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AUTHOR OF *THE SHAWLMAKERS*

SWEET WILL BE
THE FLOWER



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the Flower*

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VIL

grew up in Paisley. She has made an intensive study of the history of the town and its surroundings, and has set many of her stories there. She studied at Paisley School of Music before teaching music, and she has acted on radio and television. Now a widow, she lives in Edinburgh.

By the same author

**THE SHAWLMAKERS
AFTER MANY DAYS**

The bud may have a bitter taste,
But sweet will be the flower

WILLIAM COWPER

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Chapter 1

If she stamped a little bit harder as she passed each entry, her boots made a reassuring din in the dark. Just a few yards further and she would be round the corner, then a short run along and she would be into Canal Street. Grannie's house wasn't far then. 'Ten steps to the corner, Dandy Baxter,' she told herself. Of course she had been to Grannie's hundreds of times on her own . . . well, maybe not hundreds . . . but never in the middle of a cold, dark night. It helped keep the terror at bay if you counted. It didn't pay to think about all the hidden things and wonder what those strange bumps were when Mammie needed you to fetch Grannie. She knew what Grannie would say: 'It's your drunken faither that should be out in the dark, no' a wee lassie like you.'

She turned the corner and gasped. The strange bumps were louder and flaming torches moved in the foggy dark. Two Clydesdales snorted and stamped, seeming enormous and threatening in the shifting light. Then she was lit up and a raucous voice accosted her, 'Here, wee lassie, whit are you daein' oot at this time?'

'I'm . . . I'm . . . to fetch my grannie. Mammie's not feelin' well.'

'Whit age are you?'

'I'm ten.'

'Could your faither no' . . . ?'

'He's got his work to go to in the morning, Mammie says, and I'm the biggest. I've got six wee brothers and sisters.'

'My Goad! So that's the way o' it. Here! Johnnie! You light this wee lass along Canal Street. She's in a hurry. I'll tak' your turn at the heaving. There you are, lass. There'll be lights on the main road.'

The face under the torch was a younger one and Johnnie certainly knew how to run. 'It's awfully kind of you,' she gasped.

'Don't mention it,' he said. 'It's a treat to get away from the bloody stink.'

'Aah . . . I didn't know . . . you're the cludgie men.'

'Aye.' There was bitterness in the clipped syllable.

'It canna be nice . . .'

'Naw. It's hell. I don't know how these auld yins can stick it. I'll be out o' it as soon as I can get something better.'

'Could you not get something better before?'

'I had a fight with my boss. He was drunk, you see.'

'It's a terrible thing the drink, my grannie says.'

'Aye. You listen to your grannie and steer clear. There you are, hen. There's lights on Neilston Road. I'd better get back. You'll be all right with your grannie.'

'Aye. There's not a soul in Paisley can frighten my grannie. Thanks, mister.'

It was true, Dandy reflected, as she slowed a little to get her breath back. Grannie was scared of nobody. She didn't have to shout or anything, but she said things in such a cutting way that even Faither was forced to shut his face at times. She grinned with satisfaction at the thought. 'When I'm big . . . even before I'm very big . . . maybe when I'm fourteen, in 1908 . . . or 1909, I'll be like Grannie and nobody will dare take advantage of me. Just wait. Faither will never dare slap me again.' Her hand came up to caress her cheek which had burned for a long time after . . .

* * *

Last night. It had all happened so simply. There they were, crammed round the kitchen table as usual - Faither getting one end all to himself; Mammie at the other with wee Jack on her knee and May stuck in beside her; the big boys, George and Billy on one side; and herself with the twins, Jinty and Peggy, on the other. It had been the usual muddle with Faither glaring at the boys, who never behaved themselves, Mammie expostulating gently as she spooned food into the toddler on her knee; Dandy herself getting little peace to eat for the demands of the twins to have bread buttered, jammed and cut up, and in the middle of it all she had to remember gentle little May, who made few demands.

It was when Faither asked Mammie for another cup of tea. 'You've *had* a cup of tea, Faither,' Billy had said.

