

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Christmas Past

Glenice Crossland

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Glenice Crossland lives in Sheffield. She has loved writing from an early age, only taking it seriously after early retirement from her job in a leisure centre. She has read one of her poems on BBC2, had several read on Radio Sheffield and more published in various anthologies. She is well known locally for her watercolours of churches and local traditions. Married with one son and grandchildren she still lives a few hundred yards from the house in which she was born. She is also the author of *The Stanford Lasses*.

Also by Glenice Crossland

The Stanford Lasses

Christmas Past
GLENICE CROSSLAND



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ISBN 9781409065968

Version 1.0

www.randomhouse.co.uk

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For my brother Bernard,
Dorothy and Simon.
With love.

Acknowledgements

With thanks once again to Georgina Hawtrey-Woore and all the Random House team for their continuing support. Also to Rob Hindle and the members of the WEA Creative Writing class at Stocksbridge, for their encouragement and friendship.

Special thanks to Maggie Caine for patiently struggling through my first draft. And to Maureen Hall for taking the trouble to read my finished script.

Chapter One

‘Michael, you must let her go. It will be the making of the girl.’

Mick O’Connor made no response and the priest tapped his fingers on the oilcloth-covered table in frustration. He tried again. ‘It’s just what Mary needs. The finest fresh air, nourishing food and most of all the treatment for her TB glands. Rowland Roberts is a fine doctor,’ he stressed.

‘She should be getting the treatment she needs here, from our own doctor, in her own home,’ Mick O’Connor said.

Mariah O’Connor gave her husband a look which spoke volumes. ‘Yes, we know she should be having treatment here, Mick, and we all know why she isn’t getting it: because nothing’s been paid off the doctor’s bill since our Michael was born.’ She broddled the poker through the shining, blackleaded bars and riddled the ashes vigorously into the pan below. ‘A shilling a week is all it would take.’

‘Just as I was saying,’ the priest continued, ‘Rowland Roberts will give Mary a course of injections which will put her right in no time. Besides, she’ll have a room of her own.’

Young Mary O’Connor had been supposedly engrossed in a library book but she gave Father Flynn her full attention at the mention of her own room.

‘After all, the boys ought not to be in with the girls for much longer.’

Mick O’Connor shuffled nervously in the straight-backed chair. Father Flynn was right as usual. Although his sons Bill, Jimmy and Michael were younger than their three sisters it wouldn’t be long before the sleeping arrangements would have to be looked at. Mariah had told him often enough, not that she nagged though the Lord knew she had good reason to do so. Oh no, she wasn’t the type of woman to nag. Too good for the likes of him was Mariah. He would have to mend his ways, keep off the beer and move them out to somewhere better.

If he had but known it the same thought was going through the mind of every other person in the room. His wife Mariah was mentally exhausted by trying to make ends meet and had been driven to waiting at the pit gates on a Friday in order to get her hands on the housekeeping money before the nearest pub landlord did so. Even so, if Mick had run short of beer money by Monday he would help himself to anything left in her purse, in order to finance another day’s drinking. A collier’s Monday they called it, and it was rare for some of the miners to turn in for work on the first day of the week. God only knew how Mick had kept his job. Still, he was said to be the hardest grafter in the pit on the days he did turn in. It made Mariah seethe inside to think of the money wasted on beer when they could have moved out of the row and into somewhere large enough to house them all comfortably.

Young Mary at the tender age of sixteen and a few years older than Norah and Kathleen was having visions of a room of her own. To begin with she hadn’t really wanted to go and live with the doctor friend of Father Flynn and his wife in a village somewhere in Yorkshire. She had begun to panic at the thought of leaving home and travelling halfway across the country. Admittedly the thought of leaving the employment of the awful Mrs Brown and her two pampered

daughters had been tempting, but not tempting enough to persuade her. The promise of a room of her own was another matter. Mary had begun to dread the time of the month when her periods began. Smuggling the blanket squares in and out of the bedroom was difficult enough, but if the bleeding started unexpectedly during the night, hiding the bloodstained sheets and nightie was virtually impossible. In fact only last week young Michael had asked if she had cut herself and sent his older brothers off into a fit of giggles.

