

White Lilac

Amy Walton

Table of Contents

White Lilac	1
<u>Amy Walton</u>	1
<u>Chapter One. A Bunch of Lilac</u>	1
<u>Chapter Two. The Cousins</u>	9
<u>Chapter Three. Uncle Joshua</u>	19
<u>Chapter Four. Who will be Queen?</u>	27
<u>Chapter Five. May Day</u>	33
<u>Chapter Six. Alone</u>	41
<u>Chapter Seven. Orchards Farm</u>	48
<u>Chapter Eight. Only a Child!</u>	55
<u>Chapter Nine. Common Things</u>	63
<u>Chapter Ten. The Credit of the Farm</u>	69
<u>Chapter Eleven. The Concert</u>	78
<u>Chapter Twelve. Lilac's Choice</u>	84

White Lilac

Amy Walton

This page copyright © 2003 Blackmask Online.

<http://www.blackmask.com>

- [Chapter One. A Bunch of Lilac.](#)
- [Chapter Two. The Cousins.](#)
- [Chapter Three. Uncle Joshua.](#)
- [Chapter Four. Who will be Queen?](#)
- [Chapter Five. May Day.](#)
- [Chapter Six. Alone.](#)
- [Chapter Seven. Orchards Farm.](#)
- [Chapter Eight. Only a Child!](#)
- [Chapter Nine. Common Things.](#)
- [Chapter Ten. The Credit of the Farm.](#)
- [Chapter Eleven. The Concert.](#)
- [Chapter Twelve. Lilac's Choice.](#)

Etext from Athelstane.co.uk

Chapter One. A Bunch of Lilac.

What's in a name? *Shakespeare.*

Mrs James White stood at her cottage door casting anxious glances up at the sky, and down the hill towards the village. If it were fine the rector's wife had promised to come and see the baby, and certainly, thought Mrs White, shading her eyes with her hand, you might call it fine for April. There were sharp showers now and then, to be sure, but the sun shone between whiles, and sudden rays darted through her little window strong enough to light up the whole room. Their searching glances disclosed nothing she was ashamed of, for they showed that the kitchen was neat and well ordered, with bits of good substantial furniture in it, such as a long-bodied clock, table, and dresser of dark oak. These polished surfaces smiled back again cheerfully as the light touched them, and the row of pewter plates on the high mantelshelf glistened so brightly that they were as good as so many little mirrors. But beside these useful objects the sunlight found out two other things in the room, at which it pointed its bright finger with special interest. One of these was a large bunch of pure white lilac which stood on the window sill in a brown mug, and the other was a wicker cradle in which lay something very much covered up in blankets. After a last lingering look down the hill, where no one was in sight, Mrs White shut her door and settled herself to work, with the lilac at her elbow, and the cradle at her foot. She rocked this gently while she sewed, and turned her head now and then, when her needle wanted threading, to smell the delicate fragrance of the flowers. Her face was grave, with a patient and rather sad expression, as though her memories were not all happy ones; but by degrees, as she sat there working and rocking, some pleasant thought brought a smile to her lips and softened her eyes. This became so absorbing that presently she did not see a figure pass the window, and when a knock at the door followed, she sprang up startled to open it for her expected visitor.

I'd most given you up, ma'am, she said as the lady entered, but I'm very glad to see you.

It was not want of cordiality but want of breath which caused a beaming smile to be the only reply to this welcome. The hill was steep, the day was mild, and Mrs Leigh was rather stout. She at once dropped with a sigh

White Lilac

of relief, but still smiling, into a chair, and cast a glance full of interest at the cradle, which Mrs White understood as well as words. Bending over it she peeped cautiously in amongst the folds of flannel.

She's so fast, it's a sin to take her up, ma'am, she murmured, but I *would* like you to see her.

Mrs Leigh had now recovered her power of speech. Don't disturb her for the world, she said, I'm not going away yet. I shall be glad to rest a little. She'll wake presently, I dare say. What is it, she continued, looking round the room, that smells so delicious? Oh, what lovely lilac! as her eye rested on the flowers in the window.