'Aye, and I'm having another, my lad. What's it got to do with you?'

'Dan Stewart in my class at school said that his mother said that if you didna drink so much, Mammie wouldna have so many bairns.' George's foot had met Dandy's under the table then, forcing her to lose control. It was her stifled snort that had sent Faither into a blazing temper. His chair bounced on the linoleum as he jumped up with a roar. 'You can tell your Mrs Bloody Stewart to mind her ain bloody business,' he said to the astonished Billy, 'and I'll make you laugh on the other side of your face, Dandy Baxter.' The vicious slap had knocked her sideways. May started to cry then and the twins joined her in fright. Tears were running down her mother's face, but she didn't dare say anything. They all jumped as the door slammed.

'That's him off to the pub,' muttered George. He punched Billy. 'You are stupid.'

Then Billy was crying. 'I just said . . .'

'Aye, you just said. That was enough for that . . .' He broke off then. Dandy knew why. If he said what he

really thought and one of the younger ones repeated it - well! It didn't bear thinking about. As she went on hugging her aching jaw she reflected that George, newly nine, must have learned the same thing that she had heard from that big girl in the playground. At the time she had found it all so difficult to believe, but Faither's reaction and that sly kick from George forced her to think the big girl had not been taking a rise out of her after all. Fancy her wee brother George knowing! It wasn't nice. Her grannie certainly wouldn't approve. She liked everything in order. There was never any mess in Grannie's house. Her three daughters had learned to put their things away tidily. But there! She was at Grannie's close now. It would be easy to wake Grannie up. Faither said once that she slept with one eye open, but Dandy wasn't sure if that was true and didn't like to ask.

After the first knock she heard a distant bump. She opened the letter box and called, 'It's me, Grannie.' A candle flickered at the end of the hall and then the gas mantle flared. Grannie looked a wee bit funny in her big hairy dressing gown and floppy slippers, but her crisp questions helped to restore Dandy's confidence. 'Go into the kitchen, lass, while I get dressed. Take a biscuit from the barrel on the dresser. I'll not be long.'

Grannie Jordan's biscuit barrel was a thing of beauty. The silver bands which girdled it shone with constant polishing. Grannie took care that none of the polish ever got on to the shining oak of the rest of the barrel. The biscuits inside were of a different quality from any that ever appeared in the Baxter household. George and Billy would make short work of any biscuits and her mother never had a penny to spare, Dandy knew. Grannie had said, 'Take a biscuit.' That was a pity because the ones she liked best happened to be the smallest ones. If only she had said, 'Help yourself to the biscuits.'

But Grannie wasn't given to saying things like that. Dandy settled for her second choice. If she swithered much longer, Grannie could well be dressed and ready to leave and her chance would be gone.

The door had been closed quietly and locked behind them, but still Grannie held a finger to her lips. 'We'll talk when we're out in the street,' she whispered. Even in the street it was some time before Grannie said, 'Right! Tell me again . . . your mother fell off the table, that was in the afternoon, you say.'

'Aye - I mean, yes. I heard a bang and when I ran through to the kitchen, Mammie was lying on the floor and the table had capsized on top of her. I asked her what she was doing on the table and she said she was trying to knock down a cobweb. I asked her what she had been trying to knock it down with and she said a feather duster. I said where was it and I would knock it down for her and she said she had forgotten it and was going back for it and that was when the table had capsized and would I help her up and straighten the kitchen and I wasn't to tell anyone. I can't see any cobweb anyway. She was being far too fussy.'

'Aye,' Grannie sighed loudly. 'Poor Nettie. It's a pity she hadn't been more fussy years ago. When I think what a good-looking lass she was, so superior . . . and she had to take a drunken dyer who'll never be anything in this life. And what was she doing when you left to come for me?'

'She was sitting on the parlour floor with her skirts kind of spread round her. Our May and the twins were fast asleep there and she said she would get a wee bit of peace. She didn't want to disturb the boys in the kitchen bed.'

