

The Oakum Room



This story was previously published by Littlewood Press in NORTHERN STORIES. It has also been repeatedly used by the Northern Examining Board for the English GCSE Exam.

1903

We recognised the quick step and the slap, slap of Mrs Hanson's shoes as she walked along the corridor towards us. The sounds stopped outside the door of the oakum room, where we worked. She came in and went up to the raised dais in front of us, fanning the air, thick with oakum dust, away from her face.

"Put down your work."

I glanced across at Polly. We were never told to stop our work at this time. The only break was at twelve, when we went to the dinner hall, where we sat in straight rows facing the front, to eat our potatoes, and the thin liquor that they called gravy.

"All those between the ages of sixteen and thirty rise."

Again I looked a question to Polly, but we both rose to our feet obediently. Mrs Hanson was not one to cross if it could be helped. I rubbed my raw hands together, trying uselessly to remove the sharp particles of tarred rope.

Mrs Hanson walked slowly up and down, dipping her head, then lifting it to acknowledge the importance of what she had to say.

"One of you young women...", she paused for effect. "One of you young women is to be MOST fortunate. A Mr Jarrotson, a decent farming man has come to visit the Union Workhouse. He has asked permission of the Guardians, to choose himself a wife."

A murmur of suppressed excitement flew around the room.

"Yes indeed. He needs a clean, strong woman and of course ... she must be of childbearing age. He's here now and wishing to make his choice. You're to go to the female ward, wash yourselves and make yourselves as decent as you may. Then you must attend the reception room, where I shall be waiting to present you to Mr Jarrotson. I hope you all appreciate your great good fortune. Go now."

There were twelve of us all pushing past the older women to get to the door. I saw Clara Flint picking nervously at her thin gingham smock ... the workhouse uniform.

"Not you Flint," Mrs Hanson's voice snapped out.

Clara turned away, the distress showing in her eyes. Clara's eyes were weak, and constantly wet, with deep violet shadows beneath. She returned to her seat, shoulders shaking with the coughing that she tried to hold back.

"And not you Clark."

Annie Clark turned angrily back to her work. Annie was at least forty, and tough and bossy. I didn't know how she did it, but Annie didn't seem as 'got down' as the rest of us. Trust her to have a try at anything.

Old Nelly Parker grabbed my sleeve as I passed her.

"Smile thee best Susan, and maybe tha'll be chosen."

We hurried down the corridor to the female ward pushing and shoving to be the first there. It was not the usual slow shuffle that moved us round our workhouse world. Special extra jugs for washing had to be filled and a palaver

followed, with fights and hair pulling, over Margery's comb. There was a great pinching of cheeks and smoothing down of shabby clothes.

"Tell me how I look Susan," Polly begged. "Have I got my apron straight. I wish I'd a bit of goose grease for my hands."

"You look fine," I told her. "And I hope it's you as gets picked Polly, though I'll miss you sore. There's nowt any of us can do about our hands."

I tucked mine beneath my apron. They were red and raw from the hours that we spent unravelling tarred rope... oakum picking we called it. Soon they'd grow hard and callused, like the older women's hands. Scarred and tough like the skin of a beast. They wouldn't hurt so much then.

"You try your best," I told Polly. "Think of your bairn. Maybe he'd take the little'un too, if you be chosen. You could be together Polly all the time. No more catching a glimpse of him, when they've the charity to let you go over to the children's side for a moment."

Polly bit her lips and nodded.

We'd both arrived at the Workhouse on the same night, me and Polly. I can't think how we'd have managed to get through it all if we hadn't had each other.

Mary pulled Janet's hair down, and she screamed and hit back. Janet's wirey hair was hard to keep neat. Eliza Beck snatched little Nancy's clean apron, and shoved her grubby one in it's place. Polly pulled Nancy's clawing hand away from Eliza's cheek.

"Nay love... tha's prettier by far than Eliza. Tha'll look best whatever."

We hurried back down the corridor, and across the open yard to the main building, where Farmer Jarrotson waited. We were all pinching and pushing at each other to try to be first. The great stone built entrance loomed above us, and we slowed our steps. There was the high porch and columns... the ornate clock and flight of steps.

I stopped and took hold of Polly's arm. A flood of despair washed over me as I remembered. I stood looking up at those columns the night that I came to the workhouse. I'd carried our Peter here in my arms. That was the night that he'd been so sick that I'd feared he was dying, and I threw away my last scrap of pride.