Mrs White had taken up her sewing again.

I always liked the laylocks myself, ma'am, she said, partic'ler the white ones. It were a common bush in the part I lived as a gal, but there's not much hereabouts.

Where did you get it? asked Mrs Leigh, leaning forward to smell the pure-white blossoms; I thought there was only the blue in the village.

Why, no more there is, said Mrs White with a half-ashamed smile; but Jem, he knows I'm a bit silly over them, and he got 'em at Cuddingham t'other day. You see, the day I said I'd marry him he gave me a bunch of white laylocks and that's ten years ago. Sitting still so much more than I'm used lately, with the baby, puts all sorts of foolishness into my head, and when you knocked just now it gave me quite a start, for the smell of the laylocks took me right back to the days when we were sweetheartin'.

How *is* Jem? asked Mrs Leigh, glancing at a gun which stood in the chimney corner.

He's *well*, ma'am, thank you, but out early and home late. There's bin poaching in the woods lately, and the keepers have a lot of trouble with 'em.

None of *our* people, I *hope*? said the rector's wife anxiously.

Oh dear, no, ma'am! A gipsy lot a cruel wild set, to be sure, from what Jem says, and fight desperate.

There was a stir amongst the blankets in the cradle just then, and presently a little cry. The baby was *awake*. Very soon she was in Mrs Leigh's arms, who examined the tiny face with great interest, while the mother stood by, silent, but eager for the first expression of admiration.

What a beautifully fair child! exclaimed Mrs Leigh.

Everyone says that as sees her, said Mrs White with quiet triumph. She features my mother's family they all had such wonderful white skins. But, anxiously, you don't think she looks weakly, do you, ma'am?

Oh, no, answered Mrs Leigh in rather a doubtful tone. She stood up and weighed the child in her arms, moving nearer the window. She's a little thing, but I dare say she's not the less strong for that.

It makes me naturally a bit fearsome over her, said Mrs White; for, as you know, ma'am, I've buried three children since we've bin here. Ne'er a one of 'em all left me. It seems when I look at this little un as how I *must* keep her. I don't seem as if I *could* let her go too.

Oh, she'll grow up and be a comfort to you, I don't doubt, said Mrs Leigh cheerfully. Fair-complexioned children are very often wonderfully healthy and strong. But really, she continued, looking closely at the baby's face, I never saw such a skin in my life. Why, she's as white as milk, or snow, or a lily, or She paused for a

White Lilac

comparison, and suddenly added, as her eye fell on the flowers, or that bunch of lilac.

You're right, ma'am, agreed Mrs White with a smile of intense gratification.

And if I were you, continued Mrs Leigh, her good-natured face beaming all over with a happy idea, I should call her 'Lilac'. That would be a beautiful name for her. Lilac White. Nothing could be better; it seems made for her.

Mrs White's expression changed to one of grave doubt.

It do *seem* as how it would fit her, she said; but that's not a Christian name, is it, ma'am?

Well, it would make it one if you had her christened so, you see.

I was thinking of making so bold as to call her 'Annie', and to ask you to stand for her, ma'am.

And so I will, with pleasure. But don't call her Annie; we've got so many Annies in the parish already it's quite confusing and so many Whites too. We should have to say 'Annie White on the hill' every time we spoke of her. I'm always mixing them up as it is. *Don't* call her Annie, Mrs White, Lilac's far better. Ask your husband what he thinks of it.

Oh! Jem, he'll think as I do, ma'am, said Mrs White at once; it isn't *Jem*.

Who is it, then? If you both like the name it can't matter to anyone else.

Well, ma'am, said Mrs White hesitatingly, as she took her child from Mrs Leigh, and rocked it gently in her arms, they'll all say down below in the village, as how it's a fancy sort of a name, and maybe when she grows up they'll laugh at her for it. I shouldn't like to feel as how I'd given her a name to be made game of.

