VINTAGE

A NIGHT IN COLD HARBOUR

MARGARET KENNEDY

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About the Book

Romilly Brandon was heir to a fortune and the handsomest and liveliest young man in the county. But in his twenty-first year, the pretty daughter of the local parson, Jenny Newbolt broke his heart, and he left to live a dissipated life in London. Returning years later, Romily finds many surprises – his one-time sweetheart grown old and withered, and in possession of a great secret that shakes him to his core. When Romily finally learns the truth, is it too late to atone?

About the Author

Margaret Kennedy was born in 1896. Her first novel, *The Ladies of Lyndon*, was published in 1923. Her second novel, *The Constant Nymph*, became an international bestseller. She then met and married a barrister, David Davies, with whom she had three children. She went on to write a further fifteen novels, to much critical acclaim. She was also a playwright, adapting two of her novels – *Escape Me Never* and *The Constant Nymph* – into successful productions. Three different film versions of *The Constant Nymph* were made, and featured stars of the time such as Ivor Novello and Joan Fontaine; Kennedy subsequently worked in the film industry for a number of years. She also wrote a biography of Jane Austen and a work of literary criticism, *The Outlaws of Parnassus*. Margaret Kennedy died in Woodstock, Oxfordshire, in 1967.

OTHER NOVELS BY MARGARET KENNEDY

The Ladies of Lyndon
The Constant Nymph
Red Sky at Morning
The Fool of the Family
Return I Dare Not
A Long Time Ago
Together and Apart
The Midas Touch
The Feast
Lucy Carmichael
Troy Chimneys
The Oracles
The Wild Swan
The Forgotten Smile

TO OLIVE AND TONY HALLAM

MARGARET KENNEDY

A Night in Cold Harbour

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

‘Experience had already shown how much could be done by the industry of children, and the advantages of early employing them in such branches of manufacture as they are capable to execute.’
(*William Pitt in asking the House of Commons to reject Whitbread’s Minimum Wage Bill. Feb.* 12, 1796.)

‘And to what would they be indebted for this gentlest of all revolutions? To what, but to economy? Which dreads no longer the multiplication of man, now that she has shown by what secure and unperishable means infant man, a drug at present so much worse than worthless, may be endowed with an indubitable and universal value.’

(*Jeremy Bentham*, 1798.)

PROLOGUE: NIGHT

A FEW STONES still lie in the heather at a cross-roads on the long southern slopes of Exmoor. They are all that is left of a hut which once stood there, offering shelter for poor people on the roads.

Old Lucy Squires made use of it twice a year, when she took one of her mysterious walks from Abbotsbury, on the Dorset coast, to Minehead, on the Bristol Channel. She had a tryst there with a man who was called Jemmy the Finger, since he had six fingers on his left hand. He earned halfpence for showing it at fairs, where he wore a red mitten to conceal it. In the hut he omitted this precaution: trampers and the Poor People, as the gypsies called themselves, might see it for nothing.

In the summer of 1813 Lucy failed to keep the tryst. Jemmy hung round Cold Harbour for three days, waiting for her. It was understood that neither would wait for the other longer than four, since people were expecting them elsewhere. Jemmy would carry Lucy's news eastwards, while she went on to Minehead. Nobody in Devon, Dorset or Somerset could remember a time when Mother Squires had not been on the roads; when one died, another took her place. Lucy was the daughter of the famous Mary who narrowly escaped the gallows in 1752. Handed down in the family was the same faultless memory for facts and figures. Not a scrap of writing would ever be found on Lucy, should she have the ill luck to be searched. Her pack held no more than a common peddler's wares. The rest was in her head, down to the last barrel of liquor, the last bolt of lace, run up on moonless nights to the Chesil Beach and stored in cellars at Abbotsbury. She knew what goods were there and who had them. When she had carried word inland they were gradually dispersed.

