

HETTY FEATHER

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*For my dear friend Mary Vacher.
Thank you so much for all your brilliant
professional support –
and all your loving care and kindness.*



I

My name is Hetty Feather. Don't mock. It's not my *real* name. I'm absolutely certain my mother would have picked a beautiful romantic name for me – though sadly I have not turned out beautiful or romantic.

I shall picture her:

'My little darling,' my mother whispered, wrapping me up tightly in a shawl. She held me close close close to her chest, as if she could never bear to let me go.

'My little . . .' Rosamund? Seraphina? Christobel? My eyes are my best feature, as blue as the summer sky. Did she perhaps call me Sapphire? Azure? Bluebell?

I like to think my baby hair had not yet sprouted from my little pink head. A bald baby can still just about be beautiful. An infant with hair as scarlet as sin is an abomination, spawn of the Devil. So says Matron Bottomly, and she pulls my hair hard. Once when I cheeked her really wondrously, calling her

Matron Stinking Bottomly, she pulled so fiercely, a whole hank of my hair came away in her hand. She would have been in trouble if anyone had spotted my poor bald patch, but she crammed my cap down hard and no one saw. Well, two hundred foundling girls witnessed her assault on me, but Matron Bottomly didn't give a fig about them.

It took an entire year for my hair to grow back properly, but it was worth it because from that day onwards we *all* referred to her as Matron Stinking Bottomly – though not out loud. No other girl is as bold as me. I have a nature as fiery as my wretched hair.

I do so *hope* I was bald when I was newly born in 1876. Suppose I came into the world with little red tufts. Oh dearie, what a shock for my poor mother. Maybe she was tempted to call me Carrot or Goldfish or Marmalade.

No, I am absolutely certain my mother would not mock me. She held me close, she rubbed her cheek over my flaming head, she gently wound a little lock around her finger. She loved my red hair because it was mine. She cut off one tiny tuft to plait with pins and keep within a locket. That way she kept a small part of me for ever.

She didn't *want* to give me away. She loved me with all her heart. I know I was a poor, puny little thing, hardly weighing so much as a twist of sugar.

I'm sure my mother nursed me night and day, trying her hardest to build me up and make me strong. If I close my eyes now and hunch up small, I can almost feel her arms around me, hear her humming a lullaby, smell her sweet perfume, clasp her white hand with my tiny fingers. I cannot focus properly, but if I try really hard I can see her pale face, the tears in her own blue eyes.

Everyone says you can't remember back to babyhood. I've asked the nurses and the teachers and they all say the same. Even Jem insisted this is true, and he is the wisest boy ever. However, I'm absolutely certain they are all wrong on this point. I *can* remember.

I remember the worst day ever, when my mother bathed me and dressed me in my napkin and my petticoats and a little white gown she had stitched herself. She wrapped me up in a crocheted shawl and then carried me outside. She took me on a long, long journey. I'm sure I remember the roar and whistle of a train. Then I think we took a cab because I cried at the strange bumping and the clack of the horses' hooves. She held me tighter, rocking me in her arms, crying too.

Then the bump-clack stopped and my mother stayed crouching inside, shaking, so that I shook too. The cabman shouted at her and she gave me one last desperate kiss.

‘I will always love you,’ she whispered right into my ear.

Then she clambered out of the cab, clutching me close. She said a few words to the cabman and then walked over to a tall gateway. She murmured to the gatekeeper, so softly that she had to repeat herself. Then the gate creaked open and we stepped inside. There must have been other mothers, other infants, because I heard wailing all around us.

My mother and I stood in front of a long polished table where a line of solemn men sat and asked questions. My mother answered, while I whimpered dolefully. Then we were led to a little room with a bright gaslight overhead. I blinked and tried to burrow into my mother’s breast, but large cold hands snatched me away from her.

I was laid on my back on a hard table. My shawl was tugged away. My beautiful white dress was unbuttoned and taken from me. Both my petticoats were pulled over my head. They even removed my napkin so I was lying there stark naked. The hard hands turned my head from side to side, prodded my belly, moved my arms and legs about while I protested vigorously, screaming my head off.

Then the hands wrapped me in strange coarse clothing, not mine at all! They picked me up and carried me away. My arms and legs were too small

and weak to punch and kick. All I could do was scream. I screamed and screamed for my mother, but she wasn't there any more. I was being carried down endless corridors in this vast building, away from my mother for ever.

