

# ELEANOR C. PRICE

# JOHN'S LILY

"John," she whispered in a low quivering voice, "it's over." He struggled upright. "What?" He still held his hands behind his head, his face buried in the dark shadows cast by the dim lights, and he was only a flicker of flesh of bone, too fat still held his wrists and his fingers were like two pale sticks. "It's over," he said again, his voice a mere whisper. "I'm sorry, John. I'm so sorry." She lay back down, her head against his shoulder, her body pressed to his chest. "I'm sorry, John. I'm so sorry."

He lay there, his eyes closed, his body still. She lay there, her head against his shoulder, her body pressed to his chest. "I'm sorry, John. I'm so sorry."

"John, I wish you'd have been right," she said, adding, with a trace of exhaustion. "John, I can't help feeling that this may have been right, when we were young. But I know things may have been trying to make us do it."

John wriggled uncomfortably. "It's all good now, though," he said, smiling. "It's all good now, I understand half of it. But the other half, it's hard to people who are living it."

"It's all good now," she said, smiling. "It's all good now, John. I'm sorry, John. I'm so sorry."

John lay there, his eyes closed. "It's all good now, John. I'm sorry, John. I'm so sorry." She lay there, her head against his shoulder, her body pressed to his chest. "I'm sorry, John. I'm so sorry."

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"John, I hope we're making you comfortable." He lay there, his eyes closed. "It's all good now, John. I'm sorry, John. I'm so sorry."

"John, I'm sorry, John. I'm so sorry." John lay there, his eyes closed. "It's all good now, John. I'm sorry, John. I'm so sorry."

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By  
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# CHAPTER I

## *A LITTLE CHILD*

"Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting;  
The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,  
Hath had elsewhere its setting  
    And cometh from afar;  
Not in entire forgetfulness,  
    And not in utter nakedness,  
But trailing clouds of glory do we come  
    From GOD, Who is our home:  
Heaven lies about us in our infancy!"

—WORDSWORTH.

It was a sultry evening in summer, and John Randal was standing on the departure platform of a London railway station, looking at the train. He was a tall, fine-looking young fellow of three or four and twenty, brown and sunburnt, with dark stern eyes and an extremely grave expression. His clothes were good, though rustic-looking, and he carried a brown paper parcel in his hand. Any one who watched him might have thought there was something odd in the deep interest with which he gazed at the train, for his eyes were not attracted from it by the hurrying passengers, the porters with their loads of luggage, the ticket-collectors and guards in handsome uniform. It might have been thought that he was

looking out for a friend; but no, it was the train itself which interested him. Except in one or two short trips that same week on the underground railway, John Randal had never seen a train before.

And yet his home was only thirty miles from London. But the small retired village where he had spent his whole life lay quite out of the world's track, in the quietest of valleys, sheltered among chalk hills and beech woods, ten miles at least from the nearest railway station. If the people in John's village wanted to go far from home they walked, or else they travelled in the carrier's cart which passed twice a week along the valley on its way to and from London. This state of things had lasted for many years, but its end was now drawing near. Already a new line of railway passed within four miles of John's home, and people thought that as soon as it was finished and opened, new times would dawn for that quiet country.

John did not care much about all this. He was an old-fashioned young man, and the life he knew was good enough for him—his cottage in the village street, his blacksmith's forge, his garden, where red roses and tall white lilies grew, his mother, with her gentle ways and slow movements. He did very well, it seemed to him, and he could not see that the railway would bring much good to a village like theirs. Noise, and smoke, and dirt; newspapers and bad characters. John thought and said that he and his neighbours could get on very well without the railway.

He was an ignorant fellow, you see. Till a week ago he had never left home for more than a day.

Then his mother, who always thought that the world ought to know more of her John, persuaded him to go to London to see her brother, who was a printer. John tied up a change of clothes in a red handkerchief, and walked to London. His uncle and aunt were very kind to him, and took him about sight-seeing as far as they could. His aunt thought him a queer chap, for nothing seemed to surprise him much. Nothing tired him; he could walk for hours; but every day he grew more thoughtful and silent, as if his brain was oppressed by all he saw. When the day came for him to go home, his aunt packed his things, red handkerchief and all, with the presents he had bought for his mother, in a brown paper parcel, which she thought more respectable-looking than a bundle for a young man of her nephew's appearance; for no one would have taken John, by his looks, for a mere country lad. His uncle advised him to go home as far as he could by train, and John consented to this, as he would get home quicker. He came with him to the station, got his ticket for him, and left him on the platform to wait till the train started.

Here then John stood waiting, and all the fuss and noise and hurry of the station went crowding up and down without his taking much outward notice of it. Inwardly, he was rather nervous about the journey, wishing he had trusted to his own legs rather than to those carriages, solid as they looked, into which so many people seemed to be crowding.

Suddenly, in getting out of the way of a truck of luggage, a man and woman pushed up against him. The woman was holding a child by the hand, and as she pulled it hastily to one side, the little thing fell

down on its face on the platform, catching its feet in the ends of a long shawl which was bundled round it. It cried, not loudly, but with low, frightened, broken-hearted sobs. The man spoke loudly and roughly—"What are you doing there?" and the woman dragged at the child's arm. John stooped and set her on her feet again; a fair little girl, not more than three years old, whose delicate prettiness struck him even at that first moment. She stretched out her arm and laid hold of his hand, lifting her face in the folds of the shawl and looking up with wet frightened eyes, sobbing low all the time. The man and woman were talking together, and took no notice of her. John caught a few words of their talk—"Take care what you're about—a big reward offered—a fine chance for us—keep your eyes open and mind what you're about—if anything happens you'll pay for it." Some scraps like these fell on his ears, for the man spoke loudly and desperately. The woman seemed half stupid, and her muttered answers were too low to be heard.

"Come, bring her along," said the man roughly.

The child's hand was snatched from John's, and her parents, or whatever they were, hurried her away to the train. They looked anything but respectable. The man, though his dress had an attempt at smartness, might have come out of the lowest slums, and the woman's dirty finery was even more repulsive. John remembered their faces afterwards: the man's white, with a pale moustache and a cunning expression; the woman's flushed, stupid, and sleepy. He watched them across the platform to the door of a carriage, into which the man hastily pushed the woman and child, turning round himself

to look suspiciously up and down the train. Then the porters began to shut the doors, and one of them, passing John, looked up and asked if he was going by this train. "Then get in, and look sharp about it."

John crossed the platform with his free country stride, and stepped in at the first open door. Rather to his surprise, for he was not aware of having followed them, he found himself in the same compartment with the woman and child. The man had moved a few steps away, but as soon as the door was shut, he came back to the window.

"None of your games, you know," he said to the woman. "Write to the old shop, and you'll hear from me. You understand?"

She nodded. The man glanced sharply at John in the further corner, and then looked at her with a grin. He evidently thought him a very harmless fellow-passenger.

In another minute the train steamed slowly out of the great station into the lingering daylight of June, where towers and spires and roofs and bridges all stood out clear against a rosy evening sky, and sweet breaths of fresh reviving air blew in at the window, becoming sweeter and fresher as the train's speed increased, and before very long John saw green fields that looked greener than ever in coming twilight, and dark trees in motionless peace as the train thundered past them, and quiet streams, near whose banks the cows were lying down to sleep.

He leaned out of the window, feeling as if he had been out of the country for a year instead of a week, saying to himself, "Well, I've seen London, and that will do for me. I don't want to leave Markwood

again in a hurry. Still, I've seen it, and now I can feel for the poor folks that has to live there in that racket and mess all the days of their life. As for this here train——"

He leaned back in his corner, and looked round the comfortable carriage with a wonder and admiration that was not yet deadened by custom. Then his eyes lingered on his fellow-traveller. Almost immediately after leaving London she had fallen asleep, and her poor untidy head bobbed helplessly up and down on the cushion. At first she had stuffed the child, treating it like a bundle of shawls, into the corner between herself and the window, but presently it roused her by beginning to cry again with the same sad, frightened little moaning sound as before. She snatched it up, shook it, mumbled a few angry words, and laid it roughly at full length on the seat beside her. There it remained quite still, perhaps too much terrified to cry, while she settled herself in her corner and fell asleep once more.

John too, at the opposite end of the carriage, dozed off for a few minutes. He had had a tiring week, and it was the custom in his mother's house to go to bed early. When he awoke, suddenly startled by something that touched his knee, it was nearly dark outside, and the flickering lamp lighted the carriage dimly. On the floor stood a little figure all in white, with soft hair curling behind her ears, with one small hand outstretched, with a pale face, and large wistful eyes lifted towards John. The child had scrambled down from the seat, had struggled out of the shawl which was wrapped round her, and had

crept along the floor with her little white feet, which John now saw were bare, to her friend of the platform.

She said nothing, she did not cry, though her eyelashes were wet with tears, but only stood with one hand on his knee, looking up expectantly. John looked at her, and then across the carriage at the woman—her mother, was she?—still in a heavy stupid sleep.

John was intelligent enough in some ways, but his wits were never quick, and his home at Markwood was not the place to sharpen them. He did not at that time make any guess about the child's story, though he thought the whole thing queer. The strangeness of the child's dress told him nothing. The shawl in which she had been huddled concealed nothing but a little white woollen garment, and her head had no covering but its own fair curls.

John stooped towards her; she held out both her arms, and he took her with his strong brown hands and lifted her to his knee. There she sat upright for a minute, looking at him with an odd mixture of confidence and curiosity. Still she did not speak, and he was afraid to ask her any question, not wishing to rouse the woman in the opposite corner.

Presently the child began to smile. John, gazing at her in the dim light, thought she really must be a little angel come straight from heaven, so full of peace and sweetness was her small face now. Then she nestled down in his arms, her soft cheek against his rough brown coat, her heavy eyelids sank suddenly, and she fell into a sweet and quiet sleep. John had nursed children before—all the village

babies loved him—and he did not feel the awkwardness from which some young men would have suffered under the circumstances. He rocked the child very gently in his arms, and presently fearing that she would be chilled, reached across the carriage for the old shawl, and laid it over her.

Neither the child nor the woman woke till the train stopped at Moreton Road, the station where John was to get out. It was quite dark now. The woman looked round with a violent start, rubbed her eyes, and then burst out laughing. John, who did not feel at all inclined to be friendly with her, laid the child down on the seat with a very grave face, and without a word.

"Come along, my dear, we've got to get out," said the woman hurriedly. "There, I say, what a naughty child you be, to be sure, troubling the gentleman like that. Now then, come to mother, and let me pin your shawl. Never was such a troublesome brat as you. Thank you kindly, sir, I'm sure."

"You're welcome, ma'am. Is she your little girl?" said John gruffly, as he took down his parcel.

"That she is, and the youngest of nine, and her father out o' work, and me laid up for six weeks in the hospital with a broken leg. I'm going to take her to my mother, as lives at Fiddler's Green; but it's the awkwardest place to get at."

"So it is, if it's Fiddler's Green not far off Markwood. You won't get there to-night," said John.

"No, to be sure not; it would be bad travelling in the dark with this here precious child, wouldn't it? Come along, lovey."

John wondered where they were going for the night. He felt uneasy, though he was too innocent and unsuspicious to disbelieve the woman when she said the child was hers. But he was shy, and did not like to ask any more questions. He lifted the child out of the train; the woman seized her hand and dragged her away along the platform of the quiet, lonely station, where only a stray lamp here and there glimmered in the darkness. John, following them, thought that he had lost his ticket, and it was a few minutes before he found it, safely stowed away at the bottom of his safest pocket.

This delayed him, and when, coming out of the station, he looked up and down the dreary new-made road, the woman and child had long ago disappeared into the darkness.

He thought about them a good deal, however, as he walked on to the village of Moreton, where he was to spend the night with the old schoolmaster who had formerly been at Markwood, and had taught him all he knew. Presently, in talking to this old friend, telling him all the village news, and describing the wonderful sights of London, he did not find room to mention the odd adventure of his first railway journey. But he wondered several times that night what would become of the child, whose sweet little face haunted him. "Fiddler's Green?" Well, it would be easy to walk over there and see her again. It was true that he did not know her grandmother's name, but those few lonely cottages could not boast another child like her. "Why," said John to himself, "she was as white as a lily. And she

smiled—she smiled like one o' them baby angels in a Bible picture."

# CHAPTER

## *STORM AND SUNLIGHT*

"And shed on me a smile of beams, that told  
Of a bright world beyond the thunder-piles."

—F. TENNYSON.

John's old friend would not part with him till late in the afternoon of the next day, which was Saturday. Though the time of year was late June, the heavy heat was like July; it wearied John, strong young man as he was, and he felt that Mrs. Bland, the schoolmaster's wife, was quite right when she insisted on his having tea before he started on his walk of ten miles. She also expressed an opinion that a thunderstorm was coming—her head ached, and that was a sure sign; John had much better stay where he was till Monday.

"Thank you, ma'am, but there's my mother," said John.

Mrs. Bland's grey curls and the pink ribbons in her cap wagged as she stood looking out of the window.

"Look at that sky," she said. "Those are thunderclouds coming up, as sure as I'm alive, and my poor head never deceives me. And surely you're old enough to please yourself; a grown-up man like you needn't be in such a hurry to run home to his mother."

"Ah, Mrs. Bland, you've never seen John's mother, or you'd know more about it," said the schoolmaster from his corner.

It was only two years since he, who always thought himself a confirmed old bachelor, had been fascinated by that smiling face, with its curls and pink ribbons. In some ways his marriage had made him much more comfortable. Mrs. Bland was a capital housekeeper, and he had never had any talent for taking care of himself. But she was small in mind and great in gossip, the schoolmaster's character being the contrary of both these, and thus his frame of mind towards her became gradually one of good-natured pity, which did not prevent him, being quick of tongue, from snubbing her sharply whenever she seemed to deserve it. But Mrs. Bland smiled through it all. She had a good home and a good husband, though the village was a little dull for her taste, and though he, she said, had all the silly fancies natural to a man of his age.

"I don't know Mrs. Randal, that's true," she said; "but if she expects her son in to the minute, and isn't ever disappointed, why, she's a lucky woman, I say."

"That's just what she is," said the schoolmaster, with his kind, sharp smile; "and her son John is a lucky lad. Well, John, my boy, start when you like. If there is a storm, you'll find plenty of shelter along the road."

John, who had been listening silently while his affairs were discussed, rose suddenly to his full height in the smart little parlour. "I'll be off at once, sir," he said.

A few minutes later they stood at their door and watched him striding off down the hot silent road on his way westward, into the depths of the quiet country, while in the south, as Mrs. Bland again pointed out to her husband, great threatening clouds climbed slowly up the sky.

"There goes a fine fellow," said Mr. Bland deliberately. "It's a real pleasure to see a young man walk like that, and John Randal is as well made in mind and soul, let me tell you, as he is in body. If that chap had lived in history, and had had a chance, he would have been a hero. He would have been a knight without fear and without reproach. No, we won't despair of England as long as a few men like that are left in her villages. Fellows like John are the backbone of England, mind you."

"And a pretty stiff backbone too," said Mrs. Bland half to herself. "Well, Isaac, you talk like a book, I'm sure. Your sort of hero is a bit too rough and dull and loutish for me, you know; but I wish him well, all the same, and I hope he won't catch rheumatic fever out of the storm that's coming. If that was the case, his mother might have reason to wish he'd stayed away a bit longer."

"Mrs. Randal is a worthy mother of a worthy son," said the schoolmaster. "Those two are the salt of Markwood, Jemima. You wouldn't believe me if I told you all I know of their influence in that ignorant village."

"I'm sure I'm very glad to hear it. There's a drop of rain, and didn't I hear thunder in the distance? I said so. John's got the start of it to be sure. We shall

have it first, but if it don't catch him before he gets home never you believe me again."

"A very unpleasant alternative," said Mr. Bland, following her into the cottage.

The storm, once gathered and rising, broke rapidly, and overtook John before he was half-way home. It burst upon him in the middle of a long, bare hill, without even a hedge to give him a little shelter, the road being bounded on each side by wide-spreading slopes where wheat was growing. These stretched away to great dark woods, which looked almost black in their heavy midsummer foliage as the evening closed in unnaturally dark.

Dog Down, as that hill was called, was a part of the road dreaded by travellers in winter, when bitter north-east winds swept across it without any break or defence. It was a serious adventure to cross Dog Down in the face of a snowstorm; there were stories of men, horses, and carts having been blown bodily into the ditch by the roadside, and rescued with difficulty after lying there in the freezing snow for hours. No such danger as this, of course, lay in wait for John. The heat of the day had been so great, the air even now was so fatiguing and sultry, that he had been glad to come out of the oppression of the woods into the open road down hill. But it was not by any means pleasant, even for a strong man used to being out in all weathers, to be caught in a violent thunderstorm on the very face of Dog Down.

The flashes of lightning were continuous; they dazzled John's eyes. All the air round him seemed alive and alight with flame, while the roaring and cracking of the thunder almost made the earth shake

under his feet. At first there was no rain; but in a few minutes it came down like a waterspout, and as he walked steadily on, his head bent, his parcel tucked under his coat for safety, it soaked him from head to foot as effectually as if a large tank of water had been overturned just above his head. In two minutes the dry dusty road was a running stream, which cut ditches for itself in the chalk soil. The roar of the thunder and the rushing of the rain seemed to melt together into one great noise which filled the world, while every half minute the brooding gloom of the clouds was broken by keen, sudden flashes of light. It is at all times a lonely country, with few farmhouses, the farms being very large; with villages several miles apart, and cottages standing alone here and there, half hidden in corners of the woods. Travellers on the roads are few, and that evening it seemed to John as if nobody was out but himself, for during more than half-an-hour's walk through constant thunder and lightning and drowning rain, he saw neither a human being nor an animal on the road. All the better for them; it was not weather to be braved with much safety, not to mention pleasure. Twice, in a moment's lull, John heard strange crashes in the woods at the foot of the hill, towards which he was walking, and he was afterwards told that several fine trees had been struck and split by the lightning. He thought then that his own escape on the face of that bare down had been rather wonderful. But even then he did not regret having refused Mrs. Bland's kind offer of a bed till Monday: and when he was in the midst of the storm he only thought of his mother's anxiety, and what a good

thing it was that he had insisted on getting home to-night.

"I was that set on getting home," he said afterwards, "one might have thought I'd guessed what was going to happen."

"It was ordered so," his mother answered in her quiet way; and presently she turned to a friend and quoted the sweet old proverb, "Who goes a-mothering finds violets in the lane."

The storm was lessening, the lightning had become less vivid, the thunder less tremendous, the intervals between them longer, though heavy sheets of rain still poured from the low-hanging clouds, when John, after two miles of level walking along the white road between the woods that clustered at the foot of Dog Down, entered the long scattered village or little town of Carsham. His own home was nearly four miles further on. The broad street of Carsham lay still, as if everybody was asleep, in that stormy summer twilight. There was no sound but the splashing of the rain, as it ran in a hundred little watercourses and poured in cascades over the roofs, and flooded the spouts of the long row of houses. Here and there a light glimmered from a window; the ten or a dozen public-houses of which Carsham street boasted had lit up early that dismal evening, and their red blinds looked warm and cheery. At the Red Lion, the largest inn, the door stood open, and there was a noise of voices inside. Four more miles! A good fire to dry one's self at, and a snug corner to rest in till the storm was over. John almost stopped and turned in. He did not really know why with a sudden, impatient movement he shook the rain from

his shoulders, and muttering to himself, "I'd best get on," strode past the Red Lion, past the White Horse, the Dog and Duck, the Wheatsheaf, the Nag's Head, past the line of low cottages, over the bridge, where the mill stream came tearing down with a mighty noise, and so on in the shadow of tall trees, under the wall of Carsham Park, Sir Henry Smith's great empty mansion, whose grounds ran a long way beside the high road here.

Gradually, as John walked steadily on, the violence of the rain became less. Before he was clear of Carsham Park it had almost stopped; a lovely gold light was beginning to shine in the sky, and through the noise of the dripping trees and bushes which bordered the road, and of the little streams which ran beside and across it, the sweet voices of the birds broke out suddenly in their evening hymn.

The road here was bordered on the left by high park palings, behind which a row of great beech-trees only half hid a sheet of water in the valley, now shining gold in the sunset. From this the broad green slopes of the park, bordered with masses of trees, led up to the broad grey front of a large house, Carsham Park itself, with long rows of shuttered windows gazing dismally down its beautiful view. On the right-hand side of the road were high park-like fields, with a low steep bank descending to the road, along which stood a row of large old thorn-trees; their blossom, almost dead, still filled the air with its faint heavy scent, and their stems and roots, lying against the bank, were twisted into all manner of strange shapes. The low sun, now shining down the road, dazzling John's eyes as it made the watery

world flash and sparkle like a thousand mirrors, fell full upon the roots of the largest of these old trees as he walked past it. He stood still and stared at the strangest sight on which his eyes had ever fallen.

The gnarled roots made a kind of rustic cradle. Long, brilliantly green grass, growing against them, clustering over them, were a startling contrast in that dazzling gleam of light with the even stronger colour of a red and black plaid shawl, which lay wrapped round something in the hollow. And this something was alive—it was moving. A small white arm had pushed itself through the folds of the shawl, and as John stood breathless, a little moaning voice, frightened, unhappy, miserable, fell upon ears that had certainly heard it before. Could this be the woman's little girl—the child who had slept in John's arms twenty-four hours before? At any rate, the shawl was the same; he would have sworn to it anywhere. To be sure, she said she was going to Fiddler's Green. This was not the direct way, but she seemed a queer sort of woman. But where was she? What could she be thinking of to leave the little thing here by the roadside! Had she gone somewhere for shelter from the storm? Then why not take the child with her?

These unanswerable questions hurried each other through John's mind as he stood in the road, his wet clothes clinging to him, the birds singing joyfully all round and about, the yellow sun just setting. But it was only possible for a moment to stand and listen to that heart-breaking little cry. The child was evidently in pain—hungry, most likely—and where was its mother, and what was to be done? John laid down

his damp parcel on a tuft of grass, and kneeling on the bank, gently turned back the corner of the shawl that hid the little thing's face. Her large blue eyes had dark circles round them, her small cheeks seemed to have become smaller since yesterday, and her whole look more wistful, more unhappy. She opened her eyes and gazed at John, and for a moment the feeble crying ceased. Then again seemed to return the tiredness, the misery, the lonely hunger and pain; her eyelids drooped, her face puckered itself into sad lines, and she moaned and cried as before.

"Well, this is a queer business, my word!" muttered John; and then he began to growl in his kindest tones, "There, never mind! Poor baby! Come along then!"

He lifted the child from her strange cradle, and stepped back into the road, for a slight wind had risen after the storm, and even the solid old thorn-trees were shaking down heavy showers of drops on the grass at their feet. Though he rocked the little thing and talked to her, she went on crying mournfully, and he looked up and down the road in despair.

"She wants her mother, to be sure, but a pretty sort of mother she's got! Why, she's wet to the skin. Where can that woman be? Well, I'm not going to stand here all night waiting for her, and I'm not going to leave this here child alone under the tree. If she can't take care of it, serve her right to lose it. I'll make inquiries to-morrow; she ain't far off, I suspect. In the Nag's Head or Dog and Duck, I shouldn't wonder: she looked that sort. There, cheer up, little one. Can you talk now? Can you tell us what your

name is? Look here, little one, stop that noise, there's a pretty. Come, my name's John; what's yours?"

The child stopped crying, and almost a little smile dawned in her eyes as she looked up into the brown face that was bent over her.

