

**The Portrait
of
Adie Denton**

**A Love Story
by**

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Part One

Northampton
1924

Ice had formed on the inside of the windows. It was the last day of October and a sudden bitter cold had routed the last heat of the year. Adie pulled the blanket over her head and warmed the space beneath with her breath. She could hear the rhythmic sleep exhalations of two of her younger sisters, Vera and May, in the bed next to hers. Nell, her oldest sister, was already downstairs raking out the grate. The familiar muffled sound rubbed corrosive at Adie's guilty conscience.

Poor Nell. Everyone said 'poor Nell', for she had given up the chance of her own life to care for the four Denton children still under ten when their mother, Clara, died last year. Nell lost her mother on the Tuesday and by that Saturday her sweetheart, Walter, had been seen with another girl on his arm in Abington Park. Nell was crushed but Adie had seen the look in Walter's eye when he'd realised Nell came complete with a small army of needy children. Adie knew Nell was well rid of him. He'd tried it on with her every time Nell had her back turned. He made her flesh crawl. So did all the lads about the town. Cocky little bastards, most of them.

The only boy Adie did like was Edward Makepeace. He worked in the shoe factory like everyone else but Eddie was different. He loved poetry and reading. Much of his spare time he spent in his parents' garden shed, turning wood into exquisitely curved bowls and small items of furniture, and what he didn't know about advances in science and the arts wasn't worth knowing. Adie admired and respected him more than anyone she had ever known. He was a few years older than her but they had always been friends and allies. She must have been just five when he had waited, a big boy of nine, for her to climb safely down from the willow tree den in Delapre Abbey as darkness descended. All the other children had long since disappeared. Eddie shared his toffee with her as they walked back to the main road and the lights of Far Cotton. He was quiet and calm to be near. In the madhouse atmosphere of the Denton family home, that was a tonic.

'What're you thinking about, Eddie?' Adie had asked him the Sunday before as they sat by the river Nene in the autumn sun, a moment stolen from the banging noise and monotony of Barratts shoe factory.

'The similarity between the movement of water and the patterns that emerge from wood.' Eddie had turned his head to one side and narrowed his eyes slightly as he spoke.

Adie looked at him and smiled then. She loved his curly black hair and his slightly crooked aquiline nose, but mostly she loved the precision of his language. Nobody round here spoke like Eddie. That's why he had borne the brunt of sneering and bullying from some of the town boys. It had calmed down a lot since he came back from the trenches. He'd been a good soldier and a patriot, and that had earned him a grudging respect from his peers, in spite of his peculiar ways and the fact that he'd nearly always got his nose in a book. 'You're a funny wonder Eddie Makepeace,' she'd said, throwing a stone into the river. 'Now what does it look like?'

'It looks like you're an attention seeking bloody little nuisance.' Eddie grabbed her sides and tickled her without mercy until Adie was rolling about on the river bank

kicking, screaming and breathless. Then, stopping suddenly, he'd said: 'I'll miss you Adie,'

'Don't even know if I'll be going yet Ed, do I? There're probably loads of girls applied for it,' Adie had told him, shielding her eyes from the sun.

'You will. I can just feel it in my bones. There's a big life out there waiting for you. Go and get it, gal.'

'Go and get it, gal.' Adie turned Eddie's words over in her head. She wanted to 'go and get it' so badly she could scarcely breathe at times. And then other times she was terrified of leaving home, of the unfamiliarity of a big city full of strangers.

The mercy of sleep now eluded her and the raking downstairs had turned to the shovelling of coal. Adie threw back the blanket and swung her legs over the edge of the bed. She braced herself against the cold, took a single deep breath and slowly released it. Then she slipped into her camisole and bloomers, laid out the night before over the bottom of the bedstead. She fastened the cotton stockings to her garter belt with fingers so stupid and cold it took ages to get the button into the eye. Next her petticoat and overskirt. What a palaver! Trousers would be so much easier to wear and to keep warm for that matter. She had worn her brother Arthur's trousers once for a fancy dress party. He was only fifteen but they fitted her perfectly. Adie had turned twenty-four but her hips were narrow as a boy's and her chest was hard and flat. That's how Adie liked it really, even though Nell, with her great big tits, looked pityingly at her and nasty little ruffians shouted 'chicken breast' after her in the street. Adie liked her chest and skinny, straight-up-and-down figure. She didn't want to attract men. She'd seen where that got you. It wasn't anywhere that Adie had in mind to go.