She must be either dead or taken, thought Jemmy, as he sat on the moor and stared down the hill. But if she had been taken he would have heard of it by now. The news would have been out through the country before they had done swearing the constables. In any case she would die game. Her mother had been taken for a robbery committed in Hertfordshire on a day when she herself had been in Abbotsbury. She could have named a score of people, from Parson downwards, who had seen and spoken to her there. She would have kept mum and died on the gallows had not one of them come forward of his own accord. The tale lived on in country ballads describing him as 'Lucy's sweetheart true', a cordwainer, dead now these sixty years.

A person now appeared on the road below, coming up the hill with the aimless plod of one who lives on the roads. It was a woman, but too tall to be Lucy. When she drew nearer Jemmy recognised her. He had seen her often at West Country fairs. Her name was Hannah and she walked with a gypsy called Ptolemy Boswell who sold donkeys.

'Lucy's gone,' she said, when she came up to him.

'Ah! I thought as much. Where?'

'Yarcombe. They sicked a dog on her.'

'She died of it?' he asked in some surprise.

'It brings a weakness that flies all over her and takes her off, seemingly.'

'You was there?'

She shook her head and sat down beside him on the bank, hugging her tattered cloak round her, for the wind was cold.

'Word goes out amongst the Poor People.'

'No word from her though?'

' "I'm a-going," she says,' replied Hannah in a whining sing-song. ' "My time is come and I must go, like another. These is my last dying words," she says. "Tell them in all the Cold Harbours that Lucy Squires is no more." '

Jemmy did not believe these to have been Lucy's last words, for Lucy was a taciturn old creature. But it was plain that she had tried to send him a message. He sat listening to the chill wind, as it whistled in the grasses, and then he said:

'She was old. Ten years gone they might have sicked a whole pack on her and she'd have been little the worse.'

'Ay, to be sure. She was a very ancient old woman, I believe.'

'You'll bide at Cold Harbour tonight?'

'Who's there?'

'Some people cast away off the Lizard. Making for Bristol inland, for to escape the Press. They've got good mangery.'

Hannah rose and they started up the hill towards the hut.

'And there's Parson Purchiss with his lad,' added Jemmy.

'Him! There's an enquiration for him. At Dulverton.'

'Better keep mum about that, or he'll scarper. Who's seeking him?'

'A Rye in a fine carriage. They say there's a price out.'

'A price? But they can't hang him, I believe, if he be a true parson. What's the price?'

'Ten finches.'

Nobody, thought Jemmy, would offer ten guineas for a poor old tramp unless they wished to hang him. Gentlemen in fine carriages were not to be gainsaid. To be taken and hanged by them was a misfortune which might befall anybody at any time, although they were bound by mysterious formalities of their own. First they sent a man before the beaks, and then they sent him up the steps, and then he was hanged, although he might never know why. It was a pleasanter kind of death than some others.

'There's many will keep mum for all that,' he said. ' 'Twould be thought unlucky.'

'Ay. He has the name of a Holy Man, I believe. He has a book.'

A cheerful noise came from the hut when they reached it. The shipwrecked sailors had learnt how to look after themselves. They had brought up some faggots from the copses below and lighted a fire. Their mangery, as Jemmy had promised, was good; their forlorn tale softened the hearts of cottage wives and they got better pickings than gypsies or trampers received. Amongst them they had collected half a cold pease pudding, some green bacon, some turnips, the heels of three loaves, and two hares. They did not know that food was not common property in Cold Harbour, nor was there any need to tell them. Hannah was welcomed civilly and given a place by the fire. At a hard glance from Jemmy she produced from her bundle a red spotted handkerchief containing bread and cheese. This prize, some labourer's dinner which she had picked up under a hedge, she would have preferred to reserve for the next day, and to sup tonight on the sailors' food. Jemmy was determined to create an atmosphere of fellowship and good will. He contributed some rum himself, produced an iron pot, and offered to skin the hares.

'It's all for one and one for all,' he muttered, as he reached across her to put the pot on the fire.

He jerked his thumb over his shoulder to a corner where a trembling old man crouched beside a lad of about fourteen. This was the crazy creature whom they called Parson Purchiss. Nobody knew his real name. It was said that he was a true parson, but at war with the Quality. He had got his name from a book which he carried with him, and from which he would sometimes read out stories of travels in strange countries.

