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Farewell at the Forge

Clang, clink, clink. Clang, clink, clink. The sledgehammer beat a steady rhythm against the hot metal sheet on the anvil.

“Papa? What are you making?” Mary spoke loudly because of the roaring fire in the forge.

“When did you come in, wee Mary?”

“I have been sitting on the stool for a while, listening to you work.” Mary asked her question again. “What are you making?”

“I am making a lantern,” he answered, hitting the metal again.

Mary could tell by the sound that the metal was not yet thin enough for Papa to begin piercing the intricate patterns that would allow light to escape. Once the sheet had been perforated, he would shape the metal into a cylinder. How good it felt to sit beside the warm forge while her father worked the

metal! The sounds and smells reminded her of the old times.

"I came out here to think," Papa said. "I can always think better with a hammer in hand."

"Do you want me to go back into the cottage so that you can be alone?"

"Nay, Mary." She heard him put his tools down. He closed the door to the forge. She could feel her father pull his bigger stool next to hers. "There. 'Tis much quieter. We haven't had a good talk in a long time." Her father's strong hands lifted her off her stool and into the familiar nest of his lap. She almost protested that she was *not* a babe in arms, but she wriggled deeper into the warmth and comfort instead. Inhaling the mixture of wood smoke, soap, and earth that mingled with the beloved scent of her father was a comfort not to be denied.

"'Tis a good thing you are still a wee mite, Mary."

"I am not . . ." Mary started to protest but she could feel the chuckles rumbling in her father's belly and she realized that he was teasing her. "Oh, Papa."

"You are no bigger than my anvil. But you are much more interesting."

"Will you tell me what you see . . . please?" Nobody could paint a picture with words the way her father, John Bunyan, could. Mary, blind since birth, lived for her father's descriptions. They made her feel as though she could see.

"Aye. Now then, where shall I begin? Picture a thick head of fine hair, curling slightly at the shoulder, eyes the color of this smooth piece of metal," he put a cold piece of metal in her hand,

“and an uncommonly tickly mustache. I must confess—I am a handsome man. I stand taller than any in Bedford. I have—”

“Oh, Papa. Do not tease me so and stop tickling me with your mustache! I know what you are like. Everyone talks of you,” she said, teasing him right back, “although never have I heard you referred to as handsome.”

Papa’s stomach bounced her as he laughed.

She felt shy asking, but the older she was, the more she wondered about herself. “Could you tell me what I look like?”

How Papa loved to tease his children. It was hard to get a solemn answer from him. “You may be a little bigger than my anvil.” He lifted her high into the air, feet dangling. “Hmm, I would say about five stone in weight.”

“I know the lightness of my frame, but I also know I am as strong as an ox.” She was getting exasperated. *Don’t fathers ever know when to be serious with their daughters?*

Her father settled her on his knees. “Well, little daughter, I must admit that you are passing fair.”

“You mean I am pretty?”

“You have curls the color of wild honey warmed by the fireplace.” He pulled on one of her ringlets.

Mary was forever trying to pull Mama’s tortoise-shell comb through her tangle of curls, but she loved the picture of warm honey. The smooth richness of honey was hard to forget, even in this month of November. Each summer the honey was warmed so that the wax of the honeycomb would float to the surface. The smell was not easily forgotten. And the taste . . . “I

do like the sound of that color." She waited for him to go on.

"Your eyes are the same gentle blue of your mama's silky ribbon." His voice had become as soft as the well-worn ribbon.

Mary slept with that ribbon each night since her mama died and kept it tucked in her apron pocket by day.

"Your mama was a beautiful woman, Mary," her father said, reading her thoughts. "She had the same honey hair as you, but instead of your curls, hers was smooth and straight." He sighed, and the slow intake and release of breath shifted Mary ever so slightly on his lap. "When we wed, she brought me the most valuable dowry a man could obtain."

Dowry. The word sounded familiar, but Mary could not place it. "What is a dowry?"

"When a couple marries, the girl's family shares its wealth with the newlyweds. Most often it is silver coins or even gold, but your mama's dowry was far more valuable." He paused and Mary waited for the story. "She brought two books with her to the marriage: *Plain Man's Pathway to Heaven* by Pastor Arthur Dent and *Practice of Piety* by Lewis Bayly."

