

NANCY LIVINGSTON



THE FAR SIDE OF THE HILL

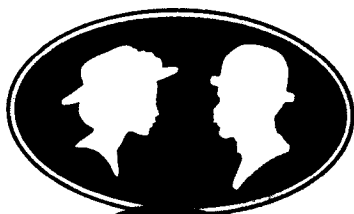
A richly nostalgic saga of the golden age
of Victorian prosperity

Nancy Livingston was born in Stockton-on-Tees. She worked as an actress, a cook, a musician, an air stewardess, and a production assistant in television before becoming a full-time writer. Her radio plays have enjoyed popular success both at home and abroad.

Also by Nancy Livingston

**THE LAND OF OUR DREAMS
NEVER WERE SUCH TIMES
TWO SISTERS**

NANCY LIVINGSTON



THE FAR SIDE OF THE HILL



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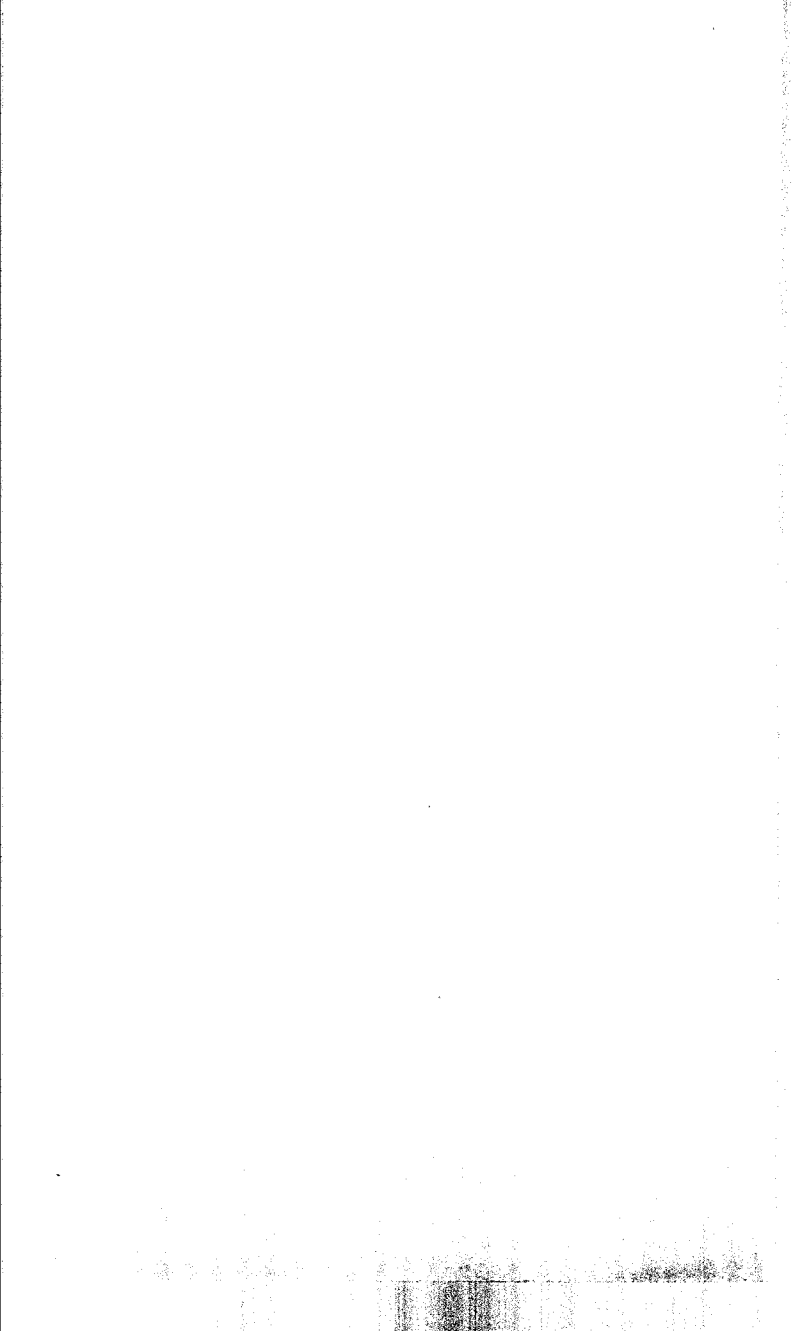
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DEDICATION

