

## INTRODUCTION

*Prudence* is the first in a series of stories about the Turnham Malpas village in the past. This one is written about a laundry maid at Turnham House at the time of the Napoleonic Wars. She is trapped, working the whole day long in the steaming conditions of the laundry, but filled with ambitions to improve her lot and longing to be somewhere else in the wide world that lies beyond her village.

Astute readers will notice that all the people in the story are ancestors of those living in the village today. Enjoy!

## LOVE AND PRUDENCE

Prudence Wright folded the last of the pillowcases and placed them on the rails above the great fireplace to air. She loved that fire, the huge flames leaping up the fireback, the smell of the seasoned wood and the hissing and bubbling of the juices coming out of the logs. It filled the whole of the back kitchen with marvellous warmth, although this wasn't such a blessing in summer and Prudence had to beg the lad not to put such huge pieces of tree-trunk on it.

The back kitchen was her favourite place. Not for her the hustle and bustle of the front kitchen with the cook ever in a rage, and the kitchen maids squabbling and shouting all the time. They worked hard, so did she for that matter, but she worked only with the help of Lily Rose Gotobed who didn't argue or question. Come to think of it she didn't say much at all, but then she was the youngest of a huge family, all of them girls and all of them named after flowers. Prudence reckoned her mother must

have run out of strength when she was carrying her, not surprising. Was it eight or nine in their cottage in Little Derehams which was no bigger than a pig pen?

Lady Templeton had taken Lily Rose to live in and that'd been a blessing for the young girl who was half the size she should have been for a twelve year old, with arms and legs like sticks. But she'd lived in for two years now and the improvement in her was amazing. When she first came she couldn't find enough strength to lift a sheet but now...well, she had muscles as big as cricket balls.

The door to the back kitchen was opened gently, so Prudence guessed it wasn't Lily Rose, and she turned around to find Lady Templeton coming in with a lacy nightgown on her arm.

'Prudence, my dear.'

Prudence curtsied.

'Prudence, my dear, this needs washing, I've brought it myself because I want to make sure it gets special treatment, it's new and very delicate and very, very expensive. Miss Clarice doesn't agree with me buying folderol like this, she thinks one should buy sensible cotton clothes, but we know better don't we?'

Lady Templeton laughed and so did Prudence; they both delighted in pretty things and there was nothing Prudence liked better than laundering delicate, expensive garments. Lily Rose came in carrying more of the sheets which had been spread outside in the sun on the hawthorn hedge that grew round the kitchen garden.

'They're nearly dry. You got the irons on?'

'Lily! Manners! Beg pardon, your ladyship. She won't have learned her manners by the time she drops dead.'

Lily laid the sheets in a huge tangled pile on the big ironing table and dropped a curtsy to Lady Templeton.

‘Sorry, m’lady, sorry.’

Lady Templeton cupped Lily’s cheek with her hand. ‘That’s all right Lily Rose, you’re always so busy, my dear. Don’t forget the nightgown, Prudence. I shall need it for the weekend. We’re going visiting, you see.’

She left the back kitchen just as quietly as she had entered it, but then that was her ladyship. Some laundry maids Prudence knew got cursed and sworn at by their mistresses but she and Lily didn’t.

Prudence banged about in her annoyance with that stuck up lady’s maid of a woman. ‘That Miss Clarice, who does she think she is?’

‘Why is she *Miss* Clarice?’ Lily asked.

‘Cos she’s a lady’s maid so they gets called Miss – to make her a bit special I expect. Right old misery she is, saying her ladyship shouldn’t have pretty clothes. I would if I had the money.’

Lily stroked the nightgown where it laid waiting for Prudence to wash it.

‘Beautiful lace in’t it. Just lovely. Maybe one day we’ll have nightgowns like this. That calico thing I wear scratches me like hell.’

‘Lily! That’s not a nice word for a girl like you to use. I’ll make you wash your mouth out with soap and water.’