We'd managed well enough for a while, after Mam had died, until my brother Peter fell sick. I couldn't get much work done then, for he needed me to look after him. In the end I couldn't find the extra money we needed for medicine or proper food. I brought him to this dreadful place, hoping to save his life, but he died the next day, and I still couldn't forgive myself for not bringing him sooner.

I clung to Polly's hand as we stood there in front of the building. Polly was the only warm and lovely thing I'd found since that miserable night, and Polly had even more reason than me to wish to get out.

"I'm thinking of our Peter, and that terrible night," I said.

"Aye Susan, I know you are, and I'm remembering how you sat with me all through that night, and helped me with my little lad, even though they'd taken your brother away from you."

I nodded. I'd been glad to sit with Polly while she laboured to give birth to her little boy, only to see him taken off to the infants side, where she caught a brief glimpse of him now and again.

Little Nancy came up close beside me, and took hold of my other hand, twisting the end of my sleeve in her thin fingers. I put my arm around her then, remembering how she stole scraps of cloth from the sewing room, to make funny little dolls for Polly's child. Eliza suddenly stopped in front of us, she turned around and looked at Nancy. She undid the apron that she'd stolen and handed it back.

"Nay ... you have it," said Nancy. "I don't know as I want to get chosen. I don't know as I want to be a wife."

Those two would often sit together in the evenings, singing songs and whispering about the happier times they'd once had.

We huddled close together then. No one seemed to want to start climbing the steps, but the door opened and Mrs Hanson came out.

"Don't hang around. Come up here. Go into the waiting room and make an orderly line."

We followed her meek and silent. Polly and I were last. We waited in our line ... heads bowed, faces to the floor, hands hidden beneath our aprons.

"Now Mr Jarrotson, come and make your choice. I'll say the names. This is Foster. Small of stature, bandy legs, but clean and strong. Childhood rickets I

dare say. This is Pearson ... a decent enough girl, though her mother's in the asylum ward, and her father is often in the vagrants' side."

I looked up and saw that Farmer Jarrotson was a fat man of about fifty, with greying sandy hair. His clothes were new and made from good cloth. His small eyes darted from face to downcast face, his cheeks flushed with enjoyment at the task.

I think it was Eliza that started it. As farmer Jarrotson passed her, he lowered his eyes to her long thin legs that bowed in the middle. Something of a sneer touched his mouth. Eliza suddenly crossed her eyes. Jarrotson moved quickly on to the next woman.

As he moved down the line, women and girls developed coughing, shaking, violent itching and dribbling at the mouth. The man moved on faster down the line, Mrs Hanson following furious in his wake. He reached the end of the row where Polly and I stood. I echoed Eliza's crossed eyes, and I brought my swollen hands out from beneath my apron. I held them out as though he should be inspecting them. He turned from me to Polly.

Polly was still and calm, staring at the floor. Her soft brown hair combed smoothly to the side.

"Aaah," Mrs Hanson cooed her relief. "Polly Allsop. She has a young child in the infant's ward. Father unknown, of course ... still, proof of childbearing. "

Jarrotson smiled smugly . His hand went out to grip Polly ' s shoulder. Polly looked up into his face. A quiver ran *through* her body, then suddenly, mouth snarling, teeth bared, she lunged at his hand biting hard and catching a pinch of flesh. He pulled back, his face gone white with shock. He headed straight for the door. Mrs Hanson's hand shot out, slapping Polly hard across the cheek, knocking her to the floor.

Eliza ' s big mouth cracked open in wild laughter . Then the fancy high carved, ceiling of the waiting room, echoed with loud gushing laughter, as we all joined in.

Jarrotson turned back to us, his eyes wide with fear.

"I'll have NON o' them."

Mrs Hanson opened the door and ushered him out. We could see that he couldn't ' wait to be on the other side .

Our laughter subsided and some fell to weeping, as Mrs Hanson returned, her face dark red, she shook with anger.

"Leave her be, " she shouted at me, as I bent to help Polly to her feet. "You WICKED women. You disgrace your charitable benefactors. You shall know the wrath of God before tonight. Since you cannot bear to leave your oakum picking you may keep at it all through the night. There'll be no more chances for any of you... I'll see to that."

The door opened and the woman known as Jeevers came in, followed by one of her tall thick-set helpers. We recognised well enough the shape of the straight-jacket in her hands.

Hanson pointed, and they went to pick up the unresisting Polly.

"File out," bellowed Mrs Hanson.

Slow and quiet we moved towards the door. Heads down, shuffling feet. Back across the cold yard ... down the stark tiled corridor, back to the oakum room.

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