

The time that is given us

How love can change lives

Von Gepo

Kapitel 2: Second chapter

Harry thanked his memory for his ability to memorise files. With all his training in recalling obscure information he had no problem recalling the name "Wool's Orphanage" in London. Being a rich man, he sent a courier to inquire about adopting a kid with instructions to wait for a written reply. It was much like sending an owl, just the Muggle way, and a lot more impressive. Especially since an owl could not tell tales about him while a human courier could.

Margret was ecstatic at the thought of a having a kid in the house. His impression that she might be lonely seemed not too far from the truth. He smiled as she rambled on about how to decorate a room for the child, the dresses she could sew for a girl, the toys she could buy for a boy. He interrupted by telling her it would most likely be a boy, explaining that he wanted an heir.

"A boy, of course, Sir." Her smile dimmed a bit. "If I may ask ... do you also plan on marrying?"

"Not especially, no." Which was strange, and Margret would not be the last to say so if he did not offer her an explanation. "I was in love once ... very much so. But she passed away and since then, I have had no interest in any other woman. By now I doubt I ever will."

"Oh, I am most sorry, Sir. I did not want to bring up painful memories." She lowered her head. "Though I have to admit that I did not ... no, let me rephrase that. I never saw much of a romantic side of you, Sir."

"That might be because I tend not to talk about the topic of romance." He nodded to her. "So let us bury the topic again and talk about the coming of my heir. Seeing as I lack a wife, do you feel up to the task of acting as his female role model?"

"Me, Sir?" Her eyes widened. "You mean ... as his mother?"

"As a motherly figure at least. You are still a servant in this household but I don't want the boy spoiled, so I don't think the boy should see you as such. I would like you in a caring but also parental position in regards to him" God, when had he begun to sound so formal? Having only Albus, the mayor and other gentleman of the highest social class as acquaintances certainly had done a number on him.

"Like a nanny?" Her smile indicated she liked the sound of that.

"Yes, a nanny." Harry nodded and smiled. "I want him to get all the love he can get but also to learn the rules of society. If one of us has to scold him, I want him to have another person he can go to." But not a mother. The mother of his children would always be Ginny, no matter the era or the children. And he did not want to fight with

Margret when it came to parenting.

"So I am allowed to scold him if I think the situation merits it?" She asked.

"Of course. Even though I would prefer if you came to me in larger matters like stealing, fire setting or whatever else he might come up with."

"Mister Horton! Why would a beloved child do that?" She seemed horrified.

"Because he first needs to learn that he is loved and we need to learn to love him. Until he feels safe with us, he might do things we do not approve of." At least that was what he expected from Tom. Harry imagined what he would have done if he had suddenly been adopted at the age of six – he would have raided the kitchen and hidden food in his rooms.

"I see you have put quite some thought in this." Her cheeks coloured. "I hope I can live up to your expectations."

"As long as you open your heart to him, I am sure we will be fine." He smiled at her and reminded himself that she was at least twenty years younger than him. He did not even know how old she was exactly. "Do you have younger siblings?"

"Two brothers, Sir" She looked up, pride shining in her eyes. "One is eleven, the other is eight. I helped with both."

"Then I guess you know what to expect." He smiled with one corner of the mouth. "I am expecting general mayhem."

"The beginning will be hard, I guess?" She smiled while he nodded. "We will give the boy a home."

"Yes, we will..." Harry said mostly to himself.

The orphanage was ecstatic to sell a kid to him. At least their reply sounded a lot like it; telling him about suitable kids and asking for "a kind donation to our most devoted institute" at the same time was audacious, but he expected it in these times. Orphanages were mostly poor and depended upon the pity (or piety in some cases) of wealthy women. Often there was no running water even though London's sewer systems were nearly a hundred years old by now, and the little ones were the first to die of the still raging infectious diseases. Food was scarce; whenever the country had a bad crop children stole to survive. Wool's Orphanage was a prime example of those badly kept homes from which no kid was ever adopted away. The building, the kids and even some of their caretakers were nothing short of filthy. Clothes and rooms were passed down from one kid to the next until they were unusable. The orphanage was located near the Thames and most of its rooms were damp, even though kids must have lived in them for decades by now. Harry expected the roof to be broken and was not disappointed when the nun in charge showed him around. Mould could be found on most walls and a lot of the children seemed to be constantly coughing.