Mrs Jordan's step quickened. 'It's like a model lodging house - seven bairns already . . . sleeping in two rooms. She'll never get a chance with that drunken

devil. It's a good thing her father's not here. It would have broken his heart to see what she's come to. If she has any more . . . Oh, God, I hope not. We'd better hurry. I canna speak . . . I need my breath.'

There was nothing but the sound of their hurrying feet till they neared the closemouth. 'Would any of the neighbours hear you, pet?'

'Maybe Aunt Violet, downstairs. She doesn't sleep very well.'

'Aye, and I expect they get plenty to keep them awake,' said Lily Jordan ominously.

Though they tiptoed carefully up the stairs, the door on the landing beneath the Baxter house opened gently as they passed. Miss Violet McLaren looked funny too, thought Dandy, with her fine greying hair screwed up in paper twists. But Miss Violet was properly dressed and was opening the door wider. 'If we could be of any help . . . take the children in here . . . or give Dandy a rest?' The look she was giving Mrs Jordan puzzled Dandy. There was something in it she did not understand. 'They get plenty there to keep them awake,' Grannie had said. It couldn't be the children; they usually fell asleep quite early. The boys' wild games had them exhausted by bedtime and though they always made a token resistance when Mammie urged them towards bed, once there they were soon sprawled out, dead to the world.

Grannie took her time in replying, even though she had been in such a hurry to get to Mammie. 'Perhaps if you could have Dandy for a little while,' she said. 'She needs her sleep if she's to go to school in the morning. Yes, I'd be grateful.'

Dandy experienced her usual feeling of relief when she stepped into the haven of the flat which was home to the Misses McLaren. The sense of peace and order always struck her so forcibly. And yet people said that

Miss Alice and Miss Violet had come down in the world. They had been brought up in a house with servants, but something had happened to their father's business – nobody knew quite what, so the stories were varied – and soon after, both parents had died; their brother, newly married, had moved with his bride to a small cottage in Espedair Street while his sisters had been forced to move to a small flat with a shared WC on the landing. The general opinion was that they were ladies all right, but they weren't stuck-up.

Dandy, unaware of the niceties of the situation, only knew that Aunt Alice and Aunt Violet seemed to be able to give her life a different colour. Their voices were gentle and not tired like Mammie's. Meals were simple but always nicely served and in an atmosphere of peace. Whenever her mother could spare her, Dandy found her way to the spinsters' house, knowing that she would always be sure of a welcome.

The kitchen fire was blazing cheerily and Aunt Alice was lifting the singing kettle to fill the teapot. 'Maybe you'd like to make yourself a bit of toast, Dandy,' she was suggesting. The McLarens' toasting fork had always intrigued her. It was quite heavy and had a little brass handle ornamented with the figure of a monkey. With no struggling weans to knock the thing out of her hand, Dandy could give herself up to guiding the fork to the hottest area of the fire then watch the golden glow deepen on the surface of the bread till a tempting smell confirmed that it was ready. Sometimes she had been so mesmerized by the dancing flames that the fork had had to be rescued by Aunt Alice and the burnt surface of the bread scraped into the fire. But that was when she was younger. It was a matter of pride now to produce a perfect golden slice, ready to melt the generous pat of butter that Aunt Alice would plop on to it. A dainty tray was set down on the tall stool beside

her; steam drifted from the cup of sweet tea; nobody would jog her elbow when she drank it. Dandy spoke her gratitude. 'When I'm big, I'm going to have a house like this with no weans, just nice things and quietness and flowers in a dish and books and things . . .'

'But children are lovely,' said Aunt Violet. 'Surely you love your little brothers and sisters?'

'Not much,' said Dandy truthfully. Violet McLaren looked vexed.

'You can get an overdose of the nicest things, isn't that right?' asked Alice.

'Aye,' said Dandy, 'and they're not always that nice anyway. If George hadna kicked me last night -' She stopped suddenly, remembering what had sparked off that little fracas.