Another thing Mary hated was the thin wall against which she slept. When her da had been drinking he never cared how much noise he made, or how the bedhead knocked against the wall when he did things to her ma. Mary would draw the blanket over her ears and pray that her ma wouldn't become pregnant again and overcrowd the house even more. Then she would have to go to confession and tell Father Flynn about her sinful thoughts. She blushed when she remembered some of the things she had revealed to the good father about her family.

Oh, she did wish her da would keep off the beer. She loved him dearly from Tuesday to Friday when he had no money left and came straight home from the pit. Black as hell's kettle was how her ma would describe him. There he would sit in the old tin bath in front of the fire whilst her ma scrubbed him with the hard brush, but even the scrubbing brush and carbolic never managed to remove the blue slivers of coal embedded in his flesh.

Father Flynn's thoughts were taking a similar turn. 'They're a good couple, Michael.' He was still bent on persuasion. 'They were never blessed with children of their own; Mary will be treated like their own daughter.'

'Aye, don't you see, man, that's the trouble? She isn't theirs. She's mine, my Mary, and I love her.'

Mary was shocked to see that her da looked close to tears.

‘It’s all right, Da, I won’t go,’ she said. ‘I don’t want to leave Newcastle anyway.’ But she did. The idea of going on a train and out of Newcastle for the first time in her life had begun to seem like an adventure.

Father Flynn ignored her. ‘Yes, Michael, you love Mary, you love all your offspring. The trouble is you love the drink more.’

The living kitchen suddenly became deathly silent. Michael O’Connor sat with his head in his hands, for once lost for words.

‘I’ll make a pot of tea,’ Mariah muttered, and filled the kettle at the low stone sink.

‘I’ll help you, Ma,’ Mary said, lifting the cups from the hooks beneath the shelf in the corner.

Father Flynn realised he had overstepped the mark. He wasn’t an interfering man, nor did he usually moralise. Besides, he felt immense pity for the man across the table, who hadn’t been a drinking man at all until a few years ago. It was the explosion at the pit that had begun his downfall. The priest couldn’t condemn him, not after what had happened: it had been enough to drive any man to drink. Michael O’Connor had dug, sometimes with his bare hands, to free the trapped men. And then to find his twin brother almost sliced down the middle would have landed many a man in the asylum; in Michael’s case it had sent him to the bottle.

The four of them sat, Mary and her mother clutching their hot teacups between their hands, the men facing each other with the steaming brew in front of them, all lost for words. It was Mariah who finally broke the silence.

‘You’re sure they would look after her, Father? If she went, I mean.’

‘Ma, I’m sixteen,’ Mary pointed out. ‘I can look after myself.’

‘Do you think I’d let her go otherwise, Mariah? A lassie I’ve watched blossom since the day she was born?’

‘And she’d get the course of injections the doctor says she needs?’

‘She would.’

‘And she wouldn’t be worked to death like she is at the Browns’?’

‘A few light duties is all that would be required of her. Why, if I know Gladys Roberts, Mary will be the one who’s waited on hand and foot.’

Father Flynn knew all about the longing Gladys had harboured for many years, the yearning for a child of her own. He considered it a tragedy, a couple with so much love to give and no child to lavish it upon. When he had written to Rowland asking for advice on how to treat TB glands, he hadn’t really been surprised when his friend replied with an invitation for Mary to go and stay with them, and he hadn’t been fooled for a second by the explanation that they were in need of a maid.

Mick O’Connor spoke at last. ‘She shouldn’t have been at the Browns’. A bloody slave-driver, that woman – I never could abide her. The hours she worked, no wonder she’s suffering. I should never have let her go.’

‘It’s all right, Da – she’s not all that bad. I get paid regularly, and look at the clothes she gives me.’

‘Aye, so she can brag about what a charitable woman she is.’