Peace descended once more as Prudence wielded the irons and Lily, with a thick cloth in her hands, passed her a fresh hot iron as needed and moved the sheets off the table when Prudence declared them done.

Catching sight of Lily’s muscles as she heaved yet another iron off the fire, and spat on it to make sure it was the required heat, reminded Prudence of the cricket match on Saturday. She’d been asked to help with the cricket tea and that meant coming close, very close, to Billy Biggs. Her heart spun at the prospect. Whose heart

wouldn't when you thought about Billy? Him with the brilliant sparkling eyes, the thick blond hair, and the fine figure of a real man, and a man with plenty of dash at that. To see him going in first to bat set all the girls in a whirl. He was only eighteen, a bit too young for her but did she fancy him? Yes, she did. Prudence couldn't decide whether she liked him best when he was bowling or batting. He looked equally wonderful to her whichever he did.

Slyly Lily reminded her, 'You'll be seeing that Billy Biggs.'

'And all the others.'

'They don't count. Billy Biggs is the best.'

'There's Jimmy Glover and their Nathaniel.'

Lily scoffed at the thought. 'Them? Huh! I saw your Billy coming out of the old hay barn yesterday, Prue.'

'You didn't.'

'I did.'

Casually Prudence asked, 'Who was he with?'

'My own sister, Lavender! She had bits of hay sticking to her clothes *and* her hair.'

'You're just saying that to make me mad.'

'I'm not, its true.' She was grinning all over her face.

'He's not my Billy anyway.'

But Prudence was devastated, she and all the girls thought of Billy as hers. He felt like he was but he never said or did a thing about it. But then he was the verger's son so he had to behave, and he worked in an office in Culworth too.

She longed for him to show just one little sign that he fancied her. Just one little sign, a wink or a smile or choosing to sit next to her, or giving her a bunch of

daisies he'd picked, but he never did. And now he'd been seen with Lily's sister, Lavender Gotobed from Little Derehams. Fat she was, and spotty, and not fit to go in the hay with anyone at all and most certainly not Billy Biggs.

Saturday came round all too quickly for Prudence. If she hadn't heard about Lavender Gotobed and Billy Biggs in the old hay barn she'd have been breathless with excitement.

Prudence surveyed the cricket tea paraphernalia laid out waiting for her, every stick and stone carried out from the scullery in the Big House. Hands on hips she studied the pitch, now almost shimmering in the heat, wondering why men loved such a slow boring game as cricket. She swore they made up the rules as they chose just so their team would win.

Prudence noticed the teams were beginning to stir so she put her mind to sorting the tea things. There were pint pots for the team and cups and saucers for the spectators; along with the urn thingy which she could never understand how to work.

The footman brought them all out and had the gall to pinch her bottom as he went back to bring the baskets of food out. He was a cheeky devil that footman; broad rather than tall like Billy was tall, but vigorous with it and a roving eye. But Prudence had her sights set on a better class of target, and flicked her eyes round the field hoping to catch her first sight of Billy Biggs.

She kept glancing across to the cricket hut to see if Billy had arrived. But she'd to finish the table yet, the big teapots to line up, the sandwiches to arrive from the front kitchen and the cakes to lay out on the lace doyley's covered with the crochet cloths to keep the flies off, and didn't they have flies this summer? When you walked across the field and passed a cow-pat the blessed things rose up in clouds. The

cricket pitch was kept clear of cows with a little fence but the flies took no notice of a fence when cakes and bowls of sugar were about.

The footman, Herbert Jones, and his able assistant staggered up with the barrel of ale for the team and any men who preferred it to tea.

Herbert drew off a pot of ale for himself and stood gulping it down whilst watching Prudence checking the extra supplies that she was hiding under the tablecloth away from the flies.

‘Coming to the dance tonight?’

Prudence didn’t reply.

‘Prue, I asked if you were coming to the dance tonight. Are you? I’ll be there.’

‘Will you indeed, I’ll have better fish to fry than you tonight.’ She gave a flirty toss of her head.

Herbert liked that. ‘Save a dance for me?’

‘I’ll think about it.’

