

The
Girl who Dared
to Dream

Also by Diney Costeloe

The Throwaway Children

The Lost Soldier

The Runaway Family

The Girl with No Name

The Sisters of St Croix

The New Neighbours

The Married Girls

Miss Mary's Daughter

Children of the Siege

The French Wife

The Stolen Baby

The
Girl who Dared
to Dream

DINEY
COSTELOE



An Aria Book

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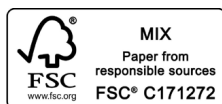
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*For Peter – whose encouragement and belief in me has
never wavered, even when I dared to dream.*



1

February 1912, London

‘Mabel Oakley! Stay behind! I wish to speak to you.’ Miss Chapman, headmistress of Walton Street Elementary School, stood at the playground door, watching as the children streamed out into the yard, their voices loud as they were released at the end of afternoon school.

Mabel waited as directed, a shiver of excitement running through her. If Miss Chapman wanted to speak to her, it must mean she had received the letter from Dada.

Mabel’s best friend Annie, worried for her, asked, ‘D’you know why she wants you, Mabel? Are you in trouble? Shall I wait for you?’

‘No,’ Mabel replied, giving her friend a little push. ‘You go on home. I’m not in trouble, I promise you, and I’ll tell you all about it tomorrow.’

Mabel hoped she was right about the letter, but she wasn’t prepared to explain, even to Annie, just in case she was wrong.

As she waited for the last of the pupils to leave the schoolyard, Mabel wondered what Dada had actually written. Had he asked if she could stay on for one more

year, as she had begged him? It was what Mabel wanted above all things, but when she'd told him she wanted to stay at school after she turned sixteen, he'd been extremely sceptical.

'Why on earth would you want to do that?' he asked. 'Haven't you had enough of schooling? Don't you want to go to work and earn your own living?' He didn't mention the fact that they could do with another income coming into the household, but it was certainly on his mind. The premium for Eddie's carpenter's apprenticeship had to be found, and then there would be Stephen to consider. 'You'll be a grown-up!'

Mabel shook her head. 'No, Dada, really. I want to stay on, perhaps take some exams and go to secretarial school. I want to be a secretary like Miss Harper!'

'Like Miss Harper?' Her father sounded horrified. Hermione Harper, secretary to the senior partner at Sheridan, Sheridan and Morrell where he was a clerk, was the terror of the typing pool, and indeed, he thought wryly, of the whole office.

'She's the last person you want to be like,' he retorted. 'She's a dried up old stick of a woman, who enjoys bossing everyone around.'

'I might be quite good at bossing everyone around,' replied Mabel with a grin.

'Maybe,' her father answered darkly, 'but she's the last person I want you to be like. She hasn't an ounce of generosity in her.'

'All right then,' Mabel conceded, 'I won't be like her, not like that. But I do want to learn typewriting and work in an office, like you do. I don't want to go into service like Lizzie!'

‘Your cousin has a good position and is doing very well,’ pointed out her father. ‘She’s already a parlourmaid, and if she works hard she may move up through the household. You could do the same. You’re a clever girl, you’d soon learn their ways and you’d have a job for life, in one household or another.’

‘But I don’t *want* that sort of job for life,’ cried Mabel. ‘I’d hate it. I do want to work for my living, Dada, but not cleaning someone else’s house like poor Lizzie has to, just because they’re too lazy to do it themselves.’

‘Well,’ her father had replied, ‘I don’t think Lizzie thinks of herself as “poor Lizzie” and that’s not an attitude I should make known, if I was you. Remember, people who can afford to employ servants provide jobs and livings for hundreds of folk, who wouldn’t otherwise have any work.’ He looked his daughter firmly in the eye. ‘Seriously, Mabel. Too many people rely on the monied classes for their livelihood. You won’t make yourself popular with anyone if you start spouting remarks like that. I would hate to hear a daughter of mine openly expressing such ideas.’

‘No, all right, Dada. I was only saying it to you.’

‘So you were,’ agreed her father. ‘And that’s the way it must stay.’