He did not beg but made shift to live in various ways, although very poorly. He baptized the gypsies' children, thus protecting them, as it was thought, from smallpox. He would read and write letters for those who had no schooling, and this service was valued by cottagers who had kindred at the wars, or on the sea. Being a true

gentleman, he would keep a secret, and was therefore more trustworthy than some know-all-tell-all neighbour who might have a little schooling. One could be sure he would set down the meaning plainly, finding words for those who were tongue-tied. He never turned out a letter so elegant as to be incomprehensible. And, crazy though he might be, he sometimes gave his clients good advice. He knew, or had once known, something about the laws. He knew how money might best be sent, or safely laid up. He could break bad news gently, and an angry letter became milder when he had written it.

For these services he was more often paid in food and shelter than in coin, but Dickie, the boy who went with him, could play the fiddle, which was a source of income.

Although they had not been on the roads for very long they were well known in the West and were regarded with friendliness, mixed with a kind of awe. It was asserted that Parson Purchiss could change a man's luck. Any striking encounter with agony or wretchedness threw him into a passion of weeping, and some people believed that these tears worked a charm. Amongst them was Jemmy, who was convinced that they had cured him of gangrene. A bite from a farm dog had set up a sore in his leg which would not heal. It began to look ugly. His whole leg swelled to an immense size so that he could no longer walk. He had been obliged to cut off his boot and cram his leg into a great fisherman's boot, covered with green mould, which he had found rotting in a ditch. Even so he could not walk, and was lying in unspeakable torment by the roadside when Parson Purchiss came by, beheld him, and wept. In a little while the pain eased. The leg, in due course, healed pretty well. Jemmy roundly testified to this miracle everywhere and once fought a man at Newbury who maintained that he might as well declare that his leg had been cured by a mouldy boot.

Had the old man been less kindly, simple, and innocent, these powers might have been ascribed to a sinister source. But nobody could suppose him in league with the devil. It was felt, rather, that his tears had power to move Somebody Else. Fear as well as gratitude prompted Jemmy to deal honestly with one who had so powerful a Friend. This view was likely to be shared by many. Ten guineas might be a temptation but there was no knowing what lay in wait for the man who took them.

The sailors were less dependable than gypsies or trampers would have been. They might, with luck, never hear of the reward, for they were avoiding large towns and villages. As merchant seamen they would be clapped into the navy immediately, if taken before the Magistrates for vagrancy. They kept to by-lanes, never begged from the prosperous, and were slipping as quietly as they could up to Bristol where they had friends. They might, of course, see some bill posted, but Jemmy was sure that four out of the five of them could not read. The fifth, a spare, sly little man called Hughes, seemed to have had some schooling, although he was not likely to inform the rest of ten guineas which he could hope to secure entirely for himself. The hares had been his contribution to the supper; he declared that they had been given to him, which nobody believed. He was not likely, by the looks of him, to believe in luck and Holy Men. He had money of which his companions knew nothing. When they first arrived at Cold Harbour they had removed their boots and bathed their tired feet in a nearby ditch. Hughes went a little apart from the rest to do this, upon which Jemmy plagued him by coming too, and making conversation, until it became clear that Hughes had some very good reason for sticking to his boots when anybody was by. With such a man on the roads it might be better that Parson should lie hidden for awhile.

Jemmy went over to his old friend but got no return to his enquiries save a dazed look.

‘He’s poorly,’ said the boy. ‘He took a fever lying in the wet one night. He does naught but shiver and shake.’

‘He should lie warmer than this. Mother Dicker, over by Watersmeet, would give him a bed. She owes him a good turn. He wept for her grandchild.’

‘I doubt I could get him so far. ’Twas all I could do to bring him here.’

‘He might do better for a taste of rum. There is reasons he should lie snug for a week or so. Tomorrow we’ll make shift to get a pony.’

‘I’ve a guinea. A gentleman at Glastonbury gave me a guinea for to go away, since my fiddling broke his lady’s sleep.’

Jemmy laughed.