"Lily," she said, in a clear, small, silvery voice that fairly startled John; and then, nestling down on his broad shoulder, she seemed to fall asleep.

John hesitated no longer, but picked up his parcel, and thus laden started off home. His long swinging steps covered the distance in not much more than half-an-hour, and he opened his garden gate before night had closed in.

"John!" cried his mother. "Why, what have you got there, my dear?"

## CHAPTER III

### ***HOME AT MARKWOOD***

"Lord, thou hast given me a cell  
Wherein to dwell;  
A little house, whose humble roof  
Is weather-proof."

—R.

HERRICK.

Markwood, the village where John Randal had lived all his life, and his father and grandfather before him, lay in the valley of the same little river that spread out into the ornamental water at Carsham Park, and turned the old mill at Carsham.

On the London road, not very far beyond where John had found little Lily, there was a place where four ways met, with a tall white finger-post pointing each way. There was the high road, running straight through from Carsham into even quieter and more distant country, with meadows and rows of trees leading down to the river on one side, and high green fields and woods on the other. Then there was a white chalky road through Fiddler's Wood, going straight off uphill to the right, hidden at once in the deep shade of the clustering beech-trees. Then there was a narrow lane to the left, which led past an untidy duck-pond, over a low bridge, past some tall poplars, a thatched cottage or two, and a large

farmhouse, so winding on, with broad green margins, till it became the regular village street, where the cottages stood nearer together, each in its large straggling garden full of flowers and fruit. Farther on were the church, the vicarage, and the little old school; then the lane went on its way between tall hedges, now sweet with honeysuckle and gay with wild roses beginning to fade, till it crossed another low bridge over the quiet, shallow river, and ended its long loop by joining the high road again, about a mile after leaving it.

Thus it was very possible for the whole world to go driving along the high road from London to the west without seeing or knowing anything of the small village that lay buried there in the valley; for even the church tower, low and square, was hidden in summer by the trees.

John's cottage was on the left-hand side of the village street, the side that faced the river, the high road, and the woods. It was very old; the low walls were coloured yellow, and the roof was thatched, but all was trim and in good order. A beautiful *Gloire de Dijon* rose climbed over part of the front, the door and one window being also shaded by an old jessamine now just beginning to show its sweet white stars.

The cottage stood sideways to the road, and in front of the door there was a small paved yard, entered by a gate. The path which led to the cottage-door passed beyond it to the garden, where John spent most of his spare time. He had several fruit-trees, plenty of vegetables, and in front of these a flower-garden full of roses and white pinks. John

had a special fancy for white flowers. At present the most conspicuous object in the garden was a row of tall white lilies, which stood up like a wall between it and the yard.

On the other side of the yard, opposite the house, were one or two sheds and buildings, so overgrown with ivy and roses that their old age was beautiful; and in front of them, facing the road, but entered also by a door into the yard, was John's forge. Here there were horses generally standing outside waiting to be shod, stretching their patient noses over the low paling, as if they liked to smell the flowers and to watch John's mother as she went backwards and forwards to the pump in the yard. Inside the forge was a warm red light, and a constant ringing and clanking noise of beaten iron; and the tall young blacksmith, strong and clever at his work, was a very grimy object as he bent over his anvil or blew up his fire.

John's mother was not the only person who found the village a different place when he was away. The farmers for a long way round would not let any one else shoe their horses, and grumbled mightily; the old vicar missed his fine bass voice on Sunday in the choir; there was nobody else who would pick up a small child in the road and carry it on his shoulder, safe and triumphant above its companions, yet a little frightened at finding itself so high in the air. John had many friends, and yet he was not the sort of man to be popular with every one: his likes and dislikes were very strong. Like many such simple, slow-natured men, he was not easily made

suspicious or angry; but when the anger came it was more serious than that of most people.

Mrs. Randal had not spent that stormy evening alone. Mary Alfrick, the daughter of a small farmer near by, had come in to see her about tea-time, as she often did, and had stayed on for hours, unable to leave the poor mother alone in her terror at the storm, her anxiety for John.

"I didn't know you were afraid of thunder and lightning, Mrs. Randal," said the girl, as they sat together in the unnatural darkness, when the vivid flashes had become less constant, and the rushing rain was almost loud enough to drown the more distant thunder.

"Ah! 'tisn't exactly the thunder and lightning I'm afraid of, Polly," said John's mother, putting her hand to her head, and looking nervously round the low room; "it's only the thought of John's being out in it. Some of the flashes were so near, I think thunderbolts must have fallen."

"He's taken shelter in Carsham, I expect. That's why he isn't here now."

"I don't think so—no, he wouldn't do that. He'd make the best of his way home. Let's see—if he'd stayed to tea with Mr. Bland——"

These calculations took some time, as neither of them knew much about the road or the distances.

Presently the rain stopped, the evening light began to shine, and Mary, by way of cheering her companion and making the time seem shorter, persuaded her to come into the garden and look at the flowers. It was wonderful how John's beautiful row of lilies had stood through the storm. Their scent

and that of the other flowers made the air breathe perfume.

Mrs. Randal and Mary rejoiced over the lilies. Presently Mary began to say in a doubtful tone, lifting her grey eyes a little wistfully, that she supposed she ought to go home.

"Nay, Polly, stop along with me till my boy comes," said Mrs. Randal. "I don't know how it is, I've a queer feeling as if something was going to happen. My dear, if there's trouble hanging over me, I'd sooner have you here than anybody else, you know."

"What can be going to happen? You shouldn't go fancying things," said the girl, a little roughly. "John's late, to be sure, but he's stopped at Carsham through the storm, and a good thing too."

She said nothing more, however, about going home. As the damp twilight fell they went back into the house, and sat there listening to every sound, till just as darkness had fallen they heard John's step in the road, and then heard him open the gate in a rather slow and fumbling fashion. The door was open, and his mother hurried out to meet him, while Mary stood still in the middle of the kitchen.

"What have I got here? You may well ask, mother. Something pretty, I can tell you, though I did pick it up by the roadside."

"But what is it? A baby! Picked it up by the roadside! My goodness! Where?"

"Under them old thorns opposite Carsham House."

"But, John, you're safe yourself, my lad? You wasn't out in the storm?"

"I was, though. Feel my coat—and so was this poor little mite, afore I got hold of her."

Bending his head as usual under the low doorway, John came with his burden into the brightly lighted kitchen, and dropped his parcel and stick with a sigh of relief on the well-scrubbed table. Then he put up his foot on a stool, and gently lowered the child to his knee, folding back the corner of shawl which had sheltered her face.

"There, wake up, Lily; sit up and look about you, little one," he said.

"Well, I never! But what a pretty child! Left by the roadside! Polly, did you ever hear the like?" cried his mother in bewilderment.

John lifted his flushed face, in which the colour deepened a little. "I beg your pardon, Miss Alfrick—didn't see you."

Whatever Mrs. Bland may have thought, the village considered John's manners very good.

Mary Alfrick smiled. "You've got something else to think about," she said in a low voice. "I've been keeping your mother company."

"'Twas good of you," John muttered.

Mary came a step nearer, and they all three gazed with deep interest at the little creature on John's knee. She sat upright, staring from one woman to the other—Mrs. Randal's worn face and spectacles, the grave yet attractive look of Mary's earnest eyes. The shawl had fallen back from her little white flannel dress, her fair curls were ruffled, the small face and hands and feet were stained with mud and rain. Round her neck hung a tiny gold locket on a piece of discoloured blue ribbon.

"I'll tell you what, John, my dear," said Mrs. Randal, peering through her spectacles, "this is no poor person's child. There's something wrong behind all this. Why"—laying her hand on Lily's frock—"this here flannel cost ever so much a yard—didn't it, Polly? And look! what's that round her neck? *Where* did you say you found her?"

John repeated his story. "But that wasn't the first time I'd seen her," he said. "I travelled to Moreton Road with her and her mother on the railway."

"You came by the railway, John! Well, and what was her mother like?"

"She didn't look good for much," John slowly confessed. "But she told me out of her own mouth that it was her youngest, and she'd had nine, and her husband out o' work, and she in the hospital with a broken leg, and they were going to her mother at Fiddler's Green."

Mrs. Randal looked wonderingly over her spectacles.

"I doubt she was taking you in, John," she murmured thoughtfully.

"Well, anyhow, she's a sweet child," said John, "and her name's Lily."

"That's queer, to be sure, when you're so fond of lilies," said Mary Alfrick, and her words brought a smile to John's grave face.

"There's a lot yet as I don't understand," began Mrs. Randal, and poor little Lily seemed to be of the same opinion, for she was tired now of looking at the strange faces, and began again to remember that she was hungry. Would they never have done talking? perhaps she thought. Anyhow, she turned suddenly

towards John, looked up into his face, and then laid her head against his coat and began to cry and sob piteously.

"I say, mother, she's hungry," said John, with great concern.

"To be sure she is, poor lamb. Here, I'll sit by the fire and you put her in my lap, and Polly'll warm some milk, and you just go straight away and change your clothes, John. I ain't going to have you sit down to supper like a soaked sponge!"

John and his mother sat up late that night after Mary was gone home, and the child, warmed, dried, and fed, had fallen fast asleep on the old sofa in the corner. Mrs. Randal was more convinced than ever that she was a lady's child. John could not yet bring himself to believe that the poor woman in the train had told him a string of lies. Somebody might have given her the flannel frock, he said. The locket seemed more puzzling. It was engraved in front with the letter L, and inside the glass at the back there was a tiny curl of dark hair. There was no other mark about the child by which she could be identified.

John's mother was half unwilling that he should carry out the plan he had made, to search the neighbourhood next day for the woman who had disappeared.

"The child's better off with us than with her, John," she said.

"You wouldn't say so if you was her mother," John answered, rather shortly.

"Maybe I wouldn't; but you mark my words, that woman's no more her mother than I am. There's

something wrong, and it was a kind Providence that brought you along the road this evening, John."

"Well—I don't know, I'm sure," he growled out thoughtfully.

Sunday morning dawned calm and bright, after the storm of the night before. The roads and trees were still wet, the little river ran bank full, but the flowers held up their heads bravely, and the air was full of colour and sweet scent.

Mary Alfrick came down the lane from her home and stopped outside the blacksmith's cottage on her way to church. The door was standing open, the sun was shining in on the red floor, and through the pots of geraniums in the window. The tall old clock ticked loudly opposite the door, the cat was washing herself on the step. Then a little child's voice broke out suddenly in sweet chattering tones. Mary pushed open the yard gate and walked in without further delay.

In the village she was generally thought rather "high," this girl who stood there, tall and slim, at John's cottage door. The girls of Markwood were a little shy of her; the young men were mostly afraid of her; she was not a person with whom any liberties at all could be taken. At the same time her home life was not a very happy one. Her mother had died when she was a child, and her father, a rough, ill-tempered man, had married again not long afterwards. There was now a large family of young children, and they and the farm gave quite work enough to Mary and her stepmother, a weak, selfish, complaining sort of woman. It would have been

difficult, in fact, for Alfrick's farm to get on without Mary.

She did her duty, though rather roughly and hardly sometimes, perhaps; the little half-brothers and sisters respected her more than they loved her. She did not trouble herself much about smart clothes, and very little of the farmer's money was spent on her. And yet, if any one asked who was the best-looking and most superior girl in the village, they were sure to hear Mary Alfrick's name in answer.

She was always ready to do a kindness, though she might be sometimes too plain-spoken to please her neighbours. It was not easy to read her thoughts, and yet one could not look into her face without trusting her. Not quite a pretty face, perhaps; a pale skin, a quiet, rather sad-looking mouth, dark earnest grey eyes under level black eyebrows, dark hair lying in smooth waves—no frizzes or fringes—on a broad, low, white forehead. Such was Mary; and as she stood at John's door that morning, an unusually sweet smile lighted up her eyes and a faint colour flushed her cheeks.

The large armchair, covered with red chintz, was pushed back from the fireside, and there sat John in his Sunday clothes, his few treasured books on the shelf over his head, his solemn face beaming for once with happy smiles, as he danced little Lily on his knee. She was prattling and singing to herself with baby unconsciousness, the tears and terrors of the night before forgotten, finding endless amusement, as it seemed, in staring at John, and sometimes putting up a small hand to pull his hair.

Then John burst out laughing, and Lily laughed and danced all the more. She looked like a fairy or spirit child, so small and delicate, her silky curls shining in the sunlight.

When Mary came to the door John started to his feet, lifted the child to his shoulder, and came forward with outstretched hand to welcome her.

"Oh, good morning," she said; "I see the little one's all right. Where's Mrs. Randal?"

"She's gone to church," John explained; "we couldn't both leave the child, you see, and she ain't so used to mother, so I'm stopping at home to see after her and the dinner; won't you sit down?"

"No, thank you, I'm going to church myself. Well, she is a sweet little thing, to be sure! She won't look at me. I wonder who she belongs to, don't you?"

"I'm going to Fiddler's Green by-and-by," said John, "to see if that woman spoke true, and I must go to Carsham and ask if she was there last night, and where she went to. I must find her if I can."

"And if you can't find her what will you do with the child?"

"I shall keep her, Miss Mary; what else should I do?"

"Oh, I don't know," said Mary, half carelessly. "Some folks would send her to the workhouse."

"Mother and I ain't those folks, are we, Lily?" said John, looking up with a smile, as both little hands grasped his hair. "Come now, tell us what your name is."

Mary looked on at the pretty picture and listened, with a slight smile, as the child whispered—"Lily."

"John's Lily, ain't you?" she said.

"Don's Lily."

"There—now the bell's stopped, and I shall be late."

Mary was gone, without even a glance at John's delighted face.

"Don's Lily," cried the silvery voice again, with a little peal of laughter.

## CHAPTER IV

### *THE CHURCHYARD STILE*

"By your truth she shall be true,  
    Ever true, as wives of yore;  
And her yes, once said to you,  
    Shall be yes for evermore."

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E. B. BROWNING.

John went up through the wood to Fiddler's Green, a few low cottages grouped about one of those wild and lonely commons that are fast disappearing from the face of England. He found no one there who could by any possibility be little Lily's grandmother, and heard nothing of the woman who had left her in the road. Somebody told him that an old woman who had died some time before, had once had a good-for-nothing daughter who ran away. This was not much help. He afterwards went to Carsham, where he had the disagreeable task of inquiring at all the low public-houses whether a woman answering his description had been there the evening before. At one of these, the Dog and Duck, he did hear something of her. At least, he heard that a poor tramping sort of woman had come in alone, wet through, had dried herself at the fire, and sat there drinking till the storm was

over, when she went away. They could not say which way she went. She seemed stupid, and they asked her no questions.

"Did she have too much?" said John.

"Nobody ever gets too much in this house, master," replied the landlady with a grin. "It's as much as the licence is worth, you know."

"Ah! I beg your pardon," said John, and he went out without saying anything more.

At none of these houses did he mention the adventure of the child. He would hardly himself have been so cautious, but his mother had warned him.

"If it's her own," she said, "you may be sure she'll be raising the country to find it. If it isn't, she'll be afraid to show up at all. So keep a quiet tongue in your head, John, and don't give the little girl away till you're sure some one has a right to her."

John took this advice as far as he could. He was not tempted to talk much at Carsham, for he was not a popular character there. He had a good deal of influence among the young men of his village, and he used this influence to keep them out of the Carsham public houses. Among the less respectable of these houses, therefore, there was a good deal of spite against John. People paid him the high compliment of calling him a "saint," which to their minds was the worst thing that could be said of a young man. They also called him a hypocrite and a molly. It may easily be believed that if John ever heard of these remarks, they troubled him less than the flies that buzzed round his head as he walked in the garden. He knew, honest fellow, that he was

neither a saint nor a hypocrite. As to being a "molly," whatever that might mean, it was an odd description of the strongest and bravest young man in Markwood and all the country round. But some people think, or pretend to think, that there is no manliness without wickedness, and of course, to such minds as these, men like John give no satisfaction whatever.

Days, weeks, months rolled by, and neither at Carsham nor Markwood was any inquiry made about the little lost child. The gossips talked a good deal at first, but soon—a nine days' wonder—the interest of the story died away, and it seemed as if Lily had always lived in the quiet village, in the blacksmith's low-roofed cottage, in the flowery garden which soon became as much hers as John's. She was backward in talking, but Mrs. Randal was soon called "mother," and John was her big brother, while she was herself known all over the village as "John's Lily."

Like a fairy she went flitting everywhere, warmly dressed by Mrs. Randal, for the child was delicate, and no wonder, after the exposure she had gone through—her silken curls shining, a little queen at once among the other children, who followed her with slow admiration in everything she said and did. As John unconsciously was a refining influence among the men of the village, and his gentle mother among the women, so was Lily among the children. She caught none of their rough ways; bad words died away into silence, somehow, before they came near Lily, as white as the flower whose name she shared; quarrels were checked by the sight of her smiling

face. She was the little peacemaker in the village. John could not for some time make up his mind to send her to school; he had an idea of keeping this fairy treasure "unspotted from the world;" and the children, though not a bad set on the whole, had of course all the faults and the ups and downs of other children. But his mother looked at it from a calmer and more sensible point of view.

"Don't you see, my lad," she said, "it would be different if you could afford to bring her up like a little lady. As things be, if nothing turns up, she'll have to live like you and me, and like the other children. We can't bring her up without education, which neither you nor me is clever enough to give, and the other children won't hurt her, John. She'll do good to them, and they'll do no harm to her. I see that with the little Alfricks, and Polly says so too."

Mrs. Randal did not add that she and Mary had talked the subject over more fully still, for they were both quite aware that Lily, being after all a human child and not an angel, had faults of her own which John's blind love would never see. She was self-willed, with all her sweetness; she was in a fair way of being spoilt by his indulgence; she did not at all dislike being petted and admired. She had her little fancies, too, and they were not always reasonable. Reigning from the first like a princess among the Alfrick children, she never seemed to care much for Mary, never came to her willingly, struggled down from her arms, turned her face away, though not rudely, when she asked for a kiss. She was quick enough to feel that Mary was not quite her devoted slave. John would always do what she wanted; he

would give up his own way for hers a dozen times a day; she could make him laugh with a look, the touch of her little finger led and ruled him. But Mary, though never unkind, could be a little rough and cross sometimes; it was not so easy to make her play and smile and forget everything for Lily. She had even pushed her away once or twice, when heavier worries than usual, poor girl, were weighing on her mind. Lily looked at her in astonishment; she did not complain, but ran away to the forge door to peep at John through a crevice.

"Don't love Mary," she said, the next time that he and she were walking hand in hand round the garden.

John looked down, startled. "Why, little one! Poor Mary! Why d'ye say that, Lily?"

No explanation was to be had, however; the child shook her curls, and in a moment was chattering about something else, though John still stared thoughtfully. Her words vexed him rather seriously, for he had lately, in his quiet way, been thinking just the opposite.

Lily had now been a year at Markwood. A few days after this little speech of hers had set John thinking—troublesome thoughts which worked round and round in a circle, so that he could find no likely way out—on a still and lovely evening of late summer, he was coming home from a distant job of work, along the lane that led to the high road in the other direction from Carsham. This was the quietest end of the village. On one side were trees that hid the Vicarage, where the old Vicar lived alone. On the other side was the churchyard; the low, small, but

beautiful old church, with its round arches and narrow windows; the old crumbling tombstones; the rows of green graves without name or date, where silent generations of Markwood lay; the great yew-trees, old too, but strong and green, that shadowed half the grass where two or three children, Lily one of them, were quietly picking daisies in the evening light. At this corner the churchyard was entered by a stile, the gate being further on, and on the stile, partly in the shade of the yews, sat Mary Alfrick watching the children.

John came up so quietly on the grass behind her, that she started when his low steady voice said, "Well, and what are you doing here?"

She was obliged to turn round and look at him, and as she did so she laughed, but it was a poor kind of laugh, and there was plenty of light for John to see that she had just been crying.

"What is it, Mary?" he said gravely, and he laid his hand over hers on the top rail of the stile.

"It's nothing, thank you."

John knew very well that Mary's troubles, though always bravely borne, were never far to seek. He had often agreed with his mother in wondering how a girl like Mary could put up with such a home as hers, with her father's roughness and ill-temper, her stepmother's selfish meanness, with nothing except the sense of duty to brighten life and make it something better than a dull, hard round of daily tasks. Mrs. Randal knew more about Mary than her son did, though hardly from what the girl herself had told her, for she was a proud girl, and never spoke of her own feelings. But Mrs. Randal in her gentleness

had a way of reading people's thoughts sometimes, and as she sat in her chimney corner, she had made plans of her own in which both John's future and Mary Alfrick's were very deeply concerned. She had said nothing to either of them. So far as she knew, John had at present no thought of marrying; but she had long decided that if he was ever to bring home a wife, Mary Alfrick must be the girl.

"Look up, then, Mary," said John, and the tenderness in his voice crimsoned the girl's cheek, and made her tears overflow again. "Come, we're old friends, ain't we? What is it, my dear?" he said.

Mary shook her head. In spite of her tears, a smile trembled about her mouth. "It's nothing," she murmured again.

They were both silent for a few minutes. The sun, slowly going down, threw the yew-tree shadows longer and darker across the churchyard grass. Beyond in the warm sunshine the children were playing quietly; sweet little voices ringing now and then among the graves. Lily, very busy with her daisies, had not seen John coming, or certainly, by this time, her arms would have been round his neck. She did not see him now as he stood on the other side of the stile, close under the shade of the great yew, though a shaft of golden light was shining on his face as he looked up at Mary.

"Look here," he said presently; "listen to me a bit. I want to tell you something. Mind you, Mary, I know you're a thousand times too good for me."

Mary shook her head again, and the smile deepened. John's grave face, as he watched her, brightened too into a smile.

"But you are, you know," he said. "Mr. Alfrick would look higher for you than a village blacksmith. I've known that a long time, and now and again it's made me wish I'd gone to London long ago and got into some higher branch, such as my uncle's talked about, and Mr. Bland too. There's ironworkers earning pounds and pounds a week with some of the big firms, and it's work as I could do. But mother wouldn't have liked to leave the old house and shop, and it always seemed to me I hadn't much but her to think on—'cept when I've thought on you, Mary."

Mary paused a minute; then she answered him as quietly as he spoke. "It's not me as would ever wish you to leave Markwood, John. I never did think much of London. If you have a nice home in the country, stop there—that's my idea. Never you think of London to please me."

"What shall I do to please you, Mary?"

"Stop as you are."

"Well, that's easy done," said the young man, not without a shade of disappointment in his tone.

There was another silence. Mary did not seem to care to speak; but her tears were all gone, and she looked happy and at peace. John, on the contrary, seemed a little troubled. He felt himself so bound by circumstances that he could not, in fairness to Mary and to other people, tell her all that was in his heart just then. Yet, when he found her crying, it had been impossible not to say something. And now he could hardly leave her without saying more.

"Listen to me a bit," he said again. "There ain't the girl in England to match you, Mary; and if I haven't told you so sooner, it ain't that I haven't

thought so, you know. I've thought a lot more about you than you've any notion of; and look here, I did feel as if you hadn't no right to be crying just now, and me not to know what it were all about."

He paused, as if waiting for an answer.

"Never mind that now—I was only silly," said the girl.

"I tell you, you're a sight too good for me," John went on. "You've a right to look higher than me; but if I thought you liked me a bit, I'd ask you something in spite of it all."

Mary said nothing, though he seemed to expect her to speak. It was impossible to break in with words upon the happiest moment her life had known till then; how happy, she did not understand till afterwards, as people may measure the height of a cliff from the sands at its foot.

"Mary dear, do you like me a bit?" said John.