She brushed back her long hair, grimacing as the tangles caught against her stroke. She could never be bothered to brush it out after she had washed her head, especially since her mam had died. It reminded her too painfully of the little scraps of time she had her mam all to herself. Adie would sit in front of the range with Clara carefully picking out the knots of hair and brushing it until it shone. Those were precious times, when Adie confided her hopes and dreams for the future, while Clara told stories of her youth.

'I 'ad a wart, big as a sixpence, on me middle finger. It were when I worked in the clicking room and as I reached up to pull the lever it caught between the rollers. Yanked out by the roots it were. 'An' there it 'ung, all bloody an' drippin' all over the floor. I screamed that loud the whole factory come runnin'.' Then Clara would lower her voice conspiratorially, 'I got in ever such a lot o' trouble.'

She was gone now. Dead at forty-seven, exhausted from constant pregnancy and childbirth. Nine kids living, two dead in infancy and another still-born. That wasn't counting the three she miscarried. Adie had adored Clara. She treasured her for the endless toil she performed with grace and good humour, for the patience and calm that emanated from her even in the midst of chaos, and mostly for the fact that, though she herself was illiterate, she had encouraged Adie in her letters. Her mam had glowed with pride as Adie read aloud to her from David Copperfield and Wuthering Heights.

Now Adie had no reason left to stay. In fact she had every reason to get out while the going was good, or at least a possibility. Her father, William, did his best. He went to work at least, but Adie hated him when he was drunk and that was every Friday and Saturday night. Nell had taken over the job of getting enough money out of him to feed the family before the lot was spent on ale. Adie knew for certain she was not prepared to forego her own life to help raise his other children, however guilty she felt about Nell.

'Adelaide.' Nell's voice rang out from the bottom of the stairs.

Adie flinched. She loathed her name. Only Nell persisted in using it. Even her dad now used the name that Eddie had given her when she was eight.

'I wish I was called Eddie.' She had confided her most private feelings to him since they had first forged their friendship.

'Well you almost are,' he'd told her. 'You're A.D. Adelaide Denton. I shall always call you Adie and that's as near to Eddie as you can get.'

'Coming,' Adie yelled back now to her sister.

The bedroom door pushed open and Alfie, the baby, stood there on his recently perambulatory legs, his nappy hanging low and stinking.

'C'mon, Alf.' Adie picked him up carefully, holding him at arm's-length so her best clean clothes didn't get shit all over them. Then, treading cautiously, she carried him down the dark and treacherous stairs, her arms aching as he kicked his chubby legs, cheerfully unaware he was on the brink of slipping from her grip.

The electric light in the kitchen burned yellow against the streaked distemper wall, just mitigating the dark. Nell was wiping her hands on a rag, a smudge of coal dust marked her brow. It was half-past six and their father was just on his way out of the back door, his pocket bulging with a sandwich wrapped in greaseproof paper.

'Help your sister, our Adie,' he admonished, standing on one leg while he secured his bicycle clip on the other ankle.

'What d'you think I'm doing?' Adie laid Alfie on the cracked brown linoleum floor. He gurgled merrily as a squirt of shit escaped his sodden nappy.

'And less of your lip my girl. You're not too big for a hiding.' William slammed the door shut behind him.

Adie knelt above her baby brother. 'Who's a smelly little shite-his-pants, then?' She kneaded his round belly in her fingers. Alfie gurgled some more and peddled his legs, releasing another wave of stink. Adie retched on her empty stomach and began undoing the soiled rag.

'I see you're going, then.' Nell had her back turned now. She stood at the stove stirring thin porridge ready for the onslaught of the Denton brood.

'I said I would, Nell. Please don't hate me. I'll go mad if I stay here. I'm not strong like you. Anyway, I most likely won't get the job. I won't be the only one being seen and I haven't got any experience of that type of work.'

'If it's not this one it'll be another. What time's your train? Will you take the kids to the school gate and watch them in, otherwise they'll run off again. We had the School Board man here yesterday.'

'Yes. Of course. Sorry I didn't...'

Nell cut her off. 'What've you told them at the factory?'