‘Two dances?’

‘Maybe.’

‘You’re the prettiest maid at the Big House, know that?’

‘Flattery will get you nowhere.’ Prudence retorted.

Secretly she *was* flattered but wouldn’t show it – not to Herbert who had a reputation for pursuing the girls.

‘But you are – they all say so.’

Prudence scoffed at him. ‘And you’re the ugliest footman around.’

Herbert straightened his back, stiffened his shoulders and taunted her with,

‘The other girls don’t think so. I’m reckoned a good catch.’

He grinned and she had to admit there was a curious flutter in her insides when she saw him smile. But Herbert Jones's family lived in that filthy cottage down Shepherds Hill. How he'd turned out smart and clean and able to come up to Sir Bernard's high standards she couldn't understand. He could read too 'cause she'd seen him when he had a spare minute, head in a book from Sir Bernard's library and with permission from Sir Bernard himself.

But Billy Biggs arrived and all thought of any meagre charms Herbert might have went clean out of her mind. Today Billy appeared to her to be surrounded with a halo of light, so full of life, so bubbling with energy and good humour. He always wanted a pot of ale before he went in to bat, or bowl for that matter, and she made sure she was close to the barrel so she could pour him one and hand it to him. Perhaps his hand would touch hers and she could treasure the feel of his hands and imagine them holding her close.

Suddenly he was coming across the pitch towards her and she was blushing right down to her boots.

'Hello, Prue, my love, my usual please.'

He drank the whole pot in one go. Prudence watched him holding his head back and saw his Adam's apple sliding up and down, up and down and admired the sun-kissed skin of his throat. When he'd emptied the glass, he put it down and grinned the same kind of grin Herbert had given her a moment before but Billy's set her insides on fire. It was a good thing someone called his name and he moved off because she felt as though her legs had all but melted away.

There was nothing for her to do while the game was being played so she lounged on the grass watching Billy score nineteen runs in his innings. After that the

match had no more interest for her until Billy's turn to bowl, so she idly watched the game and the spectators until she was needed.

While she was watching, Prudence fell into a reverie in which Billy and she were walking through Turnham Woods hand in hand. He was just about to kiss her full on the mouth and she was trembling with the excitement of it all when the tea interval was called so she had to leave that delicious moment and jerk herself back to real life. Prue served the tea in a complete dither.

Herbert had offered to serve the ale so he was constantly in her view; joking and laughing with everyone and making her realise what a popular man he was, quite different from that straight-laced footman she knew him as back at the house.

Then the Rector's daughter, Mary, appeared escorted by, would you believe it, Billy Biggs, and Prue's heart turned to stone.

Prue tried hard to sound welcoming. 'Y-yes, Miss Mary, what would you like to eat? Here we are then. Tea?'

She could have stuffed the fairy cake Mary had chosen right down her throat and not lifted a finger if she'd begun to choke. As for Billy, he sank two pots of ale and wolfed down three fairy cakes, smiling and chortling at Miss Mary as though she was the only girl in the village.

If he thought Miss Mary would melt at the touch of his hand or the sight of his smile he'd got another thing coming. Mary was prim and proper, right down to those fancy slipper things she wore. No ordinary boots for her, oh no! Ice cold and not a smile in her for us ordinary folk. Thought herself a cut above the Turnham Malpas people she did because she'd been to France. Imagine that – France, where they spoke different from Turnham Malpas people and understood each other too. He was wasting his time with her.

Billy didn't tease Prue like he would have normally, she didn't even get a second glance he was so absorbed in Mary. He never touched Mary she noticed, not like he did all the other girls, an arm round their waist or catching hold of their hands, or looking as if any minute he'd have his arms round them. . . .*kissing*. . . .

When the second half of the cricket match began, Prue looked at the clearing up she had to do. The rough and tumble piles of half empty cups, with fairy cake papers dropped in them, and the saucers all askew. What had happened to that Lily Rose? She'd promised...oh, there she was coming out of the woods with that Jimmy Glover from the cottage on the green and a more idle, lazy and useless family you couldn't hope to meet.