The girl still hesitated; then she spoke, almost impatiently: "Of course I do, John."

Some grey pigeons, the Vicar's pigeons, fluttered down from the church tower; the children left their daisy-chains to watch them, clapping their hands as the wings flapped across the churchyard. The minutes passed on, the shadows grew longer. Those two by the stile told each other—John rather to his own surprise, but he felt it was true—that there never had been a time in their lives, from childhood till now, when they had not cared more for each other than for anybody else in the world. And the evening light brightened—the church, with its flint walls, might have been built of gold—the grass lay dazzling green beyond the shadows that stretched

across the graves. But it was not all joy. Perfect happiness was still a thing that must be waited for, that shone in the distance.

"It ain't fair, after all," John said sadly. "I didn't ought to have spoke to you like this, 'cause it'll be a long while yet afore I can think of getting married, you know."

"That don't matter: we must wait," said Mary. And indeed it was quite enough for her to know that she had John's love.

The doubt of that, the fear of the future, had weighed on her mind for many a day; now she felt that she could bear anything. Now that they understood each other, nothing else in the world mattered much.

"I must save enough to keep my mother," John went on. "And now there's the child, too; we can't bring her up to work, you know—a child like her. Tell you what, when the time comes, we'll leave mother and her in the old house, and we'll take one of Pratt's cottages for you and me—shan't we, Mary? And my word, I'll work hard; but I shan't get enough in a year, nor in two years. Suppose now it was five, or seven. How long will you wait for me; tell us now?"

"Five, seven, fourteen, twenty-one," said Mary slowly, smiling all the time. "Well, I don't know where to fix it. All my life, I suppose."

"God bless you, dear," said John.

And now the children were tired of their play, and they came lingering across to the corner where Mary was waiting for them. It was strange, and perhaps they felt this by instinct, that she should

have waited so long and so patiently. When they were not very far off, Lily, who was dancing along as usual, singing a little song to herself, suddenly looked up and saw John by Mary's side, leaning over the stile. She gave a scream of joy, and came flying towards him. In a moment she was in his arms, perched on his shoulder. Mary went to meet the others, and caught up the youngest and fattest of her tribe, a sturdy boy of three. Then this company started off along the village, the two elders very quiet and very happy, the children singing and shouting round them.

"I'll be up later, Mary; it's Lily's bed-time," said John, as he stopped at his gate.

Mary nodded, smiled, and went on with her flock up the lane, quite sure that she was the happiest girl in Markwood, if not in the world.

But when Mr. and Mrs. Alfrick heard that she had promised to marry John Randal they were furious in their different ways, and being neither of them accustomed to restrain their tongues, Mary had a much worse time of it than ever. Nothing her father could say was bad enough for John; all the public-house abuse was showered on his name, and he was further called a low, sneaking cur, not fit to speak to Farmer Alfrick's daughter. John had certainly been right in thinking that the farmer would look higher for Mary. But in truth, at the bottom of it, Alfrick had far too valuable help from his daughter to think with patience of her marrying anybody. And this side of the question keenly touched Mrs. Alfrick, who could not even try to think what she should do without Mary. So she was an ungrateful girl, and

also a born silly, to give up a good home for the sake of a prig of a fellow like that Randal, good for nothing but to pick up foundling babies and carry them to his mother.

"And you're a heartless girl to so much as think of leaving me and them poor children, and if a judgment don't come on you I shall be surprised—so there, miss!" said Mary's stepmother.

But after all Mary had been prepared for these remarks by the well-known character of those who made them. She had never expected her home people to be pleased, and as for being congratulated and fussed over because of her engagement, that had never even occurred to her as possible. She was a plain-spoken, fearless girl too, with a rough tongue of her own when she chose to use it, and one must confess that her stepmother's remarks were neither received nor answered patiently.

With her father Mary took refuge in the proud reserved silence which was also natural to her. She felt and knew that she had done her duty by him and his children, and she knew too that with all his violence he was quite aware of that. Neither he nor the whole world, she was convinced, would ever come between her and John, now that they once understood each other. There was no hurry: she had told them John could not marry yet, though she had said nothing about the length to which that waiting might possibly be stretched. For herself, on this point, she felt a power of patience that seemed likely to last for years. A traveller does not much mind his miles of dusty road, if at the far end, shining in the sun, he can see the gates and towers of the city

where he is going. So the rough words of her home fell lightly on Mary, for she had just then a world of content in her heart and no fear for the future. Nothing really mattered as long as she and John kept their promise to each other, and had the happiness of meeting every day.

As for John's mother, when he told her what he had done, her pleasure and surprise were almost equal. Men like John do not always choose women as good as themselves, and Mrs. Randal had had her anxieties, feeling that no other girl in the village was worthy of her son. But with "Polly" there was no doubt; there could be nothing but thankfulness. Besides being the steadiest girl for miles round, she had all her wits about her; she knew how to keep house, and how to make a little money go a long way. And John, like most men of his simple and generous character, could never get on without a clever woman to manage his affairs and keep his home comfortable.

Mrs. Randal's only doubt was caused by the long waiting. That did not seem to her quite fair to Mary, or quite wise for her son. If it had been only the one question of John's working and saving for her, she never would have consented to it; she would have been sure to get on somehow; they could have managed to live all together in the old house, she thought, for she and Polly would never quarrel. Watching John, she saw his eyes thoughtfully following the little fairy child that played about the room. There, she saw, was the difficulty. He loved that child. He would never give her up, never let her go out into the cold world to look for another shelter;

never—unless she was taken from him by those who had a better right to her. And so, with her as his first object, he naturally feared to take on himself at present any further cares, any deeper responsibility. Mrs. Randal saw it all; she looked at Lily climbing on John's knees, at the smile that brightened his face as he stooped towards her, and she said to herself, "Well, I don't say but what we've took in a little angel unawares. Still—what with Polly and a plain, happy sort of life, I doubt as my boy mightn't have done better; but there, bless her pretty face, poor lamb, one would think I grudged her the only home she's got! He's done right, and the LORD will provide."

## CHAPTER V

### *MRS. ALFRICK*

"O shame, O grief, when earth's rude  
toys, An opening door, a breath, a noise,  
Drive from the heart the eternal joys,  
Displace the LORD of Love!"

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*Lyra Innocentium*

"I never heard such nonsense in my life!" said Mary's stepmother. She was standing, dressed in her best, in the rather untidy front kitchen of the

farmhouse, where Mary was ironing some little pinafores. Her four younger children were playing about outside, swinging on the garden gate that opened into the steep lane leading to the village; finding what amusement they could till their mother was ready, rather to the peril of their Sunday clothes.

She was going to take them all to Carsham Fair. This grand event only happened once in three years. It was the finest pleasure fair in all the country round, and attracted crowds of people who hardly left their scattered villages and lonely commons between one fair and another.

Mrs. Alfrick was in high good humour. She had formerly lived nearer London, and often complained bitterly of the dulness of Markwood. She, like many other people of that neighbourhood, made those three-yearly fairs a date in her existence, counting up to them and down from them. This child or the other was born "a month afore last fair but one." Such an old man or woman in the village would never live to see next fair. It was just three months "afore last fair" that John Randal had picked up that child in the ditch. And it was "nigh on a year after last fair" that Mary had been such a silly as to promise to marry him.

More than two years ago that promise had been given. Mrs. Alfrick certainly did not wish to part with Mary, and would have grumbled heartily enough if John had found himself able to marry; but at the same time the delay, "wasting Polly's life," as she called it, made a fine text for her to preach upon when she wanted to tease the girl.

"No, I never did hear such nonsense!" she repeated; while Mary, who had been bustling about all the morning, helping her to get the work done, to dress the children and give them their early dinner, now bent gravely over her ironing-board, wishing the whole family would start off and leave her alone.

"There you are, thinking of nothing in the world but that child's pinners," Mrs. Alfrick went on, "while you might be going down to Carsham to enjoy yourself along with the lot of us. I do say it's a shame. If John was at home I shouldn't be surprised; but he's took a holiday and gone off to see his friends—just like his selfishness!—and left you to take care of his mother and that there foundling, as ought to have been sent to the workhouse long ago; and John, he ought to have done his duty and married you. It makes me downright sick to see the fuss you all make with that white-faced bit of a child. John thinks a sight more about her than he do about you, Polly, and you're a poor-spirited girl to stand it!"

Mary made no answer.

"There now, stupid, leave them pinners and come along. Your father'll be coming down presently, and he'd sooner see you there than not; and however am I to mind all the children by myself? It'll be the death of me. Come now, Polly, I'll wait for you ten minutes, that I will, with pleasure, and we'll call for Lily and take her down too. The children said she was crying 'cause she mightn't go. Mrs. Randal won't mind if she's with you, and serve John right, with his fidgets; he'll have to get over it. Come, Polly, you ain't bound to obey the fellow yet, any way."

"Now then," said Mary, suddenly standing upright with a very decided frown; "you know you're only wasting your breath. It's John's business whether Lily goes to the fair, and he told me to mind she didn't. So don't stop for me, if you please, for I ain't coming, and would rather stop away."

"Well, you might keep a civil tongue. I'm only speaking for your good," observed her stepmother. "Some day you'll know I'm right, when you're a bit tired of being that fellow's slave, and of seeing that conceited chit always put before you. Perhaps then you'll remember it was me as had to suffer, with all them children to look after, because you was that ill-natured and that selfish. Good morning to you."

She walked out of the house with an injured air. Mary was far too much used to her way of talking, however, to pay much attention. She called after her, "Look here! just tell Mrs. Randal as you pass that I've got the ironing to finish, and the house to clean up, and I'll be down as soon as ever I can."

Mrs. Alfrick did not condescend to turn her head or to make any answer. She called the children—the elder ones had gone on before—and they trooped off down the lane all together.

It seemed, however, as if her bark might be worse than her bite, for when she reached the blacksmith's cottage, she told the children to wait for her in the road, turned in at the little gate, and knocked at the door. It was opened by Lily.

The little girl was now, as far as they could guess, about six years old, for more than three years—it was now October—had passed by since that evening of summer storm when the old thorn roots had done

their best to shelter her till she found a safer refuge in John's kind arms. She was a small, slight child, fair and delicate-looking, with beautiful, expressive blue eyes, hair still in the silky golden curls of early childhood, and a general air of grace and refinement that marked some difference, real or imaginary, between her and her companions at school and play. They all admired Lily and gave up to her; and if Mrs. Randal had not been firm as well as kind, this, with John's indulgence, might have been very bad for the child's character. But though she was self-willed and accustomed to take the lead, the home life of the cottage taught her to be unselfish, generous, and truthful. Lily had her faults, but they were not of a serious or a mean kind, and her loving little heart was quite devoted to John and his mother. Towards Mary she never, even now, showed much affection; the girl was undemonstrative and shy. But she took her as a matter of course, as something belonging to John, and therefore to be trusted, to be flown to in trouble, to be obeyed when necessary.

Mrs. Alfrick, when the door was opened, stared down rather in surprise at the slight little figure in the simple blue frock.

"Well, my dear, and where's mother?" she said slowly.

"Poor Mrs. Nash is very ill," the child answered in sweet tones, hardly spoilt by the accent of the county. "They came and fetched mother. She said I mustn't mind stopping alone for a bit, 'cause Polly was coming."

"Well, I never! Let's come in a minute, there's a good child," said Mrs. Alfrick, pushing the door,

which Lily was holding open just wide enough to show her small self, and no more. "Well, I never! and so you're left all alone."

Mrs. Alfrick stood on the bright red tiles and looked round at the polished cleanliness, the exquisite order of everything in that little low room. She did not often pay a visit there, for there was not much love lost between John's home and Mary's. Her look now was one of both envy and admiration. "But how can one ever keep a thing clean with all them children about, and that girl Polly with half her heart down here?" she muttered, in answer to her own thoughts. Then she looked again at Lily, saw that the little face was not cheerful, that the eyes so wistfully lifted were not without traces of tears, and an idea came into her head.

"Serve 'em right, every one of 'em!"

Mrs. Alfrick had been a pretty woman in her time, and still possessed a certain attractiveness when she chose to smile and look pleasant.

"Mary ain't coming yet, my dear," she said; "she's got a lot o' work to do. I'd stop along of you myself, pretty, but I'm off to the fair with the children. There now; what's the matter now, what are you crying about, child?"

"I want to go to the fair," sobbed Lily; "I want to go with the other children."

"Well, to be sure!" murmured Mrs. Alfrick, smiling.

She sat down in the large red armchair, took Lily on her knee, and danced her about for a minute or two. She could not quite make up her mind, yet every moment the idea seemed more clever, the

temptation more irresistible. It would be a fine trick to play on that disagreeable prig of a John Randal, a fine punishment for Mary, with her ill-natured ways. It could not hurt the child; she would be with the others all the time.

"Look here, Lily," she said, "would you like to go to the fair with me and Tommy and the rest of us?"

The child stopped crying and looked up. Then she shook her curls violently. "John said I wasn't to go."

"Oh, my dear, that was 'cause he was going away to see Mr. Bland, and there wasn't nobody to take you. Mother and Polly don't like fairs. But he couldn't have no objection to you going along of me."

"Couldn't he?" asked Lily, her eyes dilating joyfully.

"Of course he couldn't! There, run and get your hat and jacket; that nice clean frock'll do, you're such a good little girl, you keep so clean. Lizzie's and Louisa's frocks ain't fit to be seen an hour after they've put them on."

Lily had disappeared within the staircase door before this speech was finished. In two minutes she was down again in her Sunday hat and jacket, dancing impatiently on the floor in front of Mrs. Alfrick, who found the red chair very comfortable after a morning of bustle and fatigue, and was much amused by looking round at the possessions of John and his mother.

"Well, child, are you ready?" she said.

Lily came close to her and held up a little key.

"My locket, please," she said.

Mrs. Alfrick stared.

"My locket that I always wear on Sundays," cried the child, with an impatient jump.

Mrs. Alfrick had never heard of the locket which was round Lily's neck when John found her, and had never noticed the child on Sundays.

"Well, my dear, where is it?" she said.

Lily pointed to a small tin box on a high shelf. Mrs. Alfrick, with a sigh, uprooted herself from the comfortable armchair, climbed on another chair which Lily brought, and took down the box, partly moved by curiosity. There was the little gold locket lying in cotton wool, with a fresh piece of blue ribbon. It was soon tied round the little girl's neck.

"Did John give it you?" Mrs. Alfrick asked.

"Don't know. I've had it always. It's my locket," was the only explanation to be had from Lily. "Mother says I mustn't ever lose it."

A suspicion of the truth then flashed across Mrs. Alfrick's mind. It was not likely, certainly, that John could have afforded to buy Lily a locket which looked like real gold. It also occurred to her that Carsham Fair was not exactly the right place for a child with anything valuable tied round her neck. But these considerations did not trouble her much.

"Serve 'em right for being so close. They never told me as the child had a locket."

She took Lily's hand and hurried her out of the house. The other children were waiting impatiently, and the whole party were soon far on their way to Carsham. Mrs. Nash, the sick neighbour to whose house Mrs. Randal had gone, lived near the church at the other end of the village. Mrs. Alfrick assured

herself she could not spare the time to go fussing back there. And John was safe away at Moreton with Mr. Bland; he had gone the night before, for no work was ever done on Carsham Fair-day, and he had not had a holiday since that week in London, more than three years before.

It was about an hour later that Mary, having finished her ironing, tidied the house, and seen her father off to the fair, started down the lane with Lily's pinafores folded under her arm. The village when she reached it was very quiet, strangely quiet it seemed to her, till she remembered that by this time nearly everybody in Markwood was on the way to Carsham. But this did not account for the utter stillness that reigned in the blacksmith's little yard, and in the garden, bright with autumn flowers, where Lily was so fond of playing. Mary looked round her almost anxiously, as she turned in at the gate. Even then she felt by instinct that the house was empty, and even then a quite unreasonable feeling of alarm laid hold upon her as she slowly, hesitatingly, laid her hand on the latch of the door.

The kitchen, of course, was empty; so was the tiny parlour beyond, where a few *Gloire de Dijon* roses were still looking in at the window. Mary laid down her parcel and went to the staircase door, opening it, looking up into the darkness, calling once or twice, "Mrs. Randal, are you there? Lily!" But no voice answered.

With a vague fear that something dreadful might have happened, the girl ran softly upstairs; but the rooms were empty. She hurried down again and went out into the garden: it was possible that Mrs.

Randal or Lily might be at the far end, behind the apple-trees. No; the garden too was empty; and she came slowly back down the pathway, puzzled, frightened, yet hardly knowing why. Mrs. Randal might have gone to see a neighbour; in that case she had no doubt taken the child with her. But it was not like her to go out when John was away; and it was still more unlike her careful ways to leave her house open. Mary remembered, however, that Mrs. Randal was expecting her that afternoon, and probably a good deal sooner than she had been able to come. Of course that was why she had left the door open.

Before going out to look for her, Mary glanced once more into the kitchen. Then she noticed Lily's everyday hat on a chair, her pinafore thrown on the floor, and also, most startling of all, the tin box where her locket was kept standing open and empty on the table.

"But wherever are they gone?" said Mary to herself. "Not to Carsham, surely!"

She went out into the road, looking up and down with wondering eyes. Hardly anybody was in sight; one or two men coming home early from their work to have their tea and be off to the fair; and one old woman, whom the village generally considered almost half-witted, leaning on a stick as she came hobbling past the forge. It was possible that she might know something, for she wandered about the village all day long, and took a deep, sometimes a mischievous interest in the affairs of her neighbours. Mary came out of Mrs. Randal's gate just as old Mrs. Pierce—Granny Pierce as they called her—was passing.

"Well, when I was as young as you," said the old woman, shaking her head at Mary, "I used to say as I'd dance at the fair so long as I'd a leg to stand on. But these young folks they're all in the dumps and doldrums. Well, what are ye looking at me like that for?"

"Nothing, Granny," the girl answered quietly. "I was just wondering if you'd seen Mrs. Randal and Lily. I can't make out where they've gone."

"Jane Randal ain't gone to the fair, she's not that sort, more's the pity," said Granny Pierce. "No more's your John. When be you two going to get married?"

"Oh, I don't know. Have you seen Mrs. Randal and the child? Tell me if you have, there's a good soul," said Mary.

"Yes, my dear, I'll tell you, 'cause you always, speaks civil-like to a poor old woman. They fetched Mrs. Randal more nor an hour since to Sally Nash what's got the high strikes. Seems as nobody else could keep her quiet. She'll go off in one o' them fits, you see if she don't, and a good job too, a poor measling thing. When you hears of it, my dear, you say Granny Pierce told you."

"But then, Mrs. Randal never took Lily with her there!"

"Not she, to be sure. Lily's off to the fair. She's sent her along of your stepmother and the children."

"Nonsense!"

"She did though. I'm old, it's true, and weak in my legs, but I ain't blind. I seed 'em all going off together, and that child running hand in hand with yer little brothers. All dressed smart for Sunday she

was, with that there blue and white hat as you trimmed yourself. Well now, ain't you got a copper or two in your pocket, Mary Alfrick, for a poor old woman as has told you all them news?"

"Oh, I can't stop now, Granny," said Mary.

The old woman stood and looked after her, growling remarks that were not complimentary, as Mary started off to run. In another minute she was out of sight, for she had turned up the lane to the farm.

Ten minutes later Mary, in her turn, having hurried on the good clothes in which she felt bound to appear outside her own village, was walking at her fastest pace, sometimes breaking into a run, on the way to Carsham.

Fond as she was of Mrs. Randal, she now felt, for John's sake, really angry with her. When John had said that the child was not to go to the fair! And if Lily had over-persuaded her into letting her go, the idea of trusting her to Mrs. Alfrick, who was hardly capable of taking care of her own children, and certainly not of specially watching over a child of remarkable appearance, like Lily! And the locket, too! The treasure which only came out on Sundays, when either John or his mother always took the child to church themselves, and did not allow her to play with the others. It really looked as if the summons to poor Mrs. Nash in hysterics had deprived Mrs. Randal of her senses. What would John say?

Mary's one idea was to hurry to Carsham, to find Lily and bring her home. She was a delicate child and would soon be tired; the shows, the noise, the disorder and roughness of the fair were more likely

to frighten than to amuse her, and Mary knew very well that her own relations would stay as late as they could, very much later than was right or wise, either for themselves or the children.

It was a quiet, cloudy afternoon; the beautiful woods, the tall trees that sheltered the road, were beginning to show the bronze tints of autumn; the old thorns, one of which had been Lily's cradle, were crimson with fruit. But Mary saw nothing as she hurried along the road, and took no notice of the traps full of noisy people that passed her, or the groups of walkers that she easily outstripped. There was a weight at her heart, though her feet seemed to have wings. Some great coming trouble whispered to her in the low wind that now and then rustled the leaves, hung over her in the darkening clouds. John's little darling! And almost the last words he had said to her were, "You'll look after Lily."

In the meanwhile, when Mrs. Randal was able to leave the poor patient a little calmer, and to make her way home, tired and longing for her tea, sure of finding it ready, and of seeing Mary and Lily's face full of welcome at the door, she only found a silent empty house where the fire had gone out, and she looked round in amazement, as Mary had done, on Lily's hat and pinafore and the open tin box. Where were they? What had happened? Mary had been there, evidently, for Lily's pinnafores that she had taken to iron lay in a heap on the table. It was certainly very strange. Poor Mrs. Randal turned pale and pressed her hand to her heart. She was both bewildered and frightened. The house door open! Well, of course, Mary might have been obliged to go

out somewhere on her own business. She might have run up home, and taken Lily with her, perhaps to see to the milk, if her father could not trust his man. But then it was so queer that she should have let the fire go out—and why should Lily have put on her best hat and her locket? It flashed into Mrs. Randal's mind that perhaps Lily's own relations had come and carried her off suddenly. And John away! But Mary—where was Mary?

She opened the door and went out into the yard. To her too the day seemed to have darkened, and a cold presentiment of misfortune touched her as if with an icy hand. Outside the railings Granny Pierce came hobbling along in her shabby cloak, wild grey locks escaping under her old sun-bonnet. No one else seemed to be astir in the quiet village street: everybody now was gone to the fair.

"Good afternoon, Granny," said Mrs. Randal, in her kind voice. "Have you seen my little girl or Mary Alfrick?"

"They be never gone without your knowledge, be they?" said the old woman.

"What do you mean?" asked Mrs. Randal, a faint flush rising in her pale face. "Gone where?"

"To Carsham Fair, to be sure. They're young, and it's the right place for 'em. When I was a girl," said the old woman with a chuckle, "I used to say as I'd dance at the fair as long as I'd a leg to stand on. Don't you tie up the young uns too tight, Jane Randal, or they'll give ye the slip one o' these days."

"You don't tell me as Mary Alfrick's taken Lily to the fair? She never would. You're talking nonsense, Granny, come!"

"I may and I mayn't," said Granny, with a cunning look. "What did you ask me for, if you didn't want to know?"

"It's impossible."

"You just listen to me. Never you trust them quiet ones. They's the worst of all. There never was a girl yet——"

"But did you see them going?"

"To be sure I did. And the little un with that sweet pretty hat on, all blue and white ribbons, as your John paid a nice penny for, I daresay."

Mrs. Randal stood quite still. The old woman watched her with half-mocking eyes. She had revenged herself on Mary, anyhow, for taking no notice of her request for a copper. Now she was thinking how some useful present might be extracted from Mrs. Randal.

But suddenly, much to her disappointment, Mrs. Randal turned back into her empty house and shut the door.