‘So, can I stay on for another year?’

‘I’ll discuss it with your mother, and if she agrees, well maybe I’ll write to your teacher and see what she says. All right?’

‘All right.’ Mabel knew it was the best she could do. She, too, was well aware it would mean that she wouldn’t be adding to the family income for another year, but if she learned to type and even perhaps to take down shorthand,

she could get a job in an office like where Dada worked and she would then contribute far more to the family income than if she were a live-in servant in some mansion. She would work office hours, not be at someone's beck and call all day, every day; her time outside the hours in the office would be her own. Dear Dada – she was the only person who called him that, her special name for him – dear Dada, surely he would say she could stay on. Wouldn't he?

Now, this afternoon, Miss Chapman wanted to speak to her after school, so she must have received Dada's letter.

'Come back into the classroom, Mabel,' Miss Chapman said, once the schoolyard was empty. 'Come and sit down. We should talk properly.' A chair had been set ready in front of Miss Chapman's desk, and Mabel did as she was told.

For a long moment, the teacher looked consideringly at the girl sitting in front of her. Mabel Oakley was one of the most intelligent of her pupils. Always well turned out, with her fair hair neatly plaited and her clothes clean and pressed, it was clear she came from a well-ordered home, where pride was taken in her appearance. Mabel had an inquisitive mind, and enjoyed learning for its own sake, not something Miss Chapman could say about most of her pupils, and when she had received the letter from the girl's father, suggesting she might stay at school for one more year, Miss Chapman had been delighted. But she knew she had to tread carefully in her response. It would be no good giving Mabel ideas above her station. Mr Oakley had said Mabel wanted to learn to type and work as a secretary.

Well, thought Miss Chapman, typing would only fit her for a typing pool, not to be a secretary. Miss Chapman thought Mabel would be far better off to train as a teacher and pass

on her love of learning to the next generation. But whatever lay in the girl's future, the first thing was to convince her parents that it would be a waste of her potential to keep her in elementary school for only one more year, when she might be one of the lucky few who progressed to secondary education. Did it depend, she wondered, on the answers she gave the father? Was it purely a matter of whether they thought the extra year was worth it for a girl, or would the problem be a financial one? Simply, could the family afford to keep Mabel at school? One never knew. Pride would never allow such parents to admit they couldn't afford to be without the extra wage, and so they would give some other reason for her to leave as soon as she could.

'Now then, Mabel,' she began, 'I've received a letter from your father. Do you know anything about that?'

'Yes, Miss Chapman,' Mabel replied. 'I want to stay at school, so I can get an office job when I leave.'

'So, that was your idea, was it?'

'Yes, Miss Chapman. I don't want to go into service like my cousin Lizzie.'

'I see. And why's that?'

'I want a job where I can use my brain. I don't want to go into service and spend the day running around at someone else's bidding. I want a job with set hours, like a secretary, so that it isn't my whole life.'

'Or like a teacher?' suggested Miss Chapman mildly, and almost laughed aloud at the scandalised expression on Mabel's face.

'Oh no, Miss Chapman,' and then she felt the colour flooding her cheeks. 'Sorry, Miss Chapman... I didn't mean...'

Her words tailed away as Miss Chapman gave her a wry smile and said, 'Never mind, Mabel, maybe not teaching. But I do think it would be a waste for you not to continue your education, and what you do at the end of it, well, that's a decision for then, not now.' She smiled across at the embarrassed girl. 'Don't worry, teaching wouldn't suit everyone, but I will write back to your father and suggest you stay on for at least another year and see where we go from there. What do you think?'

Mabel was so surprised to be asked for her own thoughts that for a moment she said nothing, but then her face broke into a smile and she said, 'Oh, please write that to him. I'm sure he'll let me stay on. I know my mam wants me to.'

'You realise you'll have to work extremely hard if you want to pass the exams to be a secretary? You wouldn't be able to stay here, we'd have to get you into the new secondary school in Farringdon.'

Secondary school! Mabel had never considered that possibility, and she stared at Miss Chapman in amazement.