‘That’s a sweet way to get a guinea! I’ll take to the fiddle myself if gentlemen will give me guineas so I don’t play upon it.’

Between them they got their patient to swallow a little rum. Jemmy then took the hares out of the hut to skin, for he wanted to keep an eye on the road. Presently the boy slipped out to ask what was blowing. Upon hearing of the reward and the gentleman in the carriage he gave a despairing groan.

‘They’re coming up with him. I knew they would, at the last. We should ought to have stayed in Ireland. I was against it, but he took a fancy to come back here, seeking his book.’

They both looked uneasily southward, at a sombre world sinking into night. Questions were never asked in Cold Harbour, but Jemmy now ventured on a few, since the confidence about the guinea showed that the boy put trust in him.

‘Are you kin?’

A shake of the head, followed by:

‘He’s Quality. I’m a whore’s bastard.’

And a lord might have got you for all that, thought Jemmy.

'You been walking together long?'

'Five years. We was in Ireland at first, and we wan't on the roads then.'

'Who might be after him? D'ye know?'

'The gentry. They turned on him when Miss Jenny died. She was good to us. We was snug enough along of Miss Jenny. When she died we were forced to scarper.'

'He's a true parson?'

'To be sure he is.'

'They can't hang him then. Might it be you they're after?'

'Me! Never! Keep out of the way is all they ask of me.'

'There's a smell of Quality about you.'

'Never!' cried the boy again. 'I've but one thought in my heart.'

'And what's that?'

'To be even with 'em. To pay 'em back in the coin they've paid us.'

Jemmy laughed and began to skin the hares.

'That's proof enough,' he said after a while.

'Proof of what?'

'Even with 'em! Not one of us would harbour such a hope. You're Quality enough to get yourself hanged before your beard sprouts. Even with 'em!'

The boy muttered something about the French and a guillotine.

'Much good that did the Frenchies, poor sods! A gilliteen don't fill empty bellies. You'd best get back and play your fiddle to the sailors.'

'Them! What would they give me?'

'Good will. You might need it before the night is out. Here's the meat. Take it.'

He flung the hares to Dickie and spread the skins to dry on a flat stone behind the hut. They were worth a trifle, if

Hughes forgot to ask for them. Inside the hut the fiddle struck up *Billy McGee*.

The night was falling fast over the great amphitheatre of country below. There had been no sunset. A cloudy sky boded rain before morning. A light or two twinkled out in cottage or farm windows. There was no movement discernible on the roads, yet Jemmy smelt trouble. If our Benefactor should drive over the moor tonight, he thought, we should see his carriage lamps a long way off.

The epithet held no irony in Jemmy's mind. Benefactor was a fine name which the Quality bestowed on themselves; he had never heard it used in an attractive context. This strange species had sometimes shown him kindness. Gentlemen had tossed him a coin to drink their healths. And there was one who, seeing him very lame from that scarce healed leg, had given him a lift in a curricle, chatting affably, as one man to another. But people of that sort were not given to announcing themselves as benefactors. The word was oftenest heard from those who put man-traps in their woods, kicked stray dogs out of their way and preached repentance to condemned prisoners in Newgate.

The interior of the hut was now quite dark, save for the flames of the little fire. Faces, clustered round it, watched the bubbling stew. The stench was such that even Jemmy flinched for a moment before going in. The rum had put the sailors into a cheerful mood. They were singing *Billy McGee* as they watched their supper cooking. Hannah was now bending over the old man.

'He's a-going,' she said to Jemmy. 'He'll not last the night. Feel of his skin. Hark to his breathing, how it do roar and whistle.'

He was inclined to agree with her. The scheme to get a pony and seek shelter with Mother Dicker would never answer. Nor could he linger long, for he must be on his way, carrying news of Lucy's death to those who were waiting

for a word from her. Yet he did not like to go. He remembered the roadside where he had lain howling, and a moment of unmeasured bliss which had come to him when those tears fell, as though he had risen up and floated away into some other existence. Some part of him had been touched which had nothing to do with his leg. He sometimes felt that, ever since, he had been a slightly altered man.