"Twenty-six boys and eight girls reside with us, ranging in age from four to thirteen. Brea, our oldest girl, would make a good maidservant if you would like to consider taking more than one. She is old enough to hold a job even if you do not adopt her. We are just glad to see our children settled into good homes, whatever their position might be."

Harry sighed soundlessly. He could see why the nun – Sister Isolda – was set on foisting off as many orphans as possible on him. This building was as decrepit as could be and fewer mouths to feed would leave some money for renovations.

"You may introduce the boys ranging from four to eight to me as well as your oldest girls. My housekeeper Margret would not refuse more hands." How many could he sensibly take with him? "I also plan to open a sewing factory, so I will speak with all

girls and boys adept at that.”

It seemed cruel to actually consider child labor, but it was still thirty years before that would be forbidden in this country. Whenever given a chance, every orphan would take a job. If he were to school one boy, he could as well teach a bunch of children and have the others work in the afternoon. That was still better than living in this hellhole. “That sounds lovely.” The nun actually smiled. “The last years have been hard. This country is still suffering from the Great War and these children seldom have something good happen to them. We cannot even provide them with a roof and food. There is increasing talk of closing this orphanage but where would the children go? Please take as many of them as you can manage.”

“Bring needle and thread, I will test them all for suitability.” He could not take everyone but a few of them would most likely not be a burden. He spent the next hour judging the needle-work of all thirty-seven children – Tom included – and picked three girls and a boy as suitable. He also told the nun that he would take Tom as his adopted son, claiming the boy had impressed him with his sharp mind.

In truth they had not even spoken a word. Tom was an introverted kid, simply following the nun's orders without much resistance. He looked much like all the others – scrawny, broken down and hopeless. None of the five children seemed to have much opinion about coming with him. Being told that he had work for them and that they would be provided clothes, food and a bed seemed enough for all of them to pack up their belongings and follow him to his car. None seemed excited but they also did not seem to mind leaving this place much. The two oldest girls eyed him warily and exchanged a look, but followed him nonetheless. He seemed to have passed their test, whatever that might have been.

He instructed the oldest – Brea – to hold Tom on her lap on the drive. She made no complaint, so whatever personality Tom had, it was not completely repulsive. The other three he sat in the back of the car: Mary and Helen were both eleven years old while Richard was twelve. He thought about asking them some questions but decided against it, so that they spent the six hour ride in silence. Tom and Helen both dozed off after some hours. They arrived back in Bath two hours short of nightfall, so they would have plenty of time to settle in.

Margret seemed to have heard the car – or waited at a window, who knew? – and came out when he parked in front of the manor. He ushered all the children out, before he drove the car to the stable, where it would be safe from the weather, since garages hadn't been invented yet. When he came back, Margret seemed to have introduced herself to everyone and to have learned all their names.

“Welcome back, Sir” She greeted him again. “May I ask how the one child you wanted to adopt turned into five kids standing before me?” An amused smile graced her lips. “I'll explain in a minute. Let's show all of them the kitchen and offer them something to drink and eat first.” That got him a thankful smile from two of the girls. Brea carried Tom who was still sleeping. He began explaining the general layout as he led them to the back of the house.

While the kids – including an awakened and grumpy Tom – filled their bellies with milk, bread and cheese, Harry began his explanation to Margret: “I adopted Tom as my son, that is the young boy over there. The others have followed me of their own free will. I plan to open a sewing factory. Until I have made all the arrangements, I would like you to give them work in the household.”