‘More like it’s an excuse to buy more finery for her two horsey-looking daughters. Dress them in as many fancy ribbons as she likes and they’ll still look as though they ought to be pulling a plough.’

Mary giggled, pleased that Father Flynn was back to his normal jovial self.

‘Ten hours a day my lass worked for that woman, and I let her carry on. If she hadn’t collapsed in church she’d still have been doing it. What sort of father does that make me?’

‘Now then, Michael, you weren’t to know the girl was ill. It was nobody’s fault.’

‘Would she . . .’ Mick looked embarrassed at his sudden thought, ‘would she be able to come home? if she didn’t like it, I mean.’

‘She’ll have a return ticket if and when she needs one. The Robertses promised me that.’

‘What do you say, lass? Do you want to go or not?’

Mary felt a surge of excitement wash over her but tried not to appear too eager. ‘Only if you think I should, Da,’ she said. ‘And only if I can come home if I don’t like it.’

‘You’ll like it, Mary, I promise.’ Father Flynn was almost as excited as if he was going with her. ‘Wait till you see the place. I won’t tell you any more. Let it be as much of a surprise as it was for me the first time I visited my old friend. The best friend I’ve ever had, even if he is a blooming Protestant.’

The priest thought back to when he and Rowland Roberts had first met on their arrival at university. He chuckled to himself as he remembered some of the antics they’d got up to in those carefree days.

Mary grinned. She had known Father Flynn would persuade them. He could get blood out of a stone, that man; her da had always said so.

Torn between excitement and anxiety, Mary had worried all the way from Newcastle about what she would do if no one should be at the station to meet her. However, Father Flynn had arranged everything to perfection, and she had spotted the chauffeur even before the train had drawn to a halt at Sheffield.

She was soon settled nervously in the back seat of the gleaming black Morris and for the rest of the journey sat feeling somewhat in awe of the dark-haired driver, who didn’t look much older than herself. Fortunately, he whistled cheerfully most of the way so conversation was unnecessary. Instead she found herself relaxing and

marvelling at the comfort of the soft leather seats, in the first car she had travelled in throughout her uneventful life.

It was only as they approached the drive that Mary became aware of her surroundings. Green lawns, still sparkling from an earlier shower, spread out before her, lined by rhododendron bushes and disappearing to the rear of a beautiful old house.

‘Holy mackerel,’ she exclaimed, using one of her mother’s habitual expressions, ‘I must have arrived in heaven.’

She scrambled out of the car, completely unaware that the young driver was being given an equally interesting view of brown lisle stocking tops. Remembering his manners he turned away, but not before he had managed a good eyeful of shapely white thigh.

Mary gathered her few pieces of luggage together, mesmerised by the glory of the scene. The large, stone-gabled house; the miles of purple-heathered moorland stretching to left and right and down to the long valley below them, then up the hill beyond; the looming grey crags in the distance; and everywhere green meadows, like a patchwork quilt, dotted here and there with stone farmhouses. To the left two tiny hamlets nestled, one deep in the valley, the other high on the opposite hill.

Mary’s wide brown eyes travelled downwards to the valley and the large, pear-shaped reservoir that had been created there. She could see smoke rising to the right, a looming grey cloud of it.

‘Is something on fire over there?’ she enquired of the rather handsome young man beside her.

‘No, that’s Sheffield yer can see. Spoils the view a bit, doesn’t it? Still, it’s handy for the shopping and not too far for the doctor to travel to the hospital. He lends me the car sometimes, to take my young brothers to the park. A right good sort is Dr Roberts. Yer mustn’t take advantage of ’im, mind. He’s not daft and he’ll soon ‘ave yer weighed up.’

‘Oh, I would never do that,’ Mary assured him. ‘But why would anyone want to visit a park when they’ve all this countryside here?’

‘Yer’ll be surprised. When you’ve been here a week or two yer’ll be longing to get back to civilisation, especially in’t winter when snow blocks road to Longfield. Yer’ll wish yer’d never set eyes on’t place. If yer look over t’other way that’s Lower Longfield in the bottom and up the hill is Upper Longfield. Doesn’t the church stand well? I suppose yer’ll be going there on Sunday. Even if yer not religious it meks a change.’

