred girls hard at work always made her feel she wanted to run and hide in a corner. The laundry was a heaving, vile nightmare of a place – as hot as hell and twice as nasty, as the girls were fond of saying. There were large circulating fans above the boilers in the centre of the room, but these did little to move the air around, and the windows were never opened because of the risk of smuts coming in and spoiling the newly washed linens. It was no wonder, Velvet thought, that most girls could only manage two years, or at most three, in the steam laundry before succumbing to a life of marriage and babies with the first boy who asked them. If they couldn't find anyone to wed, then quite often their health – affected by both the relentless work and the humid, unhealthy atmosphere – would break down completely and they would 'fall into a consumption', as they said. They were then left

with no option but to take up some badly paying home employment, such as stitching shirts or sewing on buttons for a few pennies a day.

Mrs Sloane returned to the top of the room where, standing on an upturned crate, she watched proceedings with – steamed-up glasses notwithstanding – the eye of an eagle. If more than a few words were exchanged between workmates, if someone took longer than half an hour for dinner, if a white towel touched the floor, or if some procedure was not carried out correctly, she always knew.

Velvet went back to her ironing table, meeting the eyes of her friend Lizzie and giving her a quick smile.

‘Velvet Groves! I thought you’d gone for good!’ Lizzie whispered. The room was dense with noise – a hissing and roaring from the big steam washer, a whooshing as the paddles turned in the wooden washing barrels, and dull thuds from the pressing machines – so that Lizzie had to speak right into Velvet’s ear in order to be heard. ‘I thought she’d shown you the door.’

‘No! Actually, I have a new position.’

Lizzie gaped at her. ‘Never! Doing what?’

‘I’ll tell you on the way home,’ said Velvet, for Mrs Sloane was still on her crate and Velvet was anxious not to do anything which might cause her to change her mind about the job.

A little girl learner appeared at Velvet’s shoulder

bent double under a basket of wet, freshly washed sheets, and Velvet heaved them on to the enamel table and began folding them ready to go into the box mangle. The sharp smells of washing soda and carbolic soap stung her nose and the sweat was already beading on her forehead again, but now that it seemed her fortunes had turned, she could stand it. She scraped her hair off her face and wound it into a knot at the base of her neck. With luck, she thought, these might be the last linen sheets she would ever have to fold in her life. A better sort of laundry life awaited.

‘And I said my ma was a laundress and made out that I knew all about the sewing-on of trimmings and such,’ Velvet said to an amazed and envious Lizzie on their walk home. ‘Mrs Sloane said I could start next week.’

‘And *was* your ma a laundress?’ Lizzie asked, for the girls had not known each other for very long. It was only a month ago that one of Lizzie’s numerous aunts had managed to get her a regular job at Ruffold’s.

Velvet shrugged. ‘I suppose so, if that’s the same thing as a washerwoman.’

She made a quick sideways glance at Lizzie to see if her face registered disapproval, but Lizzie merely nodded. Velvet’s father had always been bitterly ashamed of the fact that his wife washed

the dirty clothes of strangers for a living, though it was clear enough to Velvet that if her ma hadn't done so, they would have starved. Besides, occasionally the families who she had washed for would pass on their old clothes and, though these were often patched, faded or the wrong size (sometimes all three), they were more than welcome, for they could never afford to buy new. Her father had hated them wearing other people's cast-offs, of course – but then, she thought, he hated most things. He had once ripped a waistcoat from Ma's back, saying that she should have more self respect than to wear discarded leftovers, but Ma had retaliated for a change, saying that sometimes you had to wear what fortune had provided or go naked. Ma hadn't often spoken back to him, for to do so meant risking a slapped face. Or worse.

'When did you say your ma passed away?' Lizzie asked gently.

'When I was about eight.'

'And can you remember much about her?'

Velvet smiled. 'I remember little bits.' Sometimes she would spend hours trying to recollect more; wondering what she'd been like as a girl, going over old times and guessing what might have caused her to marry the miserable old grouch who was Velvet's father. 'If I'd known my ma was going to die I would have kept those past times a bit safer,' she said. 'I'd

have gone over and over them so that I could remember every single day.'

Lizzie gave her a sympathetic smile and the two girls linked arms as they crossed busy Hammersmith Broadway to take the road towards Chiswick. 'And what about your pa? You told me once he did children's parties,' she said when they were safely on the other side.

'That's right.' Velvet gave a wry laugh. 'He was Mr Magic.'

'Mr Magic!' Lizzie said, and then the tone of her voice changed to one of concern. 'But how long have you been an orphan?'

Velvet swallowed and hesitated, trying to sound as natural as possible. 'My father died last year.'

'That must have been very hard.'

Velvet didn't reply to this, for in all honesty she couldn't pretend that – apart from her guilt, of course – she'd felt anything but relief after his death. She'd been his housekeeper since her mother had died, and had found it a hard and thankless job.

'If you don't mind speaking of it, how did he die?' asked Lizzie.

Velvet took in a deep breath. 'He drowned.'

'Oh, how awful!' Lizzie gasped. 'What happened?'

There was another long pause, then Velvet said, 'We had a room in a worker's cottage next to the canal in Duckworth. It was night-time and . . . and

he was chasing me. It was raining hard and he slipped and fell down between two boats.'

She didn't say any more. She couldn't possibly tell her friend that she'd heard the splash of him going into the water, heard him shout for help – and just let him go under.