But Mrs Leigh was much too pleased with her fancy to give it up, and she smilingly overcame this objection and all others. It was a pretty, simple, and modest-sounding name, she said, with nothing in it that could be made laughable. It was short to say, and above all it had the advantage of being uncommon; as it was, so many mothers had desired the honour of naming their daughters after the rector's wife, that the number of Annies was overwhelming, but there certainly would not be two Lilac Whites in the village. In short, as Mrs White told Jem that evening, Mrs Leigh was that set on the name that she had to give in to her. And so it was settled; and wonderfully soon afterwards it was rumoured in the village that Mrs James White on the hill meant to call her baby Lilac.

This could not matter to anyone else, Mrs Leigh had said, but she was mistaken. Every mother in the parish had her opinion to offer, for there were not so many things happening, that even the very smallest could be passed over without a proper amount of discussion when neighbours met. On the whole they were not favourable opinions. It was felt that Mrs White, who had always held herself high and been severe on the follies of her friends, had now in her turn laid herself open to remark by choosing an outlandish and fanciful name for her child. Lilies, Roses, and even Violets were not unknown in Danecross, but who had ever heard of Lilac?

Mrs Greenways said so, and she had a right to speak, not only because she lived at Orchards Farm, which was the biggest in the parish, but because her husband was Mrs White's brother. She said it at all times and in all places, but chiefly at Dimbleby's?, for if you dropped in there late in the afternoon you were pretty sure to find acquaintances, eager to hear and tell news; and this was specially the case on Saturday, which was shopping day.

White Lilac

Dimbleby's was quite a large shop, and a very important one, for there was no other in the village; it was rather dark, partly because the roof was low-pitched, and partly because of the wonderful number and variety of articles crammed into it, so that it would have puzzled anyone to find out what Dimbleby did not sell. The air was also a little thick to breathe, for there floated in it a strange mixture, made up of unbleached calico, corduroy, smockfrocks, boots, and bacon. All these articles and many others were to be seen piled up on shelves or counters, or dangling from the low beams overhead; and, lately, there had been added to the stock a number of small clocks, stowed away out of sight. Their hasty ceaseless little voices sounded in curious contrast to the slowness of things in general at Dimbleby's: Tick-tack, tick-tack, Time flies, time flies", they seemed to be saying over and over again. Without effect, for at Dimbleby's time never flew; he plodded along on dull and heavy feet, and if he had wings at all he dragged them on the ground. You had only to look at the face of the master of the shop to see that speed was impossible to him, and that he was justly known as the slowest man in the parish both in speech and action. This was hardly considered a failing, however, for it had its advantages in shopping; if he was slow himself, he was quite willing that others should be so too, and to stand in unmoved calm while Mrs Jones fingered a material to test its quality, or Mrs Wilson made up her mind between a spot and a sprig. It was therefore a splendid place for a bit of talk, for he was so long in serving, and his customers were so long in choosing, that there was an agreeable absence of pressure, and time to drink a cup of gossip down to its last drop of interest.

I don't understand myself what Mary White would be at, said Mrs Greenways.

She stood waiting in the shop while Dimbleby thoughtfully weighed out some sugar for her; a stout woman with a round good-natured face, framed in a purple-velvet bonnet and nodding flowers; her long mantle matched the bonnet in stylishness, and was richly trimmed with imitation fur, but the large strong basket on her arm, already partly full of parcels, was quite out of keeping with this splendid attire. The two women who stood near, listening with eager respect to her remarks, were of very different appearance; their poor thin shawls were put on without any regard for fashion, and their straight cotton dresses were short enough to show their clumsy boots, splashed with mud from the miry country lanes. The edge of Mrs Greenways' gown was also draggled and dirty, for she had not found it easy to hold it up and carry a large basket at the same time.

I thought, she went on, as how Mary White was all for plain names, and homely ways, and such-like.

She *do say* so, said the woman nearest to her, cautiously.

