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In recent years Mary has achieved her ambition to become a writer. When she is not writing she enjoys discussing books with friends in a book group, art exhibitions, aerobics, walking, and gardening, although she would rather look at other people's gardens than work in her own.



Cold Fusion is a new series for readers who are curious, who enjoy a challenge and who like thinking outside the box.

Paupers

Mary Chapman





Paupers
by Mary Chapman

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One

The iron door-knocker, shaped like a fist, glinted in the moonlight. Beneath it huddled three figures, shivering in the cold wind that swept across the fields. Behind them, muddy lanes and bare hedgerows. Before them, high walls, a locked and bolted door.

‘I’ll knock, Mam,’ said the boy.

He reached up, grasped the cold metal and banged it against the door.

They waited. Silence. The other two figures moved closer together. One of them held a bundle in her arms. The boy tried again, pounding the knocker against the door with all his strength.

A rattling of chains, and a sliding of bolts. The door creaked open. A sliver of light shone out.

‘Who’s there?’ said a rough, male voice.

‘Lydia Maddison and children, sir, from Cranby, sir.’

‘Who sent you?’

‘Relieving Officer, sir.’

‘Where’s your husband? Or ain’t you got one? Are these all your bastards?’

The woman flinched.

‘Our father’s gone and left us,’ the boy said. ‘We’ve nowhere to go.’

‘How many of you?’

‘Three - me and my daughter and my son - and a babby,’ the woman said.

‘You can come in tonight, but you’ll have to go in front of the Board tomorrow.’

The door opened wider and they stumbled in.

A thick-set, grim-faced man stood in front of them.

‘You, boy, come with me. And you two can wait here. Mrs Scrimshaw, Assistant Matron, will deal with you.’

‘But we’re together,’ Lydia said. ‘We’re a family.’

‘Not here you’re not. You’re paupers. We don’t let families live together in here no more. And quite right too.’

‘But we’ve as much right to be together as a family as rich folk,’ Lydia said. ‘Just because we’ve fallen on hard times ...’

‘It’s the new Poor Law. It stops idle folk coming in here to live off the Parish in the lap of luxury while decent, hard-working souls struggle to earn a crust.’

‘Mam,’ the girl whispered, ‘I don’t want to stay here if we can’t be together.’

‘No, Mam, nor do I,’ said the boy.

‘Then be on your way.’ The man threw open the door. ‘There’s plenty of others who’ll be grateful for a bed.’

Lydia looked out into the dark night. Bare branches of trees tossed and swayed in the wind. Clouds covered the moon. She shook her head.

‘We’ve nowhere else to go,’ she said. ‘We’ve no choice. We’ll stay.’

The man slammed the door shut.

‘Very well. Now, boy, you come along with me.’

‘Where are you taking him?’ Lydia tried to step between the boy and the man, but the man pushed her aside.

‘To get out of them mucky clothes and into some clean ’uns,’ he said. ‘My missus’ll do the same with you. Come on, boy. What’s yer name?’

‘Tom.’

‘Tom what?’

‘Tom Maddison.’

‘Tom Maddison what?’ the man shouted.

‘Say *sir*,’ Lydia whispered.

‘Tom Maddison, *sir*.’

‘It’ll be Maddison here, and I’m *Mr Scrimshaw* to you.’

He pushed Tom in front of him. The boy turned to look back over his shoulder at his mother.

‘Go along with *Mr Scrimshaw*, Tom, there’s a good lad.’ Lydia tried to smile.

Scrimshaw gave Tom another shove, harder this time, so the boy stumbled. Lydia saw the smirk on Scrimshaw’s face before he turned away to march after Tom down the dimly-lit passage.

In the opposite direction, at the far end of the passage, in the flickering gaslight, Lydia could see a dark shape approaching. It was a woman in a

long, black dress and apron, with a bunch of keys at her waist – Mrs Scrimshaw.

‘Follow me,’ she said, as she reached Lydia and her daughter, ‘and hurry up about it.’