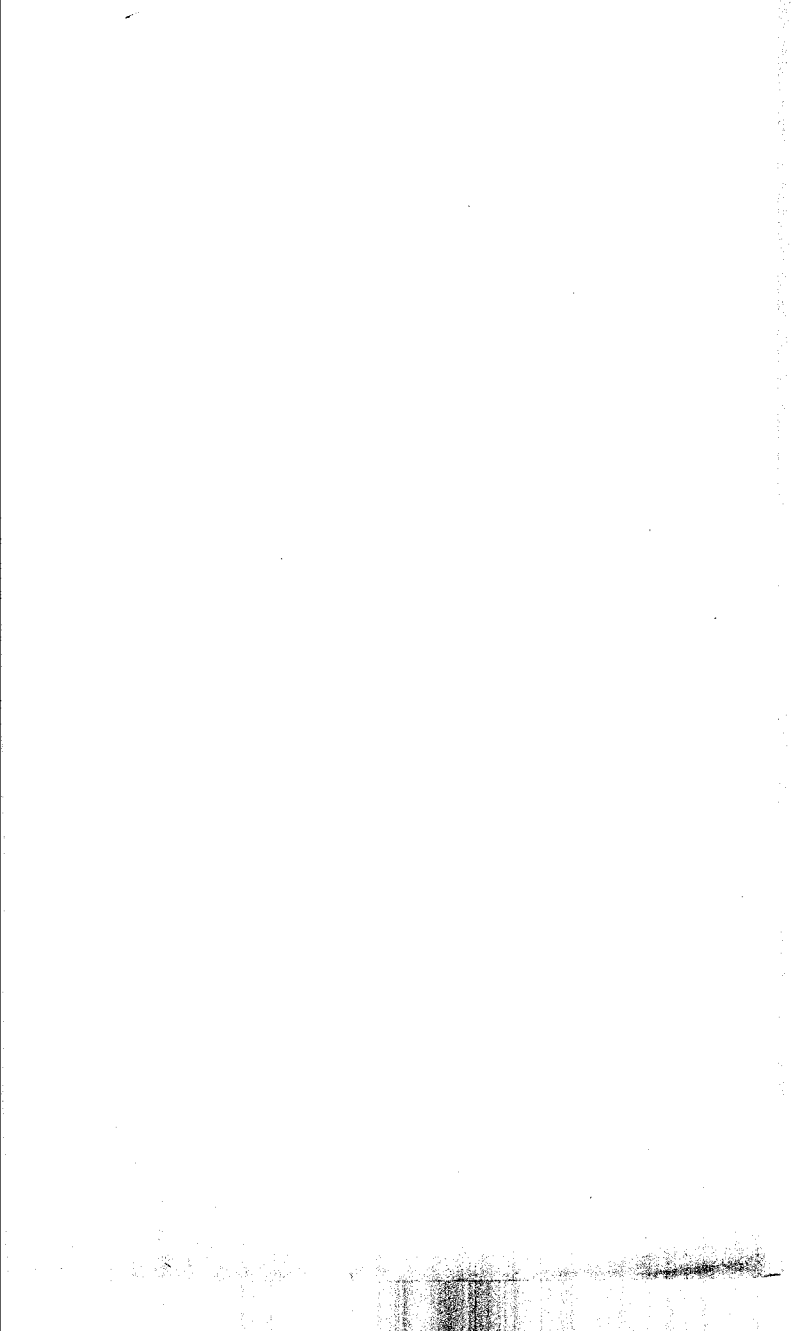
This book is dedicated to the memory of
Alexander Livingston and Jenny Woods.

Lines from a poem on page 90 are by
A Livingston of Camus-storsa by Salen.



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CHAPTER ONE

Beginnings

The peninsula was remote and very beautiful. Men had lived there for centuries. They'd fought to possess it and their successors often found souvenirs of battles washed up on the sands after winter storms. There were never any reminders of the women who'd loved them, no broken pieces from children's toys; only tokens of war.

This was strange for the land was gentle, full of legends about the strange Megalithic cairns, about the standing stones; but in the midst of gentleness were sharp reminders: the Viking hill forts and Stone Age remains of Celtic Chieftans.

