



Contents

1. Farewell at the Forge	9
2. Black of Night	21
3. Quarrel in the Kitchen	29
4. Slough of Despond	39
5. St. Andrew's Day Fair	53
6. An Unusual Friendship	63
7. Gypsies, Beggars, and Tinkers	71
8. Putting the Pieces in Place	85
9. Uproar at the Cottage	95
10. Gifre's Attack	105
11. The Healing Begins	111
12. All Things Through Christ	119
Epilogue	127
Glossary	129



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 Eliza-

both 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.



“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 harrumphing 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 knelt 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

Farewell at the Forge



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.



Black of Night

Mary woke with a start. Something was wrong. She moved her hand along the floor to the mat against the wall and felt both sleeping children. She touched the blanketed mound to her left and was satisfied. Her two brothers and sister slept. A moment of stillness, then she heard the restless creak of bed ropes below her sleeping loft.

Elizabeth. Something is wrong with Elizabeth.

Mary eased off the *pallet*, careful not to disturb the other children. Slipping her arms into her thin robe, she slid her hand along the wall to the bannister and undertook the steep stairs. Feeling the edge of each well-worn plank with her bare toes, she reached with the opposite foot to the step below. She quickly repeated this familiar motion, counting one . . . two . . . three . . . all the way till she leapt over the sixteenth step to land on the rough wooden floor. She hurried to the tiny bedroom alcove just off the common room. Whether from being startled awake or from the awful fear that something else was

going wrong, she couldn't tell, but her heart was thumping so hard she could feel the drumming in her ears.

"Elizabeth?" She moved in closer and could hear her stepmother's labored breathing.

"Mary, is that you?" Elizabeth's damp hands pulled her to the bedside. "Something is very wrong. 'Tis not time for the baby yet." The young girl could feel tremors of fear as the clammy hands began to tighten. Elizabeth, now writhing, whispered her name, clenching her teeth on the last desperate syllable. Mary heard each separate wave of pain in that prolonged "eeeeeee" of her name.

When the pain subsided, Elizabeth loosened the grip on Mary's hands. "You must get help. Do you know where Midwife Dunkirk lives?"

"Aye. I think so."

"Please bring her back here. Things are not as they should be." Elizabeth's breathing reminded Mary of the heaving of a blown horse, as if the very act of pulling air into lungs was painful. "Do you need Bets or Jake to go along?"

"No." Mary thought of her brother and sister sleeping upstairs. Seven-year-old Jake would love the adventure of going out into the night, but he could be such a pest. She hated to have to explain everything to him. And Bets—well, Bets already did more than her share of work. "I can go alone."

"Go then," she said, "and Godspeed."

Mary quickly moved around the obstacles in the dark room. She took off her robe, hung it on her peg, and pulled her dress on over the top of her *chemise*. She reached for a pair of warm woolen stockings that had been drying on the hearth and yanked them over her cold feet. Her shoes stood precisely

where she had placed them at bedtime, making it easy to quickly slide her feet into them. Taking her cloak from the peg by the entry, she unlatched the door and moved into the chill November night, closing the door behind her.

The dampness hit with a jolt of reality. She shrank back against the cottage wall. *What am I doing out here? How am I to find the midwife? Oh, Papa! Can anything more go wrong?* Mary turned around and opened the cottage door to reclaim the safety of home.

“Mary, is that you?”

How could she let Elizabeth down? This was the first time that Elizabeth had needed Mary’s help. Had she not promised Papa to try harder to accept Elizabeth? She was as frightened by the events of the last few days as Mary and the children were. And now this.

“Yes, Elizabeth. I forgot my cane.” Mary was too embarrassed to admit that fear had driven her back into the cottage. “I shall be so much faster if I use it.” She went to the recess under the stairs and retrieved an odd-looking cane. It was long and slender with an intricately worked metal tip. As she touched its familiar handle, she remembered the care with which Papa had crafted it.

“A cane, Mary,” he had said, “will be a valuable tool. It will extend your touch and allow you to move with confidence. Listen to the sounds of the metal tip on the cobbles. Feel the vibrations of moving cartwheels through the wood. Hear the splash of a puddle against the shaft.”

Move with confidence. Yes, that is what I must try to do, Mary thought. *Thank you, Papa.* She moved out into the cold once again, her cane moving with a delicate cadence across

the cobblestones. The chunk of fear crowding her heart started to melt as she fell into the familiar rhythm of movement.

Tap, tap, thud, tap. Mary could judge the wall to her right. Tap, tap, thunk. The gutter. She remembered to step over the filth that ran in the open ditch and to cross the road. She knew she had a long way to go. At the next crossroad, she turned to her right as she hit the wobbly cobblestone. The smell of the gardenia creeping over the wall of Goodwife Harrow's wash yard was a welcome relief from the stench of the street.