‘Is it Catholic?’ Mary asked doubtfully.

‘No. We don’t have a Catholic church in Longfield. I expect yer’d ‘ave to go into Sheffield for the nearest, although there is one over in Millington where some of the lads go on St Patrick’s night, but that’s only to the dance – yer’d be as bad burned as scalded trying to get over there every Sunday. By the way, I’m Tom Downing. I hope yer like it here and stay a bit longer than the others. Like I said, it isn’t much of a place for young folk. I’m used to the quiet, being born down in the village, but for someone from town it takes some getting used to. Can’t seem to keep a maid at all. Can’t think why, with a good boss like doctor. Where are yer from, anyway? Obviously not Yorkshire with an accent like that.’

‘Newcastle.’ Mary smiled and clasped Tom’s outstretched hand, then grabbed her bags and hurried up the steps towards the large panelled door. It opened even before she reached it, revealing a rather buxom, grey-haired lady who looked immaculate in a black skirt and crisp white blouse, the sight of which made Mary feel even more bedraggled. She should have brushed her hair in the car, and someone should have warned her not to stand near the edge of the platform. She had been speckled with soot even before leaving Newcastle.

She patted her beautiful chestnut hair back into the tortoiseshell comb behind her head. Then her hand was clasped in a warm welcoming one and she was drawn into the hall, from which a staircase curved upwards. Mary had seen a picture of one like it once, in a book at Father Flynn's, but imagined they only existed in the homes of film stars and royalty.

Gladys Roberts not only fussed like a mother hen, she looked quite like one too. Her head jutted forward when she walked and her nose had a little bump on it making it rather beak-like in the middle of her ruddy face. Despite her fifty years her eyes had not yet lost their healthy shine, and her whole appearance seemed to ooze energy. She had been up since six this morning cooking and baking. The windows had been polished to a high shine with crumpled newspaper and the large range in the kitchen blacklead until it gleamed. Despite the warm August day she had built up a fire to give the kitchen a cosy glow, and all for the new maid. Dr Roberts had pointed out to his wife that Mary was not to be treated like a hotel guest but as the girl appointed to do all the tiresome jobs Gladys was now doing herself, thus leaving her time for the leisurely pursuits befitting a doctor's wife. But Gladys Roberts had no more intention of taking to her sofa with a piece of fancy, useless embroidery than the doctor had of neglecting his patients.

Truth to tell it wasn't a maid Gladys needed but someone on whom to lavish the deep maternal love which had grown in her heart from the day she was first married. Not once in all the years had she voiced her disappointment at her childless state but inside she had grieved continuously, as much for her husband's sake as for her own. She had never suspected it to be his fault, nor he hers. They had come together from the first with an earthy passion, never forced but exchanged spontaneously, whenever and wherever the urge came over them. Yet for all the love they had to give she had remained barren.

Gradually the pain had subsided but she still continued to lavish her pent-up affection on any young person available. If only the house had been nearer to town she would possibly have considered adoption, but, being an unselfish soul, by the time she realised it was too late for motherhood she considered herself too old to be a suitable companion for a child out here at the back of beyond.

So a series of maids came and went again after a few months, and now another. Perhaps this one would be different. She certainly looked less flighty than the previous ones. Father Flynn had pointed out in his letter that Mary was hard-working and eager to be taught, but in the end what had persuaded Mrs Roberts to take her on instead of one of the local girls was the fact that Mary had been diagnosed as suffering from TB glands. Newcastle and the lack of nourishment endemic among miners' families there could only restrict her recovery, so here she was, to be filled with as much food as could be stuffed inside her and more fresh air than she had breathed in her entire life.