'Lily Rose! I've been waiting for you to help me. Where've you been?'

Jimmy said, 'No prizes for guessing where we've been.' Upon which he and Lily both sniggered in a silly fashion, and Jimmy slapped her bottom which made her laugh even more. Prue sniffed their breath and thought she could smell whisky, like in the master's decanter thingy in the dining room. She looked at Lily and saw a strange look in her eye – wild and relaxed kind of.

'Lily! You been drinking?'

She giggled and said coquettishly, 'You can ask but I shan't answer.'

'Don't you be cheeky to me.' Before she knew it she'd slapped Lily across her silly drunken face. It wasn't fair. Everyone had a boyfriend except Prudence Wright, even a stupid useless piece of rubbish like Lily Rose Senior.

Wild with temper and disappointment Prue scurried about clearing up. Dirty cups and pots in the baskets, left over cakes wrapped up for her to take to her Granny's on Sunday, milk back in the churn, sugar scooped up into the bag, cloth for her to wash on Monday and...tears welled in her eyes.

Herbert noticed Prue's tears and took hold of her elbow and led her to the back of the big wild rose bush behind the tea table and put his arms round her. He'd long wanted to stroke her blonde hair and put his arm around her slim waist and give her a squeeze, and now he could. She was quite pliant in his arms and he hadn't expected that, not after he'd seen how hard she'd slapped Lily. Not like Prue that wasn't, she must be very upset.

The tears tipped down her cheeks, and he used the only handkerchief he possessed to dry her eyes. 'Come on, Prue. Cheer up, love.'

Herbert got carried away and kissed her forehead right where her blonde fringe stopped.

'Oh! Herbert!' Prue nestled into his arms and took comfort from his sympathy, till she remembered their filthy cottage and the abject poverty of his mother. Still, Herbert himself smelt clean and nice and she set great store by that. But the table had to be cleared and she'd the pots and things to wash in the scullery back at the house, so she'd better get on.

'I'll carry everything back Prue. You get started on the washing-up, the lad'll see to the table.' Herbert kindly more than halved her work and she was washing-up in the scullery before she knew it.

She heard the clapping from the cricket field and knew the match was finished. Good, she thought, ten minutes and I'll have done and I'll have a lie on the bed for half an hour. Just as she had put all the pots away and was wringing out the dishcloth, the sunlight coming through the outside door was cut off and Prudence turned to see who'd come in.

It was Billy. Her face went a fiery red, she felt such a fool, him seeing her hot and tired, wringing out the dishcloth of all things. Why couldn't she have been

looking pretty sitting on a seat in the sun being...well...elegant? But no, old workaday Prue was at her worst.

In a hoarse whispery voice she asked, 'Can I do anything for you?'

'All depends.' There was something cheeky and bold about his face and Prue felt confused. She liked Billy no end, but she distrusted that look.

She put on a brave front. 'Quite right, it all depends.' She stood with her hands on her hips presenting herself as well able to cope with anything he might have in mind but feeling wobbly inside.

Billy bent his head and stepped into the scullery. He wasn't employed by the House and she knew he shouldn't come in but yet he had without so much as a 'by-your-leave'.

'You've no business...' Prue exclaimed.

'I have.' It took him three steps to reach her, grinning and smelling of drink.

'Kiss me. Give me a kiss, Prue, my love.'

She remembered Herbert's gentle kiss on her forehead and she knew instinctively that Billy's wouldn't be like that.

'No. No kisses for you. Go away.' Prue had surprised herself. What was she saying when his kiss was what she had always wanted?

One of Billy's big hands reached round her waist, his other hand cupped her chin and she was pulled towards him despite her resistance and his lips were kissing her with an urgency she'd never expected.

There was no escape, she kicked his shins, struggled to push at his chest to force him away but it was no good, he was just too strong for her. When he began caressing her throat and neck with his lips she began to scream and when his hands began roving all over her body and she found that struggling to stop him was useless,

she screamed louder still. This wasn't what she wanted, not at all. She became so frightened she couldn't scream anymore.