She set patiently to work to light up the fire, saying to herself, "What am I doing, to mind what that poor foolish old body says? If Polly has taken the child, Polly'll bring her back again. I'd best be quiet and get me some tea, and keep the kettle boiling against they come in. Polly won't be long, specially with John away. She'll know I'm anxious."

Nearly three hours later, when it was dusk, John lifted the latch and came in. His mother, still sitting solitary by the fire, started up to meet him.

"Why, mother—where's Lily?" were the first words he said.

## CHAPTER VI

### *AT THE FAIR*

"For a Crowd is not Company."—*Bacon's Essays.*

The High Street of Carsham, generally so quiet and deserted, was crowded and noisy enough that day. The wide space in front of the old market-place was filled up with swinging boats and merry-go-rounds, and rows of booths ran down each side of the wide street next the pavement. A field between the street and the river was occupied by shows—a wild-beast show, a theatre, a shooting-gallery, and all the various amusements that attracted the country people who stood staring in groups, or wandered slowly in and out of one tent or another. Every hour the crowd went on slowly increasing, the noise and life of the fair strengthening. A band was playing in the street, and music was also going on in hot and stuffy dancing-saloons at the back of several public-houses. These were doing a fine trade.

Altogether it seemed that Carsham and its neighbourhood was determined to have a day of thorough enjoyment, to spend as much money as could be scraped together. It was an opportunity that only came once in three years, and people were determined to make the best of it. Whole families

flowed in from quiet villages and lonely commons; old and young, on foot or on wheels, they kept on coming; and this would go on till late in the evening, till the fair, which had always a few London roughs mingled with its crowd, was neither a safe nor respectable place for quiet people.

But there was not much rowdyism to be seen in the afternoon, when Mary walked in from Markwood; the amusements in the street were harmless enough; the gay booths were crowded with women and children, many of whom she knew, busily buying all manner of rubbish. The crowd was dressed in its Sunday clothes, and only now and then some rough lads with their horse-play disturbed its generally quiet enjoyment. The scene was lively enough, and noisy enough; but the noise was harmless. Mary met with no pushing or rudeness of any kind as she made her way along the street, and her eyes were attracted by many sights that amused them; but she did not stop to look at anything or buy anything. She could not be happy till Lily's hand was in hers. Then she thought she would buy the child a fairing, and would insist on her coming home at once. They would be at home long before John was; and he could hardly be angry with his mother for letting the child go. Though the more Mary thought of that the more astonished she felt that Mrs. Randal should have done it. A particular person like her! it seemed unnatural.

Mary suddenly stood still in front of a toy-stall, at which she appeared to stare with the deepest interest. But in reality she saw nothing; it was a new thought that had stopped her. Was it possible that Lily had

been left alone in the house for a few minutes, and had dressed herself and run away to join the other children? She wanted to go to the fair, Mary knew; she had been crying about it the day before. And it was very possible that, if she had done it, Mrs. Alfrick would not have taken the trouble to send her back. The fact of her wearing the locket seemed to make this a reasonable idea, for Mrs. Randal was even less likely to send the locket, the one means of identifying Lily, than to send the child herself.



"Mary suddenly stood still in front of a toy-stall." —P. 76.

### **"Mary suddenly stood still in front of a toy-stall."**

"Well, she *is* a naughty little thing!" said Mary to herself. "And John won't have her punished. Well, I do sometimes wish that child was back where she came from."

Here Mary was roused by the keeper of the toy stall, who began bringing forward her best goods to tempt such a respectable-looking purchaser, and seemed a good deal injured when she shook her head and walked away.

She went on to the very end of the street, looking eagerly about among the women and children that crowded her path, but nowhere did she see the Alfrick children, or their mother, or Lily. They were not in the boats, or on the merry-go-rounds, they were not standing about listening to the band near the market-place, they were not to be seen among the ever-thickening crowd that made its way slowly along the line of booths. Mary began to feel lonely, as well as anxious. Some of the ruder people, the strangers, stared at her, and she felt that Carsham Fair was hardly the place for a girl of her age to be wandering about alone. Her presence there would not please John, she knew, any more than Lily's—and if he could see her there alone, he would certainly be angry. However, Mary had not time to think much of this. She must find Lily—that was her first work, her first duty; and then they would both turn their backs on Carsham Fair quickly enough—gladly enough too, as far as she was concerned, for she had seldom felt more anxious or more miserable.

She began to think that Mrs. Alfrick must have taken the children into one of the shows. Making her way slowly back down the street, towards the part of the town where these were, she now met a few neighbours from Markwood, who stared and grinned at the sight of her. Was this Miss Mary Alfrick, who generally treated common amusements with scorn?

Mary stopped in spite of their looks, and asked if they had seen any of her people. "No." One woman had noticed Farmer Alfrick going into the Wheatsheaf Inn; but there was nobody else with him.

"Anything wrong at home, as you want him back in a hurry?" asked another.

"No, thank you," Mary answered civilly. "But they're all here, Mrs. Alfrick and the children and all—and I wanted to find them."

She went on down the street, instantly losing these acquaintances in the crowd.

"Her young man had ought to be with her," said one of the women; but then they stopped in front of one of those fascinating booths, and forgot all about Mary.

She stood about for some time at the gate of the field where the wild-beast show, the theatre, and other attractions were set up. It was not a nice place for waiting; there were a good many unpleasant-looking people about, and a little way down the lane there was an old and not very respectable public-house, much patronised at these times by the roughs and tramps who came from London. For some time Mary stood looking down the lane towards this house, which was actually hidden from her, however, by two great chestnut trees that had not yet lost the orange masses of their leaves. Music, though only of a barrel-organ, was going on merrily; there were shouts of laughter now and then, and sounds as of people dancing on the other side of the trees.

Mary saw and listened to all this without realising it much. She was trying to make up her mind to go inside one of these shows after another in search of

Mrs. Alfrick and the children. It did occur to her that she might follow her father to the Wheatsheaf and ask for his help. But she shrank with a sort of pride and disgust from facing him and his companions there. He was likely enough to answer her rudely. And after all, the rest of the party could not be very far off; they must be somewhere in the fair. Mary tried to persuade herself that it would be all right—and still she was miserable.

The afternoon was closing in fast, too; it would soon begin to get dusk; she must have been standing about Carsham more than an hour already, and now another half-hour was soon wasted, while she waited about the entrance of the shows. She was just making up her mind to venture inside the wild-beast show—they might be there—though the roars and growls to be heard were more likely to frighten children than to attract them—when suddenly a crowd of people came pouring out of a large tent, the entrance of which was ornamented with a terrifying picture of an immense black man with an axe, and an announcement that The Black Giant, a drama in three acts, would be performed twice that day.

In another moment Mary had rushed among these people and seized her stepmother by the arm. Three or four children were clinging to her, but Lily was not among them; a moment's glance showed Mary that.

"Mother, where's Lily?" she cried. "You've left her in the tent! Come along back and fetch her. I expect they won't let me go in."

Mrs. Alfrick was flushed, tired, and extremely cross.

"Plague take the girl!" she exclaimed. "So you've come after all! You might as well have stopped away. Nothing but Lily, Lily, from morning till night—I'm out of patience, and no wonder. Lily ain't a baby in arms, and I've got my own children to think of first—and as for that John of yours as picked her up in the ditch, he'd better stop at home and look after her, and you may just go and tell him so."

Mary turned white. She held Mrs. Alfrick's arm fast, and drew her to one side, while the other people hurried on to the gate.

"Look here," she said in a low voice. "Tell me this moment—what have you done with that child?"

"She's a naughty girl, Lily is," protested Mrs. Alfrick, while the other children began to cry; they found no enjoyment in a quarrel between Mary and their mother, for Mary's crimes were usually visited on them. "I gave her buns and sweets just like my own—I told her to come along with them and we'd all enjoy ourselves together."

"Where is she?"

"I paid a penny for her to go into that there theatre along of us—and it's more than many would have done for a brat like her—and we hadn't been there a quarter of an hour when she begins to cry and say she's frightened, just because there was a few murders on the stage—like there always is, you know. Well, I couldn't have her making a disturbance in there—they'd have turned out the lot of us in no time—so I just sent her along out with Lizzie, and told 'em both they was to stop about the gate till we come. Lizzie's a good girl and does as

she's bid. She was pleased to go out with Lily; you know what a fuss she always makes of her."

"But where are they now?"

"Do just stop your noise, Mary. Ain't I telling you? They're somewhere outside here, waiting for us. I won't deny as that performance was longer than I expected—but don't you worrit now. They're as right as they can be."

"I hope so," said Mary grimly. "But all I can say is, I've been waiting about here for you half-an-hour or more, and I've seen nothing of them."

"Oh, it was longer ago than half-an-hour," said Mrs. Alfrick. "They've got back to the stalls and the music. Lily wanted to stop by the music before."

"Lily ought never to have come here at all, that's where it is," said Mary. "You don't mean to tell me Mrs. Randal sent her?"

She would hardly have confessed it, but she was rather more at ease now. Lizzie Alfrick was a steady child of nine years old, the best of the family. She would indeed, with a better bringing up, have been a nice little girl; but Mrs. Alfrick's system of alternate spoiling and knocking about was not likely to improve any character.

Mary had no satisfactory answer to her question.

"Well, and if she did," said Mrs. Alfrick, "it's no business of yours, as I can see. You ain't married to John yet. When you are, take my word for it, you'll have a bigger dose of Lily than you care for. Him and his mother, they're both right down silly over that child."

Mary knew her stepmother too well to go on asking questions. After all, it did not much matter

how Lily got there. The next thing was to find the two children, who had evidently strayed away and lost themselves in the fair. This was not an easy business, for the crowd had thickened very much since Mary first came, and the advancing dusk, and the lights which were beginning to glimmer everywhere, made it extremely difficult to find anybody.

Mary set out to make her way along that crowded street once more. It was becoming like a bad dream, this perpetual hurrying up and down through the noisy fair, her ears and brain bewildered by the sound of voices, of music, or the discordant shriek of penny trumpets. She pushed along through the people. There were plenty of children wedged in among those groups that surrounded the lighted booths, but nowhere could she find either of the children she was looking for. She soon, being active and not encumbered with clinging hands, had left Mrs. Alfrick and her family some distance behind, and was working her way desperately through those stationary crowds.Flushed with trouble and fatigue, no summer night could have seemed to her more exhausting. The heavy air of that street weighed on her as if it had been a close and suffocating room, though some of the people were shivering, and a cold little October wind was whistling along, shaking the tents and making the lights flicker wildly.

"It's going to rain," said a voice. "It always do rain on Carsham Fair."

Mary searched to the end of the street, and round the market-place, without success. Then she turned

back, and after a little while met her stepmother and the children. Mrs. Alfrick was crying now, and telling one or two sympathisers in the crowd that she had lost her little girl, that Lizzie had been led away into mischief by the worst child in the village, a nasty good-for-nothing who had been picked up in a ditch.

"I've heard tell of that child," said one of the women near. "It was John Randal, the blacksmith over at Markwood, weren't it? He was a soft, not to send the child to the Union."

"I wish to goodness he had," said Mrs. Alfrick, with a deep sigh.

At that moment Mary pushed her way through the crowd to her stepmother's side.

"It's no good," she said. "I've looked in every corner. We must fetch father out of the Wheatsheaf and have a proper search made. There's bad characters about, and those children may have been stolen. We must go to the police."

"Fetch your father out of the Wheatsheaf! You may do it yourself, then!" cried Mrs. Alfrick, sobbing again, while several of the bystanders laughed.

Mary hesitated. She knew it was too true that her father, after a couple of hours at the Wheatsheaf, at fair-time too, was not likely to come out in a state to give any reasonable help. Every moment the curtain of dusk seemed to descend lower and lower above that flaring street; the shadows, the dark corners, the crowd that thickened perpetually—all made it harder from moment to moment to find what was lost. And yet—"They must be found!" said Mary to herself:

though she wondered how long her brain would bear the bewilderment, the pushing, the noise and clamour in which this search had to be carried on.

If she could only see or speak to some respectable person with a grain of feeling and sense! But alas! as a rule, such persons were not to be met with at Carsham Fair.

As she looked round with distracted eyes, there was a sudden movement in the little crowd that surrounded them, and Lizzie Alfrick broke through and rushed to her mother, burying her face in her gown.

Mary's joyful exclamation was checked upon her lips. For the child was alone and crying bitterly; there was no sign of Lily; and then a terror seized on Mary, compared with which her former anxiety had been nothing. Now, for the first time, she had to think of John's treasure, John's Lily, really alone, deserted and lost in the fair.

For a minute the confusion was too great; Mrs. Alfrick's sobs and scoldings, Lizzie's screams, the loud chatter of the people standing by—Mary could do nothing in the midst of all this. But presently she took Lizzie's hand and pulled her away from her mother.

"There, stop that noise," she said impatiently. "Be a good girl and tell me where Lily is."

"I don't know," said Lizzie, looking solemnly up into her face. "We lost each other. We was dancing to the organ over there, and it got so dark, and a man brought a lantern, and then I couldn't see a bit; and I went dancing round the trees and come back again, and Lily was gone, and then I couldn't find mother;

and I went back to the house and they drove me out and telled me not to come bothering there. I thought I was lost too."

"But why were you such naughty children as not to stop where mother told you till she came out? If you had, I should have seen you there," said Mary.

"We didn't go far off. Only as far as them big trees, Polly. We went and picked up chestnuts—and then there was a man playing the organ and some children dancing, and we came and danced too. There was a woman too, and she brought Lily a stick of candy and said she was the prettiest little girl she ever saw in her life. Lily gave me half."

"Who was the woman? Did she belong to the house down there—the Travellers' Joy?"

"I don't think so," Lizzie said vaguely. "I didn't see her when I went back."

Mary stood still and thought for a moment. Somehow, all her distraction and bewilderment were gone. In spite of all the deafening confusion, her head was now clear.

"We must go to the Travellers' Joy and inquire there," she said to Mrs. Alfrick.

"Go where you please," was the answer. "I ain't coming. Lily ain't my child, and I won't be plagued with her any longer. She's up to some mischief, I'll be bound. You'll find her dancing in front o' that organ and getting more sticks of candy."

Mary turned away, only saying—"If you won't come with me, take my advice and go home with the children. It's nearly dark now. Lizzie can come with me; she may be a help, and I'll take care of her."

"She shan't then," cried the mother. "When I've just lost her and found her again! I always did say you was the most selfish girl living."

"Very well. Stay with your mother."

Mary let the little girl's hand go, and in another moment was alone in the crowd.

Without much difficulty, now that she knew where she must go, she made her way to the end of the street, turning down past the meadow where the shows were. The crowd was not so thick here, but it was very unpleasant in the gathering dusk. Under the chestnut-trees it was nearly dark; no playing or dancing was going on there now, but the windows of the old inn beyond were lit up brilliantly, and a great noise of stamping and shouting was to be heard from within. Mary knew that it was not a place for a girl like herself, but without hesitation she went straight to the open door, and asked a rough-looking woman who was crossing the passage if she had seen a pretty little girl with fair hair. She was answered by a torrent of bad language that drove her away from the door, her face burning with indignation and horror.

For a long time she waited about, as near as she dared, watching everybody who went in or came out. Something in the woman's look and manner, though she seemed to be anything but sober, made her suspect that she had seen Lily, that she knew where she was.

Mary was almost in despair. She thought, as she moved restlessly round and round in the darkness under the great trees, for a time which seemed to her quite awful in its length and hopelessness, that there must be respectable people in Carsham who would

help her if she could get hold of them—police if she knew where to find them—a clergyman's house, if she could venture to apply to a total stranger. Mary was a shy, reserved girl, and had lived all her life at lonely Markwood—but now she would have had courage to do anything, if she had only known what to do. In the meanwhile, it grew darker every moment; the autumn night, black and starless, was settling down on Carsham Fair.

## CHAPTER VII

### *IN THE DARK*

"I stood alone (as some forsaken lamb  
Goes bleating up the moors in weary dearth)  
Crying, 'Where are ye, O my loved and  
loving?'"

—E. B. BROWNING.

John Randal did not wait for much explanation from his mother. In truth, she had little to give him. It was impossible for her to imagine where Mary and the child were gone, unless to the fair. Why, in any case, should Lily have been dressed in her Sunday clothes? And though Mrs. Randal agreed heartily with John when he said—"But Polly never would take her there!" yet the moment after she was shaking her head and sighing over the certainty that, for some unknown reason, this was what Polly had done. Poor old Granny Pierce had no object to gain by telling a lie about it, as far as she could see. "No, John dear—Polly never would!" said Mrs. Randal. "But then you know, if she did, of course she meant to bring her home before dark. The child got round her, I expect. She did want to go, Lily did. It seemed a bit hard, with all the other children going. If you'd been at home, John, maybe you would have taken her yourself, just for an hour or so. Don't vex

yourself over it too much. They'll be in soon, anyhow."

John's face grew sterner and graver every moment.

"No, mother, I should never have taken her. What's the good of leading a child like that into low sights and low company! I could never have believed it of Mary. Why, only yesterday, when I said good-bye before I started, she says to me that all her family was going to the fair, and that she was coming down to tea with you and Lily. Ay, says I, that's right, and mind Lily don't get away with the others—for that child is like quicksilver, I said, there's no holding her; she flies here and there like a little winged spirit. And Mary, she says, Never you trouble, John, she is safe with your mother and me. Well, I'm vexed with Mary, that's the truth, and I'm bound to tell her so."

John turned to take up his hat and stick.

"You'll stop and have some tea, my dear?" said his mother. "The kettle's boiling."

"No, mother, I can't swallow my tea. They ought to have been in long before this," said John. "I'm going straight off to look for them. Ay, and I'll take the lantern; for it'll be as black as a wolf's mouth in an hour."

"Don't you be hard on Polly, John," his mother called after him as he went out into the dusk. "Maybe she'd some good reason."

"We'll settle it between us," John answered, and the yard gate shut sharply behind him.

On the darkening road it was not long before he met a few of the more respectable Markwood

people, coming back from the fair. He stopped the first of these and asked rather stiffly if they had seen any of the Alfricks. One woman said she had seen Mary, rather distracted like, searching about for her mother and the children.

"Did you happen to see if our Lily was with her?"

"No, I didn't see her—I should say she wasn't."

John marched on with great strides. Half-way to Carsham he met Mrs. Alfrick and her children dragging wearily along the road, the younger ones crying, cross and tired. The dusk was drawing in so fast now that John's tall figure towered beside them almost before they knew that he was near.

"Oh I say, John, you did make my heart beat!" cried Mrs. Alfrick, and then, fearful of blame to herself, she began to pour out a torrent of confused words about stupid girls and tiresome children, and how she was that moithered she didn't know which way to turn, and she was sure it was not her fault, and if Mary had behaved like a sensible girl from the beginning this trouble wouldn't have come upon them.

"Where is Mary now, Mrs. Alfrick? Where have you left her?"

John's voice was loud and angry.

"I ain't accustomed to be spoke to in that style, young man," said Mrs. Alfrick. "Ask a civil question, and you may get a civil answer. Well, I wasn't likely to stop there all night, was I, with all these children—and Polly wasn't likely to come off and leave her precious treasure there alone?"

"She's got Lily with her, then! what on earth are they doing there at this time of night?"

"Well, John, it's the shortest way to tell the truth. Lily's got lost in the fair somehow, and Polly's looking for her. I couldn't do no good, you know, with all these brats to look after."

"He's gone, mother!" said little Lizzie Alfrick, pulling her mother's gown. "But he didn't ought to be angry with Polly, 'cause it wasn't her fault that Lily got lost."

"You hold your noise, and don't correct your betters," replied Mrs. Alfrick. "He may be angry with who he likes, for all I care, and if you go chattering I'll knock your head up the chimney as soon as we get home."

Before John reached Carsham it was so dark under Sir Henry Smith's large trees that he lighted his lantern, being afraid of missing Mary by the way. Long before he entered the town, he could hear the discordant noises and see the flashing lights of the fair. At the near end of the bridge his hurried steps were suddenly checked by Mary's rushing up to him and clasping her two hands round his arm.

"O John!" she said in a low voice, which trembled on the edge of a sob. "Oh, some good angel's brought you! Have you heard? have you met mother? what shall we do?"

"I've heard that you have lost Lily—that's what I've heard! Took her to Carsham Fair and lost her—that's enough bad news for one day," said John. "You, as I trusted like myself! You took Lily to the fair and lost her, while I was away."

The flush in Mary's tired face faded to a deadly paleness as John spoke. He lifted his lantern and looked at her; the poor girl gazed back at him with a

bewildered horror that he did not in the least understand. For a moment she felt as if she must faint; her hand leaned heavily on his arm, and his voice as he went on speaking seemed far off, mingled with the rushing of some distant sea.

"You understand? you've deceived me—you've broke my heart—I shall never trust in you again. And coming home without her, were you? Well, go on then. Take the lantern, for you can't see. Tell my mother I'm not coming back till I've found the child."

Mary's lips moved. "Wait a minute, John!" she tried to say, but could not utter a sound.

He shook his arm free from her detaining hand, and tried to give her the lantern. Its light flickered up and down, on the great boughs of the trees that stretched overhead, on his dark face, pale and stern, in a white heat of anger such as Mary had never seen there before, certainly never with herself for its object.

"Stop—let me tell you," she began, with a violent effort. "You oughtn't to speak to me like that——"

"Speak to you! I don't want to speak to you at all. I wish I had never trusted you—but it's the last time!"

"Very well," Mary said. Somehow, his extreme anger, which altered his voice, making it hoarse and shaky, so that she would hardly have known it, had the effect of raising anger and pride in her too. He was so utterly unjust, if he only knew it; and he would not let her speak to tell him. This was not a man to make a girl happy. She stepped back from him into the road; he still held the lantern in a hand that trembled.

"Very well; let it be the last time," said the girl. "That's my wish as much as yours. The place where Lily got lost is under the big trees outside the Travellers' Joy. My belief is, she's inside that house now, but the woman abused me and wouldn't answer nor let me go in. That's all I can tell you. Good night."

Her voice was as hard and cold as John's was angry.

"What am I stopping here for then?" he exclaimed. "Here, take the lantern—and whatever possessed you to take that child anywhere near the Travellers' Joy, or to go near it yourself! It's little better than a den of thieves."

"Ah—well, you see you didn't know what a wicked girl I was," said Mary bitterly; and then she laughed.

John stared at her for a moment; he could hardly believe his ears. She suddenly took the lantern from his hand, and started off on her way home; the next instant he was half across the bridge hurrying into the town.

Mary went straight back to the farm, and reached it safely, having overtaken her stepmother and the children in the lane. She would not answer a single question, only saying that she had met John, and he was gone to look for Lily. The look in her face gave Mrs. Alfrick some secret anxiety; she suspected that the two had quarrelled, and knew very well that it was all her doing.

"Well, serve him right! only they're sure to make it up again, worse luck! She's too good for him, as

her father always said—an ignorant, stuck-up fellow!"

In the meanwhile, in the gathering darkness of that evening, a small covered cart was slowly climbing the long slope of Dog Down.

A man and woman walked by the side of the horse and talked together in low tones. In the cart a child was tied to the seat, muffled in shawls and handkerchiefs, so that Lily in her bright fairness could hardly have been recognised. She was terribly frightened, poor little girl; she was moaning to herself, crying out for John, yet afraid to cry loudly, for the woman, after petting and cajoling her at first, had threatened to beat her within an inch of her life if she made any noise.