'Come in, come in. Whatever is Tom thinking of letting you carry those bags? You must be exhausted after your journey. Here, let me take your coat. We usually leave our outer wear down here in the hall - it saves so many journeys up and down stairs when we're in and out of the garden or the outbuildings. The wind's cutting up here in winter so don't you be running around without a coat.'

Mary's coat was placed carefully on the hall stand along with the more expensive garments belonging to the Robertses. She felt her face burning at the sight of the threadbare sleeves, but Mrs Roberts didn't seem to notice. She guided Mary by the elbow through the first door on the right. 'This is the dining room. Don't you think it's lovely?'

Mary managed to suppress the words 'Holy mackerel'. Instead she stood there open-mouthed. The rectangular room seemed enormous, with a large marble fireplace

furnishing one wall and three tall windows along the opposite one. A long table in the centre was surrounded by eight velvet-bottomed chairs and everything in the room seemed to shine like the new pennies in a Christmas stocking.

Dumbfounded, Mary followed Mrs Roberts back into the hall and towards the door opposite.

‘This is the lounge, smaller but much more comfortable, I think.’

‘A piano!’ Mary couldn’t conceal her excitement. For years she had been fascinated with the school piano, pomming out ‘Chopsticks’ with one finger whenever Miss Williams happened to leave the room and receiving a crack across the knuckles with a ruler on numerous occasions for her efforts. Of course she would never be allowed to touch this one either, but she might hear someone else playing it.

Mrs Roberts was flicking an imaginary fleck of dust from its lid.

‘Yes, and doesn’t it take up some space? Still, my husband loves his music. He’s the choirmaster, you know,’ she told Mary with pride. ‘We usually retire in here after supper. He’s obsessed with the wireless at present. World affairs, you know.’

Mary didn’t know, but she wasn’t going to admit it.

Apart from the piano – a baby grand which really did take up some room – and a wireless set on a small table, all the room contained were two large leather straight-backed easy chairs and a long low sofa. Not one like Father Flynn’s with worn upholstery and a wobbly leg, but a beautiful, padded, leather one with two curved arms and a buttoned back. The leather matched the wooden floor and the walls which weren’t lined with books were also of panelled wood. The curtains and central carpet square were a warm honey beige. Mary wondered how she would keep a carpet of such a pale shade clean.

‘And now the scullery, my favourite room.’

Mary loved it on sight. The long, white, scrubbed table, with chairs to match, was laid at one end with a folded checked cloth and a china tea set. The fire cast a glow on to the brass fender surrounding the nasturtium-patterned hearth tin, and the copper kettle, saucepans and bellows hanging on the wall. Two spindle-backed chairs were set in front of the fire, and long wooden cupboards lined the back wall. A side dresser was stacked with willow-patterned crockery, and shelves were crammed with colourful chutneys, jams and preserves. The alcove by the fire was brightened by gingham curtains, under which was a sparkling white ceramic sink.

Mary had never seen anything like it. The contrast with the living kitchen back home was unbelievable. If only her ma could have a kitchen like this – no, a scullery. She must remember to call it a scullery from now on.

She never thought she would be grateful for the elocution lessons Father Flynn had encouraged her to have, but she was glad of them now. At least Mrs Roberts could understand what she was talking about. Her Newcastle accent was not nearly as pronounced as it used to be, and anyway Mrs Roberts had a slight Yorkshire accent herself, although it was a lovely voice all the same.

‘Come and sit down, Mary,’ she was saying. ‘We’ll have a cup of tea. You must be parched. Or would you prefer nettle beer?’

‘Oh, tea please,’ said Mary, not sure what nettle beer tasted like, or if it would have the same effect on her as the beer had on her da.

A slice of parkin was placed in front of her, sticky and hot with spices, almost as good as her ma’s.

‘Eat as much as you like. We really must fatten you up a bit and get some roses in your cheeks. We grow all our own fruit and vegetables, thanks to Tom. I really don’t know what we’d do without that boy. I do hope we aren’t going to lose him to the war service but Dr Roberts can see it

happening soon. Still, I hope you'll be a help to me when you become accustomed to things. Then I should have more time to spend in the garden. If there's one thing I enjoy it's my garden. Are you used to housework, Mary?'