After bloodshed between the clans, the English came and took away minerals from beneath the soil. Then they emptied the land of people, dragging Highlanders from their homes, setting the thatch alight, pulling apart stone and turf walls until there was nothing but charred circles left to show where an entire community once lived.

A few remained, clinging tenaciously, refusing to accept that this was God's will (for Ministers were in the habit of equating

Him with the ruling classes). They re-established their right to the crofts while at the Big Houses, built with all the certainty of Victorian self-righteousness, the English returned to enjoy what could never be destroyed, a magical landscape of sea and sky surrounded by distant hills.

(i)

In one settlement on the eastern tip of Kentra Bay, a small boy lugged an empty bucket up the slope to the spring. He moved quickly to keep warm. He'd been asleep five minutes earlier when his mother roused him but there wasn't a moment to lose. So many things had to be done before he set off on the greatest adventure of his life. His brother John was already up, helping Father bring in peats for the fire, feeding the hens, taking the beasts to the grazing, but then John was ten, a responsible age: Davie McKie was only eight.

As he unlatched the door, cold air made Davie blink. Outside, the mud was firm under his bare feet. It was early September but already there were ground frosts most mornings. Not hard, like those in the mountains, but sharp enough to kick the sleep out of a boy.

Davie pounded up the track. Five hundred yards to the spring, downhill all the way back. Sweet water that had never run dry, the source of life here since time began.

He could see others moving now. Alla's married daughter, making her way along the track to see to her father's breakfast. Alla still grieved for his son, killed with the rest of the gang building the new railway line. It was a tragedy right enough, Davie had heard the men discussing it, but this was the age of progress, of steam. Dynamiting was dangerous but when the line was finished, a man could travel from Fort William to Glasgow and from there, all the way to London! It was an incredible thought for a boy who'd yet to see a train.

When the bucket was full he made his way back slowly. Overhead in a clear sky he could see the golden rim of the sun rising above the hills: it would be a grand day!

Inside the croft the dog sensed the excitement and hid, not

wanting to be outside where he belonged. There weren't many places of concealment, even for a dog; the one room was full to overflowing. Davie and John slept in the cupboard beds, built into the walls on either side of the fire. On the hearth was the hob where Jeannie, their mother, did the cooking and heated the water. Above, on a narrow shelf that stretched the width of the croft, all their most precious possessions were stored. It was dark, apart from the firelight, but the family could find what they wanted on that shelf, by reaching out a hand. In pride of place was the oil lamp, never used if a rushlight would suffice.

For furniture, there was a bench along one wall. In front of it was a table with stools for Jeannie and Davie. Beside the fire were the only chairs. Beyond the door, beneath the one small window, was a rickety box covered in oil-cloth on which Jeannie prepared their food. All the way round the walls, in any remaining space, their belongings were stored: pans waiting for the tinkers to come and mend them; bits of sacking which everyone used to protect themselves from the weather; spare tackle and tools; all the detritus accumulated by a family sharing a room for years. Above, from the beams, anything that could not be stowed hung on nails.

Built onto the end wall of the croft was a lean-to where Alex and Jeannie slept, surrounded by wooden tubs that contained flour, oats, salt and sugar. These were replenished twice a year when the supply boat called from Fort William.

Nothing was new when Alex brought his bride home nearly eleven years ago. How could it be on a labourer's wage of nine shillings a week and that uncertain during the winter? Jeannie hadn't known much about her bridegroom either. At the Big House where she was third housemaid, 'followers' were strictly forbidden. She would have risked losing her place if it had become known she had one, and her 'character' - which would have been disastrous. Her mother warned her about that when, at fourteen, Jeannie was turned out to go and earn her living.

With seven brothers and sisters at home, she never expected to return. Unable to read or write, speaking only Gaelic, she had no other prospect than service at the Big House. The Minister provided her with a piece of paper on which he'd written her name and date of birth. This Jeannie handed to the

housekeeper, from Glasgow, who didn't understand the Gaelic.

If Jeannie wept at her fate, she wasn't alone. Four other girls from the crofts shared the same attic bedroom. It smelt of urine because Jeannie's predecessor had been so homesick she'd wet the bed, but no one suggested replacing the mattress.