It had all been very puzzling, and Lily could not understand it. She had very vague ideas of her own past life, but she had a notion, half from memory, half from the talk of other children, that Mrs. Randal was not really her mother, nor John her brother; that she had been found somehow and brought home—to the home which she loved and never wished to leave again. And now this woman, who came out of the public-house with smiles and admiring words and sticks of candy, and kissed her, and looked wonderfully pleased to see her, had enticed her into the house "just for a minute," and the man who was playing the organ had followed with a very unpleasant grin on his pale face, and they looked at Lily's locket, and said to each other, "It's her sure enough! Well, this is a piece of luck!" And the woman had looked hurriedly at her other clothes, and kissed her again, and told her she was a sweet

child and her poor mother had found her again, and now she would come along with them, wouldn't she? and they would show her no end of pretty things, and she should have a new frock and a necklace and lots of barley-sugar, and dance to the organ as much as ever she liked. But by this time Lily had become alarmed and dissatisfied. She did not like the woman's red face, and shrank away from her kisses; as for the man, he looked ugly and cruel, and she was frightened. She cried and stamped her foot, and said, "No, you ain't my mother. I want to go back to my mother—I want to go back to John."

"Make yourself easy, pretty one," said the man. "I don't know who John may be, but he's no business with you. And as for your mother, she's a long distance off."

"There—didn't I tell you it was me?" said the woman.

"You won't get her to believe that in a hurry," he said, with a hoarse laugh.

Then they agreed it was best to start as soon as possible, before any friends the child might have should begin a search for her; and so they changed their tone, silencing her with rough threats, and wrapped her up and smuggled her away under the tilt of the cart, unknown even to the people of the Travellers' Joy.



"The poor little horse toiled dismally up the long slippery hill. —P. 97.

### **"The poor little horse toiled dismally up the long slippery hill."**

The poor little horse toiled dismally up the long slippery hill, while the two from whose hands John had first rescued Lily walked together at his head and talked over their recovered prize. At last the reward that had long ago been offered for the lost child seemed to be really within their grasp. They could claim it now with an open face, for this time it could not be said that they had stolen the child.

"'Twas a lucky thought of yours, going down to that fair," said the woman to her husband. "As to me, I never expected to see her again. I couldn't believe my eyes when she came dancing round the tree with that very same locket round her neck, and looking just the same, only a bit bigger. They're good people as has taken care of her all this time. They might as likely as not have sent her to the Union. I wonder what their name is. There's a John as she talks about like as if he was a big boy."

"We won't make inquiries about John," said the man. "He'd maybe put in a claim for half the reward. Well, that's a queer part of the country, where they never hears nothing. But don't you go boasting too much. We should have been rich folks three years ago, if you hadn't made a fool of yourself. Just because I sent you and her down to lie quiet in one o' them lonely villages for a bit, till I could find out how the land lay, you must needs be so careful as to leave her under a hedge while you went drinking. I ain't going to trust you again in a hurry. My word, I wonder I didn't murder you!"

"Well, there, Dick, let bygones be bygones. What'll you do next?"

"Next? Why, lie safe at Moreton till first train to-morrow morning, and then get up to London and back to the old shop. Then let the police know as we can give information of the whereabouts of Miss—there, no names."

"Wouldn't it be safer to go all the way with the cart?"

"No, stupid. It's likely enough they may follow us from Carsham—depends what sort of people they

be, this here John and his lot. We must get out of this country as quick as ever we can."

That night John's Lily sobbed herself to sleep in a little black hole of a room, at the back of a low public-house in Moreton. The man and woman had changed their tone again, now that she seemed to be safely in their hands; perhaps it struck them that unkindness might not pay in the end. They did their best, though without success, to make her eat some supper. Finally the woman carried her upstairs, so weary with grief and the day's excitement that the fair little head could not hold itself up, but drooped and lay on its jailor's shoulder. Not unkindly the woman unwrapped the child and laid her down on a grimy little bed.

"Now you are a silly," she said. "Me and Dick's the kindest friends you've got, my dear. We're going to take you to a beautiful house where there's lots of servants and all kinds of pretty things, and sweets and toys as you never saw the like—leastways not since you was lost—and gentlemen and ladies to make ever such a fuss with you, and beautiful children to play with, and sweet new frocks so as you'll never be poor and shabby again. Oh, and such a lot of rooms—" she went on, seeing that the tired blue eyes had opened wide, and that in the dim flicker of the candle Lily was gazing with awakened interest—"and pictures on the walls and lots of lovely flowers——"

"The blue lady on the stairs!" Lily said suddenly. Some remembrance of her baby life, some impression that had lain asleep in the utterly changed existence of the last three years, woke up then in

Lily's childish brain. She looked round the black little room with bewildered eyes.

"There—to be sure, yes," the woman said in wheedling tones. "And then you was lost, you don't remember about that—" it certainly was better that the child's memory should not revive there—"and then your poor dear papa, he looked for you everywhere, and now me and Dick, we've found you, and if you're a very good child we're going to take you back to him. Yes, little one, we're good friends, me and Dick."

But if any vision of the past had flashed for a moment on Lily's mind, it was soon forgotten. She was cold, she was tired and sick with crying, and she longed for the only home she really knew. So when the woman began again to talk of the beautiful house and all its riches, she turned her head aside with an impatient moan.

"I want John—I want John and mother!"

"Never mind, little missy—don't be naughty now. You'll see them again some day. Now go to sleep like a good girl."

"I must say my prayers."

In a moment she had scrambled down from the bed, and was kneeling on the dirty floor. "Our Father, which art in heaven." Such holy words, such a sweet and silvery little voice, had not often before been heard in that black den of a room. They were very strange to the ears of the poor degraded woman who stood by with the crooked dip candle in her hand, looking down on the fair golden head, the innocent face bent, the little hands reverently put

together. She could not have moved or disturbed the child, even if Dick had been thumping on the door.

"O LORD, forgive my faults and comfort poor sinners, and bless all those that love me, for JESUS CHRIST'S sake. Amen."

It was the little form of prayer that Mrs. Randal had taught the child, with a thought in her heart for some distant father and mother who might have lost Lily. To-night she waited a moment, and added quickly out of her own head—"O LORD, please take me back to John."

"You didn't know what you was saying," said her companion, rather grimly, as she tucked her up in bed. "Whatever John may be, he isn't your own father, and it's him you're going back to, my dear."

After that she left her alone in the dark, and Lily, frightened once more and broken-hearted, sobbed till she fell asleep.

Very early the next morning she found herself sitting alone in the waiting-room at Moreton Road Station. Outside, a wild tempest of wind and rain was tearing past the wooden building, rattling the windows, streaming noisily down the roofs. The cold breeze that whistled among the booths at Carsham had brought this, and the second day of the fair was likely to be anything but cheerful. Dick and his wife had no objection to the bad weather. He despatched her and the child early to the station, lingering himself to the last moment in the comfortable bar of the inn. She, arriving at the station, found it was half an hour too early, and could not resist running back for an extra glass of something hot to cheer her through the journey. She kept out of his sight,

knowing very well that he would not approve of her leaving the little girl alone. She had herself no fears on that score. Lily was neither old nor clever enough to run away. She left her quite quiet and sad and sleepy in a corner of the bench, so wrapped in shawls that her little face was hardly to be seen.

She had only been alone there a few minutes, when two people with wet umbrellas and waterproofs hurried along the platform and came in. They were an elderly man and his wife, who sat down side by side, and began talking of the business that was taking them to London by the early train. At first Lily in her misery hardly noticed them; but presently the man said—"It was a good thing that our friend John had not such weather as this for his long walk."

"Ah! I thought he might as well have stayed till this morning, but there never was such a young man for going home to his mother. Still, I've nothing to say against him. Of all your friends, Isaac, John Randal's the one I like the best."

"And well you may, Jemima," said the old schoolmaster. "He deserves both respect and affection. I am anxious to see Miss Mary Alfrick; I wish John would bring her one of these days to pay us a visit. And his little Lily too. It would give me sincere pleasure to see those three together."

"I'm afraid that poor child stands in the way of his marriage," said Mrs. Bland. "Goodness me, what's this?"

For suddenly the bundle of shawls in the opposite corner scrambled down from the bench, shuffled as

well as it could across the floor, and made frantic efforts to climb into her lap.

"What little girl is this?" said the schoolmaster.

Lily pushed the shawl desperately back. With large eyes wet with tears she made her silent petition for help.

"Please," she said then, "I'm John's little girl, I'm John's Lily. Please take me home."

## CHAPTER VIII

### *THE TRUTH*

"We both have undergone  
That trouble which has left me thrice your  
own:  
Henceforward I will rather die than doubt."

—TENNYSON.

Rather to his wife's disappointment, Mr. Bland decided at once that he could not go to London that day. In a few minutes, in the dingy waiting-room, while she sat on Mrs. Bland's damp but friendly lap, and while the noise of the rain died gradually away, as if to listen to her story, Lily told John's two friends how some wicked people had stolen her away from the fair and said that John and mother should not have her any more.

"Well! It is a queer story to be sure. There's something behind as we don't understand," said Mrs. Bland. "As to this child, Isaac, wherever John picked her up, she is a little lady. Now I wonder if those people knew——"

She murmured these words mysteriously, while Lily gazed at her with heartfelt anxiety in her blue eyes, and repeated, "Please take me home."

"Yes, little one, and that's what we are going to do," said the schoolmaster. "Lift her up, Jemima, if

you please. I'll carry her, and the umbrella too, if it isn't too wet to be of use. London must keep for another day: this child's safety must be seen to first."

"It's very inconvenient."

"Our convenience is not at present the first thing to be considered," said Mr. Bland gravely. "And London town was not built in a day, and is not likely to disappear in one. Come, my dear. We will take John's little girl home, Jemima; she shall be warmed and fed. I will then hire Dobson's trap and drive her over to Markwood. You can give us the pleasure of your company, if you feel so inclined."

"You'll both get wet to the skin. Better write to John to come and fetch her," said Mrs. Bland, rather disapprovingly.

"I shall do as I would be done by," said the schoolmaster.

Lily curled one arm round her new friend's neck, regardless of his wet mackintosh. She pressed her cold little face against his rough grey whiskers, and kissed him affectionately. As he carried her away from the station, hidden under his large and dripping umbrella, she looked over his shoulder and saw in the wet and misty distance the woman from whom she had escaped, hurrying back through the mud to rejoin her charge. Lily hid her eyes, and tightened her hold on Mr. Bland. "Take me home quick," she whispered in his ear.

Later in the day the rain cleared off entirely, and there was a clear yellow light shining in the sky when Mr. Bland, with Lily wrapped in Mrs. Bland's largest cloak nestling close by his side, turned the steady old horse from the high road into the

Markwood lane. This was a horse of great virtue, except that he would not understand that Mr. Bland and Lily were in a hurry. They met a good many stragglers from the fair, though Mr. Bland drove through by-lanes, so as to avoid the main street of Carsham. Some of these people were noisy, but the horse took no notice of them. One man called out, "Why, ain't that the little kid as was lost? There's been folks hunting for her all night, high and low, up and down, all round about Carsham. Where did you pick her up, master?"

"Never you mind, my friend," replied the schoolmaster. "She'll be safe at home in half-an-hour, and nobody need concern themselves further."

Dobson's old horse, not being accustomed to such long journeys, chose to proceed through Markwood at a foot's pace, and stopped at several houses before he reached the blacksmith's door. Mr. Bland was not great as a driver, and neither whip nor reins nor encouraging "chucks" had any effect on the animal. At last, Lily dancing on the seat with impatience, and followed by groups of such village children as were not at the fair, the trap drew up at John's gate in the glow of the evening sun.

A woman was passing at the moment; it was Mrs. Alfrick, who, not being altogether bad, had spent some hours of self-reproach. "Well, I never!" she said.

But neither Mr. Bland nor Lily took any notice of her, and she hurried on home with the wonderful news. Mr. Bland was quite occupied with climbing down from his high seat, begging Lily all the time to wait till he could lift her down. As soon as the child's

feet touched the ground, she sprang across the yard. At the door she waited a moment; and Mr. Bland never forgot the pretty, refined little gesture with which she turned and held up her finger to him, then gave three gentle taps on the old door.

"Any common child would have burst right in," he said to his wife afterwards.

Mrs. Randal's kitchen was hardly as tidy and bright as usual that afternoon. She had not had the heart for her usual cleaning and polishing, having sat up half the night for John, who had never come in at all till a couple of hours ago. He had found no trace of the lost child; Lily's own father, when he lost her, could hardly have been in a state of deeper dejection, more hopeless despair.

"I never would have believed it of Polly," said Mrs. Randal. "To take that child to the fair, when she knew your wishes as well as yourself, not to mention how uneasy I should be—and then never to come near me, John, last night or this morning! I'd have gone up myself to the farm, but what with worrying there was no strength left in me—besides, I couldn't bear to be out of the house, for fear you should come home—but I did think Polly——"

"Don't you mention Polly no more," said John, in a rough hoarse voice which did not sound like his own.

His mother lifted her tired eyes, full of a new sorrow, but his face was hidden in his hands, and she could read nothing there.

"I met Polly on the road last night," he said. "We had words, and no wonder. All's broke off between

us two. So now you know, mother, and just please to say no more about it."

"Oh, my boy, it's a double trouble," sighed Mrs. Randal, while the fresh tears welled up in her sore and aching eyes.

Presently John went out of the house, and she sat brooding over the fire, falling half asleep now and then from utter weariness. From this dozing state she was suddenly roused by those three little taps on the door. It seemed to her at first that she was dreaming.

"Who's there?" she said in a low voice.

Then the latch was lifted, the door opened very slowly, inch by inch, and a fair little face looked in.

"Mother!" said Lily.

Mrs. Randal, in breathless surprise, was still holding the child in her arms when Mr. Bland followed her into the kitchen.

"Here we are, among old friends," he said, his kind face alight with smiles. "How are you to-day, Mrs. Randal? And where's John?"

"Ob, mother, we rode in a trap all the way—such a long way—and the horse went so slow!" Lily was explaining. "And the men said there was the little girl as was lost and her folks was looking for her; but Mr. Bland said it didn't matter now she was found. Mother, where's John?"

"I don't know, my precious. Go and look for him; he's wearying for you," said Mrs. Randal tenderly. "He's in the forge or the garden, maybe. Now, Mr. Bland, you're welcome indeed. Please to sit down. You've brought back the sunshine to our house, sir. John's well-nigh distracted over losing that child."

"That was only to be expected," said the schoolmaster, sitting down in John's chair. "And now I should like to know how she got lost, for her story was difficult to understand. Knowing John's views, I was surprised that she ever found herself at Carsham on fair-day."

"No wonder," said Mrs. Randal with a sigh. "You couldn't be more surprised than I was. Mary Alfrick took her to the fair."

"Did she really? Are you sure of that?"

"As sure as we can be. Ah, that's half my grief, and a half that can't be mended, Mr. Bland. The best girl and the faithfulest and steadiest girl for miles round. Well, you know the name she had in this country for being superior. Ever since my John got engaged to her, I've felt that his future life was safe to be all right and happy, and I've left off fretting over leaving him, as I must some day—a day not far off, too, for I'm not the woman I was. Well, Mr. Bland, those two have quarrelled over this business of the fair, and of losing Lily. They've had words—John told me himself—and all's over between them."

Mrs. Randal's voice was choked by tears.

"My dear friend," said Mr. Bland, "I'm most sincerely sorry to hear what you tell me. And you think this melancholy split is quite beyond mending?"

Mrs. Randal nodded and shook her head; she could not speak.

"Life is thorny, and youth is vain," muttered the schoolmaster, who was well read in the poets. "Thus we break in an instant what we would give our lives to repair. But I cannot reconcile the child's own story

with what you have told me, Mrs. Randal. She described herself as going to the fair with other children. She told me that *Mrs.* Alfrick—not *Miss*, or *Mary*—had sent her out of the theatre because she was frightened—that she and another child had then danced to an organ, after which she was decoyed away by the people from whom my wife and I recovered her."

"Well, I don't know," said Mrs. Randal vaguely. "All I know is, Mr. Bland, John told me as he and Polly Alfrick had had words about it and broke off the engagement. But do go on, please. Who was it as run away with Lily—and how did you chance to find her?"

In answer, Mr. Bland gave an eloquent account of the scene in the Moreton Road waiting-room that morning. It appeared from this that he had not seen Lily's captors. He knew from her own chatter that they were a man and a woman—"ugly and nasty," she described them. With a grave face and earnest manner, watching Mrs. Randal all the time, he went on to repeat more of the child's talk. He thought it of great importance, for it had convinced him that Lily was a child stolen with the intention of gaining a reward; and he was inclined to think that the same man and woman were the cause of both her disappearances.

While these two were talking in the kitchen, Lily, happy and excited, had found her John in the garden. He was gathering some late apples, and it was not a wise day to choose for this, as grass and leaves and fruit were all soaking from the late torrents of rain. But John was not in a wise frame of mind. He was so

miserable that he set to work on the first thing that occurred to him, without stopping to consider. There was already a heap of shining apples under the damp tree when Lily came running down the path. It would have grieved Mrs. Randal to see them, for after such treatment they were not likely to keep, and it was the best apple-tree in the garden.

John swung himself down from the tree, when Lily's voice called him, and caught the child up in his arms.

"So you've come back, little one!" he said.

The strong young man was very pale, his eyes were wild and hollow; he looked—and his looks told the truth—as if he had been tramping all night and had eaten nothing for many hours.

"Who brought you back? Where did you come from?" he said to Lily.

In answer she poured out a torrent of musical chatter, chiefly about Mr. and Mrs. Bland and the drive in the trap and the slowness of the old horse. John listened for some time in silence. Presently he sat down on the garden bench, where many happy hours had been spent on summer evenings, and took the little girl on his knee.

"Look here—let's get a bit further back," he said. "Mr. and Mrs. Bland found you at the station—how did you get there, little one?"

"In a cart. Oh, it was dark and nasty and cold. And then they put me to bed in a room, and I was frightened—but I said my prayers—and do you know"—her voice was smothered against John's shoulder—"I asked GOD to please to bring me back to you. And so He did—didn't He?"

"Yes—well, who put you to bed, dear?"

"Oh, she did—Dick's wife—I don't know what her name was—but she said how she and Dick was my true friends, and she said they was going to take me to such a beautiful house where my papa lived, and brothers and sisters, and lots of beautiful pictures—and I seemed to know——"

Lily stopped, wrinkling her brows with a puzzled expression.

"Go on; what did you seem to know? did you remember about that house?" said John.

He spoke very gently, but he had arrived at that moment in life—some of us have known it—when we realise that something we have cared about very much is lost for ever—really for ever—that no change in this world's circumstances can bring it back again. Yes, this little treasure of his had a home of her own; he quite knew it and believed it. She had returned to him, but only for a short time. He must lose her, and he had already lost Mary.

"Did you remember about that house, Lily?" he repeated.

"No—I don't think so. I seemed to be carried upstairs, and there was the blue lady up on the wall, she looked at me. But it was a little dream."

"Well now, this woman, and this man Dick—what was they like to look at?"

"Oh, ugly!" said the child, shaking her head in disgust. "Her face was all red, and I couldn't bear her to kiss me, I tried to get my face away. Dick had something else to do than to look after little girls, you know. He looked after the horse, and he played the organ—but he seemed awful pleased to see me,

and him and her, they both looked at my locket and twisted it about, and they said to be sure it was the same."

"Had Dick got a little bit of a moustache, and a whitish sort of unwholesome-looking face?"

"I don't know. Yes, I think so."

"It's the same couple as before," said John to himself. "Now they've some object. Was they really going to take that child home, I wonder? Look here, Lily, how did they come to leave you alone at the station?"

Lily shook her head. "She wrapped me up on the seat, and told me not to stir till she come back. She said she wouldn't be a minute, but she was ever such a time, and Mr. and Mrs. Bland they come and took me away."

"Well—and so you're back again. How did those people get you away from the fair?"

There was a certain sternness in John's voice now.

"Was it naughty to dance under the tree?" Lily asked in rather frightened tones. "Mrs. Alfrick said I was a naughty girl 'cause I cried at all them murders, and then she sent Lizzie and me out of the theatre, and while we was waiting we heard the music and ran and danced a bit, and then Dick's wife she came out of the house and spoke to me and give me some candy, and then she got me to come along with her, and then I couldn't go back to Lizzie, and I cried ever so, and then they carried me and put me in the cart. Was I naughty, John?"

"No, dearie," the young man answered. "There was nothing to blame in you. Those that took you to

the fair, it was all their doings, and no thanks to them as worse didn't come of it."

"She said you'd let me go," said Lily, with wide blue eyes fixed upon his face.

"She never said that, did she? Well, I never would have believed it of her."

His eyes fell, and his face became crimson. Lily stared at him in astonishment.

"I telled her you said I wasn't to go," she murmured, "and she said that was 'cause there was nobody to take me. And she said she'd take me along of the other children, if I'd make haste and get ready. And I run up and got my Sunday hat, and then she fetched down my locket and tied it on for me, and she said it was a pretty locket and she'd never seen it before, and she wanted to know if you gave it me, and I telled her I'd had it always and I wasn't never to lose it."

"What are you talking about, child?" said John, bewildered.

"About my locket. Here 'tis. I haven't lost it, please."

"What did you mean, saying as Mary Alfrick had never seen that locket before? Why, she's tied it round your neck on Sunday, dozens of times."

"I never said—I don't know"—Lily stared and hesitated, herself quite as much at a loss as John. He looked angry, too, and she was frightened. A little over-wrought, tired with the excitement of those two days, the child was ready to burst out crying. She could not answer John, the meaning of his question being entirely beyond her.

"There, there!" he said suddenly. "Never mind, Lily. Mary ought to have known better than talk all that stuff and take you to the fair. That's all. It can't be helped now. Don't cry, my pretty flower; it was no fault of yours, you know. Taking you inside such places as them theatres too! Mrs. Alfrick and all was there, then, as well as Mary?"

Lily nodded. She still looked puzzled, her brain being rather too young to understand John's mistake. But her next words enlightened him, though dimly.

"Polly was coming down to tea with mother and me. She'd got my pinnies to iron. I 'spect I ought to have stopped for her. Mrs. Alfrick said she wasn't coming yet awhile, and mother had gone to Mrs. Nash and left me all alone."

John passed his hand over his face. Slowly, gradually, the knowledge was dawning on him that he had made a tremendous mistake. He tried hard not to frown, not to frighten Lily by any hard word or rough tone. He spoke after a minute's pause, asking the question on which his life's happiness now seemed to depend, while his heart beat so heavily that the words could hardly make their way.

"Who was it as took you to Carsham, Lily?"

"Mrs. Alfrick," was the instant answer.

"And Polly—was she there too?"

Lily shook her head violently. "No."

"But she was at the fair. I know she was, for I met her. Didn't you see her—wasn't she with you there?"

"No."

Lily had never been known to speak a word that was not true.

John stared at her in silent surprise, but never thought of doubting her.

"This is a black business," he said after a minute, more to himself than to her. "Somebody's been telling lies. The next thing is to get to the bottom of it. Come along, little one. Let's go and say thank-you to Mr. Bland for bringing of you home. He must have had a job, a troublesome piece of goods like you!"

Something of John's old happy smile shone in his face as he kissed the child and lifted her to his shoulder and carried her through the garden where flowers were almost over, under the dripping apple-trees.

"Good afternoon, John," said the old schoolmaster, stretching out his hand. "We didn't expect to meet again so soon."

"No, sir. Thank you for bringing her home," said John.

