

Steel Dust.



In memory of my dear friend Hilda Cotterill.

1934

Hilda's hands shook as she carefully sliced yet another quarter of ham.

"Now mind you get 'em thin," the old woman insisted. "I've ten of 'em to feed. I can't do with thick slices."

Thinner slices would have been impossible and Hilda opened her mouth to say so, but she remembered that it was Thursday, and kept her patience. She couldn't do with anything going wrong, not today of all days.

"I'll take a pound of sugar. No ... no make that half a pound."

The hand on the polished wooden clock over the shop doorway jerked another minute away. Forty minutes to go. Hilda's stomach lurched, and she pushed herself up on tiptoes, to catch her reflection in the mirror behind the confectionery counter ... a short round faced girl, in a starched white overall.

She could have been twelve rather than seventeen, something would have to be done about that. There was that new lipstick in her pocket, Cherry Kiss it was called, that would help.

"I said, I'll take half a pound of sugar."

"Oh yes ... sorry."

The woman was frowning and tapping her fingers on the counter, so that Mr Jones the shop manager looked up from his lists of figures.

Hilda's hands shook even more as she folded the blue sugar paper bag, and weighed out the right amount.

"Hmm. I think that'll be all from THIS shop."

The clock dragged its way through those last forty minutes. Mary on the cakes counter kept winking and grinning. It was a whole five minutes past two, when Mr Jones eventually looked up at Hilda, and nodded.

"Very well Miss Banks. Your afternoon isn't it? Off you go then ... er no need to run."

There wasn't much light or room in the staff toilet, but Hilda didn't care. She was good at this, she'd practised enough at home, and she'd watched their Nan. She pushed her lips forwards, and drew the outline of a Cupid's Bow, in deep cherry red. She filled in the shape of her bottom lips, then pouted at the reflection in the glass. Yes that was better, but the hair wasn't right. She fished in her bag again, then brushed her frizzy brown curls over to the side. That's it! She let it flop down over one eye, not caring if she could see where she was going or not? That great grin on her face was no good; it made her look like a big daft kid. She'd have to make herself stop that, even if she did feel like the cat with the cream. You had to look snooty and sullen, that was the thing.

She sighed at the girl in the mirror. Well ... HE seemed to like her enough the other night. She pulled the folded paper from her pocket and read the address again. It was a Little Mesters workshop in one of the yards off West Street, he'd said he worked there ... grinding work of some kind, she couldn't remember exactly what.

"Not much of a job," he'd said.

But they'd both agreed that he was lucky to have any job the way things were.

What she did remember, was that he had dark brown eyes, was tall and a lovely dancer. He'd swung her round in such a confident way that she'd felt as though she could dance too ... her ... Hilda, the one her sisters called Elephant Feet.

She walked quickly through the big grocery store, hoping Mr Jones wouldn't notice the lips and hair; then pushed through the swing doors out onto Fargate. Mary noticed her, she would. She mouthed rude words through the window and wagged her finger above the cream buns and eclairs. Hilda refused to look at her and walked off up Fargate, her head held high. It was impossible to keep the grin from her face.

This was what she'd wished for. This was what she'd wanted. She was going to meet a young man. Her young man. Even her mother agreed that now she was seventeen, and working in the shop, she was old enough to walk out with a fellow.

The trouble was, the fellow hadn't seemed to be there. She and Mary had searched the dance halls on Saturday nights, but the only ones who looked at them were old, or ugly, or rough. That wouldn't do. Then last Saturday they'd both struck lucky. Mary had found Charlie, and Hilda had found Jack.

The evening hadn't started well. They'd gone to the Crookes Ballroom first. They hadn't paid. They never paid until they were sure it was worth it, they'd just peeped in and pulled a long face at each other ... no men there.

"Come on, that's no good" Mary had grabbed her by the wrist. "Glossop Road'll be better. It's busier towards town."

Then they'd run all the way, down hill, Hilda's short plump legs tottering along in silk stockings and silver high heeled dancing shoes.

Glossop Road Dance-Hall, was above the swimming baths, so that a faint smell of chlorine hung in the air, but when they looked in they could see that the White Rose Band was playing and there were lots of men.