For the next two years she rose at six and began cleaning, dusting and polishing the first of five large rooms. When these were done, she scrubbed first the front steps of the house, then kitchens, sculleries and pantries. She had no identity as far as the owners of the house were concerned. If one of that family appeared, Jeannie was expected to flatten herself against a wall until they'd passed. After a turbulent, noisy but loving home, she lived and worked in limbo. Her presence was never acknowledged unless she failed to curtsy deeply enough.

Out of a wage of seven pounds nine shillings a year, Jeannie was expected to clothe herself, provide for her old age, and send money home to help her parents. By sixteen, she no longer wondered why some women ended up penniless and on the parish; she knew. They weren't any different: they were old or sick, no longer capable of work. This thought haunted the dreams of these girls in the attic. There was only one escape.

Jeannie first saw Alex among a group of beaters waiting patiently in the rain for the gentry to come out with their guns. She recognized him as one of the many workers on the estate, hired during the summer and laid off in winter. He was several years older than herself. She'd heard of the McKies. She knew that Alex's father had died as a rebel years ago but that was all.

Jeannie herself had learned what it was to feel rebellious. Two years in service had hardened her. That, and the mistress's trick of leaving coins under the carpets, to ensure Jeannie cleaned beneath and to test her honesty. They were usually half-crown coins, silver representing nearly a week's wage. It was cruel temptation but each time she found one, she handed it to the housekeeper, burning with indignation.

Outside in the rain, the fair-haired Alex saw the girl stare. She was thin, dark hair tucked under her cap, with an anxious look about her. She'd been on her way across the yard when she'd paused. They were only feet apart but to move and converse would've been against the rules. Jeannie hesitated a fraction longer before continuing on her way to the pump. On an

impulse, Alex McKie followed and began working the handle. She looked up from her pail, and blushed.

During the next three years, they seldom met for longer than a few minutes at a time. As Jeannie couldn't read, Alex took to leaving flowers for her at their special trysting place. It was enough. They had an 'understanding'. When, after morning service one Sunday, he murmured, 'Will I speak to the Minister?' she had only a few seconds to decide her future. Even as she loitered, the head housemaid called out sharply.

It meant losing the security of employment. As the wife of a labouring man, her future would be bleak. But she would be free! Alex had a croft, surely they could survive? Jeannie didn't hesitate. She squeezed his hand then hurried to take her place in the crocodile of servants.

On the morning of her wedding, after she'd scoured the front steps for the last time, Jeannie put on her hat and listened submissively but without understanding, to the housekeeper telling her how stupid she was. One of the other girls who had sufficient English, stood at her side to ask for the precious 'character'. It was an insurance, should Alex fall sick and Jeannie need to earn for both of them.

During the lonely walk to church she had plenty of time to consider her folly but when she saw Alex, his hands full of flowers gathered from the hedgerows, she set down her bundle in the porch and walked proudly into church beside him.

(ii)

A year later, although childbirth was as bad as she'd feared, Jeannie was even more convinced she'd made the right choice. It didn't matter that she'd married a stubborn man – in the Highlands to be stubborn was to survive – she'd also married a man with enough sense of poetry, he could reach out and touch the moon! And what ambition! Not for themselves, it was too late for that, but for their children.

Alex had been away when Jeannie's pains began. Her neighbour heard the cries, helped her back into the croft and made her comfortable. There was nothing more she could do. No

doctor or midwife lived anywhere near, nor could the crofters afford them. Each woman did her best for her friends knowing her own turn would come. Some survived, some did not. The most the women could hope for was a spring baby. Like the lambs, they stood a better chance of growing strong before the next winter.

When Alex returned that evening, Jeannie had been in labour eleven hours. He sat beside her, wiping away the sweat, trying to distract her. 'They were saying in Salen there is a new law passed by Parliament. All children are to be educated now. Our son will not be allowed to work in the fields until he is ten years of age because of the education.'

'Oh, it's to be a son, is it? And were they telling you that in Salen?' She tried to smile but a wave of agony swept through her. The pain of her grip frightened him.

'Of course it's a son, Jeannie my love.' Oh God, let it be over soon!

The next time she shrieked, the neighbour told him he must leave. Outside the night was very dark. Alex waited in the warm steamy byre. 'Dear God, don't let her suffer so!'