'Secondary school!' she breathed.

'As I said, it will take hard work. There's an entrance examination you'd have to take in June, but I'm sure you could pass that easily enough if you applied yourself. What do you think? Are you prepared for that?' Miss Chapman raised an interrogatory eyebrow.

'Oh yes!' Mabel was thrilled with the idea. 'Oh yes, I don't mind how hard I'd have to work.'

'All right, I'll write to your father, and we'll see what he says,' said Miss Chapman. 'But in the meantime I suggest we keep this between us.'

When Mabel left the schoolyard, she was walking on air.

She and Mam would get round Dada. She was going to be allowed to continue at school, maybe even secondary school, and whatever she did at the end of that extra year, she was not going to go into service.

As she walked along the road on her way home, she passed the station and, on impulse, she turned down the alley that ran to the covered bridge across the railway tracks. Just before the bridge, with its back against the wall of the station yard, was a tiny building with a small painted sign over the door: *Thomas Clarke, Printer*. Even before she reached it Mabel could hear the regular thump of the printing press and knew Mr Clarke was hard at work. It was a cold day, but the door had been left ajar for some fresh air, and Mabel, peeping through, saw him standing at his press, rhythmically feeding it with paper.

Without missing a beat, Mr Clarke smiled and called out, 'Mabel, my dear, come in. I've nearly finished this.'

Mabel had met Mr Clarke several months ago, when running an errand for her mother to her father's sister, Susan, who lived across the old railway bridge. Mabel had gone happily enough, carrying the bag of shoes she and her brothers had all outgrown.

'Just take these to Auntie Susan,' Mam had said. 'Tell her you're all too big for them now, but there's plenty of wear in them and they should serve a turn for Milly and David.'

As Mabel had been passing the little print shed, a man had emerged from the covered bridge and lurched towards her, his trousers adrift and his member sticking out.

'Hello, little girl,' he slurred. 'Would you like to stroke piggy?'

For a moment she stopped dead, staring at him

uncomprehending, and then, as he reached to take her hand, she gave an agonised shriek, and backed away.

At the sound of her scream, the man dropped his hand and shuffled back onto the bridge, but her cry had been heard by Mr Clarke. He hurried out to see the man lurching away, trying to button his trousers, and Mabel cowering with her back to his own door.

‘My dear child,’ he cried. ‘He’s gone! You’re safe now. Come, come into my shop and sit down for a minute. What a fright he must have given you!’

Mabel allowed herself to be led into the tiny shop. Inside, the single, free-standing printing press took up half the space. The rest of the room was furnished with a small upright desk, an old armchair, an electric lamp, a gas ring on a shelf and a tiny sink with a cold water tap. Shelves ran round three of the walls stacked with small cardboard boxes, and behind the door was a small chest of drawers. It all looked very businesslike and Mabel, pausing on the threshold, liked it at once.

‘Come in, come in and sit you down,’ said Mr Clarke. ‘You’ve had a fright. Why don’t I make us a nice cup of tea? I’ve got some biscuits, too.’

When he had made the tea in a small brown pot, he handed her a mug. ‘There you are, my dear, you drink that and you’ll soon feel better.’ He smiled across at her. He was a small man, with untidy black hair shot through with grey, and horn-rimmed glasses so large they seemed to cover the top half of his face, but she could see that when he smiled, his eyes crinkled at the corners.

‘Now then, my dear, I’m Mr Clarke. Who are you?’

‘Mabel Oakley.’

‘Well, Mabel Oakley, what brings you to this footpath?’ He looked at the carrier bag she still clutched in her hand. ‘Are all your belongings safe?’

‘Yes, thank you, Mr Clarke. I’m taking some shoes to my Auntie Susan for my cousins. Me and my brothers have grown out of them, but they’ve got smaller feet.’ Mabel sipped the tea, full of sugar for the shock, and then she noticed he wasn’t having a cup. ‘Don’t you like tea?’ she asked.

‘Yes, I do,’ said Mr Clarke with a smile, ‘but I’ve only got one mug!’