'I said I had to go to London to visit a sick auntie. Our Arthur backed me up. He said she were really poorly and you couldn't go with all the children to care for and the poor old dear had no one else in the world. He's a proper good fibber.'

'So he's in on it as well, is he?' Nell didn't turn round.

'Oh for Gods' sake! I'm not doing it against you. I'm doing it for me. Can't you see that?'

'You do just what you like. You always have.' Nell's bitterness infected the cold air between them.

Adie silently cleaned Alfie's bum, their breath visible in the still chilly kitchen. Then she held him to her, his little body warm as toast. He reached up and took her face in both his small dimpled hands, grateful for a bottom no longer encased in faeces. Adie felt tears stabbing at the corner of her eyes. She did not let them flow.

Arthur came yawning and stretching into the kitchen. Nell sloshed a ladle of porridge into a bowl.

'Ta, sis.' Arthur stood at the sink blowing on his breakfast. 'You look the bee's knees, our Adie.' He coined one of his American phrases picked up at the Vaudeville Electric Theatre.

'Oh talk English and get out of my way. The bloody bee's knees.' Nell grumbled as she bundled past him to get to the sink. In response Arthur danced a jig around her singing, 'Yes, we have no bananas' in a fake cockney accent. Adie couldn't stop herself from laughing. He was a good lad, open hearted and even tempered. Confidence, bestowed from his youth and good looks, permeated the air around him. When Arthur was in a room it was hard not to be drawn into whatever nonsense he instigated.

Nell pushed the lad roughly aside and began ladling porridge into bowls lined up on the wooden draining board. May and Vera came next into the already cramped space, quarrelling about which of them should get Sam dressed and ready for the infants' school. Sam already despised school. He had started in September and kicked up a terrible ruckus about going. Some days Nell or Adie had to drag him screaming his lungs out through the gates. Bert and Lizzy's constant attempts to dodge school hadn't helped in this respect either. At least May, at near fourteen, would leave school at Christmas and bring another wage to the household. Adie and Nell had bickered for years about the value of schooling. Nell thought that education was all well and good but there seemed little sense in it once a child had their basics of letters and numbers. Even those skills were really cosmetic when the available work for the vast majority required only physical strength and the ability to withstand boredom. It was another source of annoyance to Nell that Adie had loved school and thrived on learning.

'You and your airs and graces. You're no better than anybody else round here, our Adelaide.' Nell thought keeping your feet on the ground a near godly enterprise.

Adie felt constantly disapproved of by her older sister. It didn't help that Nell disliked Eddie Makepeace. When Adie had come home with the copy of 'The Lady'

magazine and showed her sister the advertisement for a ladies' maid, Nell's first response had been to blame Eddie.

'I suppose that strange Edward Makepeace's at the bottom of this. Honestly, Adelaide, why don't you settle down and find a nice chap? He'll never marry you, y'know?'

'Marry me. That's ridiculous.' Adie had blushed at the wrongness of the thought. Eddie felt like her own brother. 'We're best pals, and so what if he did give me the magazine. At least he wants me to be happy and get out of this stinking town.'

'Happy.' Nell had screamed. 'Why are you entitled to be happy? Some of us just have to keep on going 'cause others need us.'

'Oh don't be such a bloody martyr.' Adie wished she hadn't said it but the words were out before she could stop them.

After that they hadn't spoken for near a fortnight. Nell had gradually softened when weeks went by without Adie getting any response from her application. But when the letter had come through, inviting Adie to an interview in London, the antagonism reared back up in another huffy silence, which Adie found much worse than an all-out fight.

Bert came wandering into the kitchen with dried snot caked on his face. Nell spat on her hanky and rubbed angrily at his cheek as he tried to twist out of her grasp. Arthur noisily scraped the last of his porridge from his bowl. May and Vera had resumed their quarrel but this time it concerned the ownership of a blue velvet ribbon.

'I'll go and get Sam up,' said Adie, glad to leave the cacophony of the kitchen. She left Alfie wobbling around the table and moved to the bottom of the stairs just as Lizzy leapt down the last three, landing painfully on Adie's foot and nearly knocking her over.

'What on Earth?' Adie shouted.

'Sorry, Adie, but I'm frit of the dark stairs. Our Bert said the Red Lady chased him down them the other night on his way to the lav.'

