

CURTAIN UP



TROUBLE AT MILL

1882

They all knew how the fire started. It was the clogs. Just one girl. A novice, probably first day on the job, who didn't know any better or simply wasn't thinking. She was only twelve years old as it turned out, but hadn't she wondered why the other women and girls left their clogs outside the factory doors? Hadn't anyone told her? Obviously not. But then all the workers entered those hideous cotton mills mindlessly, robots resigned to the endless drudgery of the day ahead, to the deafening clash of monster metal looms, to shuttles crashing back and forth and cogs gnashing like the teeth of giants. Who would notice that one small girl wasn't barefoot like the rest of them?

The mills were ghastly places, and Comberton Cotton Mill, built on the bank of the River Croal in the centre of Bolton, Lancashire, was no better or worse than the rest of them. Employing principally women and their children, it consisted of a massive single room ninety-five yards long and forty-four yards wide with a ceiling over fifty feet high. Thirty feet from the floor was a series of gantries, metal beams stretching across the entire space, and at regular intervals along each gantry were cast-iron wheels with leather belts that led to the looms below. The looms were driven by shafting from an adjacent engine and boiler house that employed a steam turbine-driven generator, and as the workers operated their machines – all 150 of them – the relentless action turned the air into a soup-like fog, muggy and stifling. Tiny wisps of cotton, invisible to the naked eye, choked the air, threatening also to choke the women if they forgot to breathe through clenched teeth.

The heat was not the only reason the workers left their clogs outside – although it was true they preferred working barefoot – it was because of the danger the clogs might present. Those clogs that had 'calkers', anyway. Commonly referred to as 'horseshoes', the iron calkers that were nailed beneath the wooden sole of some styles of clogs could spark off a fire if struck against the metal edge of a loom. Fire, always a threat in the cotton mills, was not an uncommon occurrence at the best of times; why add to the danger by wearing horseshoe clogs?

The young girl was wearing just such clogs. She was working a loom on the eastern side of the mill.

It was astonishing how quickly that one little spark from that one little clog became a firestorm.

For the first several moments the effect was magical. The tiny wisps of cotton, previously invisible, were now fairies, dancing, prancing in mid-air, a virtual wonderland shimmering in an unreal light. Then minutes later, the eastern side of the mill was ablaze, a

tinderbox erupting, combusting, jumping from one machine to the next, destined to engulf the entire factory.

The workers had not paused to wonder at the sparkling world that had momentarily surrounded them. In a cotton mill, the merest suspicion of fire signalled the awful nightmare each of them suffered, the nightmare of becoming a human torch. They bunched up their skirts and ran between the machines screaming, all heading for the doors; those further down the line, particularly those on the eastern side, pushing, shoving, desperate to get to the front. Including the girl with the horseshoe clogs. But in the panic that ensued, some of them didn't make it in time. In fact, many of them didn't make it in time. As they spewed out into the cool afternoon air, quite a number were on fire.

Once outside, sanity prevailed – among those who had emerged unscathed anyway, particularly the older ones. They smothered the flames threatening to devour their sisters; they fetched water from the river in the many buckets that always sat beside the factory doors for that very purpose; they calmed the younger workers, some of whom were children, understandably terror-stricken and hysterical. The older factory workers were tough. These were women accustomed to hardship and the daily fight for survival.

'Mill's on fire! Mill's on fire!' Several ran down the street, yelling out the news, raising the alarm.

But it was unnecessary. Clouds of smoke billowing above the township was announcing to the whole of Bolton that Comberton Mill was in flames and already, several blocks away, firefighters were preparing the horse-drawn pump for action. They would not be able to extinguish the blaze, but hopefully they might prevent the fire spreading to adjacent buildings.

In the meantime, help came from another quarter. First on the scene were the two Worthing brothers, who worked at the nearby foundry. Twenty-four-year-old William and twenty-two-year-old Maxwell, young, strong and fit, arrived within only minutes, other foundry workers following along behind.

'Is everyone out?' Will yelled above the chaos as he and Max joined the team of women who had formed a bucket chain, which although doing little to douse the fire was proving useful for those poor souls who lay still smouldering on the ground.

'No,' the woman beside him yelled back, passing him a full bucket, 'our Gertie's still inside! She's done for, poor sod. Up on the work platform, no way she can get down.'