Then, as I said to Greenways this morning, 'It's not a consistent act for your sister to name her child like that. Accordin' to her you ought to have names as simple and common as may be.' Why, think of what she said when I named my last, which is just a year ago. 'And what do you think of callin' her?' says she. 'Why,' says I, 'I think of giving her the name of Agnetta.' 'Dear me!' says she; 'whyever do you give your girls such fine names? There's your two eldest, Isabella and Augusta; I'd call this one Betsy, or Jane, or Sarah, or something easy to say, and suitable.'

Did she, now? said both the listeners at once.

And it's not only that, continued Mrs Greenways with a growing sound of injury in her voice, but she's always on at me when she gets a chance about the way I bring my girls up. 'You'd a deal better teach her to make good butter,' says she, when I told her that Bella was learning the piano. And when I showed her that screen Gusta worked lilies on blue satting, a re'lly elegant thing she just turned her head and says, 'I'd rather, if she were a gal of mine, see her knit her own stockings.' Those were her words, Mrs Wishing.

Ah, well, it's easy to talk, replied Mrs Wishing soothingly, we'll be able to see how she'll bring up a daughter of her own now.

White Lilac

I'm not saying, pursued Mrs Greenways, turning a watchful eye on Mr Dimbleby's movements, that Mary White haven't a perfect right to name her child as she chooses. I'm too fair for that, I *hope*. What I do say is, that now she's picked up a fancy sort of name like Lilac, she hasn't got any call to be down on other people. And if me and Greenways likes to see our girls genteel and give 'em a bit of finishing eddication, and set 'em off with a few accomplishments, it's our own affair and not Mary White's. And though I say it as shouldn't, you won't find two more elegant gals than Gusta and Bella, choose where you may.

During the last part of her speech Mrs Greenways had been poking and squeezing her parcel of sugar into its appointed corner of her basket; as she finished she settled it on her arm, clutched at her gown with the other hand, and prepared to start.

And now, as I'm in a hurry, I'll say good night, Mrs Pinhorn and Mrs Wishing, and good night to you, Mr Dimbleby.

She rolled herself and her burden through the narrow door of the shop, and for a moment no one spoke, while all the little clocks ticked away more busily than ever.

She's got enough to carry, said Mrs Pinhorn, breaking silence at last, with a sideway nod at her neighbour.

She have *so*, agreed Mrs Wishing mildly; and I wonder, that I do, to see her carrying that heavy basket on foot she as used to come in her spring cart.

Mrs Pinhorn pressed her lips together before answering, then she said with meaning: They're short of hands just now at Orchards Farm, and maybe short of horses too.

You don't say so! said Mrs Wishing, drawing nearer.

My Ben works there, as you know, and he says money's scarce there, very scarce indeed. One of the men got turned off only t'other day.

Lor', now, to think of that! exclaimed Mrs Wishing in an awed manner. An' her in that bonnet an' all them artificials!

There's a deal, continued Mrs Pinhorn, in what Mrs White says about them two Greenways gals with their fine-lady ways. It 'ud a been better to bring 'em up handy in the house so as to help their mother. As it is, they're too finnickin' to be a bit of use. You wouldn't see either of *them* with a basket on their arm, they'd think it lowering themselves. And I dare say the youngest 'll grow up just like 'em.

There's a deal in what Mrs Greenways's just been saying too, remarked the woman called Mrs Wishing in a hesitating voice, for Mrs James White *is* a very strict woman and holds herself high, and 'Lilac' is a fanciful kind of a name; but *I* dunno. She broke off as if feeling incapable of dealing with the question.

I can't wonder myself, resumed Mrs Pinhorn, at Mrs Greenways being a bit touchy. You heard, I s'pose, what Mrs White up and said to her once? You didn't? Well, she said, 'You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear, and you'll never make them girls ladies, try all you will,' says she. 'Useless things you'll make 'em, fit for neither one station or t'other.'

That there's plain speaking! said Mrs Wishing admiringly.