Mary had been asked to dance straight away, so that Hilda had been left feeling awkward and lonely. She'd stuck her chin in the air, tapping her foot to the thumping beat of the band. They were playing that new tune STARDUST, and a crooner was singing. Hilda loved it and she sang the words quietly to herself.

"Sometimes I wonder why I spend the lonely night, dreaming of a song..."

She was determined not to appear as lost as she felt. She stroked one of the green silk petals on the skirt of her dress, and looked around, not at the men, but at the women. She decided that they were a pretty common lot, but they were all wearing the latest styles. Her own frock, was her favourite, the one that she'd always felt good in, but comparing it with the others made her realise that it had been a gorgeous dress four years ago when their Nan had first worn it, now it was just old fashioned.

The crooner had a lovely voice, but the words were making Hilda sad,

"That melody, haunts my memory,

And I am once again with you..."

Courage was seeping away fast, her shoulders drooped, she was even thinking of making a run for the ladies toilets, when she looked up to see a tall young man in a dark suit and white shirt, stooping down towards her. He held out his hand.

"Will you dance?"

She could have hugged him there and then with the relief of it. She'd been bright and chatty while they were dancing, and she hadn't worried about the steps just followed his lead, enjoying the music.

He hadn't stayed with her all night, he kept going off to talk to his friends, and he danced with other girls, but he came back to her when they announced the last waltz. Jack, held her close, asking if he could walk her home.

Hilda nodded, trying hard not to look too eager. He talked in an easy friendly way as they walked through town, telling her where he worked and suggested that she called in to see him there.

"It'll have to be Thursday, " she insisted.

"Any Thursday would be fine."

When he said goodnight standing on her doorstep, she lifted her face willingly to be kissed, but the kiss never came. He solemnly shook her hand and bowed. He left her staring after him puzzled and a little disappointed as he went off down the street.

"He's a gentleman," she told herself.

Now it was Thursday afternoon and Hilda crossed over Leopold Street, turning up West Street. She knew the building though she'd never been in it before, a big three storied place. As she walked in through the main gateway, there were whistles and shouts from a gang of lads in overalls, pushing heavy laden barrows out onto the street.

Hilda could feel her heart thudding and her face turning red. It was like a rabbit warren, packed with steep steps and tiny workshops that rang with the harsh sounds of, hammering, polishing and grinding. For two pins she'd have turned back and gone home, but no ... she knew she'd hate herself if she did that. She wasn't going to let this chance go by. He'd told her clearly how to find him and she followed the instructions ... up the steps on the left, then down the passage, first workshop on the right.

The door stood open, so that dust blew out into the passageway. The irregular grating whirr of the grinding wheel came in loud bursts, and her polite knock on the open door seemed rather silly.

Jack was hunched over the wheel hard at work. Well she presumed that it was Jack. He wore a long leather apron and he'd got a sweat rag tied round his neck, covering his mouth and nose, so that you could hardly see his face. His fingers were wrapped around with dust coated rags; his hair and hands covered in grey steel dust. The whole tiny room was covered in steel dust: the window ledge, the table, the tin plate and mug, the piled up boxes of work ... all powdered with the same fine metallic smelling stuff.

Hilda was almost standing by his elbow, before he noticed her. He suddenly stopped his work and seemed to stare blankly at her. Then at last he pulled the cloth down from his face, grinning; clearly surprised.

"Oh. Oh yes, well now. You found you're way then?"

"Of course, it was easy."

"Well, it's nice to see you again. Very nice."

Hilda smiled and nodded her head, but her heart sank. He wasn't expecting her. She wasn't a fool ... she could tell. Had he just forgotten it was Thursday, or had he never really meant her to come at all?

There was an awkward silence, though they both continued to smile politely at each other. Hilda wondered whether it might be best if she just turned and ran.

"Look," he said. "I ... I didn't realise how much work they were going to send today and you see I have to deliver that lot over there, for three o'clock. I'm so sorry ... I didn't realise."

He was lying to make her feel better. He was kind and he WAS a gentleman, he was just what she wanted. She wasn't going to run away and she wasn't going to LET it all go wrong.