Forty-five-year-old Agnes Smeed turned away to accept the next full bucket in the chain. A lean woman, but as strong as a man, indeed stronger than many, she'd resigned herself to the loss of her youngest daughter. How many times had she told Gertie not to go up on the platform during her ten-minute break? 'It's dangerous, love,' she'd said, 'you could fall, or worse still, if a fire broke out you'd get stranded up there.' Those had been her very words, and now look what had happened. But Gertie was a wilful girl, just like sixteen-year-old girls were. She enjoyed sitting up there, eating her cheese and pickle sandwich, looking through the window at the outside world, or gazing down at the giddy spectacle of the mill floor thirty feet below. 'I like heights, Mam,' was all she'd say, not rude, but cheeky, the way Gertie always was. 'I like bein' up high.'

Well, she's paying for it now, isn't she, Agnes thought, heaving the next bucket to the young man who'd just arrived. *Nothing to do but keep working, she told herself, try not to think about what's going on in there, my little girl burning to death.*

'Right up among the gantries, she is, our Gertie,' Agnes said, 'not a hope.' And she turned away once again to accept the next bucket.

Max and Will exchanged looks, both aware of what the other was thinking. More foundry workers had arrived by now, eager to help with the chain and, handing over their buckets, the brothers raced to the western doors of the mill where the fire was less ferocious than it was on the eastern side.

They took off their jackets and, draping them over their heads, peered inside.

Through the fire and the smoke they could just make out the girl. She was up on the work platform that offered access to the gantries. But she was on the eastern side of the factory, which was fully ablaze, the narrow steel stairs that zig-zagged their way down beside the wall offering her no escape. Here on the western side, however, the steel stairs to the gantries, barely ten yards from where the brothers stood, were approachable despite the ever-encroaching flames.

'You can do it, can't you?' Will yelled above the noise of the fire.

'Course I can,' Max replied. Then he shouted across to the girl, 'Oi, you up there, Gertie, can you hear me?'

'I can.' The young voice came back loud and clear, although Gertie wasn't sure to whom she was yelling. Through the flames and smoke she couldn't see the men far below on the opposite side of the factory floor.

'Stay where you are! I'm coming to get you.'

'I'm not goin' anywhere.' Gertie was brave. Or rather, she was pretending to be. In truth she was terrified beyond belief, but just the sound of a human voice had lent her the strength to reply.

Will and Max ducked back outside.

'Buckets!' Will yelled to a number of the foundry workers. 'Bring buckets, we need water in here!'

As the men arrived with their buckets, Max dropped his jacket on the ground and took several deep breaths, filling his lungs, drinking in all the oxygen he could. He would need to keep his breathing shallow up there in the gantries, where the smoke would be thick.

Then he was back inside the mill, racing for the stairs, Will and the others following him, throwing buckets of water at the flames that licked his boots as he ran.

'Form a chain,' Will ordered the men, 'keep the water coming. These service stairs have to be kept clear so he can bring her down.'

One of the foundry workers, a close mate of the Worthing brothers who knew the double lives they led, was aware of what was about to happen, but the others were in a state of mystification. They could see the blurry shape of the girl over there on the other side of the mill, way up high among the flames. Bring her down? How?

Max took the narrow stairs nimbly three at a time, not touching the railings, which would be blisteringly hot, and when he got to the landing he paused, assessing the task that lay ahead, taking in through the pall the vague shapes of obstacles that lay in his path, the cast-iron wheels at regular intervals along the gantries. He slowed his breathing to a

minimum, exercising only the very upper part of his lungs, avoiding the use of his diaphragm, and even his intercostal muscles. Up here the smoke was dangerous.

Then, holding his arms out either side at shoulder height, he stepped from the platform onto one of the gantries.

The metal beam beneath his feet was barely visible, which didn't at all bother him. One never looked down anyway, one always relied upon one's sense of touch, although one's sense of touch was difficult through a pair of boots and thick socks. On the highwire he favoured barefoot, but he'd be minus several layers of skin if he tried that now, wouldn't he? The thought for some reason vaguely amused him. This solid, steel beam was a damn sight easier than highwire. Under normal circumstances he could probably have run across the thing rather than the leisurely stroll he was taking. But he went slowly, with infinite care; this was a rehearsal for the trip back with the girl, which would be far more complicated. What if she became hysterical and tried to fight him? He mustn't think about that now.