Move with confidence. It reminded Mary of a favorite verse that Papa often repeated as he led her along. "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me."

Her father had come to depend on God for everything. Mary did not mind because Papa was so very strong already, long before he became a Christian. It was different for Mary, though. She hated the idea of being dependent on anyone—even God. She wanted to learn to be strong all by herself. Much of the time she felt weak and frightened, though she always tried to hide it. *Oh, how I wish I were confident and strong like Papa,* Mary thought.

She repeated the first part of the verse over and over as she walked with measured rhythm. "I-can-do-all-things . . ." She did not realize that she always left the second part of the verse off. "I-can-do-all-things . . . I-can-do-all-things . . ." The familiar phrase seemed to strengthen her.

She felt the missing cobble and then the wooden fence. *Gifre's house.* She knew it was too early for him to be about, but her heart began to thud louder.

Ever since the Bunyans moved from Elstow to Bedford, Gifre had taken an unnatural delight in tormenting Mary,

missing no opportunity to taunt her with her most hated words, “Poor blind Mary.” When he said it, there was no pity in his voice—just ridicule.

Mary never understood why Gifre was so angry. She knew that his father had lost much during the years of the *Protectorate*, but all of that had been restored. He was a staunch opponent of Papa’s, but many in Bedford differed politically and still remained polite. Perhaps she would never know the cause of the anger that ruled Gifre. What she did know was that she tried to stay as far away from the boy as possible. He frightened her, much as she hated to admit it.

Her cane did little good along this dirt stretch, but she knew by counting steps she must be nearing the lacemaker’s cottage where she must turn left. Aye, the cobblestones began again.

She smelled the yeasty scent of the malt beer fermenting in kegs in the brewery alongside the Crown Pub as she turned onto High Road. It was a welcome sign, however smelly, that she was making progress. The wood smoke from the baker’s oven mingled with the malty odors. He must be getting ready to put the raised loaves into the oven so that they would be ready to deliver at daybreak.

Just the thought of bread made her stomach rumble. She knew the baker started with *maslin*, the dry brickle bread that was the daily fare of the poorest citizens of Bedford. It did not matter if it was cold by morning, for it was no better warm than it was cold. Mary knew that the diminishing hoard of coins in the family coffer was all that stood between the Bunyans and *maslin*—or worse. *I must come up with some way to feed our family.* And it was more than food that they needed.

Jake's sole was nearly off his shoe. Every time Mary heard that peculiar slap of leather as he walked or ran, she considered it a warning. *How are we to eat, let alone buy new shoes? Save that worry for later,* she scolded herself. *Only one problem at a time.*

As she made her way toward the midwife's house she heard the gnawing, scratchy movement of rats scurrying nearby. The stench reminded her that the sewage gullies belonged to the rats. She was the intruder.

The thought made her shiver. Every time Jake tried to describe rats to her, he used words like evil, foul, stinky. Jake was good at word descriptions, but he was terrible at helping Mary conjure up pictures. When he tried to make a word picture of a rat, she kept getting it mixed up with her idea of puppies—furry, long tail, sharp teeth. Mary loved the feel of a puppy, especially when it lay sleeping with its rounded tummy full of milk or when it pushed its damp nose against her, trying to get her attention.

She must ask Papa for a word picture of rat. The jailer at Bedford *Gaol* had sent word that if the prisoners were to eat, the families must provide food. She soon would visit Papa.

Oh, Papa, I miss you! How will we live without you? How could you leave us this way? Her thoughts tumbled in the same fearful circles that had consumed her the last few days. *How will we . . . ? Why did they . . . ? Whatever will become of us?*

Mary shivered again and decided it was easier to think about rats than to think of her father in Bedford *Gaol*. *At least he is still in Bedford and not banished to faraway Barbados as many others have been.* She could not bear to think about life without Papa.

Something bumped against her cane. Perhaps she was just as happy that she could not bring to mind a precise picture for rat. The furtive movements on all sides made her shudder, so she decided to try to picture puppies instead of rats. It did not help overmuch. She knew she would faint if one of the rats pushed its nose against her. Better to not even think about it.

Tap, tap, tap. She continued to make her way through the streets of Bedford. “I-can-do-all-things . . . I-can-do-all-things . . .”

Tap, tap, clink, clink. *The metal fence. I’ve reached the corner of Castle Lane and High Road. At last—the Dunkirk house!* “Please, oh, please, let the midwife be home,” Mary whispered to herself.