‘Come on, Rose.’ Lydia put an arm round her daughter.

Rose clasped her bundle tightly, and they followed Mrs Scrimshaw along the passage.

At last she stopped by a door, selected a key from the bunch that rattled at her waist, unlocked the door and pushed it open.

‘In here. Hurry! Hurry!’ she snapped.

Lydia had hoped to see beds, or at least a mattress on the floor. She was desperately tired and she knew Rose was exhausted, but the room they were in was cold and bare, empty except for the tall cupboards along one wall and a tin bath in the middle.

Mrs Scrimshaw pulled a pair of scissors from her apron pocket. Without a word she grabbed

Rose by her hair and cut savagely into the long, dark tresses.

‘Now, off with your things,’ she said, taking a broom and vigorously sweeping the hair into a mound.

Lydia opened her mouth to protest, and then looked at Mrs Scrimshaw. Best not to cross her.

‘Give Lucy to me, Rose,’ she said. ‘You go first.’

‘Whose bastard is it?’ asked Mrs Scrimshaw.

‘Lucy is Rose’s babby,’ said Lydia, gently taking the child from her daughter.

Rose removed her cracked boots and thin, worn garments. She rolled everything into a bundle, holding it in front of her as she stood, head down, waiting, shivering bare-foot on the cold stone floor.

‘Put them mucky old things down there,’ Mrs Scrimshaw said. ‘I’ll burn ’em later. Now get in that bath, and wash yourself and wash your hair.’

The water was murky and soupy. *How many*

others had washed in it? Rose wondered. Mrs Scrimshaw waited, a bar of carbolic soap in one hand and a scrubbing brush in the other.

‘Come on. Come on. I haven’t got all night,’ she said.

Rose bit her lip and tentatively put one foot into the water.

‘Get in, and mind you wash yourself properly.’ Mrs Scrimshaw handed over the soap and scrubbing brush. ‘We don’t want any disease here.’

Rose shivered as she climbed into the bath. She lathered the soap over her thin body and cropped hair. Then splashed herself all over with the cold water. While Rose dried herself on a damp grey cloth, Mrs Scrimshaw fetched clothes and boots from the cupboard. She gave a bundle to Rose and a bundle to Lydia. The coarse material was rough to the skin, but at least it would be warm.

‘And you’re to wear this as well.’ She handed Rose a jacket of the same cloth.

‘Why?’

‘You’re a jacket woman.’

‘What do you mean?’ Lydia asked.

‘It’s her mark of shame. She’s got a bastard child. She’ll go to the ward with all the other jacket women.’

‘But we want to be together as a family,’ Lydia said. ‘You’re a woman. You must understand that?’

‘I understand the law, and the law says families don’t stay together. Inmates are to be segregated,’ Mrs Scrimshaw said. ‘There are separate wards for women, men, girls, boys, jacket women. You’re paupers. What d’you expect? Now, Missus, give that babby here while you get in that bath.’

‘No!’ Rose took the baby from her mother. ‘I’ll see to Lucy.’

Mrs Scrimshaw turned back to the cupboard

to find baby clothes. Rose gently unrolled the cloths that Lucy was wrapped in, and as she did so removed a small object, like a thin tube. She slipped this into her jacket pocket. Lucy began to whimper as she lay in Rose's arms.

'Please ... Mrs Scrimshaw ... ' Rose asked, 'could I have a little water and a clean cloth so I can wash Lucy on my lap?'

Impatiently Mrs Scrimshaw ripped off a strip of clean linen from a stack in the cupboard and slopped water from a chipped enamel jug into a bowl. Lydia quickly undressed, washed herself in the tin bath, dried herself and dressed, while Rose bathed and dressed Lucy. Then Mrs Scrimshaw locked the cupboards, rattling each door in turn to make sure it was securely fastened.

'I'll take you to your beds now,' she said. 'You've missed supper, but it won't be long till morning.'