I was bound so tightly within the scratchy woollen shawl that I couldn't move. I was laid on my back in an iron cot, still screaming. I cried for my mother, but she didn't come to rescue me. I cried for my own soft familiar clothes, but I stayed stuck in these harsh, worn garments reeking of carbolic. I cried for the comfort of my thumb, trapped inside the shawl. I cried for gentle arms and warm sweet milk.

'Now now, what a terrible noise! You're disturbing all the other babies. What are you crying for, hm?' said one of the nurses, picking me up.

What did she *think* I was crying for? I was only a few days old and I'd lost everything I loved. No wonder I howled. But she meant it kindly enough. She held me against her flat starched chest and patted my back as if my problem was just a little trapped wind.

'There, there, nearly time for your feed,' she said.

She put me down again and I cried harder. I only quietened for a few seconds when someone plucked me once more from my cot. I desperately hoped

they were about to return me to my mother, but the hands that held me were coldly capable, not tender and stroking. A bottle was thrust into my mouth. My lips puckered and would not suck. It tasted wrong. It wasn't my mother. I choked and tried to spit it out.

'This one's a hopeless feeder – and she's tiny as it is. I don't know why they accepted her. She's not long for this world.'

'They'll have to christen her quick or she'll be off to Limbo-land,' said another. 'Let me try. I'll make her feed.'

I was passed over promptly and the bottle poked hard against my mouth. I kept my lips pressed together. She pinched my nose so I had to open my mouth to breathe. I yelled furiously at this mean trick.

'Temper, temper! Never mind Limbo-land, she's like a little imp from H-e-l-l,' she said, giving me a shake. 'Take the bottle like a good girl! You don't want to starve, do you?'

I did not care whether I lived or died if I could not be with my mother. I cried all day, until my throat was raw and I shook all over, but it was no use. She still didn't come.

There were other babies crying too, though not as loudly and insistently as me. I couldn't see them as I was stuck on my back, but I could hear them.

I heard their sucking and sighing after the hateful hands had lifted them from their cots.

‘Won’t you feed too, poor little lamb?’ This was a gentler voice, with smaller, softer hands. She wasn’t my mother but she cradled me almost as carefully. She didn’t ram the choking bottle into my mouth straight away. She shook a few drops of milk onto her finger and stroked it against my lips. I opened my mouth and sucked.

‘Ah, it’s good, isn’t it? Some more?’

She gave me more drops on her finger and I sucked it dry. She did this again and again. When I opened my mouth eagerly for more, she edged the bottle very cautiously against my lips. I could not resist sucking – and felt the sweet milk splashing down my sore throat. I still did not like the feel of the bottle, but I ached with hunger and thirst so I sucked and sucked.

‘My, look at Winnie with 25629! She’s got her sucking away a treat now.’

So the kind nurse was called Winnie. And 25629 seemed to be *my* name now. I was not old enough to understand numbers, but the long sound was harsh and I hated it. However, before long I was given yet another name. I was dressed in a gown so stiff with starch I was stretched out rigidly, scarcely able to draw breath. I was carried to a new place, vast and echoing, with strange windows that played patterns

of red and blue on the stone floor. There was solemn talk and then a voice addressed me.

‘I christen you Hetty Feather,’ he said, and sprinkled icy water on my forehead.

I cried, trying to tell him that I didn’t *wish* to be called Hetty Feather, that wasn’t my real name at all, my real name was . . .

But I couldn’t speak yet so I simply screamed, and someone tutted and scolded, whispering that I was a bad example to the other babies. I paused for breath and heard thin copycat wails. I took satisfaction in the fact that no one else could achieve anywhere near my volume, for all that I was so small.

I was carted back to the sleeping room in disgrace. Gentle Winnie was there and rocked me gently.

‘Hello, little Hetty! No need to cry so. There now. I’ll take the christening robe off and fix a bottle for you.’

I was soon soothed, though I hiccuped a little as I gulped my milk. Winnie laughed and hiccuped too, teasing me. I peered up at her, trying hard to focus. She had a round rosy face with fair hair escaping from her cap. She wasn’t special like my mother – but perhaps Winnie could be a second mother to me now? I was too small even to smile, but I fixed my blue eyes on her. She looked back, doing all the smiling for both of us.