'Your brother kicked you?' The sisters spoke almost in unison.

Dandy paused to consider. These aunties were 'ladies'. Would 'ladies' know about the thing that big girl in the playground had said? But if it was true, all the grown-ups would know about it, surely. She could test if it was true now. These two would show by their faces. She would watch them. And if it *was* true. Then . . . they would know what that creaking was that she could hear through the wall from Mammie's bed . . . that is, if it *was* true what the girl said. And she was pretty sure now that it was. George's kick had helped confirm it. Could that be what Grannie was thinking of when she said that the McLarens would get plenty to keep them awake? They were watching her now, puzzled and a little anxious.

'Well, I wouldn't have laughed and made Faither angry.' She paused. Her listeners said nothing.

'You see, we were at the table having tea and Faither . . . my father asked for another cup. Our Billy tried to stop him and Faither couldn't understand why and then

Billy said that Dan Stewart in his class at school's mother had said that if Faither didn't drink so much, Mammie wouldn't have so many weans. It would have been all right if George hadn't kicked me under the table, but that made me laugh and Faither was that angry. He swore at Billy and slapped me hard on the face and then he banged the door shut and went to the pub.'

During her recital Dandy had been keeping a careful eye on the two women. Alice who was plump was always pretty rosy, especially in the firelight, but Violet was easier to spot. The pink line had gradually risen and broadened in her neck. Now she was clutching it anxiously. 'George kicked you?' she gasped out.

'Aye, or I wouldn't have laughed,' repeated Dandy.

Alice spoke firmly. 'Oh, well, there's no need to worry here. Just enjoy your wee supper – or is it breakfast?' She gave a forced laugh as her hand rested on Violet's shoulder. Dandy noticed the warning pressure. So the big girl was right. If the truth had been otherwise they would have wanted to know why she had wanted to laugh and why George had kicked her.

Unlike Grannie, the Misses McLaren never criticized anyone. They simply slipped off into a siding, you might say. And yet, somehow you knew what their real attitude was. Though Dandy agreed most of the time with her grandmother's sentiments, it didn't really help to be told the same old thing; her mother had been a gentle, well brought-up girl – Grannie had seen to that; Grannie supposed you could say that Faither was handsome then: tall, with fair hair and bold blue eyes that seemed to knock the girls silly – and not only her Nettie. Grannie wished to heaven that one of the others had got him and not her fine girl. None of Nettie's sisters lived in a dump like theirs; none of them had bairns making a mess all over the place; none of them got

every decent piece of china you gave them broken by a couple of wild devils their father should be keeping an eye on; instead of that he was off to the pub to spend the money her daughter should be having to feed her bairns; she couldn't see what the end of it would be.

It was this last remark which irked Dandy most, because she couldn't see the end of it either. One thing she was determined on was that it would never happen to Dandy Baxter. Never! But though her mother irritated her with her dumb acceptance of her fate, she couldn't help feeling protective towards her – and to May, the gentle little sister who smiled shyly and never seemed to lose her temper, even when her wild big brothers managed to damage the doll her Sunday School teacher had given her. May had asked Dandy then to help her bandage the bedraggled creature and called out in protest when Dandy had turned on the culprits with her ready fists.

'They said they didn't mean it, Dandy,' she had pleaded.

'They should be looking after their wee sister instead o' breaking the wee doll for her. That bairn's too good to live,' Lily Jordan had remarked. It was a common phrase but suddenly its full import had struck Dandy. She looked then at May in a sort of daze; the delicate little wrists were busy with the bandage; everything about May seemed to be gentle. If only I could buy our May nice clothes, she could look like an angel, she thought. But, really, she didn't want an angel. She wanted her wee sister to be strong and healthy. A sudden fear struck her and she resolved to make sure that May got her share of whatever food was available and was not thrust aside by the Gannets, as she thought of them. She turned a baleful glare on her brothers.

But it was better to forget all that and just enjoy the peace. 'Make yourself another bit of toast, if you like,'