He felt for the wheels with the toe of his boot, again not looking down, but relying upon touch, counting the number of steps between each wheel, measuring its height as he stepped over it. The distance and height were uniform. *That's good*, he thought, *that's good, makes things easier*.

Beneath him, the fire raged. The heat was intense and the smoke threatened to suffocate, but Max's focus did not waver. His bare hands felt as if they were burning so he balled his fingers into fists. Step after step after step, then over a wheel, then step after step after step and another wheel. It was a slow and methodical exercise, every movement carried out with the utmost precision.

And then he was there.

'What took you so long?' she asked as he stepped onto the platform.

Her face grubby with soot and grime where she'd rubbed at her eyes, she looked at him, feisty and daring, but he could tell she was petrified. He admired her pluck. She was standing on a pad of folded material to protect her bare feet – he guessed it was her petticoat – and she'd knotted her skirt together at the front to help prevent it catching sparks. *Practical too*, he thought. *That's good*. Then she started coughing. No, that wasn't good, that wouldn't do at all.

'Here.' He took his handkerchief from his shirt pocket and, folding it in half diagonally, tied it around her face like a bandit's mask. 'Breathe through your nose,' he instructed, 'and try to keep your breathing very shallow. Right here,' he said, laying the flat of his hand on her breastbone, 'right here, up high in your lungs. Go on, try it, no deep breaths, just try and pant; you know, the way a dog pants, little short breaths.'

She obeyed. The coughing stopped and he could feel the palm of his hand gently move to the light rhythm of her breathing. *Good*, he thought, *she takes instruction well. Good that she's slender too, just a slip of a thing really*.

'Ever walked the highwire?' he asked.

She shook her head.

'Well, you're about to.' He picked her up in his arms. Light as a feather. She was no heavier than little Jamie and he'd carried Jamie standing on his shoulders in last season's tour. But it was all about weight distribution; they had to get the balance right. He'd

intended slinging her over his shoulders, but he'd have to hold her there, losing the use of his arms, and the imbalance would require quite a deal of compensation. Then another idea struck him. She seemed so bold, so brave, and yet also obedient, an excellent combination for a highwire performer. *Yes, it might work*, he thought. It was worth a try anyway.

'Stretch your arms and your legs out,' he instructed. She did so. 'Now stiffen all your muscles, tighten your body. Try and make yourself rigid, like a plank.' He felt her stiffen in his arms, but not enough. 'No, you're sagging in the middle,' he said, adjusting his grip on her, feeling the balance between the weight of her head and arms on the one side and her legs on the other. 'Point your toes as hard as you can.'

'Why?' she asked.

'Because it makes you turn your muscles on, that's why.' He gave an encouraging smile, urging her to obey, they were running out of time. 'Besides, it looks good.'

Gertie pointed her toes as hard as she could, feeling her calves and thighs harden. *He was right*, she thought. She balled her hands into fierce fists and felt the whole of her outstretched arms tighten. She hardened her stomach and her buttocks, rigid now, every muscle in her body as taut as could be.

'Good girl,' he said, 'good girl.' *Yes, she's got the message*, he thought. 'Now you stay like that, Gertie, you stay tight like that and don't you move, you hear me? You're my balancing pole and we're about to walk the highwire.'

He stepped from the platform onto the gantry.

The return trip started out easily enough. The girl was perfectly balanced in his arms and the routine was the same as it had been before. Step, step, step, then over a wheel, then step, step, step and another wheel. The familiarity was so comforting he was able to switch off from the inferno below, and the black smoke that all but engulfed them, and focus simply upon the repetition.

The major worry, Max knew, was whether the girl would be able to keep in her rigid state for the time required. She was no acrobat, her muscles were not accustomed to such tension, and if she were to cave in, as he suspected she might, they could be in trouble.

But she didn't. At least not until they were well over halfway across. Several times he felt her body quivering with the strain, but she didn't cave in at all; if anything she tightened even harder. *She's probably cramping by now*, he thought, *she might well be in quite a deal of pain. The girl's a real trouper all right.*

Down below, the men on the bucket chain continued to douse the service stairs. As they worked they kept looking up at the gantry, breathlessly following the couple's progress, expecting any moment that the two might fall into the hellhole that awaited them.