'Oh, yes, ma'am. I've been in service since I was fourteen, and learned from my mother long before that. My mother's the best cook in our street: everyone comes to her for help at weddings and funerals. The trouble is she's hard up most of the time so can't afford the ingredients, but I can cook almost as good as she can. Even Mrs Brown who I worked for admitted that and she never says anything good about anyone.'

Mary blushed as she realised she was rambling on but Mrs Roberts laughed and poured another cup of tea.

'I think we're going to get along fine, Mary,' she said. 'But now you must be tired. Come, let me show you to your room. We have supper in here at seven thirty, but don't bother coming down tonight. I'll bring you a tray and you can have an early night. We'll discuss your duties in the morning.'

Mary marvelled at her room. At home, the only privacy she ever had was in the lavatory and even there she'd rush in and out again, panic-stricken at the sound of scurrying rats from the midden round the back. And now, here she was, in this beautiful room.

Though the sun had disappeared the room seemed to be filled with light. The yellow curtains were matched with the bed covers and the lino on the floor. A carpet square of green reminded Mary of the velvety lawns outside. She looked out of the window, unable to believe anything could be so glorious.

If only their Norah and Kathleen could see her now, and her ma and da. Oh, she was going to miss them. She felt the tears prickling her eyes, but she mustn't cry. Mrs Roberts might think she didn't like her room and she

seemed such a kind woman, it would be dreadful to disappoint her.

Mary unbuttoned her dress and stepped out of it. Then she poured water from the jug into the basin and began to wash, finally stepping out of her undergarments and washing her whole body, revelling in the silky feel of the water, softened by the scented soap and the fluffiness of the towel, yellow to match the furnishings. How lovely to smell of lemon instead of carbolic.

The knock on the door startled her.

‘Can I come in? What was I thinking of, not showing you the bathroom? Slip on your dressing gown and I’ll take you now. Then you can eat your supper.’

Mary blushed. She had never had a dressing gown; indeed, it was only thanks to Mrs Brown that she had a couple of presentable nighties. She slipped one over her head and stood waiting.

Gladys Roberts suddenly realised the girl’s plight. Wishing she could recall her words, she left the room and was back immediately with a dressing gown of her own.

‘I wonder if you would like this?’ she said. ‘It’s far too small for me. Come along, the bathroom is just along the corridor. Don’t worry if you hear a banging in the night, it’s only the air in the water pipes. If you want a bath this is the best time – the water has time to heat up again then for the doctor. I usually take mine in the afternoon, when I’ve finished in the garden.’ She smiled.

The bath was unlike anything Mary had ever seen, long enough to lie down in and decorated with a blue floral pattern. The water closet stood beside it. Mary was speechless.

‘Well, I’ll leave you now, but don’t be too long or your cocoa will be cold. Goodnight, Mary. I’ll see you at breakfast.’

Then Mary was alone, more alone than she’d ever been in her life, and she didn’t care at all.

Chapter Two

During the months that followed only three things worried Mary. One was the electricity. For the first few days she managed to avoid switching the contraptions on and off by busying herself with other things until Mrs Roberts did it for her. Finally she had to tackle the frightening thing herself, and was surprised to find it quite painless. After that she was delighted to use the huge, noisy vacuum cleaner which made the carpets look almost new again, and she always made sure the lounge was bathed in light by the time the doctor and his wife retired there in the evening after supper.

The second thing she worried about was the injections. The doctor had given her two so far, and even though they didn't hurt she felt quite sick at the thought of them. Dr Roberts had examined her carefully and gently, given her a large bottle of Scotts Emulsion with which she was to dose herself every night, and done her more good than all the medicine in Sheffield by telling her she was like a ray of sunshine flitting about the house with her freckled face and shimmering hair. She was still rather scared of him, with his booming voice and his infectious laughter.

'Hello,' he would bellow every time he passed her as she went about her work. 'And what has my little town mouse been up to today then?'