“I certainly won't complain about helping hands. So you four will get your work from

me come tomorrow. Four kids ... if the weather is fair, you can begin with the garden. Since we've gone without a gardener for quite a while now, there is a lot of work to do. Have any of you ever done gardening?" All of them, Tom included, shook their heads. "Oh well, you will learn a lot of useful skills then." She turned to him. "We have two rooms for maids and servants but each has only two beds. Tom will have his own room, of course, but what about the other boy? Where can we put him?"

"Is there another room we could use?" He recalled his tour but only came up with guestrooms far away from the servant's wing.

"There is the gardener's shack but it is not well maintained. The scrawny thing will catch his death out there." They both looked at Richard, who in turn watched them with a questioning gaze.

"I guess I should have the carpenters repair the old one then. Until then, he can have a guestroom."

"But what if there are actual guests? Are you sure?"

"I am not expecting anyone in the next month, so do not fret." He smiled gently at her. "It is a temporary solution. Certainly better than having him sleep on the floor somewhere."

"True enough." She shook her head in exasperation. "Well, boy, you just earned a real feather bed for a month just for being male."

"Do I hear jealousy in your voice?" Well, she was something like a head maid now and he had just given one of her underlings much better quarters than hers. But he could not have a boy and a girl together in a room. How else to solve that?

"Just for a moment." Her smile surfaced again. "Sorry, Sir, that was immature."

"You are still young yourself." He let his gaze wander over the multitude of kids in the room. "Brea, what education did you receive at the orphanage? Can you read and write?"

"Yes, Sir" She straightened up. "We four had three or four years of schooling. We can read, write and do sums."

"Very good" Harry nodded. "In that case, I will first only teach Tom. As soon as he has reached your level of schooling, I will teach all of you. Margret, I would like you to attend lessons with Tom, so you can help him with homework if needed." That way she could learn herself, without exposing her ignorance.

"Of course, Sir" She actually curtsied. She had never before curtsied. Was that a bad sign? No, she actually seemed thankful. Well, schooling meant you were able to get better jobs.

"I think instead of beginning with the gardening, we should all go into town tomorrow. You kids need some new clothes. I'll ask the seamstress to teach you a few basics. I wanted to speak to her anyway. After that, I guess we'll need to buy a lot more food, right?"

"Oh yes" Margret sighed. "These five growing kids will clean out our pantry in no time at all."

"Have all of them wash themselves in the morning. And please check them all for fleas and the like."

"Yes, Sir." She sighed deeply. Well, they knew what was coming, they had talked about it beforehand.

"Tom, I'll show you to your new room. Richard, come with me as well."

Both boys followed him without being asked twice. They might be dirty and thin as twigs, but the nuns had drilled obedience into them. He gave Richard the first of the guest rooms and took Tom to the one Margret had prepared with a six-year-old in

mind. If Harry remembered correctly, the boy would turn six this winter.

"This will be your room from now on, Tom." He stepped aside so that the boy might enter.

"Mine?" The little one looked completely floored when he saw a feather bed, a dresser, a writing desk and an empty bookshelf.

"Yours alone." Harry kneaed next to him and put a hand on his tiny shoulder. "I expect you to study hard to become worthy of living in such a room. Understood?"

"Yes, Sir" The boy looked at him with fearful eyes.

"Good" He smiled. "Since we were expecting you, we've already bought you some clothes. Let's wash you up and change you into your pyjamas."

"Pyjamas?" Tom spoke the word slowly and deliberately.

"Nightclothes. You have your own wardrobe now. You already own some trousers and shirts. We will add formal wear when you have grown a bit."

"Thank you, Sir" The little boy still looked stunned but he knew his manners. Harry was simply astonished, he had not expected such behaviour. He remembered James at that age ... oh well. He set to helping the boy but Tom seemed mostly self-sufficient. Harry checked him for parasites himself and found lice. At least it was only lice. No strange boils or wounds on the kid, that was good to know. He tucked him in and went to bed, absently scratching his own head.