Mary heard a scuffling sound by the far window and another sound that caused fear to grip her stomach—a cynical laugh that could only belong to Gifre. "Did you hear that, Papa?" asked Mary.

"Hear what?"

"I thought I heard Gifre sneaking around outside." Perhaps she was wrong.

"No, I heard nothing over the din of the forge, but my

hearing is not as sensitive as yours. Has that boy been bullying you again?" Papa asked.

"He never stopped, but I do not allow it to worry me." Mary stiffened her back. After all, he would not risk hurting her . . . would he? "But we were speaking of Mama's dowry—you said the books were valuable. More valuable than gold?"

"These were," her father answered, "for they helped me find my way to the Truth." He paused. "Never have I hidden my own rough youth from you, Mary. It was said that there was no one in the village of Elstow who could blaspheme like the young tinker, John Bunyan. I am not proud of it, mind you, but it is a fact."

"And these books taught you how to stop cursing?" Mary asked.

"Oh, no, I could never have changed my life by myself. They pointed me to the One who would change me. Your mama helped set me on the path too. No question about that."

"If you tried hard enough, surely you could have conquered the habit," Mary said with determination.

"My fiercely independent little daughter," her father said, sighing. "You'll have your own arduous journey to make until you learn that you cannot do it in your own strength. I doubt not that you will come to Christ, but you shall have to discover the Truth on your own, just as I did."

"Tell me what you mean, Father."

"You have spent so many years proving that you are little hindered by blindness that you have developed a fearsome

determination. Your toughest lesson may be learning how to depend on God and on other people.” Papa was quiet for a time. “Your mama would be proud of you, Mary. Look at how much you have done since she has been gone. You are scarcely ten years old, yet you have helped your sister care for the household and you have been a little mama to Jake and Thomas.”

“I loved doing it, Papa. Bets and I were a team until—” Mary realized she had said too much. Papa had married Elizabeth the year following Mama’s death. Elizabeth was kind, with a soft voice and gentle hands. Bets said their new stepmother was pretty, but she was only seventeen years old. Seventeen. Just seven years older than Mary. There was no way Elizabeth could ever be a mama to Mary.

“Mary, you are the oldest child and I know you had a hard time accepting Elizabeth.” After giving Mary a chance to reply, he continued. “I never thought I would be able to love again after your mama died, but Elizabeth was a gift from God. Coming into our family of four children cannot have been easy for her, but she has done her best to ease the burden.”

“I know, Papa.” Mary hung her head as Papa continued to talk.

“I had hoped you would be friends long before this, and now with the new baby on the way . . .” His arms enfolded her as he rocked her back and forth as if she were the baby. She wished she could stay like this forever, even if she was almost grown.

“I will try, Father. I will try much harder.”

“You will, lass. I value your strength. If anything were to happen, you would be one to depend on.”

Mary shivered. *If anything were to happen.*

Ever since he started preaching about four years ago, things had not been the same. How odd that her father was at the center of this whirlwind of English politics and religion. She remembered when he worked as a tinker in Elstow. How she yearned for the days when he spent his time mending pots and kettles and fashioning things out of metal.



The trouble had started several weeks earlier with warnings. Late at night men came to the cottage to speak with her father. “You must stop preaching,” one warned. “Word is out that in spite of promising tolerance, the parish churches are pressuring King Charles to do something about the nonconformists.”

Another voice chimed in, “Ever since the royalists managed to get Charles on the throne they have been anxious for a restoration of their former power.” The voice grew more insistent. “They see you as a threat.”

“They do not endure threats lightly,” the first voice warned.

Mary recalled the sound of Father shifting his stance. By the thud of his firmly planted feet, she knew that he was not going to budge.

“Thank you, brothers, for the warning,” he had said. “I know that you did so at great risk to your own families. I wish it did not have to come to this, but we made too much

progress to allow our freedoms to be swallowed by the state church's bid to regain power.”

They argued for hours. Much of it was confusing to Mary, but she understood that her father was too visible and too successful as a lay preacher to go unnoticed. The people who assembled to hear him talk about the Lord had begun to number into the hundreds. Papa made words come alive. No one could make Mary see more clearly than Papa. He seemed to have that effect on everyone.

When they left, Mary had hundreds of questions for her father. “Why are we in trouble, Papa?”