"I could make you a cup of tea, ... perhaps." He looked helplessly at the dust covered enamel mug.

"No," Hilda said firmly. "I'll help. What can I do? Can I deliver those for you? Where do they have to go?"

He ran his fingers through his hair and scratched his head. "Oh I couldn't let you do that."

"Yes you can," she told him firmly. "Where do they go to?"

"Well ... it's Clarence Street, it's quite a way. You'd have to push the barrow. Very heavy."

"I can do that," Hilda insisted. She wanted to do it. She wanted to be doing something for him. Something to make her belong there in that dusty little room along with him.

"Well that's grand of you," he smiled and scratched his head again. "If you take those bundles, then I can carry the big box down the stairs."

"What are they?" Hilda stared puzzled at the dozens of short steel rods.

"Steels," he laughed. "Butchers steels to sharpen the knives on. I grind the bolsters, that thin bit there, above the handles. Then I send them back to be finished."

"Of course," Hilda giggled.

They made three journeys up and down the steps to load the barrow, then Hilda lifted the handles to try it out. It was heavy, but she could just about

manage to move it and he was laughing and smiling, he seemed to think it grand, being so willing to help.

"If you do this, I can be finished in an hour. I'll take you somewhere nice for your tea. Now are you sure? It's not too heavy?"

Hilda, brushed his worries aside and went tottering up the hill with the barrow. Her much polished high heels didn't help.

She was finding it rather hard going by the time she reached the corner, but as she struggled to turn the barrow round, a man in overalls stopped her.

"I was just coming to get those," he said.

"Oh," Hilda sighed with relief. "Are you from Clarence Street then?"

"I am that little lass."

Hilda cheerfully handed them over, thinking that's even more time saved.

Jack was hard at work again when she got back. He stopped his work and stared, pulling up his goggles. "Why you've not been gone five minutes."

"No," she said. "It's all right. The man came for them."

"What? What man? How did you know?"

She blinked hard, her eyes suddenly watering.

Jack was up and crossing the room. "How do you know it was the right man? They're so desperate these days, they'll pinch anything! Glad to pinch a barrow of work they are! Silly little lass."

He was off down the stairs two at a time, leaving Hilda red faced and mortified, clinging to the door.

She moved towards the table and sat down, careless of her coat on the dust covered stool. How could she have done it? How could she have been so stupid? She'd been so keen to make him HER young man and she'd done it all wrong.

Her hands were covered with dust and she'd messed up her face where she wiped her cheek. She must look dreadful now; filthy too, and he was furious with her. Well ... no good sitting there, feeling sorry for herself, she'd better go, and she'd better go quickly, before he came back. She didn't want to have to listen to him telling her how stupid she was again.

She stumbled down the stairs, brushing the dust out of her sleeves as best she could, but ran straight into Jack at the bottom. She tried to dodge him and run off up the street, but he caught hold of her.

"It WERE the right fellow," he said.

It was only then that she dared to look up at him. He was smiling and laughing at her. "It WERE the right fellow you gave them to."

"Oh," said Hilda. She lifted her head and tried to scrape back a bit of dignity, wishing desperately that she didn't look such a mess. "So I hadn't been so stupid after all."

"I'm sorry. Please don't go. I'm SO sorry for what I said. You see, he's never come round to collect them before and I just can't afford to loose any work at the moment. I just couldn't think... I was so rude!"

It was seven o'clock when Hilda got home. Nan was on her way out, and passed her in the hall.

"We've not kept your tea for you," she said.

"I've been out for my tea," said Hilda, "and I'm going out again ... later."

"Oh are you?" Nan snorted with laughter.

"What's so funny?"

Hilda tried to be offended, but she couldn't wipe the glowing smile from her face.

Nan bent towards her and sniffed at her coat and hair.

"I know that smell," she said, then she turned back inside the house and bellowed. "Come and look at our Hilda Mam. She's got star dust in her eyes, and steel dust in her hair."

And Nan went off, singing. "Sometimes I wonder why I spend the lonely night, dreaming of a song."