At first Mary had blushed and stood there tongue-tied, but gradually she had found herself beginning to enthuse over the day's activities: how she'd dared to feed the hens without Tom's assistance, or had made five pounds of bilberry jam, learning quickly from Mrs Roberts how to test the fruit – which had cropped late this year – for setting.

After a while the doctor sought Mary out most evenings for a chat, on the pretext of asking if she was feeling better, an unnecessary question, for Mary was blooming like the beautiful bronze chrysanthemums which were at present growing in profusion in the glass lean-to round the back of the house. She gradually overcame her shyness and chatted away as though she'd known him for ever. His little goat's beard and curled moustache fascinated her, and once she had grown accustomed to the volume she found his deep voice beautiful. Once she heard him singing to his wife's accompaniment on the piano and she opened her bedroom door to hear more clearly, overcome by the deep bass rendering of 'Linden Lea', and other songs she had never heard before.

The third worry, which Mary harboured long after the others had been solved, was what to do about her religion. She had written a carefully worded letter to Father Flynn, along with one to her mother, giving them to Tom to post in Longfield. She had explained how she had not been to Mass since leaving home as the only church within reach was Protestant, and it was time she went to confession. So far the only reply had been from her mother, and that was no help at all. Ma assured Mary that the family were all well, and then went on to tell her about Joyce Bailey, who had been her best friend. Joyce, to everyone's dismay, was expecting. The young man, who had been in Newcastle looking for work, had moved on before Joyce had realised the plight she was in, and her father had thrown her out on to the street. Joyce had been taken in by One Shilling Lil and everyone knew how she'd turn out living with a woman

like that. Everybody was sorry for the girl's ma, being shamed like that, and Mary must remember not to do anything which would put her in the same position.

Mary, who had been looking forward to her first letter, felt quite depressed after reading it. Poor Joyce. All her life she had been deprived of affection. Her parents had been even worse than her da for the drink, and Joyce had been brought up hanging around pub doorways waiting for closing time. Maybe she'd be better off with One Shilling Lil. At least Lil's house was clean, and she had often given Mary and the other children a penny or a slice of bread and jam when they were little. Then her ma had found out and forbidden her to go there again. Mary had learned later that Lil had come by her name by entertaining men during the evenings, but she still liked her. She was a kind woman. Maybe that's why the men liked her, too: because she was kind and laughed a lot. Besides, she was ever so pretty. Yes, Joyce would be all right with Lil. Mary knew she shouldn't be thinking such things and felt ashamed. She really ought to go to confession, but she couldn't ask Mrs Roberts, her being Church of England.

Suddenly, Mary's worry was resolved by Dr Roberts. Once a month he visited the orphanage at Upper Longfield. His duty was to keep an eye on the children, treating any colds, tummy upsets or more serious complaints which affected them from time to time. The orphanage was run by nuns from the convent, a dark dismal place hidden completely by trees so that passers-by rarely noticed it, and even if they did they were deterred from exploring further by the locked iron gates.

The young novices' only worldly pleasure was working at the orphanage, when at least they were allowed to speak freely and enjoy caring for the children, who would have been in a sorry state without them. Dr Roberts was the only male, apart from the priest, they were allowed contact with and they had even been known to laugh on occasions

during his visits, as he narrated anecdotes to them from the outside world. He knew he was their only link with it and made sure he passed on any items of local gossip, feeling pity for the poor girls cooped up away from reality.

It was on one of his visits to the orphanage that he mentioned Mary, and was told she might attend Mass in the chapel once a week. Tom was to take her every Wednesday, when she could also make confession. Dr Roberts found it difficult to imagine what she could possibly have to confess, but he knew from a letter he had received from Father Flynn that she was worrying about it. Why in God's name hadn't the girl told him? And there was he thinking she was nicely settled in and able to talk to him without reservation now. Well, at least she didn't hide away from him any more, or blush crimson at the sight of him. Besides, she had certainly done Gladys a world of good. He hadn't seen her so animated in years; teaching the girl to dressmake now by the looks of things. He must arrange with Tom to take them into town next week when he dropped him off at the hospital.