'Take no notice. There's no such thing as the Red Lady.' Adie spoke with authority since it was she who had invented this spectre years before as part of a ghost story she'd made up to entertain her younger siblings. She'd had a good hiding for it from her Dad because the littlest ones wouldn't go to the toilet unaccompanied and this ended up with the six year-old Vera wetting the bed.

Adie went up the narrow staircase to the boys' bedroom. The putrid smell of socks, sweat and young males brought another spasm to her guts. She could make out the hump of a small body curled at the bottom of the biggest bed and she gently lifted the covers on the angelic sleeping form of her little brother, his hands poised with the grace of a ballet dancer in flight.

'Sam,' she said, gently stroking his blond locks out of his eyes. He wriggled aggrieved and turned his skinny back to her. 'C'mon. Time to get up. You want to be a big, strong, clever boy, don't you? If you jump up now I'll bring you a present back from London.'

'What is it?' he said without moving.

'It's a surprise.'

'Will I have to share it?'

'No. It'll be just for you.' Adie was already regretting this ploy since she possessed only enough money for her train fare and possibly a box of biscuits. She'd have to think of something.

Sam clambered off of the high bed as Adie held out his shirt. 'I'll do it myself,' he said.

'Okay, but go down and get your breakfast as soon as you're dressed or our Bert'll eat it.'

Adie went back to her own bedroom, now vacated by her sisters, and sat on the bed, closing her eyes against the morning hullabaloo going on downstairs. Her feelings were in turmoil: excitement, guilt, anxiety and outright fear all vied for prominence. She slumped forward, bringing her eyes to rest on her clenched fists. When she looked up, she saw her purse on the chest of drawers. Inside, a folded letter wrapped around the advert clipped from 'The Lady' magazine.

Wanted: ladies maid. Temporary position in first inst. Duties include light cleaning, washing clothes and personal care. Willingness to learn more important than experience. Must be prepared to travel abroad. Applications by letter to Lady Una Troubridge, 37 Holland Street, London.

Lady Una Troubridge? Adie pondered the advert. The name seemed familiar somehow. The letter - on headed notepaper bearing the Troubridge family crest, a medieval helmet atop a buttressed castle - invited her to attend for interview at twelve noon on October the thirty-first. Re-reading it she felt a bubble of panic and loneliness. For a moment she considered not going, just turning into work instead and forgetting all about leaving the fetid cosiness of her family. Then she thought about explaining to Eddie why she hadn't gone. He would be outwardly kind and understanding but, underneath, his disappointment would torture her. Adie stuffed the letter back into her purse and went back downstairs swallowing her fear.

By half-past eight Adie had delivered Bert and Lizzy to the elementary school. She watched as they walked sullenly into their respective entrances. 'Girls' and 'Boys' carved in stone, marking their separation. Sam dragged on her hand, yanking painfully at her shoulder as she walked him to the infants' annex.

'I don't want your rotten present anymore. Just let me go. I won't tell Nell.'

Adie cringed at this. It was clear that Sam saw her as one of the kids and Nell as the responsible adult. 'Good. You won't get one either,' she told him sternly. At which he dug his heels into the pavement and folded himself in two. Adie pulled him to his feet. She could have wept for him as much as for herself. To lose your mam in your twenties was bad enough but Sam was just turned five when Clara died; old enough to feel the despair of loss and still too young to cope independently. Kneeling down she held him by his shoulders. 'Look at me, Sam.' He looked away, tears by this time streaming down his face, making grubby runnels either side of his nose.

Miss Haver, Sam's teacher, appeared at the school entrance. She smiled rueful but warmly at Adie. 'Leave Sam with me now, Miss Denton. He'll be fine in no time.' She was probably only a couple of years older, but seemed to Adie infinitely more worldly and sophisticated. Adie blushed. As Miss Haver took hold of Sam's hand the fight in him dissipated. 'Now young man you run along inside,' she said briskly. To Adie's dismay, Sam did as he was bidden. 'Not a work day, then?' The teacher regarded Adie's polished boots, buckled tweed jacket and new cloche hat with interest. Adie had foregone her old coat and was feeling the chill of the cold morning.

'No. I'm going for an interview in London,' Adie said with pride, glad now she hadn't let cowardice overcome her.