Mr Dimbleby had not uttered a word during this conversation, and was to all appearance entirely occupied in weighing out, tying up parcels, and receiving orders. In reality, however, he had not lost a word of it, and had

White Lilac

been getting ready to speak for some time past. Neither of the women, who were well acquainted with him, was at all surprised when he suddenly remarked: It were Mrs Leigh herself as had to do with the name of Mrs James White's baby.

Re'lly, now? said Mrs Wishing doubtfully.

An' it were Mrs Leigh herself as I heard it from, continued Dimpleby ponderously, without noticing the interruption.

Well, that makes a difference, don't it now? said Mrs Pinhorn. Why ever didn't you name that afore, Mr Dimpleby?

And, added Dimpleby, grinding on to the end of his speech regardless of hindrance, like a machine that has been wound up; and Mrs Leigh herself is goin' to stand for the baby.

Lor'! I do wish Mrs Greenways could a heard that, said Mrs Pinhorn; that'll set Mrs White up more than ever.

It will so, said Mrs Wishing; she allers did keep herself *to* herself did Mrs White. Not but what she's a decent woman and a kind. Seems as how, if Mrs Leigh wished to name the child 'Lilac', she couldn't do no other than fall in with it. But *I* dunno.

And how does the name strike you, Mr Snell? said Mrs Pinhorn, turning to a newcomer.

He was an oldish man, short and broad-shouldered, with a large head and serious grey eyes. Not only his leather apron, but the ends of his stumpy fingers, which were discoloured and brown, showed that he was a cobbler by trade. When Mrs Pinhorn spoke to him, he fingered his cheek thoughtfully, took off his hat, and passed his hand over his high bald forehead.

What name may you be alludin' to, ma'am? he enquired very politely.

The name 'Lilac' as Mrs James White's goin' to call her child.

Lilac eh! Lilac White. White Lilac, repeated the cobbler musingly. Well, ma'am, 'tis a pleasant bush and a homely; I can't wish the maid no better than to grow up like her name.

Why, you wouldn't for sure wish her to grow up homely, would you now, Mr Snell? said Mrs Wishing with a feeble laugh.

I *would*, ma'am, replied Mr Snell, turning rather a severe eye upon the questioner, I *would*. For why? Because to be homely is to make the common things of home sweet and pleasant. She can't do no better than that.

Mrs Wishing shrank silenced into the background, like one who has been reprov'd, and the cobbler advanced to the counter to exchange greetings with Mr Dimpleby, and buy tobacco. The women's voices, the sharp ticking of the clocks, and the deeper tones of the men kept up a steady concert for some time undisturbed. But suddenly the door was thrown violently back on its hinges with a bang, and a tall man in labourer's clothes rushed into their midst. Everyone looked up startled, and on Mrs Wishing's face there was fear as well as surprise when she recognised the newcomer.

Why, Dan'l, my man, she exclaimed, what is it?

White Lilac

Daniel was out of breath with running. He rubbed his forehead with a red pocket handkerchief, looked round in a dazed manner at the assembled group, and at length said hoarsely: Mrs Greenways bin here?

Ah, just gone! said both the women at once.

There's trouble up yonder on the hill, said Daniel, pointing with his thumb over his shoulder, and speaking in a strange, broken voice.

Mary White's baby! exclaimed Mrs Pinhorn.

Fits! added Mrs Wishing; they all went off that way.

Hang the baby, muttered Daniel. He made his way past the women, who had pressed up close to him, to where the cobbler and Dimbleby stood.

I've fetched the doctor, he said, and she wants the Greenways to know it; I thought maybe she'd be here.

What is it? Who's ill? asked the cobbler.

Tain't anyone that's ill, answered Daniel; he's stone dead. They shot him right through the heart.

Who? Who? cried all the voices together.

I found him, continued Daniel, up in the woods; partly covered up with leaves he was. Smiling peaceful and stone dead. He was always a brave feller and done his dooty, did James White on the hill. But he won't never do it no more.

Poachers! exclaimed Dimbleby in a horror-struck voice.

Poachers it was, sure enough, said Daniel; an' he's stone dead, James White is. They shot him right through the heart. Seems a pity such a brave chap should die like that.