'It might be for the best,' he said. 'Better than that he should be taken.'

He took the hot shrivelled hand and felt a faint pressure.

'D'ye know me, sir?' he whispered. 'Jemmy? 'Tis Jemmy.'

A faint reply was drowned by a bellow from the sailors.

'His horse has found a warmer stable.
Billy McGee McGaw!
His dog has found a bigger kennel.
Billy McGee McGaw!
His mort has found a better mate,
And we shall get some grub to ate!
So they all flapped their wings and cried:
Caw! Caw! Caw!
Billy McGee McGaw!'

'When you've eaten,' he said to the boy, 'go you and watch the road. Give word if you see carriage lamps.'

'They'll never come tonight!' protested Hannah.

'My mind mistrusts me. This Cold Harbour is well known. No profit to enquire by day. 'Tis after dark they might hope to find folks here.'

'And what might you have done with them skins?' said a voice at Jemmy's shoulder.

It was Hughes who had slipped quietly up to them.

'On a stone behind there, if you want 'em.'

'To be sure I want 'em. What's to do here?'

Hughes bent over to look and exclaimed sharply:

'The man's dying.'

'No, he an't.'

‘I say he is. He must go outside. There’s no luck to be had sleeping with a corpse. It won’t hurt him to die on the heath and we can sleep in peace.’

‘You may sleep in peace on the heath if you choose,’ said Jemmy. ‘He’ll bide here.’

‘I’ll have you to remember there are five of us. You’ll do as we say. Take him out. Take him a mile off at the least, so we shall have no trouble tomorrow. When they find a dead man in Cold Harbour they bring back all those that were with him to speak before the Crowner.’

‘You know too much for a sailor,’ retorted Jemmy, ‘nor you don’t speak like a sailor. Must have been the fear of the gallows drove you to sea. He’ll bide here. Unless you want that your cullies should know what you’ve got in your boot.’

Hughes started and changed colour.

‘Have it your own way,’ he said hastily. ‘Since you set store by the old fellow. Who might he be?’

‘One that passes for an honest man with the Walking People. If you want to see Bristol you won’t cross us.’

Hughes retreated.

‘That Gaujo means no good,’ said Hannah.

‘He’d skin his own mother for tenpence,’ agreed Jemmy.

The pot was lifted from the fire and all gathered for the meal, spearing out pieces on their knives.

Jemmy took pains to establish cordial relations with the sailors. He gave them advice as to the safest lanes eastward, told them of a good barn where they might spend the next night, and amused them with stories. All that he said impressed upon them the importance of winning favour with the Walking People. He told them about the Bottle Man, at Shaftesbury Fair, who had filled a large tent with people paying sixpence apiece to see a six-foot blackamoor get inside a pint bottle and there to sing a song. After waiting for near an hour they tore the tent to pieces. The blackamoor and his barker helped them to do so since, in the interval, one had washed his face and the

other had assumed the disguise of an old woman. So great was the riot that a record number of pockets had been picked. But later a reward was put out and the conspirators were taken. One that knew them, explained Jemmy, turned informer, not being accustomed to the roads but making their acquaintance in a Cold Harbour, as it might be this one, and by trade a seaman, as it might be one of the company. No detail was spared as to the ultimate fate of the informer at the hands of the Walking People.

All the time, as he talked, Jemmy's heart was as heavy as lead. He could not forget the life ebbing away in the corner. No death had ever affected him as this one did. When the sailors began another song he went back.

'He's trying for to say something,' murmured Dickie.

Jemmy put his ear to the trembling mouth and caught a whisper:

'Trouble for you … Coroner … put me … in a ditch … for Billy McGee.'

'No, no, Parson. We'll stay by you.'

'Dickie!'

'I'm here. Holding your hand.'

'Learn…. Don't stay on the roads…. Eccles…. Go to him … tell him … from me … he will help you….'

The voice fell silent.

'Go back to the door,' said Jemmy to the boy. 'And don't blubber. He'll go so quiet I believe the rest won't know unless we tell them.'