‘Oh no!’ cried Mabel in dismay. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘Don’t be,’ replied Mr Clarke. ‘I had one just a while ago. Now then, when you’ve finished, I’ll walk to your auntie’s house with you and then you won’t be bothered by anyone else along the way.’

As good as his word, when Mabel had finished her tea, Mr Clarke walked her across the bridge and down the street to Auntie Susan’s house. When they reached the front door, he held out his hand.

‘It’s been a pleasure to meet you, Mabel Oakley. I don’t think you’ll be troubled by that man again.’ I’ll be making certain you aren’t, he thought, but didn’t say. He’d have a word with PC Darke, the beat copper. ‘Do come to call on me again. I’m always in my shop and I don’t get many visitors.’

‘Yes, I will,’ promised Mabel, as she took his hand. ‘I want to see how you do printing on your machine.’

Mr Clarke smiled. ‘I’ll look forward to that, Miss Oakley.’

‘Who was that with you, Mabel?’ asked her aunt, as she opened the door.

‘That’s Mr Clarke, the printer,’ Mabel replied, but she didn’t tell Auntie Susan about the other man on the bridge.

When she had delivered the shoes with Mam’s message, she set off back home again, but when she reached the printer’s shop, it was closed up with blinds at the window and the large padlock on the door.

‘But I will come and see you again,’ she promised, under her breath.

She’d gone back several days later, taking with her an old mug from the kitchen at home. He was delighted to see her and tickled pink that she’d thought to bring her own mug.

‘I’ll leave it here, if that’s all right,’ she said before she left. ‘Then we can always have tea.’

It had been the beginning of a strange but firm friendship. Mabel didn’t tell them at home about Mr Clarke. She didn’t quite know why. Was she afraid they wouldn’t approve and forbid her to go and see him again? Or was it that this was a tiny, but entirely private part of her life? She was never quite sure, but she and Mr Clarke were comfortable in each other’s company and gradually, over the weeks, had come to know a little about each other.

Mr Clarke had remembered she wanted to see him work at the press, and one day, a few weeks later, he said, ‘Do you want to have a go?’ And when she nodded excitedly, he began to show her how to work the treadle with her foot while he fed paper into the machine.

Today Mabel had rushed to tell him she was going to be able to stay at school for another year. While he put the final sheets of paper through the press, she sat on the chair and watched. As soon as he’d finished, Mr Clarke wiped his hands on a piece of rag and reached for the kettle.

‘You’re looking excited,’ he said as he lit the gas ring. ‘What’s up?’

So Mabel told him, explaining how this single fact was going to shape her future.

‘So, you see,’ she finished, ‘if I can pass the exam, I can go to secondary school in the autumn. Miss Chapman thinks I could pass, if I work hard. Secondary school! And after that I could go to typing college, and then I can get a job in an office.’

‘I see you’ve got it all worked out,’ Mr Clarke said admiringly. ‘They teach typing and that at night school, you know, so maybe you could learn the typing there, in the evenings.’

Mabel had never thought of night school and she asked was he sure they taught typing there? He said he was almost certain they did, and they discussed this new idea as they drank their tea.

‘Something to find out about, anyway, just in case your father says no to more school, eh?’

‘Yes, if he does, but I’m sure he won’t.’ She sighed as she finished her tea. ‘I’d better go,’ she said reluctantly, ‘or Mam’ll be wondering where I am.’

‘Well, I’m delighted you’ve got the chance of another year’s schooling,’ Mr Clarke said, as he took her mug from her. ‘Education’s never wasted, whatever you decide to do with it.’

‘Most people think it’s wasted on a girl. They say all she’ll do is fill in time and then get married, so she doesn’t need to know things, like a man does.’

‘Don’t you believe it, my dear,’ said Mr Clarke. ‘Behind every great man there’s a clever woman. There’ll come a

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time, I reckon, when women will be as important as men in this world. Not in my lifetime, probably, but quite possibly in yours. Just needs a few girls like you to make a stand and you'll be surprised. Now you'd better cut along home and tell them what the teacher said.'