He stood in the middle of the kitchen with a grave, thoughtful face. He did not look altogether unhappy, but a kind of bewilderment seemed to weigh upon him. The eyes of his mother and his old friend were full of sympathy; they knew that the loss of Lily had not been the only trouble of those twenty-four hours. The child, when he put her down, still clung to his hand.

"Go to mother, dear," said John, and Mrs. Randal held out her arms.

For a minute there was no sound but the loving words that she whispered in Lily's ear.

"Mother, there's been some big mistake," John burst out suddenly. "The child says it wasn't Mary as

took her to the fair after all. It was Mrs. Alfrick as walked her off before Mary came down."

Mrs. Randal stared and shook her head.

"Oh, that can't be, John. Granny Pierce told me she'd seen them. And—why—you met Polly yourself coming back. You said so."

"Yes, of course," John said impatiently. "Polly knew the child was lost—she'd been looking for her—but I see now it wasn't Polly as lost her. I expect she went after them, when she found her stepmother had taken the child. That's what she would be sure to do. What a blind fool I've been!"

His voice shook.

"Well, my lad, that quarrel will be soon made up," said Mr. Bland consolingly; but John seemed hardly to hear.

"I don't understand, my dear," murmured Mrs. Randal. "Granny Pierce said——"

"Oh, mother, don't you go setting that poor old creature's word against our Lily's here. She's told me the solid truth. Polly never fetched her yesterday; she never even saw her at the fair. I believe that child's word, mother, for she's never told you nor me a lie in her life yet."

"No more she has," said Mrs. Randal, stroking Lily's fair curls. "But, John, if that's so, why hasn't Polly been down here before now? I'm sure she must have known as I wanted her bad enough."

"She wasn't likely, mother, after the words as passed between her and me."

There was another painful minute of silence. Mr. Bland's kind eyes were full of tears as he watched

his old scholar. Lily jumped suddenly down from Mrs. Randal's knee and clutched at John's hand.

"Come along!" she cried. "Let's go and fetch Polly."

John lifted her in his arms for a moment, then set her down on the floor. "Stop here, little one," he said.

Then he left the house, without another word to any of them, shutting the door and the gate sharply behind him.

"That matter will soon be settled, I trust," said the schoolmaster. "And now, my good friend, may I point out that your kettle is boiling over."

# CHAPTER IX

## *PARTED*

"And trust me not at all or  
all in all."—TENNYSON.

John had never walked so fast in his life. Almost before Mr. Bland had politely lifted off the kettle and filled the teapot under Mrs. Randal's directions, he was half-way up the narrow muddy Jane that led to Alfrick's farm. There he found Mrs. Alfrick, with a worried countenance and every sign of a recent fit of crying, leaning over the garden gate.

"Well! So you've got the child back! Where did Mr. Bland pick her up, I wonder?" she began at once. "And I hope you don't bear no more malice, John!"

"How did you know?" said John gruffly; but he went on without waiting for her answer. "Look here, don't talk about me bearing malice, Mrs. Alfrick, but just tell me the truth about this affair, for I mean to know it. You ain't going to deny that you took Lily to the fair—and Mary—she had no more to do with it than my mother herself."

"If you know so much, what's the good of asking?" said Mrs. Alfrick, with a slightly hysterical laugh. "Well, you'd have been made of stone yourself, John Randal, if you'd resisted that child's face when she said she wanted to go. Yes, it was me as took her, and thinking no harm, you may be sure, in giving her a bit of amusement like my own children. But if I'd known all this row and fuss was

to come of it, I'd have locked Miss Lily in the house sooner than take her with me. Why, there was my Lizzie, she nearly got lost too—and Polly—nothing would satisfy her but racing after us to fetch that precious child back—and so naturally you took it into your stupid head it was her that lost her, while all the time it was nobody's fault but the child's own. If she'd kept by me, she'd have been safe enough. I'll never be bothered with her again, that's positive. What did become of her, after all?"

"That doesn't matter," said John. "Some people stole her and took her off to Moreton, and Mr. Bland found her at the station."

"Well, that was queer." Mrs. Alfrick would have asked a great many more questions, but another subject was occupying her mind, as well as John's. Standing outside the gate, he was looking up over the low garden wall at the front of the house, his eyes wandering wistfully from window to window. If only Mary would look out at one of them!

The woman at the gate, though foolish, selfish, spiteful and small-minded, was not altogether bad and barbarous. She was now really sorry for the misunderstanding between John Randal and her stepdaughter, and not altogether because its consequences seemed likely to fall upon herself, and had already brought her a scolding from her husband. There is a corner of romance, of sympathy with true love, in most women's hearts, and Mrs. Alfrick's heart was not without it. She had always abused John, but she could not help respecting him; she had always complained of Mary, but she valued her none the less for that.

"Polly ain't in," she said, "so it's no use you looking for her. She went down to the Vicarage half-an-hour ago."

"To the Vicarage! What has she gone there for?"

"Mrs. Elwood's staying there, you know. Years ago she told Polly if ever she wanted to go out to service she was to let her know."

John flushed angrily. "She's not going to service," he said.

"She says she is. Her father's angry, of course; him and me, we neither of us can spare her very well. It's worse than the thought of her getting married, 'cause no one knew how long you and her would be about that. But I wonder at you looking so surprised, John. Didn't you understand as it was all over between you and Polly? She told us so, and she said she couldn't abide to stop in this village to be pointed at by all the boys and girls, and so she was going down straight to the Vicarage, and she'd get the Vicar to write to his sister by this very post if she was gone—but the children saw her yesterday, so I expect she's found her there still."

John stood like a stone. The colour faded from his brown face and left it very pale. There was certainly a little gratified malice in Mrs. Alfrick's eyes as she watched him, mingled as it might be with pity and regret.

"Anyone might make a mistake," said John. "And she needn't have taken it up like that altogether."

He turned round and walked away, without a word of thanks or farewell.

"He is a lout, that John Randal," reflected Mrs. Alfrick as she leaned on the gate and looked after

him. "I'm not going to waste sorrow on Polly, for I do think she's got the best of it. She won't be tied down for life to this deadly dull place, nor married to the grumpiest fellow in it, barring her father. My word, girls needn't be in a hurry to get married; they little know all they're giving up. Same time, I hope John'll bring her round, for she'd be a serious loss to us all, Polly would, and to me in particular."

John walked as far as the Vicarage gate without meeting Mary, and then, for half-an-hour or more, he walked restlessly up and down under the churchyard wall. One or two people passed and stared at the industrious young blacksmith idling there; but after all, it was the second day of Carsham Fair, and the country had not yet settled down again to work. They asked him no questions, for John was not in the habit of giving an account to his neighbours of what he chose to do.

He was standing at last half hidden above the gate, in the shadow of the Vicar's trees, when he heard a step in the drive, then the quick opening and shutting of the gate, and Mary came out into the road. She did not look in his direction, but walked off quickly towards the village. In a moment John had overtaken her.

"Will you please to stop; I want to speak to you," he said, in a voice half choked with excitement.

Mary stood still. She lifted her eyes for a moment, then let them fall, but John could see that they were tired and swollen with crying, and that her face, generally so happy and healthy with all its quietness, looked pale and worn, as if she had gone through some great grief. There was no softening in

that glance at John, and no change of colour. It was sorrowful, but it was also hard; it checked the young man's impulse to draw her close to him and make up their quarrel on the spot.

"What's this I hear about service, Polly?" he said, with a timidity quite strange to his character.

"Oh! that don't signify to any one but myself," the girl answered coldly. "I thought you had got some news about Lily, perhaps."

"So I have. She's found:" and John hurriedly poured out the story. He was so puzzled by Mary's manner to himself that it was almost a relief to stand there and talk on some other subject.

"Well! I'm glad to hear it," said Mary, when he paused, and she began to walk on.

"What are you in such a hurry about?" murmured John, his shyness returning.

"What's the use of standing here?" Mary retorted.

"Look here," said John desperately, "come with me a bit the other way. I want to know the meaning of all this, please."

"All what?" said the girl; but she made no objection to turning round with him and walking the other way. He did not speak for a few yards, walking beside her with his head bent and his hands in his pockets. He stopped at the corner stile of the churchyard, went up and leaned upon it. Once more the grass looked brightly green, a yellow light was shining from the west; but there were no children's voices to break the stillness now, and the shadow of the great yews was gloomy.

"Mary," John said, "it was in this place you promised to marry me. You was sitting on this stile—perhaps you don't remember?"

"Yours is a long memory, and mine a short one," Mary answered, after a minute of silence, while a little shivering wind rustled the upper branches of the yews. "It seems you have forgotten what happened yesterday."

"No, I've not forgotten. Nothing of the kind."

"You've found the child," Mary went on relentlessly, "and now you begin to see you were a bit hard on me. She's told you, I suppose, that however she got to the fair, it was no doing of mine."

"But why on earth didn't you tell me so yesterday?" cried John. He seized both her hands, but she drew them away from him instantly.

"None of that, if you please. You forget we've done with each other. And you forget how I tried to tell you and you wouldn't listen to a word. No, you'd never trust me again. No, you were sorry you ever did trust me. No, I'd deceived you and broke your heart."

"Mary, you're breaking it now," he said. "I was mad just then; I didn't know what I was saying. There, can't you forgive me? Let bygones be bygones. I'll never be happy without you."

"Oh yes, you will," Mary said. She stopped a moment and then went on hurriedly—"I never minded what my stepmother said, because I knew it was half of it spite, but many's the time she's mocked at me and said you thought ever so much more of that child than of me. I never believed it, I never troubled about such nonsense, not till yesterday."

"And you believed it then, did you?" said John, half to himself.

"Many's the time," Mary went on, "as I've stood up for you in the village, when people said you were just silly over that child and spoilt her down to the ground. I told them it was only natural you should think a lot of the little thing, when you'd saved her life, one may say, and she had no friends in the world but you and Mrs. Randal. Of course you couldn't help making a fuss of her—and you know as well as anybody that I've tried to help you with her, and behaved to her as kind as I could. I'm not saying this to praise myself, but just to put you in mind. It wasn't likely I should expect that losing Lily would take away your trust in me. Love and trust goes together, to my mind, John. You'd ought to have known for certain, whatever people said, as I had nothing to do with Lily's going to the fair. You ought as soon to have doubted yourself as me. But it seemed as if the losing of the child took away your senses; you had no thought nor understanding left for me. No love and no trust neither—and if you think I'm the girl to marry without them, and knowing all the time as something may come between us any day—that poor child or anything else as takes your fancy—why, you're mistaken, that's all. You say you were mad yesterday. I was in my right senses, and when I said it should be the last time, I meant it. So now you know."

Mary made this long speech in a low monotonous voice, without a break in it or any sign of feeling. Her face was white, and once her eyes swam with

tears, but John's own were hidden on his arm against the stile, and he saw nothing.

He said nothing either. To have lost Mary, the one love of his life, his idea of all that was good and noble and sweet in a woman, whose promise had given such brightness to his future—it was a trouble indeed, like nothing he had ever known. If Mary only knew it, nothing in the whole world, not even the helpless little lost child, who had wound herself round his heart by the fact of her helplessness, was half such a treasure as she. He felt as if half his life was torn away—and all through his own fault. He realised that clearly enough, and could not defend himself, being truthful and modest by nature, against the things that Mary had said. But he did think in his heart, as he leaned there on the stile, that Mary ought to understand and forgive him. He would have forgiven her, he thought, if she had lost her temper, and had been unjust to him. The truth was, that her extreme pride, and the coldness which belonged to it, stood in the way of their happiness quite as much as his own anger and thoughtless injustice had done.

He said nothing, being at no time so quick of thought and speech as Mary, and presently he heard her speaking again. She was very quiet, and full of good sense; she reproached him no more. She told him, in a voice that sounded hard and unfeeling to the poor fellow's ears, that the Vicar and his sister, Mrs. Elwood, had been very kind; she had talked things over with them; they quite understood her wish to be away from Markwood, and Mrs. Elwood knew of a situation under the matron of a large

orphanage, to take charge of clothes and linen, which seemed to be just the kind of thing she was fit for.

"She's going to write about it to-day," said Mary.

John stood upright suddenly; he was a little angry with her now.

"All right. I wish you well, I'm sure," he said. "You'll be wanting to get home—don't let me hinder you, please. I'm going the other way."

Mary's eyes widened with astonishment, and her pale cheeks flushed suddenly.

"Very well. Good evening," she said. "I'm sorry I've detained you so long;" and without even another look or shaking hands they parted.

Mary walked back through the village with her head very high.

It was an hour later before John got home. Mr. Bland was gone; his mother had put Lily to bed, and was sitting by the fire, watching her kettle and waiting for him. She looked sadly at his face and asked no questions. But presently she said, "John, dear, do you know what Mr. Bland says? He says you ought to try all you can to find Lily's parents."

John made no answer at all, but stared gloomily into the fire. In his heart he wished Mr. Bland would mind his own business, for why should he lose everything? Dark, selfish, miserable thoughts, like flocks of evil birds, seemed to hover over him and shut out heaven.

## CHAPTER X

### *IN DANGER*

"But if it were not so—if I could find  
No love in all the world for comforting—  
"

—E. B. BROWNING.

Mary Alfrick went away to the Orphanage, and Markwood lived its life without her. She was not very much missed by the neighbours, from whom she had always held rather aloof. At first there was constant grumbling at the farm, for only now that Mary was gone did her relations really feel how much of the work had been done by her. Life seemed harder than ever to Mrs. Alfrick; but Lizzie, a good and willing child, did all she could to help her mother, and by degrees the household settled down to a bearable sort of daily life, though less tidy and less comfortable than in the old days when Mary was at home.

The blank that she left at the blacksmith's cottage was less easily filled up. No one could be Mary's substitute there. Mrs. Randal never complained, but in truth the girl had been her right hand for years. She could hardly remember the time, since Mary grew out of childhood, when she had been without her constant affection and ready help. Then it had always been a hope in the mother's heart that some

day Mary would be really her daughter; and she had even smiled a little to herself over the extra quiet, steady ways of both, which delayed the engagement, she fancied, longer than was necessary.

And now all was over. Mrs. Randal knew that Mary had her full share of temper and pride, and she was not altogether very much surprised that John had failed to make it up with her. She told herself that after all a girl worthy of John did not exist. In her first sorrow and disappointment, she could have said a few hard words of Mary; but when something of this kind escaped her, John got up suddenly and flung himself out of the room, after which she said no more.

From him, no one ever heard a word of reproach or complaint, and one day, meeting his mother's eyes full of tears, he said rather impatiently, "Don't you go worrying about me, mother. I ought to have known. I deserve all I've got, and more."

"Well, I hope she knows what she's lost," sighed Mrs. Randal.

"Don't blame her," said John; and Lily just then running in from school, neither of them said any more.

To both John and his mother, through that cold and sad winter, life would have been dreary indeed without Lily. The child's intelligence developed day by day. She grew taller and stronger, thus repaying Mrs. Randal's tender care, and was always trying to save her trouble in all sorts of pretty, thoughtful little ways. There was something graceful, fairylike, almost brilliant, about the child sometimes, which used to draw the attention and admiration of people

passing through the village. As the spring came on, a good many strange faces were seen there, for at the end of February the line of railway through that country was finished, and a station was opened four miles off.

Under these circumstances, John watched over Lily more carefully than ever. When it was time for her to come home from school, he might often be seen standing at the forge door, all black from his work, with the glowing furnace behind him, and perhaps one or two great cart-horses waiting to be shod. Then presently the small figure in the large pinafore would come flying along the road, sometimes with other children, but more often alone, hurrying back, the first of all, to help "mother" with tea. When she was safely near the gate, John would give her a nod and a smile, while she threw him half-a-dozen kisses, and would turn back contentedly to his work. Lily was not allowed to go inside the forge now; it was found disastrous to frocks and pinnafores, and there was no Mary to wash them out, as in the old happy days.

All this time, John had by no means forgotten Mr. Bland's hint about Lily's parents. The taller and prettier she grew, the sweeter and more thoughtful her ways, the oftener those words returned, and weighed upon him. He knew that something ought to be done; but he did not know what, and he put off the subject from day to day. Sometimes it crossed his mind that the Vicar might tell him what to do. Mr. Sands was a very quiet, good old man, who never interfered unasked in the affairs of his people. He had often noticed Lily, but had never said anything

to John about the child. John was shy, and the Vicar was shy; they liked and honoured each other, but had never had a real conversation in their lives. John felt that if he went to the Vicar on purpose, it would just be giving up Lily of his own free will. It might be right—he hardly knew; he could not make up his mind to do it.

One mild afternoon in February, when the sun was shining softly, and the gardens were full of snowdrops, and the birds were chirping in all their new joy of spring, John heard the voices of children in the distance, and looked out as usual for Lily on her way home to tea. A little group, running and dancing, soon approached him, but Lily was neither in front nor in the midst of it. Neither could he see her beyond; she had not yet reached the turn of the road: it was the strangest thing for Lily to be last among the children.

"Where's Lily?" John called out to them as they came near.

"She's by the school; there's a man talking to her," was the answer.

"What man? A stranger?"

"Yes."

They all began to laugh when John set off running down the road. He looked a very rough object in his working clothes, no hat on his head, face and hands grimy. He was carrying an iron bar which he had forgotten to throw down, and this gave him a fierce and threatening appearance.

In the school door stood the schoolmistress, a delicate young woman, looking anxious and pale. In the middle of the road a shabbily dressed man was

talking to Lily, who stood staring at him with a sort of fascinated terror. When she heard John's running steps, she started and sprang to meet him with a quick little cry; then, clinging to his hand, burst into a passion of sobs and tears.

"What's all this about?" said John angrily. "Who are you, and what have you been saying to the child, to frighten her like that?"

The man did not answer for a moment. He was a small, white-faced man, with a light moustache and a look of attempted smartness. He seemed to wish to be civil, though the appearance and manner of John were certainly not encouraging.

"I didn't mean to frighten little Missy," he said. "I know a bit more about her than you do, perhaps, and I was just asking her a question or two, to see what she knows about herself."

"And what business is that of yours?" demanded John.

"Or of yours either, if you come to that. You ain't no relation, and I suppose you don't pretend to be. If that little girl will come along of me, I'll take her straight to her father."

"You'll do nothing of the sort," said John furiously.

"Who's to prevent me?"

"I'll prevent you."

"Who are you, I should like to know?"

The man turned a little whiter, and his voice was quite as angry as John's, though not so loud. The schoolmistress came down from the doorstep, and laid her hand on Lily's shoulder.

"Let her come in with me a minute, Mr. Randal," she said.

But Lily clung to her friend and would not let him go. He turned quite gently to the mistress.

"It's all right, Miss. I know something about this gentleman, and I'll soon send him off. Well, sir, my name's John Randal, if you want to know, and this here little girl is under my care. Who her parents may be, I know not. I know she was alone and friendless when I found her, and I'm pretty sure you have no right to her, whatever you may say. If you know who has, and if you'll please to tell me their name and address, I shall see what's best to be done."

"I dare say you will," said the other man with a slight grin. "In cases like this there's sometimes a reward offered, you know."

"Oh, a reward! I was wondering why you should mix yourself up in it," said John. "It isn't the first try you've had after that reward. Lily, isn't this the man as took you away from Carsham Fair? I thought so. Well, sir, I know something about you, you see. And I've seen you before."

"That's not true, any way."

"You lost the child, or your missus did, somewhere down in this country, and you've been trying to track her ever since. I'd have known you again anywhere. I saw you in London at the station—you two—dragging the poor baby between you. I come down in the train with your missus and her, and saw no more of them till I found the baby in the hedge between here and Carsham. D'ye think I'm going to give her up to you again, feeling pretty sure

as you never got hold of her by fair means in the beginning?"

"What do you mean by that, young man?"

"I mean that you or your wife, or both of you, stole this here little girl, on purpose to get the reward as was sure to be offered," answered John, with perfect coolness. "And now do you think you're likely to get hold of her again in a hurry? I shall keep my eye on you, and you'll be lucky if you escape the police."

"There's nothing can be proved against me. That there child was left on a seat in the Park, and my wife found her."

"The police may guess whether that's true."

"Any way, it's no affair of yours. The child don't belong to you."

"I've heard say possession's nine points of the law," John answered. "You may get your reward after all, if you like to go and inform this child's parents how she's in charge of John Randal, blacksmith, Markwood, and if you like to face the police and me. For there'll be a clear understanding before you get that reward, I can tell you."

The other man stood silent for a minute; then he laughed spitefully.

"You're a nice nurse for a young lady," he said, "bullying and swaggering all over the place with an iron bar in your hand, like as if you was going to knock some one on the head. She's had a rough time of it, I guess. Well, I won't say what I'll do, Mr. Randal. One thing I can tell you for certain—you won't have that child long."

"And one thing I know—I shan't part with her to you," John retorted.

He turned round, still holding Lily by the hand, and walked off home.

The schoolmistress, who had again retreated to her doorway, watched the strange man anxiously for a minute, while he stood in the middle of the road, looking sulkily down and muttering between his teeth. Presently he too strolled off in the opposite direction. John walked along silently till Lily pulled at his hand.

"John, did you know it was Dick? Isn't he nasty and cross? I was glad when I saw you coming."

"Never you speak to him again if you can help it," said John.

"But I could not help it then. I wasn't naughty. Oh, John, I wish I might stop with you all day in the forge! It's such a nice safe place. I don't want ever to go away."

"It's a dirty place for you, Lily," said the young man. "Well, little one, maybe that fellow's right and I shan't have you long. You've got a beautiful home somewhere, I expect. It's been just an angel's visit to poor mother and me."

"I don't want a beautiful home," said the child. "Please, I want to stay with you."

She repeated this once or twice as they went home together through the village street, but John had not much to say. He looked very grave, and swung the bar in his other hand in a manner that Dick might justly have called threatening.

When they reached the cottage it was nearly tea-time. Lily ran in to put her school things away and

have her hair brushed, while John went to wash and change his coat. The child began of course chattering to Mrs. Randal about Dick and all he had said, and all John had said to him. Mrs. Randal, with the teapot in her hand, looked anxiously across at her son.

"It's all right, mother," he said with a slight smile. "No more o' that, Lily. Mother don't want to hear about a fellow like that. I'll talk to her afterwards."

They were not alone till the child had gone to bed, for John would not let her go out to play as usual; he could not feel sure that Dick might not still be lurking in the village. When she was gone, he told his mother the whole story. She looked extremely grave.

"Well, my boy," she said, "we thought it must come some day, and so did Mr. Bland. Yes, John, I've a feeling as the time's drawing near for us to lose little Lily, and to be sure life will be dreary without her—but we've done our duty by the child, and we must find some comfort there."

"Cold enough comfort," said John, staring into the fire.

## CHAPTER XI

### *THE STRANGER*

"I looked, and to myself I said,  
'The letter L.'"

—JEAN INGELOW.

But days and weeks and months went by, and in spite of Mrs. Randal's presentiment, no one came to claim Lily; it seemed that her parents, if she really had any, were no nearer finding their lost child than when she disappeared four years before. John had somehow expected that Lily's father and mother would be among the first passengers from London by the train that now stopped only four miles off: to Markwood people, in their remoteness, this seemed like a station at their very doors. And in truth, when the long-delayed discovery came at last, the railway had something to do with it.

But all the same it was a strange chance—only there is no such thing as chance—which made that midsummer Sunday morning so beautiful that Sir Henry Smith asked his friend Colonel Maxwell if he was up to a walk of three miles or so, and would like to go with him to a little out-of-the-way village called Markwood, where there was a very pretty old church and a nice old vicar who used to be his tutor, but whom he had not seen for years.