'Well, the very best of luck, Miss Denton. What job is it?'

'Ladies' travel companion,' Adie thought this sounded better than ladies' maid.'

'What an adventure. I'm sure you'll be snapped up. Anyway, must run or there'll be a riot.' Miss Haver held her hand up in a short wave as Adie watched her walk back into the school.

Castle station was a good twenty-minute walk away and Adie quickened her step to keep warm and to make sure she caught the ten-past nine train. The big clock in the station hall was just ticking to five-past nine when Adie arrived. She rushed to the ticket booth where two women were haggling with the clerk over the price of the train to Coventry. The waiting London train blew a plume of steam on platform one.

'Please.' Adie stuck her head between the women. 'I've got to get the London train,' she said to the acned youth in the ticket booth.

One of the women tutted, but they moved aside allowing Adie to push her seven shillings and sixpence under the glass. The spotty clerk slowly counted the change into his till.

'Return, is it?'

'Yes, please hurry.' Adie noticed the clock jerk forward another minute.

The clerk tore the ticket from his reel and pushed it back at Adie. She snatched it up and ran through to the busy platform as a gust of steam billowed white into the dank October sky. Third class was several carriages down the train. Adie hurried along, dodging round people and suitcases, still panicked that the train would suddenly lurch into life and leave her behind. Just as she reached out to open the door, a hand touched her elbow and she spun round.

'I thought you'd chickened out,' Eddie said, a grin lighting his face.

'I had to drop the kids at school, nearly missed the bloody train. Why aren't you at work?'

'I wanted to wish you luck. Said I'd be in the closing room. Bugger old Gifford, by the time he works it out I'll be back anyway. I've got something for you to read on the train.' He handed Adie a brown envelope just as the guard blew his whistle.

Adie jumped aboard. 'Thanks, Ed. I really love you. You're the best.' Just seeing his beautiful face made her calmer.

Eddie nodded, slowly moving his head up and down, and then stepped back as the train began chugging slowly away. Adie watched him turn and sprint back along the platform. She made her way to a vacant place on a bench. The windows were steamy with breath. A fat man opposite winked lasciviously in her direction and Adie quickly looked away. She opened the envelope that Eddie had given her and shook a book into her lap. A small, tatty edition bound in green. She turned it over in her hands. "The Ballad of Reading Gaol" by Oscar Wilde. The gold lettering had peeled away in places and the B and O were only vague indentations. Inside the flyleaf Eddie had written: To Adie, my twinned soul. With love, Edward.

Adie smiled. She had always loved the way Eddie expressed himself. She had missed him terribly when he went to war and wrote to him every miserable, fearful week that it had dragged on. Her letters had been silly newsy things, full of daft gossip and girlish worries. His responses, when they came, always made her feel understood and able to laugh at herself. She knew the instant she laid eyes on him when he came home on leave that something fundamental had changed. His eyes betrayed sorrow too deep to fathom. He would stare into the mid-distance with a rigid intensity that Adie found near to frightening. She was afraid to ask him what was wrong, sensing his pain vicariously. When he finally returned home still intact, physically at least, they resumed their friendship, but something unspoken, perhaps unspeakable, lay between them, clouding their words with reserve and distance. Years had passed since Eddie's return but, like a lot of those who'd served, he had never talked about his experiences.

Flicking through the pages of the book, Adie stopped where a verse had been underlined in pencil.

*I know not whether Laws be right,
Or whether Laws be wrong;
All that we know who lie in gaol
Is that the wall is strong;
And that each day is like a year,
A year whose days are long.*

Adie read and re-read the lines. She knew her own gaol intimately, had marked time on its walls in mute desperation. The gaol of her family, of the factory, of Northampton all sprang to mind as she pondered Wilde's words.

'A nice young woman like you reading that queer fellow!' The fat man nodded towards the book with a smug expression. 'Oh dear me, no!' He shook his head in distaste.

Adie half turned away from the man. His words almost winded her. A great bulb of awareness burst open inside her but confusion and fear for her beloved friend shadowed her thoughts. Eddie was queer. It seemed obvious now. A myriad of random memories massed in her mind. How had she not known? She swallowed hard to stem the weeping she had been verging on all morning, but as she closed her eyes a solitary tear escaped, dripping from her chin and blotting the yellowed pages of her book.