He'd slammed the outside door shut when he came in, but she heard it crash back on its hinges and a voice shout, 'Stop that!'

Billy released her and swung round to see who was there.

It was Herbert.

Billy sneered.

Herbert catapulted himself across the scullery floor and lifting his arm back socked Billy hard on the jaw. For a moment Billy hesitated with a dazed and puzzled look on his face and then crumpled to the floor. Herbert began to kick Billy as he lay there semiconscious.

Prudence pleaded with him to stop but he wouldn't. Herbert shouted, 'He deserves it. And another! And another!'

'Stop it, Herbert, please. He didn't mean anything. Stop it!'

'Didn't mean anything? Of course he did. I know exactly what he was after. Come on, get up. Come on.'

Herbert gave him another sharp kick in his ribs and Billy came to with a roar.

Quicker than it takes to tell, he was up on his feet and chasing Herbert round the scullery. Twice he caught up and punched him, but Herbert was resilient and prised him away and then, trapped in the corner by the stone sink, Herbert turned to fight and grabbing the iron ladle left in the sink by Prue, hit Billy hard over the head.

This time Billy really was unconscious. They both stood silently waiting for Billy to surface but he didn't, so Herbert grabbed his feet and hauled him, with Prue's help, through the door onto the path outside. Then, taking the ladle, he scooped some cold water out of Prue's laundry bucket and poured it over Billy.

Prue, thoroughly flattered at the idea of two men fighting over her, was also horrified at what had happened and she muttered, 'We haven't killed him have we?'

'Course not. He'll have a bit of a headache tomorrow but he'll come to no harm. Come inside, you're as white as a sheet. He'll think twice before he comes after you again.'

Herbert put a warm comforting arm around her waist, sat her on a bench inside the scullery and gave her a cup of water.

'There, you sit down till you feel better.'

Prue thought that if that was loving Billy then she didn't think she wanted him any more. The way he'd forced himself on her wasn't right. He was good to look at and very pleasant to admire from a distance but...

Her disappointment at Billy's behaviour made her contemplate Herbert.

'Herbert, how old are you?'

'I'm twenty-two and only on the first rung of the ladder.'

Twenty-two, that was just right.

'What ladder are you talking about?'

'The ladder of life. Don't think I'm stuck here as a footman all the rest of my days. I'm heading for butler and then, well, the sky's the limit.'

Herbert pointed to the sky through the scullery window and turned to laugh at her. 'See, some titled family 'cept not a sir and a lady like here, maybe an earl or a duke you never know. But that's where I'm heading, to work in a really posh household.'

'Oh! Herbert. You are exciting thinking like that. Won't your mum be proud?'

'Would you be proud? Of me?'

'Oh! Yes, I would.'

‘London’s the place for progress. Would you come?’

Herbert took her hands in his and examined them. ‘We’d move and you’d turn into a lady’s maid so your hands would be smooth and beautiful. No more slaving over steaming tubs of water, heaving hot kettles about, and pegging out the clothes, so there’d be an end to wrinkled hands and broken nails. You’d be with me, the two of us. Mr and Mrs Herbert Jones, eh? Nothing to stop us, is there now?’

He gently kissed her cheek and looked down at her with loving, admiring eyes.

Prue was dazzled with excitement about Herbert’s vision of the future. She could see everything he talked about in shining heavenly colours, to be a lady’s maid! In London! Where *everything* happened. Where there was *life*! How incredible he was to have ambition to fancy working in a stately household, and in London of all places. That was more like it, a man with ideas! She loved the thrill of it all and could feel it racing through her veins. A whole dazzling new world opened up for Prue. She looked him up and down as he stood in front of her holding her cup of water. He wasn’t all that bad wasn’t Herbert; in his own way he was quite dashing.

Still feeling shaky after her experience with Billy, she managed to take a deep breath and whisper softly, ‘Oh! Herbert, that sounds wonderful.’