Other babies were wailing now, demanding attention, but Winnie still held me, whispering my new name. 'Little Hetty Feather! Well, you're light as a feather and no mistake.' She whirled round and round so that I whirled too. We danced in and out of all the iron cots. It felt as if I was flying. I willed Winnie to whirl us right out of the door, away from this chill, puzzling prison, but another nurse spoke to her sharply and she put me back in my little bed, both of us breathless.

I did not cry for my mother that night. I still thought of her longingly, but I consoled myself with the thought that I'd see Winnie in the morning – and every morning after that.

I couldn't have been more wrong. The next day new hands fed me, bathed me, and then dressed me in my uncomfortable clothes. The shawl was wound extra tightly and knotted at the ends, so that I resembled a small woollen parcel – and like a parcel, I was picked up, carried along corridors, taken outside the huge door and posted into a waiting cab.

I was stuffed into a large basket padded with rags. I lay there, too stunned even to scream. What was happening to me now? I wanted Winnie. I wanted my mother. My heart started beating so fast it nearly burst through my shawl. *Were they taking me back to my mother?*

The cab door opened again. I heard an infant wail, so sad, so scared. My mouth was shut so it couldn't be me. The cries grew frantic as another child was crammed into the basket beside me. I let out a little wail myself and the other crying stopped in surprise. Then it started up again and I started too. We drew breath at the same time so we were crying in unison. Then I stopped and the other babe stopped too. It was as if we were talking to each other.

Hello! I'm here too. I'm just as anxious as you are.

Where are they taking us?

I don't know. I want them to take me back to my mother.

I want mine too!

Well, at least we have each other.

Our hands were trapped in our woollen shawls, but it was as if we were reaching out and clasping each other.

The cab jerked and the horses' hooves clacked and I remembered my own mother so painfully. Then we stopped and the door opened, and my fellow basket baby and I blinked in the sudden light. Someone took us up out of the cab, swinging us along into a vast, roaring, smoky hall. This brought back memories too. I now know that we were at a vast London station. Soon we were

stowed in our basket upon a seat and the train jerked into motion. The other baby and I cried lustily, but the steady chug and whir of the wheels beneath us grew soothing and soon we both slept.

I dreamed that I was back in my mother's arms, but when I woke I was still trussed up in the shawl and stuffed in the basket, and the baby next to me was wailing forlornly. I cried too because I was hungry and thirsty, my stomach empty and aching. The baby beside me set up a mournful descant.

When we lived in the huge bleak building we had always been fed every few hours and our napkins changed. I was now wet and sore, my shawl damp and reeking. So we cried and cried, and then slept some more out of sheer exhaustion – and then the train slowed and stopped. The door opened and we were swung out into the fresh air. Our carrier stamped his feet and marched forwards. There was a clamour of voices with a softer country burr. The basket rocked as hands reached in, lifting out my baby neighbour.

‘This here is Master Gideon Smeed, fresh from the Foundling Hospital!’

I heard laughing and cooing and clapping. I was left in the basket by myself! I screamed – and more hands came back for me.

‘No chance of forgetting this one. Miss Hetty Feather. I’m not sure you’ll want her, missus. She might be little but she’s a shocker for screaming. She’s been squealing like a pig ever since we left London.’

‘Oh well, it shows she’s got spirit,’ said a voice. ‘Let’s have a squint at her then.’

I was placed in strong arms, my face pressed against a very large soft chest. I snuffled against her. She smelled of strange new things, lard and cabbage and potatoes, but she also smelled of sweet milk. I opened my lips eagerly and I heard laughter all around.

‘There! She’s smiling at you, Mother! She’s taken to you already!’

I was stunned. This was not my real mother. Was she a *new* mother? She held me in one arm, my basket baby brother in the other. Her large hands held us safe as she walked out of the station, children clamouring about her.

‘I dare say you’ll do a good job with them, missus. You bring on the scrawny ones something wonderful,’ said the basket-carrier.

‘It’s a bit of challenge, two little ones together, but I dare say I’ll manage,’ she said. ‘Let’s take you home and get you fed, my poor little lambs,’ she murmured in our ears.

We had a home. We had a mother. We were safe.

We never had to go back to the great chill baby hospital again.

Don't mock, I say! I was only a few weeks old. I didn't know any better.