Will was at the head of the chain. He was dangerously exposed to the fire, which had intensified, but the bucket chain was proving effective, the flames around the stairs being kept sufficiently at bay.

He too looked up, but unlike the others he did not expect to see his brother fall. Not Max. Nonetheless, Will was surprised by the method his brother had chosen to employ. *He's using the girl as a balancing pole*, he thought. *How inventive, and how very like Max. Always loves a challenge, always trying out a new act. And it's working, what's more.*

Then, as they were nearing the finish, he saw his brother falter. *Something's wrong*, he thought, and for the first time he felt a jab of concern.

Up on the gantry, Max halted. The smoke had taken its effect and the girl was on the verge of coughing. Her lungs demanding air, any moment her mouth would instinctively open to suck in all her body needed. Her stomach muscles would spasm, she'd convulse and their balance would be lost.

'Don't give in, Gertie,' he urged. 'Don't breathe. Don't breathe at all. Hang on. We're nearly there.'

Without daring to breathe himself, Max continued his journey. He could see the platform now, only three iron circles ahead and only three steps between each. Could the girl hold her breath that long?

She could. And as he stepped onto the platform a great cheer went up from below.

'You can relax now, Gertie,' he said.

The girl sagged in his arms. She took a deep breath and was overcome with a bout of coughing. Then a moan, more like a growl, emanated from somewhere deep in her throat, her whole body knotted with pain.

He slung her over one shoulder, grasping her legs, feeling her bare calf muscles rock hard beneath his hand.

'I know, I know,' he said, 'we'll look after the cramp when we get outside. Just hang on for now, girl, hang on.' And he was zig-zagging his way down the steel staircase, arriving at the bottom to be doused by buckets of water as he made his way to the door.

Once outside, he carried her well away from the mill to the grassy riverbank where most of the women were gathered.

'Massage her legs,' he instructed, laying Gertie on the ground, 'and her arms and shoulders. Go deep, she's cramped up badly.'

The women did as they were bidden, strong hands digging in hard, Gertie moaning in pain.

Agnes Smeed, having left the bucket chain to arrive at her daughter's side, joined in, stretching Gertie's tightened limbs to their limit, the strongest and toughest of all the women.

'Well, that'll teach you, won't it, girl,' she said as she lent her full weight onto Gertie's outstretched leg, pushing it over the girl's torso.

'Ow, Mam,' Gertie squealed.

'You're going to cop it from your pa when he hears about this.' She pushed even harder, bony fingers digging into hardened muscles, and Gertie squealed again. 'Wouldn't be surprised if he gives you a right walloping, I can tell you that here and now.'

Agnes Smeed was distracting herself as she worked on her daughter. They said you weren't supposed to have favourites, didn't they? But of course you did. And Gertie was hers. Of the three she'd lost as little 'uns, and the three others she had, now full grown, Gertie had always been the one. The special one. As Agnes pummelled and pushed, she hoped people couldn't see the tears of sheer relief that cascaded down her cheeks. And if they did, she'd say it was just sweat, sweat from the fire and the exertion, that's all.

'Very impressive,' Will said, 'very impressive indeed.'

Will and Max were standing respectfully to one side, allowing the women space for their ministrations. The amount of bare leg on display would be considered unseemly by most and not for men's eyes. Not that they hadn't seen far more female flesh than this in the past themselves.

'An even better show than I'd expected actually,' he added. 'You were lucky with the girl, of course.'

'Yes,' Max agreed, 'very lucky with the girl, she's a natural.'

'Where is he?'

A young voice rang out loud and clear; Gertie certainly had a voice that carried. She was sitting up looking about, her skirt now demurely pulled down over her legs.

'Where is he?' she demanded. 'Where's my hero?'

'Go on,' Will nudged his brother, 'that's you.'

Max crossed to the girl and knelt beside her.

Silence reigned as they stared at each other for a moment or two, Agnes Smeed and the other women watching on.

'Thank you for saving me,' she said, 'that was real heroic, that was.'

He shrugged. 'All in a day's work.'

They shared a smile.

'You're a natural, Gertie,' he said. 'You should be in show business.'