An' him such a good husband! said Mrs Wishing. An' the baby an' all as we was just talking on, said Mrs Pinhorn; well, it's a fatherless child now, anyway.

The family ought to allow the widder a pension, said Mr Dimbleby, seeing as James White died in their service, so to speak.

They couldn't do no less, agreed the cobbler.

The idea of fetching Mrs Greenways seemed to have left Daniel's mind for the present: he had now taken a chair, and was engaged in answering the questions with which he was plied on all sides, and in trying to fix the exact hour when he had found poor James White in the woods. As it might be here, and me standing as it might be there, he said, illustrating his words with the different parcels on the counter before him. It was not until all this was thoroughly understood, and every imaginable expression of pity and surprise had been uttered, that Mrs Pinhorn remembered that the Greenways ought to know. And I don't see why, she added, seizing her basket with sudden energy, I shouldn't take her up myself; I'm goin' that way, and she's a slow traveller.

An' then Dan'l can go straight up home with me, said Mrs Wishing, and we can drop in as we pass an' see Mrs White, poor soul. She hadn't ought to be alone.

White Lilac

Before nightfall everyone knew the sad tidings. James White had been shot by poachers, and Daniel Wishing had found him lying dead in the woods.

As the days went on, the excitement which stirred the whole village increased rather than lessened, for not even the oldest inhabitant could remember such a tragical event. Apart from the sadness of it, and the desolate condition of the widow, poor Jem's many virtues made it impressive and lamentable. Everyone had something to say in his praise, no one remembered anything but good about him; he was a brave chap, and one of the right sort, said the men, when they talked of it in the public-house; he was a good husband, said the women, steady and sober, fond of his wife, a pattern to others. They shook their heads and sighed mournfully; it was strange as well as pitiful that Jem White should have been taken. There might have been *some* as we could mention as wouldn't have been so much missed.

Then came the funeral; the bunch of white lilac, still fresh, which he had brought from Cuddingham, was put on Jem's newly-made grave, and his widow, passing silently through the people gathered in the churchyard, toiled patiently back to her lonely home.

They watched the solitary figure as it showed black against the steep chalky road in the distance.

Yon's an afflicted woman, said one, for all she carries herself so high under it.

She's the only widder among all the Whites hereabouts, remarked Mrs Pinhorn. We needn't call her 'Mrs White on the hill' no longer, poor soul.

It's a mercy she's got the child, said another neighbour, if the Lord spares it to her.

The christening's to be on Sunday, added a third. I do wonder if she'll call it that outlandish name *now*.

There was not much time to wonder, for Sunday soon came, and the Widow White, as she was to be called henceforth, was at the church, stern, sad, and calm, with her child in her arms. It was an April morning, breezy and soft; the uncertain sunshine darted hither and thither, now touching the newly turned earth of Jem's grave, and now peering through the church window to rest on the tiny face of his little daughter in the rector's arms at the font. All the village had come to see, for this christening was felt to be one of more than common interest, and while the service went on there was not one inattentive ear.

Foremost stood Mrs Greenways, her white handkerchief displayed for immediate use, and the expression in her face struggling between real compassion and an eager desire to lose nothing that was passing; presently she craned her neck forward a little, for an important point was reached

Name this child, said the rector.

There was such deep silence in the church that the lowest whisper would have been audible, and Mrs Leigh's voice was heard distinctly in the farthest corner, when she answered Lilac.

Not that it matters, said Mrs Greenways on her way home afterwards, what they call the poor little thing Lilac White, or White Lilac, or what you will, for she'll never rear it, never. It'll follow its father before we're any of us much older. You mark my words, Greenways: I'm not the woman to discourage Mary White by naming it to her now she's so deep in trouble, but you mark my words, she'll *never* rear that child.

Chapter Two. The Cousins.

For the apparel oft proclaims the man. Shakespeare.