Gladys could buy some material then and have the girl make herself some pretty dresses, instead of the dismal things she was wearing now, even when off duty.

Mary was in seventh heaven. They had set off at eight o'clock along the road to Sheffield. The moors resembled a large golden-brown carpet, and the hedgerows were a mass of scarlet rose hips and luscious juicy blackberries. Hazelnuts clustered together on branches overhead.

She spoke not one word on the journey to the infirmary. Dr Roberts had to be dropped off at eight thirty and had promised to show them the new operating theatre block before Tom took them into town.

Mary, who had never been in a hospital before, would rather have stayed in the car, but had to admit the place was impressive. Mrs Roberts left Mary alone and went off

to chat with her husband's colleagues, and when Mary caught a glimpse inside an opened door she felt quite faint at the sight of a small boy lying on a rubber sheet on the floor. A nurse, seeing her scared white face, assured her that he was only recovering from having his tonsils out.

'The recovery room will be full before the day is out,' she said. Even so, Mary hoped she would never need a tonsillectomy herself, and was most relieved when they were on their way again.

Tom weaved his way in and out amongst the tramcars. He seemed to know exactly where he was going and pointed out various landmarks as they passed them by. He knew just where preparations were being made in case of attack. The announcement that Britain was at war had been made a few days ago. Dr Roberts had come sadly home from church and told them the news, his eyes filling with tears as he did so. By now most of the halls throughout the town had been either closed or taken over for military recruiting and other purposes. Tom seemed to know all about it, and told Mary how the city had undergone a trial blackout as long ago as last year, so that things would be in order when the war finally came.

Now the worst had happened. Everybody was living in fear and a kind of panic had set in. Children were being sent to schools out in Derbyshire, and some had already been evacuated. However, Sheffield seemed not the least bit frightening to Mary, and when Tom dropped them off at the market she almost skipped with excitement by the side of Mrs Roberts.

Gladys Roberts didn't usually shop in Castle Market, but today was Mary's day. If she was to settle in Sheffield, as Gladys hoped she would, she would need to know her way about. They bought a few yards of fine material, which Gladys let Mary choose herself. She didn't interfere except to suggest that Mary would look lovely in green or lemon,

which would bring out the colour of her hair. Mary took her advice and left the stall thrilled with the chosen fabric.

They also found fresh herrings for tea, and Mrs Roberts bought some extra for Tom to take home for his family. Mary was fascinated by the fish market, and Gladys bought her a tiny plate of cockles to eat at the stall. She thought they were delicious.

Afterwards they walked up town and Gladys showed Mary the City Hall. They wandered round the gardens and visited the Graves Art Gallery. When Tom returned with the grocery order they went to Gladys's favourite restaurant for lunch together, and the coffee was so delicious that Gladys bought some beans to take home. Mary loved Sheffield and thought it was the happiest day she had ever spent. Even so, she couldn't wait to get home and begin work on her new dresses.

As she tacked the dress material ready for Mrs Roberts to sew, however, she began to feel a little guilty. Her sisters would be wearing the same old dresses they had had when she left, some of them cast-offs of her own. She felt the warmth and comfort of the scullery around her and tears pricked her eyes as she recalled the shabbiness of the kitchen back home. Suddenly she needed her mother's smile and the sound of her sisters and brothers, laughing or even arguing. For all the luxury of Moorland House, nothing could make up for home. Then Mrs Roberts smiled across the table and Mary cast aside her homesickness and the feeling of guilt. This was her home now. Even so, she vowed to write to her parents regularly and make sure none of her family forgot her.

She handed the tacked bodice to Mrs Roberts and excitement overcame her sadness. She was to have a new dress to go with her new life, a life she could never have imagined until she came to Longfield. She vowed that if she ever had children of her own she would do everything within her power to protect them from poverty and instil in

them the importance of working hard to keep to the standard she was determined to set for them.