The boy went to the door and cried out immediately that the lights of a carriage were coming up the hill.

An uneasy silence fell upon the hut. Presently they heard the distant ticking of hooves, the rattle of wheels. The sound came nearer. As the carriage clattered past a ray of light from a lamp looked in for a moment at the open door. It went on but, just as a sigh of relief broke from the listeners, it stopped.

‘No matter what questions is asked,’ said Jemmy urgently, ‘we knows nothing.’

Voices were shouting outside.

‘It’s here or hereabouts.’

‘I believe we’ve passed it.’

Then came a quieter voice in the accents which they had most cause to fear:

‘Don’t turn. I can walk back. I think I see it.’

A door slammed. Quick footsteps approached the hut. The vagrants within huddled close together as if for protection and Hannah threw her cloak over Parson Purchiss. A tall man appeared in the doorway. Flinching, as Jemmy had flinched, from the stink, he paused on the threshold. A cluster of faces, lit by the dying fire, stared at him. To his greeting, which was civil enough, Jemmy returned a mutter which might serve for all.

‘Is this the place they call Cold Harbour?’

‘Ay.’

‘I believe that some of you good people might be able to help me. You are all travellers, I take it?’

‘Travellers and Poor People,’ whined Hannah. ‘What does the kind gentleman want with the likes of us?’

‘I’m seeking two people who may be wandering in the country hereabouts. I believe they lodge very roughly. An old gentleman, the Reverend Dr. Newbolt, and a boy called Richard Cottar. Have any of you heard of such people?’

There was a general murmur of dissent.

‘Are you sure? They might not go by those names. But any person who has seen them would, I think, remember them. The boy carries a fiddle. I am offering a reward of ten guineas to anyone who may bring me to them. So keep your eyes and ears open.’

‘Might we know your name, sir? In case we should hear of them later?’

This was from Hughes. Dickie made a quick movement. He had whipped out a knife before Jemmy caught his arm

with a firm grasp.

‘My name is Brandon. Of Stretton Priors, Severnshire. For the next few days I shall be found at the Dolphin Inn at Porlock.’

The silence and stillness in the hut seemed at last to daunt the stranger. He paused, as though at a loss, and then said:

‘I trust you will help me, if it is ever in your power. Meanwhile, perhaps you will drink my health.’ He tossed a coin towards Hughes, who had at least made a civil reply. ‘And remember! I intend to be the benefactor of any person who brings me word of them.’

With this unfortunate statement the scene closed. He wished them good night and turned up the road again. Everybody stirred and sighed. Not one of them, not even Hughes, hankered after a benefactor in any shape or form.

They heard the carriage door slam again. The horses started forward. The hooves clopped and the wheels rattled for a long time in the still night, but at last they could be heard no more.

PART I
A YOUNG GENTLEMAN IN A RAGE

1

ROMILLY BRANDON, BORN in 1777, was reckoned by the neighbourhood to be a child of singularly good fortune. As an only son he was heir to a considerable property. A large sum of money had also been left to him by an uncle, of which he was to have absolute control when he came of age. His excellent parents doted on him. His five sisters were expected to defer to him in everything. His tastes were considered, his opinion asked, at an age when most children are told to hold their tongues. In person and capacities he deserved his reputation as the handsomest and liveliest young man in the county.

He knew no check, was balked of no desire, until his twenty-first year, when Jenny Newbolt wantonly broke his heart. She was a distant connection, the daughter of the Rector at Stretton Courtenay, and they had been sweethearts as long as they could remember. They had agreed to announce their engagement and to marry as soon as Romilly was twenty-one, when his uncle's bequest would make him perfectly independent. But, six months short of the date, Jenny suddenly took it into her head to wreck this delightful scheme. It had been, she said, a childish fantasy which must now be given up. They must wait, for some years perhaps, since her mother had died and she could not abruptly abandon her father at such a time.

Romilly was furious. Whatever the claims of her family might be, he insisted that her earlier vows to himself should have priority. When she refused to listen to him he broke with her completely and fell into a fit of the sulks which culminated, before the year was out, in a bitter