This was what the railway had done. It had brought the owner of Carsham Park back to his old home, with the intention of living there part of the year, at least. Sir Henry Smith was a restless man, fond of travelling, fond of art and of his fellow-creatures. He had found the old house, so far from a station, too dull and too inconvenient for him, and

for some years he had spent most of his time abroad. During that time he had made friends with Colonel Maxwell, who was also travelling about, trying in all sorts of new scenes to find consolation for certain great troubles which had fallen upon him.

The two friends walked a long way through Sir Henry's park, then turned into a narrow, shady lane which brought them out at last at the far end of the village of Markwood. Both were struck with the quiet beauty of this depth of peaceful England. On that June morning, the beech-woods had hardly lost their young brilliancy of green; old thorn-trees here and there filled the air with the scent of their fading bloom; a great arch of soft, warm, calm blue sky lay over the valley, reflected in the ripples of the river. The Markwood bells were chiming sweetly, but they had stopped by the time that Sir Henry and Colonel Maxwell reached the churchyard gate, where the dark yew shadows lay on green rows of graves. Out through the low church porch, where the door stood open, came a murmured sound of prayer.

"This is a peaceful corner indeed," said Colonel Maxwell to his friend, as they lingered a moment at the gate. "One could end one's days happily enough here."

"Yes, it is pretty. My wife used to say it was like a place in a story-book."

"There is something quite charming about it, to my mind," said Colonel Maxwell.

They went quietly into the church, and sat down on a bench near the door. A few heads were turned, but Sir Henry Smith was almost a stranger among the people here, and his friend was quite unknown.

The Vicar recognised his old pupil, and his voice shook a little nervously as he read the first lesson; but neither the reading nor the music in Markwood Church had need of any excuse or shyness; both were as good as they could be. And there was a tall, dark young man in the choir who sang out bravely in the morning Psalms, "I was glad when they said unto me: We will go into the house of the Lord."

Colonel Maxwell looked as if nothing in the world could ever make him glad any more. He was a fair, pale, worn-looking man, with melancholy blue eyes; it seemed—as indeed was the truth—as if sorrow and trouble lay like a heavy burden on his shoulders; he stooped slightly, in spite of being a soldier, and looked years older than he was. When the service was over and the congregation was going out, Sir Henry Smith asked him to wait a minute, while he went into the vestry to speak to Mr. Sands. Colonel Maxwell stayed in his place by the door: he sat leaning forward, shading his eyes with his hand, letting the people pass without much notice, though some of them looked curiously at him. A small group of children came among the last, their feet tripping lightly over the old uneven pavement; and last of these came a little girl of about seven years old. She was a fair, delicate-looking child, slenderly made and with small features; her large blue eyes had a grave puzzled expression. She was dressed in a plain white frock and had a small locket tied round her neck; a round hat with a blue ribbon was set on a head of thickly curling hair. The curls were like pale gold silk, soft and fine, clustering in shining rings about the child's neck and behind her ears. She

followed the other children to the door, where one of them turned round and spoke to her. She shook her head violently, while the grave little face lighted up with a happy smile.

"No!" she said in a loud whisper. "I'll wait for John."

Then she stood still in the porch, just where a ray of sunshine fell across the rough wall, nodding and smiling to the others as they hurried on their way; then she turned round and looked into the church with a quick little air of impatience, and met the eyes of the stranger, fixed upon her so intently that she might have been frightened, but for their gentleness.

She was not frightened. On the contrary, she seemed to be a little attracted, for she mounted the doorstep, which brought her a few inches nearer, and gazed at him, in the dim half-light of the church, as earnestly as he gazed at her. The puzzled look seemed to deepen in her eyes. Her curiosity was roused to the utmost. Who could this be, who sat so still, looking so kind and so very unhappy—so strangely surprised, too, at the sight of a little girl? And as for Colonel Maxwell, he passed his hand once or twice over his eyes, as if he doubted his own sight, and looked again at the child, and said to himself, "Come, this is simply a delusion. It has her look, somehow—it is what she might have been by this time—but how could it be possible! I must get over these dreams and fancies. It is not the first time I have fancied a likeness—and yet certainly—what has the child got round her neck? I wish she would come a little nearer!"

But those quiet moments were over; the singing men and boys were coming out now, and among them came a tall young man whose stern face brightened at the sight of the child; she, with a little jump, caught hold of his hand, and they walked off instantly together.

The child looked back once; and before they reached the gate she said to her companion, "Did you see the poor man in church, John?"

"What poor man, Lily?"

"Sitting just by the door—didn't you see him? He had such a thin face, and big eyes something like mine, and he looked at me as if he wanted something so bad. If you hadn't come just then, I think he'd have spoke to me."

"Would he? Well, we don't want strange poor men, Lily," said John, as he tramped along the road.

"He wasn't like that nasty Dick. He was a gentleman."

"I didn't see him," said John, now looking round a little nervously. "Oh, I know who you mean—the gentleman as come in with Sir Henry. He's some stranger. He wondered what you was waiting about for, that's all."

"He's got a kind face, poor man!" said Lily.

As soon as the child and her companion had disappeared, Colonel Maxwell got up and went to the vestry. Sir Henry Smith was standing there, talking to the old Vicar, and both looked round in surprise when Colonel Maxwell knocked at the door and came in.

"This is my friend Colonel Maxwell, Mr. Sands," said Sir Henry. "My dear fellow, what is it? You look as if you had seen a ghost."

"I have seen a vision," said his friend in a low voice. "I have seen my little girl."

The two friends were looking at each other, or they would have noticed the sudden light of surprise and intelligence which sprang into the old clergyman's face.

"It must have been fancy, Maxwell," said Sir Henry slowly. "I thought you had given up all hope—and she couldn't be here, you know."

"Why not?"

"Why—so near London!"

"It would be strange—and unexpected—but that is what happens," said Colonel Maxwell. "At any rate, if Mr. Sands will kindly tell me—but I must first explain to you that four years ago I had a very terrible misfortune. My youngest child, a little girl of three, disappeared from the garden of a square near our house—the nursemaid left her for a moment—the thing is often done, no doubt, and the consequence is not always fatal. No human means have availed to trace the child. I offered a reward of a thousand pounds. The police have done their best, I believe; and they have now come to the conclusion that she can be no longer living. They are quite sure she was stolen; and they think it would have been the interest of the thieves to restore her with some plausible story; or they could have kept in the dark and demanded what they pleased. Of course that is plain. She cannot be living—unless by some miracle she is no longer in the hands of the thieves."

Sir Henry Smith shook his head and smiled, but very hopelessly.

Mr. Sands was listening with grave and eager interest.

"And do I understand that you think——" he began.

"I only want to know this," said Colonel Maxwell, his voice trembling with impatience. "As I waited by the church door just now, I saw a little girl with fair hair, the age that my child would have been. She was dressed in white. There was something about her that made me feel almost sure—in fact, I am sure. Who is that child?"

"Did she go away with one of my choir-men—a tall, dark fellow?"

"Exactly—she did."

"It was a little girl they call Lily——"

"Lily! Her name!"

"Yes, my dear sir. One moment, and you shall know all. The young man with whom you saw her is John Randal the blacksmith—a good fellow, the best fellow in the village."

"One of the old Randals? Of course I know all about them. The best blacksmiths in the county," said Sir Henry.

"One evening, four years ago, between this place and Carsham—opposite your house, Sir Henry—John Randal found that child by the roadside. He and his mother have brought her up since then, and no child could have been taken better care of."

"By the roadside!—between here and Carsham!" repeated Colonel Maxwell breathlessly.

"I do not remember the story very clearly," said the Vicar. "But I believe John had seen her the day before with a woman who spoke of her as her own child. I know he took some trouble to find that woman, but without success. However, all this does not matter now. The first thing is to decide whether little Lily is really your child. Let us go at once to Randal's cottage."

Colonel Maxwell asked no more questions then. It seemed as if he did not wish to hear more till he had seen the child again. Down the churchyard path and along the shady road into the village he walked a little in advance of the others, his head bent, deep in thought, hearing nothing of what they said, and looking neither to right nor left. In the meanwhile Sir Henry Smith was talking gravely to the Vicar.

"I am very much afraid," he said, "that poor Maxwell will find himself mistaken. It seems almost impossible that he should really recognise the child—hardly more than an infant when she was stolen. It is true the date corresponds—but is it likely that the police would not have tracked her here, within thirty miles of London! No, I strongly suspect she belonged to the woman with whom you say she was first seen. It will not be his first disappointment, poor fellow! He has been off on a wrong scent several times already."

"Is his wife living?"

"No. I believe she died soon after this child was born. I have only known him three years; we made acquaintance at Naples. As nice a fellow as ever lived. I am uncommonly sorry for him."

They went on talking. The Vicar gave one or two reasons for thinking that little Lily was really the missing child, but Sir Henry did not seem any more inclined to agree with him. He was one of those matter-of-fact people who never believe in anything that seems unlikely, and such a string of strange coincidences was quite beyond his limit.

John's cottage and yard and garden were in the trimmest order; the yellow roses on the wall, which lasted all the summer, were already out; so were the red roses beyond, and the clusters of white pinks; but more beautiful than all were the lilies in their stately row. The cottage door was open, but Lily herself was not to be seen or heard. She had run away into the garden to gather a few of the first strawberries, having had a large pinafore tied over her clean white frock, and many injunctions to be careful. John, rather silent and thoughtful, was sitting in the large armchair, while his mother was laying the cloth for dinner.

"What are you thinking about, John, my lad?" said Mrs. Randal.

"Don't know, mother. Sir Henry Smith was at church this morning, and another gentleman with him, a stranger."

"Ah! Well, I'm glad the family's come back to Carsham. I don't hold with people having a beautiful place like that, and leaving it to stand empty. It's a bad thing for the country, and for themselves too, careering in foreign lands and spending a lot of money as had better be spent at home. Dear me! who's this?"

Mrs. Randal heard the click of the gate, and looked up to see three gentlemen turning into the little yard.

"John," she said, "here's Mr. Sands—and Sir Henry himself, I do believe."

And the stranger. While his mother was welcoming Mr. Sands, and telling good-natured Sir Henry, with her kindest smile, that she remembered him as a little boy, John forgot his manners in gazing at the stranger. Why did he look so queer, and why did his eyes wander so anxiously round the low, shady old room?

"Mrs. Randal," said the Vicar in his gentle voice, when Sir Henry had said a few kind words, "we have come on rather a strange errand. And your son looks as if he almost guessed what it may be."

There was a moment's silence, while he and Sir Henry and Mrs. Randal all looked at John. She turned a little pale, and his colour deepened; he was half ashamed to be caught staring at the stranger. Colonel Maxwell seemed to notice nothing of all this. He was looking out of the door now; then he turned to Mrs. Randal and said in an absent, hurried way—"May I ask—where is the little girl who has been living with you?"

"She is in the garden, sir," answered Mrs. Randal, her voice trembling. "John, my dear, will you call Lily?"

"If the gentleman will please to excuse me," said John, "I would be glad to know first what he wants with Lily."

"It's all right, Randal," said Sir Henry Smith, rather impatiently. "We know how the child was

found, and all that. It is a curious coincidence that my friend Colonel Maxwell had a little girl of the same age who disappeared just at that time. He saw the child in church to-day, and noticed a likeness. So be good enough to call her, will you. The sooner the truth is known, one way or the other, the better for everybody."

John heard all this very well, but he still lingered a moment. It was so sudden, so unexpected, though he had known it must come some day. His mother, though she felt as he did, was more equal to the occasion, for calmness and reason had grown in her with years.

"I shouldn't wonder if the gentleman's right, John," she said. "It seems to me, too, as little Lily has a look of him. Go and fetch her in, my dear."

"Shall I go with you?" said Colonel Maxwell, as John left the house.

"No, sir. Please to stop here," was the rather startling reply, which filled Mrs. Randal with confusion and turned her paleness to blushes.

"I hope you'll make allowances for him," she said hastily. "He is that devoted to Lily, he's never happy when she's out of his sight. You wouldn't believe, sir, as a young man like him could take such care of a child as he's taken of Lily, ever since the day he brought her home. She's been his first thought—almost too much, I might say—for he was going to be married to the best girl in the village, and they had words because he thought she'd taken the child against his wish to Carsham Fair, which she never had, and never would, for it was all a sad mistake—but Mary Alfrick, she had a spirit of her own, and

that quarrel's never been made up, and never will be now, I suppose, for it's nine months ago, and she's left the place and gone to a situation. Mr. Sands, you know that's one of the biggest troubles I've known."

"Yes, Mrs. Randal; I was truly sorry about that," said the Vicar. "I still hope those two may come to an understanding in time, for they are worthy of each other, though patience was lacking on both sides. But now, before John brings little Lily, will you tell us the story of how he found her? I was only able to give Colonel Maxwell the main facts."

"Certainly, sir. Please to sit down, gentlemen," said Mrs. Randal.

The Vicar and Sir Henry did so, but Colonel Maxwell stood just inside the doorway, looking along the path, past the row of tall white lilies, towards the garden that lay beyond the thick shade of two or three old apple-trees.



Very busy and very happy.—P. 153.

### Very busy and very happy.

The strawberry-bed, where John found Lily, was at the far end of the garden. She was very busy and very happy, having forgotten all about the "poor man" in church in the joyful surprise of finding more ripe strawberries than any one had expected. There was already a red and bright little heap in her basket; she had thrown off her hat, and her curly hair was

shining in the sun, which had also tinted her cheeks with pretty colour.

"O John, such a lot!" she called out, as he walked slowly up the grass path between the currant bushes. "Is it dinner-time so soon, John? You must come and help me finish."

"No, you must come in now. I'm tired, I've got a stiff back, I can't stoop like you, little one," said John. "Look here, I'll sit on the bank while you get six more. That'll be enough for to-day."

"That'll leave a lot for the birds—but you like them to have some, doesn't you? Why has you got a stiff back, John dear? You's getting old."

"Ay, very old," he said, and he sat there for a minute and watched her.

He was selfish, perhaps, in not thinking enough of the man who was waiting so anxiously at the house door, a little uncertain whether this was really the recovery of his lost child. If John had seen any uncertainty in the matter, he would have led the child to her supposed father quickly enough. But Colonel Maxwell's face, the eyes, with their look of Lily, the whole expression so like hers, had been quite enough for him. As soon as he had had a good look at Colonel Maxwell he had known, without the shadow of a doubt, that Lily's father stood before him. And this father of hers—she would belong to him all his life—so surely, John thought—or felt, for he did not reason about it—surely he ought not to grudge these few last minutes to somebody who would have given his life for her cheerfully at any time within the last four years.

"Come along, Lily," he said, a little gruffly. "You've had time to pick a dozen. There, little one, give me the basket, and you shall have a ride on my shoulder once more. Once round the path, and then back home. Tired of your old horse, ain't you?"

"No, never, never!" cried the child with a little scream of delight, as he ran round the strawberry-bed, the little hand with its pink fingers firmly grasping his hair.

"Let me ride all the way home, dear John, please."

But John would not listen to this. Before they were in sight of the house he set her lightly on the ground again, and she ran on before him till the green path turned in the sunshine between the rows of tall lilies, taller than the child herself. There she stood still. The man she had seen in church was standing a few yards from her, looking at her as if they two were alone together in the world.

"A Lily among the lilies!" murmured Mr. Sands; but nobody heard him.

## CHAPTER XII

### TAKEN AWAY

"When I remember something which I had,  
    But which is gone, and I must do without,  
I sometimes wonder how I can be glad,  
    Even in cowslip time when hedges  
sprout;  
It makes me sigh to think on it—but yet  
My days will not be better days, should I  
forget."

—JEAN INGELOW.

Lily stood still at first, bewildered. Then the same attraction that she had felt at the church door drew her a step nearer to the stranger. He held out his hand, saying softly, "Will you come to me?" And she went forward at once and put hers into it, looking up into his face with a grave but sweet little smile.

"Would you like some strawberries?" she said.

Colonel Maxwell could hardly find voice to answer her. Mrs. Randal turned suddenly away to the house, with her apron to her eyes, and the old Vicar's too were dim. Sir Henry Smith, who stood behind, expressed his feelings by a smile and a long low whistle.

"Not now, thank you, my dear child," said Colonel Maxwell.

Lily liked his voice, for it was musical and pleasant, though it shook in a funny way. He held her hand and looked at her with a sort of shyness.

"Will you show me that pretty locket of yours?" he said. "I see the front of it—the letter *L*—but I want to see the back too—may I?"

Lily's quick fingers untied the ribbon, and she put the locket in his hand.

"The letter *L* belongs to you, Lily," he said, "but whose is this lock of hair, do you know? It is dark hair, you see—not like yours."

Lily shook her curly head.

"It's my locket; I've had it always."

"Yes, you have had it since you were three months old. It is your mother's hair."

Lily gazed, not at all understanding.

He tied the locket round her neck again, and then said, "Do you know who I am, Lily?"

"I ain't sure."

An odd quiver passed across Colonel Maxwell's face, but he recovered himself directly.

"You will remember by-and-by, perhaps. Now tell me—have you forgotten all about Toby? Who is Toby?"

"He's a dog!" exclaimed Lily, her eyes opening wide, as some faint vision of a bygone time seemed to flash upon her suddenly.

"I thought you could not have forgotten poor old Toby. Is he a big dog or a little one? And what colour?"

"Oh, a big black dog, and so curly!" cried the child, with a little jump. "He carried me on his back when I was a baby."

"Many a time have I held you there," said Colonel Maxwell. He lifted the little girl in his arms, kissed her, and set her down again. Then he turned to the Vicar. "Mr. Sands, this settles the question."

"It certainly seems so," said Mr. Sands. "You are able to remind the child of things she might naturally remember. Mrs. Randal and her son have done their best to find out what were her recollections of her home, but without much success, I think."

"I am not surprised at that," said Colonel Maxwell. "She was backward as a little child, and very delicate. When she was three years old she could not talk much, and had very little memory. But she seems quick enough now. Mrs. Randal, you have taken good care of her."

"I've loved her like my own," said Mrs. Randal. "Of course, sir, John and me, we couldn't bring her up according to her station, which was plain to us from the first. But we've done our best to keep her from all common ways. I think, sir, there was things she remembered about her home, in a faint sort of way. One day she told John about being carried upstairs, and a blue lady on the wall as looked at her—a picture, I suppose."

"Her great-grandmother's picture. And she is like her," said Colonel Maxwell. He turned to Lily again, who was still holding his hand, looking from one to another, and listening with a puzzled face to all this talk which seemed to concern her.

"There were two little boys," he said. "One had dark brown hair, like the hair in your locket, and the other was fair like you. You used to play all together in the nursery. The eldest had a rocking-horse, and

you wanted to ride like him. You wanted to ride his horse, and what did you say to him?"

"Charlie, let Lily ride your horse!" was the instant answer. "Oh, and there was Tom! He was little, almost like me, and one day he kicked me."

"I dare say he did. Tom was always a Turk, and little brothers don't always know how to behave to their sisters," said Colonel Maxwell, and for the first time he laughed.

Lily laughed too. "Little brothers!" she said to herself.

"And now won't you tell me what your own name is?"

"Lily."

"Nothing more than that?"

"Lily Randal," murmured the child, with less readiness than before.

"No, no; I shall have to tell you, if you can't tell me."

The child suddenly turned her head. It was time, she evidently thought, for all this fun with a stranger to come to an end. He was a very nice gentleman, and looked very kind, and said a great many things she could not understand, and made her say things too. But reality was best, after all; a heart's love is not transferred in a moment, no matter who may have the best right to it; and there stood John, looking pale and grave, in the shadow of the apple-trees, listening in silence to all that was going on.

"I'm John's Lily!" she said, and slipping her hand out of Colonel Maxwell's, she sprang back to her old friend and began in an eager whisper, "John, John, pick me up and give me a ride round the garden.

Quick, John dear! When we come back they'll all be gone and we'll have dinner."

John bent towards the little girl, colouring scarlet, while Mrs. Randal hastened to explain and apologise.

"The village people got into the way of calling her John's Lily, sir, because those two always thought such a lot of each other. They are such playfellows—and the dear child don't quite understand yet, so I hope you'll please to excuse——"

But there was no need of any excusing. Instead of carrying Lily off round the garden as she wished, John led her back among the lilies, and put the little hand he held into Colonel Maxwell's once more.

"Look here, Lily," he said, "this is your father, your own father, as lost you that time I picked you up, when you was a little girl of three. Now you're going away with him to your own home, and you've got to be a good girl and show him as mother and me hasn't spoilt you. Look up now and call him father. Say 'Dear father.'"

Lily stared at John in silent astonishment. But she had learnt by this time to know his face on the very rare occasions when he meant to be obeyed. So she lifted her wondering blue eyes to that other face, strange but so kind, and said in a low, half-unwilling voice, "Dear father!"

"My dear little girl," Colonel Maxwell said under his breath, as he stooped to kiss her.

Then he grasped John's hand and shook it heartily.

But Lily, over-wrought by these surprises, rushed away from them both, flung herself into Mrs. Randal's arms, and burst into a violent fit of sobbing and crying. John's mother, comforting and scolding by turns, took her away into the cottage and closed the door.

So John's Lily passed from his care into that of her rightful guardian. There was of course a great deal to tell Colonel Maxwell that he had not heard yet; the adventure of the fair, when those who had originally carried off the child made such a bold attempt to possess themselves of her again; the reappearance of Dick, as he was called, only last February, and his trying to entice her away from the village till John frightened him successfully away. There was a great deal to talk over, a great deal of surprise to be expressed at the failure of the police to trace the child, which could scarcely have been possible except in this very lonely country village so far from railways and the outer world. Sir Henry Smith was inclined to think John a stupid fellow for not having exerted himself to give notice to the police; but Colonel Maxwell understood John's unwillingness better than his friend, remembering that the child herself could tell nothing about her home, and that John could not possibly have known into what hands he might be surrendering her.

Colonel Maxwell had a great deal of talk with John and his mother that Sunday evening, when he walked over to Markwood again, this time alone, and took his little girl to church with him. He had something to give thanks for now, something to

make him glad. Most of the village knew by this time that Sir Henry's friend was Lily's father, and he was stared at by many curious eyes. After the service he took Lily back to Mrs. Randal and asked her to keep her for one more night; the next day he would drive over and fetch her to Carsham, where Lady Smith was ready with a kind welcome for the little stray bird so happily caught again.

John walked nearly to Carsham House with Colonel Maxwell that evening, and came back alone in the sweet summer dusk. When he got home his mother was not in the kitchen; he listened at the foot of the stairs, then called very gently, "Mother, are you there?" for fear of waking Lily. His mother did not seem to hear him, but he could hear her moving about upstairs. Presently, however, she came down, and he could see that she had been crying. For a few minutes they sat in their two chairs, silent; then John said suddenly, "Don't take on so, mother. Is the child asleep?"

"Fast asleep now, dear lamb," said Mrs. Randal. "But it was a long time before she went off, she was that excited, and no wonder. I had to sit by her and sing hymns with my old cracked voice. Dear, dear, she'll have no one to sing her to sleep to-morrow night, I guess."

Mrs. Randal ended with a sob, and dried her eyes again.

"Her father thinks no end of her," said John after a pause.

"Yes, and he does seem like a nice man. But it's a mother's care as she'll miss, that poor little one. He'll have a good nurse for her, I dare say, but that won't

be the same thing. I've been just a bit more than an old nurse to Lily. And she'll miss you, John. Her father and her little brothers may be ever so fond, there's not one among 'em all as will be the slave you've been. I almost told Colonel Maxwell as much."