“’Tis not ‘we ’ who are in trouble, wee Mary, ’tis I.”

“What did you do wrong?”

“God called me to preach and I answered that call. During Cromwell’s time we worshipped with complete freedom outside of the state church. Were it just a few years earlier, my activities would be perfectly legal. Now—who knows?”

“Can you simply stop preaching?”

“No, lass. I spent many years of my life wandering from God. If I have learned but one lesson, it is that I would sooner face danger in partnership with Him than a life of ease apart from Him.”

“What will happen if you continue?” Mary could not imagine life without Papa.

“I am afraid it will go hard on us, Mary. Unless something intervenes, I will be arrested. If I still don’t agree to give up my calling, I will be sent away from England, or worse.” He paused.

“Are you sure you want to hear the answers to your questions?”

“Aye, Papa.”

“Aye.” Her father sighed. “Never have I seen a one like you, Mary. You are a child in years only—you have borne more than your share of burdens.” She found herself in her favorite place, sitting on Papa’s lap, surrounded by his great, gentle arms.

“How I pray that you learn you cannot carry your burden alone.”



“Mary, what are you thinking about?”

They were still sitting by the forge, but Mary’s mind had been miles away.

“I was thinking about the trouble. Do you think—” Mary heard the cottage door slam and Bets calling for Papa.

“In here.” Papa put Mary down, but held on to her hand. She could hear him breathing slowly, as if to fortify himself.

“Papa! There are men coming,” Bets announced breathlessly. “Elizabeth says it is the constables.” Mary could hear the quiver of fear in Bets’s voice. Bets was just ten months younger than Mary and they had been each other’s confidants for as long as they could remember. It took a lot to scare Bets.

“Girls, into the cottage by the back door. I shall close the forge and follow.”

Papa had barely gotten into the house when they heard a ferocious pounding on the front door. The battering continued until the door was opened and Papa was summoned. Mary

crowded close to Papa so she could tell what was happening. The constable with the heaviest tread—the one who smelled of roast mutton—cleared his throat with an explosive har-rumphing sound and then began reading in a self-important voice. She could only catch snatches of the unfamiliar words.

“. . . an upholder and maintainer of unlawful assemblies and conventicles.” He made more phlegm-clearing noises. She could hear a crowd gathering outside the open door. “. . . not conforming to the National Worship of the Church of England.”

He was arresting Papa for unlicensed preaching. “John Bunyan, you are under arrest and sentenced to perpetual banishment by order of his majesty, Charles II, King of England.” Perpetual banishment! Her stomach twisted. That meant that he was to be sent away from England forever.

Mary heard the crowd milling outside the open door. Some were even weeping. As her father slowly gathered his things, she heard a thud and felt the shudder of something heavy hitting the floor. Someone outside shrieked, “Elizabeth has fainted.”

Mary moved to where Elizabeth had been standing. Her father leaned close to her ear. His voice was broken—so different from the playful, teasing voice in the forge. “Mary, take care of Elizabeth. If you can, please get word to me at the Bedford Gaol that everything is well—or find someone to send a note to me—anything. Anything.” He kneeled on the floor by his unconscious wife for what seemed to be the longest time.

Was he praying? Was he crying? She heard him kiss Elizabeth.

Mary could hear her sister Bets bring the baby to their father. As usual, Bets was trying to be strong, but Mary could sense the wad of sorrow groaning in Bets's chest. Two lingering kisses and murmurings—one must have been for Bets, the other for little Thomas. She felt the whoosh of air as her brother rushed over and she heard the sound of her father ruffling seven-year-old Jake's hair.

At last he drew Mary tightly to his side. "Oh, wee Mary . . ." The rest of the words seemed lost in his throat. He ran his calloused fingers down Mary's face, as if to savor its softness. His kiss on her forehead was as gentle as the stroke of a feather. As he dipped his hand into her honey hair, she felt him let it curl around his finger. She reached her hands up to memorize his face and touched wetness on his cheeks.

He gently took her hands away. "Take care of them, Father God," he whispered.

His body seemed loath to move, but she could feel him tighten with resolve as he stood. His reluctant steps vibrated on the bare floor as he moved toward the door, speaking to the crowd outside. "Leaving my family is like pulling the flesh from my bones." The words seemed to be ripped from his very soul.