The neighbour prayed too, silently. She was frightened Jeannie might die. She'd helped at other birthings that had been straightforward. This time was far more difficult. She felt clumsily, to see if the cord was round the baby's neck. Her man would be home by now, wanting his dinner. 'Come on now Jeannie McKie, push harder!'

Out in the byre, Alex whispered to Jupiter, low in the sky, 'Boy or girl, our child will have the education. He will be the equal of any man's son,' and began to calculate the cost. For naturally, although it was now the law, one had to pay for the privilege.

(iii)

It wasn't easy. From 1875 to the end of the decade, farm prices fell every year. Alex's wage fluctuated alarmingly. There were four disastrously wet summers too, one after another until Jeannie began to fear for their survival, never mind an

education. But Alex was stubborn as usual and continued to save. She proved she could match such tenacity with her own remarkable thrift.

After so many lean years, if she didn't bother to thank her Maker for his most bounteous gifts, at least he'd answered her most urgent prayer. There were only two children. She and Alex were spared the nightmare of her mother's existence.

Both boys were healthy too, Davie gloriously so. But when the neighbour put that baby in her arms, two years after John's birth, Jeannie was startled. 'Where on earth does he get that red hair?' she asked. The neighbour sniffed.

'Well, Jeannie McKie, only you can tell us the answer. And will you listen to that noise! You'll not need bellows any more if he keeps that up.' Jeannie hugged her second son tenderly. Let him yell. There had been too much meekness in the Highlands.

(iv)

John knelt in front of the fire and spooned porridge onto two plates. He'd inherited his mother's thin build but his father's strength of purpose. Life for John McKie would always be a serious matter. And he understood enough of poverty now to ensure nothing was wasted. This morning not a drop of porridge was spilt. Apart from her thinness, John had Jeannie's anxious eyes. They were a lighter grey and slightly myopic. Nor was his hair as dark or his cheeks as bright. Altogether he was a much paler boy.

At the other end of the room, the door burst open and Davie stood there, glowing. 'It's going to be fine, John. Will you take a look? A really grand day!'

'There will be time enough to see it. Come and get your breakfast. We do not want to be late.'

Alex waited until the last bit of bread had wiped the plates clean. Neither boy spoke. They daren't look at one another, they were afraid. Had father forgotten? Or, much more likely, had there not been enough money?

Then Alex rose, opened a cupboard and reached to the top

shelf. 'You are to look after these, Davie. They cost me three-pence ha'penny and are to last you, mind.'

'Aye, father.' Davie was so brimful he nearly choked.

'John's only cost me threepence,' Alex grumbled.

'That was because they didn't have the laces, Alex,' Jeannie said quickly. 'You could not expect to pay the same with the laces.' She could see Davie was near to tears. She couldn't bear for him to break down, not today. Alex put the boots in front of Davie and the family gazed contentedly at the utter perfection: secondhand boots, well patched and studded with nails, the laces neatly threaded, the leather polished by Jeannie to a chestnut sheen. Holding his breath, Davie put out a finger to stroke an immaculate toe. His very own boots!

Jeannie busied herself, wrapping oatcakes in two pieces of cloth. 'You are old enough to see to your own food, Davie. Don't lose it on the way.' There was one final ceremony. Alex took down from the shelf a cracked tobacco jar and counted out twopence to each of his sons.

'Education is a privilege, Davie, never forget that.'

'No, Father.'

'Stick at your lessons like John and I shall be content. Now be off with you.'

Outside, high above, a kestrel hovered. Beneath the two dots that were John and Davie moved forward but the bird wasn't interested. Columns of smoke rose from the crofts and evaporated in the sunlight. The bird spiralled lazily in the air currents. Suddenly there was a slight twitch in the bracken and he spotted it. His wings trembled as he manoeuvred into position then snapped shut as he dived. They heard the scream. Davie stopped. 'Did you see? He got a rabbit, I think.'

'Come on. It's a fair way yet.'

Davie obeyed, reaching every so often to finger his talisman, the boots, swinging by their laces round his neck.

'You must try and remember everything I've told you.' John had more of Jeannie's air of anxiety about him this morning. He peered at Davie from beneath the brim of his cap and frowned.

Immediately Davie felt guilty. When John looked at him like that he knew he hadn't been concentrating hard enough. 'Suppose you go through it again, John,' he said, placating