"It couldn't have gone on always, and it's just as well it's happened now," said John, rather doggedly. "If you ask me, I expect we shall miss her more than she'll miss us. At that age they soon forget. But you and me—we shall have a precious dull life of it now, mother."

Mrs. Randal rocked herself gently backwards and forwards.

"Yes, my lad, yes," she said. "It would ha' been better for you, after all, if you'd never seen Lily in your life."

"No, that it wouldn't."

"Yes, yes," his mother persisted. "If it hadn't been for her, poor child, you might have been married to Polly Alfrick long before now, and had a home and a family of your own like other young men of your age. Why, John, my dear, you're nigh on eight-and-twenty."

"I told Lily to-day as I was getting old," said John, with a grim smile. "But don't you worry about me. I wouldn't have had it different."

There was another long silence. Mrs. Randal sighed once or twice. At last she said, "And what did you and the Colonel talk about?"

"Oh, a lot of things," said John. "He has some notions about me; there's scarce anything he wouldn't do for me. To begin with, there's a thousand

pounds reward for finding the child, which belongs to me, he says, though I don't see how. It appears to me as he found her himself. Well, and over and above that, he'll start me in a farm or a blacksmith's business in Canada, and pay our passages out, yours and mine. Or he'll put me in the way of a superior sort of trade in London, where I can go in for all sorts of ornamental iron-work and make a lot of money. In short, he'll do all as lies in his power to help John Randal on in life and make him rich and happy. Do you understand, mother? A thousand pound cheque to begin with—that means a balance at the bank—and anything you please to follow after. But even with a thousand pound, this here old place won't be big enough to hold you and me—will it, mother?"

Mrs. Randal took off her spectacles, as people sometimes do when they want to see more clearly. She rubbed her eyes and looked at John. But she could make out so little that she put her spectacles on again. The brilliant prospects which he had been spreading before her seemed to have no effect on John's countenance; his eyes were no brighter than usual; his dark face looked tired and pale; his long legs were stretched out wearily. Presently, as his mother said nothing, he glanced at her with a faint smile.

"Well, what do you say, mother? How will you like being rich? Do you vote for Canada or London?"

"My lad, it's selfish of me—I am behaving queerly, to be sure! Here's your fortune made all of a stroke, and me no more thankful than this. Well,

John, there's no doubt you'll do well wherever you go, whether it be London or beyond the seas, and I'm sure Colonel Maxwell's very kind. Only there's one thing to be said. I'm too old to move, my dear, that's certain. You must let the forge—Jim Nash is sure to take it—and your old mother must stay in the old cottage to welcome you back again. I wouldn't stand in your way, and it's real thoughtful of Colonel Maxwell to say he'll pay my passage too, but I'd be frightened out of my life to go in a boat even, much more a big ship on the sea—and as for London, the smuts and the noise would shorten my life by ten year. So you just do the best for yourself, John, without thought of me."

John listened very quietly.

"And you'd stay here all alone by yourself, would you?" he said.

"Yes, my dear. I couldn't leave the old home, so don't worry about your mother. I should be lost among strangers. With a young man like you it's a different thing. I expect Colonel Maxwell thinks you're thrown away at Markwood, and he's not far wrong."

"But supposing I chose to stop at Markwood—there'd still be the thousand pound. What should we do with that, mother—build a new house?"

"I don't know," hesitated Mrs. Randal. "The old one's good enough for me. But of course you'd get married, John."

"There's nobody I want to marry—you know that."

"Well, you might in time—and she'd be sorry, maybe—she might come round——"

"Do you think I'm likely to ask her again?" he said, his face hardening.

"She don't deserve it, to be sure," murmured Mrs. Randal. "Well, thinking over what's best for you, I do believe Canada's best. You've had a lot of trouble, and losing this dear child ain't the least of it, and in a fresh country you'd make new friends and start over again."

"Forget it all and start fresh. That's what you're thinking, is it?" said John.

"Well, my boy—seems as if it might be the best for you."

"I'll tell you then," he said. "You've heard Colonel Maxwell's offers, but you haven't heard my answers to them."

"Why, you've got to think them over."

"No. He said so, but I said there was no need for that. What's the good of considering and beating about the bush when one's mind's made up already?"

"What was the good of taking me in so, then?"

"I had a mind to see what you'd say."

"Well, but what did you say? That's what I want to know!"

"Look here, mother, you may think I'm wrong. Colonel Maxwell went on for half-an-hour or more, offering me all these fine things. I refused every one of 'em."

"You did, John? The money and all?"

"The money first and foremost. I've no right to the money, and if I had, would you and me like to be paid for sheltering that child, who's been the brightness and the blessing of our lives for four years? 'No, thank you, sir,' I says to him. 'My

mother's looked on your little girl as her own, and she loves her as her own, and she'd never speak to me again if I pocketed a shilling of your money. Besides, your getting back the child was no doings of mine or hers. It belongs more to Sir Henry Smith, your friend, as brought you here to-day.' He laughed at that. Then I thanked him all the same, and I told him I wanted no change in no shape or way, and I'd no taste for emigrating, nor had you, and I wouldn't live in London on no account, nor ask you to do so, and my cottage and my old trade, which was my father's and grandfather's before me, was all I wanted in this world. Whether he thought me a mean-spirited chap, I don't know—all I know is, I want help from no man, and from him less than anybody. So, mother, there's the end, and Lily leaves you and me pretty much as she found us."

Mrs. Randal was half thankful, half disappointed. Good and gentle and refined as she was, she had not quite John's grand contempt for money and for getting on in the world. One need hardly say that she had not a covetous or an ambitious thought for herself, or that she spoke the exact truth in saying that she wished to end her days in the old cottage where all her married life had been spent. But it is possible to care not at all about worldly advantages for one's self, and yet to value them highly for those one loves; and Mrs. Randal, while John was talking of Colonel Maxwell's offers, had felt both glad and proud that her son was no longer to live a hidden life in this quiet village of Markwood. With a large sum of money to start him, with his own good capacity and steadiness and industry to carry him on, John

would indeed have had a chance of raising himself and his family to a very superior position. And the world outside Markwood—so his mother thought—must be so much the better for knowing John. However, it was not to be; and Mrs. Randal, who never fretted over useless fancies, told herself that John knew best and that he had decided rightly. She understood him; she was all the prouder of him in her heart, really, because he chose to live his life independent of another man's money or help, and to work on in his own quiet way. Remembering, as she often did, the pure love and kindness in his face when he first brought in the lost baby, on that stormy summer evening four years ago, she could not help understanding that those four years of Lily's bright presence would lose half their sweetness as a happy memory, if all his unselfish tenderness was to be paid for.

Of course there was a great deal of talk in the village, among both young and old, about the departure of John's Lily, about her new-found father, and about the fine London house which was supposed to be her home. Markwood had not often such a subject for gossip. The worst of it was, that much of this gossip had to be made up on the spot, for very little information was to be dragged out of the only people who really knew anything—John, Mrs. Randal, and the Vicar. Mrs. Alfrick was particularly vexed at having missed seeing Colonel Maxwell; now that Mary was gone, she seldom got through her work on Sunday in time to go to church. She wrote off the news to Mary, however, and observed that John looked more glum and

disagreeable than ever, and that his mother would tell one nothing. She also expressed deep offence that Lily had not been sent up to say good-bye to her and the children, when she was sure she had always treated that foundling child kinder than anybody, long before a living creature could have guessed that her father was a grand gentleman.

Lily was gone; her flower namesakes faded in the hot summer sun; the creamy rose-leaves dropped on the narrow paved walk under the cottage wall, where she used to gather them up so carefully. John went about his work as usual, but he neglected the garden a little—it was too silent, too sad—and he never looked out of his forge when the children were coming from school. His mother, always quiet, grew a little quieter, and watched him sometimes with eyes to which the tears sprang too readily. They seemed to think only of each other, and did not talk much of the past; one might almost have fancied that those homely walls had no history, that dead loves had never lived at all, that both Mary and Lily were forgotten.

## CHAPTER XIII

### *GIVEN BACK*

"The time draws near the birth of  
CHRIST:

The moon is hid; the night is still;  
The Christmas bells from hill to hill  
Answer each other in the mist."

—TENNYSON.

A hard winter followed that beautiful summer, and Christmas Eve, when it came, was one of the coldest days that Markwood could remember. This is saying a good deal, for the cold of those valleys can be something which higher and drier regions do not know. The frost-fog that lingers there on a level with the river has the power of piercing to the marrow of one's bones; it is colder than the bitterest wind that ever blew.

Mary Alfrick thought she had never been so cold in her life as on that Christmas Eve, when she came home for her first holiday after fifteen months of steady work at the Orphanage. She had had a long cross-country journey. Her father met her with his trap at the station; he seemed glad to see her in his rough way, and the welcome, careless as it was, made Mary feel that she had been right in coming. She had not been very willing to come; there was not

much love at home for her; the associations of Markwood could only be painful; and yet sometimes she knew that her heart fairly ached with longing to see the place again from which she had banished herself so resolutely.

It was not so foggy on the high ground near the station, though the ground was as hard as iron, and the red sky foretold sharper frost still. Lower down, through Fiddler's Wood, they seemed truly to drive into the Arctic regions. A slight covering of snow lay on the road, enough to make driving bad and slippery; but the rime frost itself, the congealed white fog, which hung on everything, clothing every twig and bush in a thick coat of snowy crystals, had almost a more wintry effect than actual snow. Among the trees the mist hovered; it lay like a cold white sea in the valley, catching their breath as they descended into it and drove through the village, where in the advancing dusk nobody was to be seen, except a few boys sliding on the side of the road. Farmer Alfrick shouted at them angrily, and growled a good deal about broken legs.

They did not pass the blacksmith's shop, which was further on towards the church, and they could not see along the street through the fog. It was a little better when they turned into their own lane and climbed the short hill to the farm. Here Mary's welcome was cordial enough; her stepmother was pleased at her coming—"somebody to speak to at Christmas-time," as she said—and the children, especially Lizzie, were glad to see her. Mrs. Alfrick had honoured her guest by lighting a fire in the parlour, and here she and Mary sat in the evening

after supper, when the children had been sent to bed and the father was smoking his pipe in the kitchen, which he found the warmest room of the two.

Before sitting down with her stepmother, Mary went to the house door and looked out. It was quite light, for a moon was shining above the fog. Invisible herself through white misty clouds, she yet filled them with her light, so that the mist itself seemed to shine. It was intensely cold, freezing hard. The church bells in the valley were ringing a Christmas peal—"Peace on earth, goodwill to men"—but their sweet and joyous voice only filled Mary with a deeper sadness. She almost wished now that she had not come. It was bad to be reminded of happy Christmas Days gone by. She closed the door and went quietly back into the parlour, where Mrs. Alfrick was poking the fire, and began unpacking some presents she had brought for the children.

"Well, Polly, I always did say you had a good heart," said Mrs. Alfrick. "My word, they will be pleased! There, sit down; you look perished. Your father said you were improved in looks, but for my part I don't see it. You're ever so thin, and to my mind you look years older than when you went away. I expect you've been harder worked than at home. I wish you could have settled your mind to have stayed—there was nothing to drive you away as I could ever see. You and John was a pair of idiots to make such a fuss about nothing, and now you see that child's gone, so you wouldn't have had much longer to wait."

Alfrick and his wife were both right about Mary. She looked thinner and older, though in fact her

work had been easy. But in other ways she was improved; better dressed, gentler in manner and voice; an extremely nice, refined-looking girl, who did not now, with a wider knowledge of the world, think it necessary to hide her natural goodness under a rough, hard manner, or to "speak her mind," whether reasonable or not, on every occasion. Mary quite saw that she had herself, by her own obstinate temper, destroyed John's happiness and her own. Many a time she had said to herself, "I might have forgiven him when he asked me. I needn't have broke it all off like that." But regret seemed useless. John had his pride too, plenty of it; and even if they met again, a reconciliation hardly seemed possible; neither of them, now, could easily ask for it.

"Well—that's over, so don't let us talk about it," said Mary. "How's Mrs. Randal, though?"

Mrs. Alfrick pulled a long face and shook her head. "Didn't your father tell you? She's alive, and that's about all."

Mary started. "Mrs. Randal—dying! You don't mean it, mother!"

"I do. It's the bronchitis. She never was over strong. She caught cold the beginning of this severe weather, you know, and for the last week she's been as ill as ill can be. John's so grumpy, I haven't liked to go there much myself, but I saw Ellen Nash this morning, and she'd seen the doctor coming out, and he said it was very serious."

"Did he say there was no hope?"

"Well, I can't repeat his words, but that's how I understood her. She said this here frosty fog was killing her, spite of all John could do."

"Who is nursing her?" said Mary.

"Why, John. He don't seem to care about the neighbours coming in. Mrs. Nash says she'd do anything, 'cause Mrs. Randal was always good to her; but there, she's a weak sort of creature, not much use in a sick-room."

Mary did not say much. Mrs. Alfrick went on talking, and she sat listening like somebody in a dream. Perhaps half-an-hour passed in this way. She gazed at the fire, but saw Mrs. Randal's pale kind face, and remembered that June day long ago when John was out in the thunderstorm, and his mother had said words that sounded so sweet, telling the girl Polly that if trouble was to come she would sooner have her there than any one else. Then the storm had passed away, and in the golden evening John had come in with the little lost child in his arms.

"GOD forgive me!" thought Mary. "Even then I was a bit jealous of that child. I tried to do my duty by her, so I did, but that's not much after all."

Presently one of the children upstairs began to cry, and Mrs. Alfrick went up to it, leaving Mary alone in the parlour. After a few minutes she went out again into the passage and opened the front door. All was the same there—cold, still, misty and shining. Mary turned back into the house, remembering that she had left her warm shawl in the parlour. She threw it round her head and shoulders, slipped gently out once more, down the path, through the garden gate, into the quiet lane. Less than five minutes, even in this thick mist which obscured the way, would bring her to John's door.

Markwood is an old-fashioned place, and goes to bed early. Even the bells were silent now, and though it was Christmas Eve the houses were shut up; no lights glimmered through the fog when Mary turned the corner into the village and hurried along the street. Almost sooner than she expected she was close to the blacksmith's forge: her hand was on the old gate once more, she was lifting the familiar latch. But before going further she stood still and looked at the cottage; a red light rose and fell in the kitchen window where the blind was not drawn down, and the window above shone with a steadier light; that was Mrs. Randal's room. Mary stood at the gate trembling, partly with cold, partly with the fear of being too late, most of all with extreme nervousness at meeting John again. She had never known she was so weak, and felt surprised at herself, but at that moment she nearly turned round and ran back to the farm.

The house seemed to be quite silent. Mary collected herself, told herself this was no time for shyness, that her old friend wanted her help, whatever John might think or say. She went with light steps along the yard and looked in at the window. The kitchen was empty, only the old tabby cat lay asleep before the fire. Mary did not knock, but gently tried the latch of the door; it opened easily, she stepped quickly in and shut it again, so that the cold mist might not follow her. Then she stood in the middle of the room listening.

If John was awake, his quick ears would certainly have heard some one come in; if he had fallen asleep from fatigue, poor fellow—well, she could wait a

minute or two and then go softly up to his mother's room. She had hardly time to think this before she heard a sound upstairs; a chair moved; slow, careful footsteps crossed the floor, and now were coming down. Mary suddenly felt suffocated by her shawl, and threw it off; there she stood in the ruddy firelight, in the middle of the room, with flushed cheeks and shining eyes, a strange vision indeed to John, who came down cautiously without a light to see what unexpected visitor Christmas Eve Lad brought him.

For a moment they looked at each other in silence, and then Mary, seeing that she must break the ice, came towards him and held out her hand.

"You'll forgive me, John?" she said, in a very low, tremulous voice, "and let me nurse your mother."

John's answer was not made in words. A few minutes later, when he had a little recovered from his first bewildered joy, he told Mary that his mother was better that evening, wonderfully better. Her cough had been less troublesome all day; she had been far less feverish, and now, not long ago, she had dropped off into a beautiful sleep.

"I thought them bells would keep her awake," said John; "but no, she lay there and listened as if it was sweet music, and went to sleep as happy as a child, with a smile on her face. I believe she knew you was coming."

"I think the bells made me want to come," said Mary. "They always sound so like old times, don't they? Let me go up and see her."

"You must be as quiet as ever you can. Oh, Mary, I've got more than I deserve. I thought maybe I should never see you again."

"Well—I told you once I'd wait all my life," said Mary; "but to-night I found I couldn't wait any longer."

After an hour's refreshing sleep, Mrs. Randal woke to see the faces of her two children bending over her. Just then the bells broke out once more, so loud and joyous that they almost shook the old cottage roof with their swinging.

"I'm better," said Mrs. Randal. "Polly dear, is that you? A happy Christmas!"

## CHAPTER XIV

### *SEVEN YEARS AFTER*

"So, Lily, from those July hours,  
No wonder we should call her."

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E. B. BROWNING.

Once more a summer day. The children, not long out of school, were loitering in the warm shadows of the village street, for the sun was still high in dazzling, cloudless blue, and there was no air stirring, not even enough to flutter the topmost leaves of the great trees that stood round about Markwood. The roses and the jessamine were out on the blacksmith's cottage, and its old yellow front looked just the same, opening on the little green yard. Beyond was the row of stately white lilies in full flower, and beyond them again the red rosebushes and the clusters of pinks. The house door stood open, but all was still, except for the sound of clanking iron that came from the forge. There the blacksmith of Markwood worked as usual, and was never in want of work, for his name, still more than those of his father and grandfather, was known all round the country as that of a clever and conscientious workman.

He was alone in the forge that afternoon, for the usual group of horses, which often came from miles away, had tramped off down the street, and though

John in the prime of life was a more sociable man than in his younger days, he did not care now any more than then to have his workshop made a gossiping place for the village. Still, at thirty-five, he was the leader of all the best young fellows about in their cricket and other games, but still he was a man with few intimate friends—his home and his trade were enough for him.

He was finishing some work that afternoon, whistling a tune as his hammer clanked on the anvil, looking very black and very hot, with his shirt sleeves rolled up above his elbows, when the light from the door was suddenly darkened. John looked up, pushing back his hair from his forehead, and then stood upright, balancing his hammer and staring with bewildered eyes. In the doorway stood a tall young girl, dressed in white, with a shady hat, under which her fair hair fell in curling ripples to her shoulders. She was slender and pale, but though she did not look strong, the smile that shone in her blue eyes spoke of perfect happiness. She looked as if her life was all made of summer days, and better than this, the sweetness of her expression seemed to show that she loved making others happy. As she stood looking at John, the pale cheeks flushed a little, and she almost laughed at his wondering astonishment, but she said nothing.

"Why—Lily!" said John, under his breath, and then he too coloured suddenly, as if ashamed of himself. "I beg your pardon—I never thought of seeing you like that—a grown-up young lady."

"I'm not grown-up—I'm only fourteen," said Lily, and she stepped inside the forge and held out her

hand. "Oh, John—I'm so glad to see you again. You're just the same—and how is mother?"

"She's very well, thank you," John replied; but he looked at his own black hand and shook his head and laughed. "No, that won't do," he said. "But it is your own self, and—I hope your father's well."

"Yes, thank you, John. We have come to Sir Henry Smith's for a few days, you know, and I did so want to see if you had forgotten me, and I asked Lady Smith if I might come here all alone, and she sent me in a pony-cart—it's waiting in the village. Did you think I was never coming back any more? I believe you had half forgotten me."

"No, no," said John hastily. "I couldn't ever forget you. But don't you see, you've grown up; you ain't the little child any more, and standing there with your back to the light, 'twas no wonder I was a bit puzzled. And it's a long time, to be sure——"

"So it is—but I've written to you always, haven't I, John? And you know how my father took us abroad very soon, so that we haven't been much in England since I left you. As for you, John, you are not altered in the very least. Just exactly the same."

"Ain't I? I've got some grey hairs, Miss Lily. Well, I have much to be thankful for," said John. "I've got a good wife and a dear little child. Now please to go to Mary in the house, and I'll clean myself and be with you in a minute. You'll take a cup of tea with us, for old sake's sake?"

"Please. I should like it very much," said Lily.

Mary was looking out of her kitchen door. She had heard John talking to some one in the forge, and had seen the light little figure in the doorway, and

guessed very well who it was, though she had not seen Lily since the terrible day of Carsham Fair, when the child was the innocent cause of the greatest sorrow of her life. But she bore no malice for that now; she was far too happy as a woman to find it worth while remembering the troubles of a girl, and she could not have been married more than six years to John without catching something of his wide, generous, simple way of looking at life. It was with the kindest smile, therefore, that she came forward to welcome Colonel Maxwell's daughter.

"Oh, Mary, what a naughty little girl I was!" said the child, putting up her face to be kissed. "And you were always kind to me. But there never were people like John and mother. Tell me again, before he comes in, about his bringing me home that day."

"I'll tell you everything you like," said Mary, smiling. "But won't you come into the garden first and see the flowers. You used to like them—and mother's there—and you know there's another Lily."

"Yes; but why did you call her so?"

"It was John's wish. I expect he couldn't do without a Lily."

The old apple-trees seemed more bent, more mossy; their shade seemed deeper on the green garden paths; and there, her grandmother's faltering steps left far behind, a little child came running—a little shy child—and buried her face in her mother's gown. The girl, her namesake, looked down at this small creature wonderingly. This was the first strange element in her old home; a child who had more right there than she. The garden that used to be her own, with all its fruit and flowers, where she was

queen, and the first of her subjects used to carry her throned on his shoulder—her garden now belonged to this fat, rosy creature of five years old, whose life had been troubled with no adventures, no wild changes of losing and finding, who had a little brown face and dark eyes like John's, and hair of that brown fairness which means to become dark by-and-by. This was Lily—John's Lily now;—but the child of fourteen, with all her sweet fancies and romantic recollections, shook her head and thought that this baby's name did not rightly belong to her. A dear little loving child, but not one of the flowers that rule the garden. She would be John's little maid, her father's pet and darling, but never a princess that ruled him with a look or touch, never the real "John's Lily."

But Mrs. Randal, looking eagerly over her spectacles, rather lame with rheumatism, came hobbling hastily along the path by the strawberry-bed, and her welcome was loving enough to make Lily Maxwell feel that there was one heart here, at least, where she still had the warmest corner. And then John came, with clean hands and face and in his Sunday coat. He was a little shy with this young lady, who was somehow so very different from the child who had been taken away from him seven years before. Just a shadow of her old wistfulness came into Lily's blue eyes as he turned away from her after a few words and caught up his own little girl to his shoulder, and whispering, "Lily like a ride?" rushed off with her round the long old path, the nice green slope round the strawberry-bed, so familiar to another child long ago.

But it was all peaceful and happy. There could not, indeed, be a happier village home than this where Lily came to visit her old friends. She stayed to tea with them in the quaint old kitchen, and lingered there, talking and telling them long stories about her life and that of her brothers, till the shadows were growing long, and the evening sweet and cool. Then she left them, promising to come again soon.

And little Lily Randal, John's own little girl, proudly showed her father what the pretty young lady had fastened round her neck: a gold chain with a small locket engraved with the letter L, just like one she wore herself, except that the hair in it was not dark, but pale gold like her own.

"She always was a sweet child, and she is still," said Mrs. Randal. "They haven't spoilt her. She told me the four years with us was the happiest of her life. I hope not. I hope there's many blessings in store for her."

"She was always something like an angel," said John thoughtfully. "When I looked up and see her standing in the door, all in white like that, I remembered when she come to me in the railway carriage. There was always the same look in her eyes."

And Mary smiled and said, "Ah! she'll always be John's Lily."