But Mrs Greenways was wrong. Twelve more springs came and went, cold winds blew round the cottage on the hill, winter snow covered it, summer sun blazed down on its unsheltered roof, but the small blossom within grew and flourished. A weak tender-looking little plant at first, but gathering strength with the years until it became hardy and bold, fit to face rough weather as well as to smile in the sunshine.

It was twelve years since James White's death, twelve years since he had brought the bunch of lilac from Cuddingham which had given his little daughter her name that name which had once sounded so strangely in Mrs White's ears. It had come to mean so much to her now, so many memories of the past, so much sweetness in the present, that she would not have changed it for the world, and indeed no one questioned its fitness, for as time went on it seemed to belong naturally to the child; it was even made more expressive by putting the surname first, so that she was often called White Lilac.

For the distinguishing character of her face was its whiteness "A wonderful white skin", as her mother had said, which did not tan, or freckle, or flush with heat, and which shone out in startling contrast amongst the red and brown cheeks of her school companions. This small white face was set upon a slender neck, and a delicately-formed but upright little figure, which looked all the straighter and more like the stalk of a flower, because it was never adorned with any flounces or furbelows. Lilac was considered in the village to be very old-fashioned in her dress; she wore cotton frocks, plain in the skirt with gathers all round the waist, long pinafores or aprons, and sunbonnets. This attire was always spotless and freshly clean, but garments of such a shape and cut were lamentably wanting in fashion to the general eye, and were the subject of constant ridicule. Not in the hearing of the widow, for most people were a good deal in awe of her, but Lilac herself heard quite enough about her clothes to be conscious of them and to feel ashamed of looking different. And this was specially the case at school, for there she met Agnetta Greenways every day, and Agnetta was the object of her highest admiration; to be like her in some way was the deep and secret longing in her mind. It was, she knew well, a useless ambition, but she could not help desiring it, Agnetta was such a beautiful object to look upon, with her red cheeks and the heavy fringe of black hair which rested in a lump on her forehead. On Sundays, when she wore her blue dress richly trimmed with plush, a long feather in her hat, and a silver bangle on her arm, Lilac could hardly keep her intense admiration silent; it was a pain not to speak of it, and yet she knew that nothing would have displeased her mother so much, who was never willing to hear the Greenways praised. So she only gazed wistfully at her cousin's square gaily-dressed figure, and felt herself a poor washed-out insignificant child in comparison.

This was very much Agnetta's own view of the case; but nevertheless there were occasions when she was glad of this insignificant creature's assistance, for she was slow and stupid at her lessons, books were grief and pain to her, and Lilac, who was intelligent and fond of learning, was always ready to help and explain. This service, given most willingly, was received by Agnetta as one to whom it was due, and indeed the position she held among her schoolfellows made most of them eager to call her friend. She lived at Orchards Farm, which was the biggest in the parish; her two elder sisters had been to a finishing school, and one of them was now in a millinery establishment in London, where she wore a silk dress every day. This was sufficient to excuse airs of superiority in anyone. It was natural, therefore, to repay Lilac's devotion by condescending patronage, and to look down on her from a great height; nevertheless it was extremely agreeable to Agnetta to be worshipped, and this made her seek her cousin's companionship, and invite her often to Orchards Farm. There she could display her smart frocks, dwell on the extent of her father's possessions, on her sister Bella's stylishness, on the last fashion Gusta had sent from London, while Lilac, meek and admiring, stood by with wonder in her eyes. Orchards Farm was the most beautiful place her imagination could picture, and to live there must be, she thought, perfect happiness. There was a largeness about it, with its blossoming fruit trees, its broad green meadows, its barns and stacks, its flocks of

White Lilac

sheep and herds of cattle; even the shiny-leaved magnolia which covered part of the house seemed to Lilac to speak of peace and plenty. It was all so different from her home; the bare white cottage on the hillside where no trees grew, where all was so narrow and cold, and where life seemed to be made up of scrubbing, sweeping, and washing. She looked longingly down from this sometimes to the valley where the farm stood.

But other eyes, and Mrs White's in particular, saw a very different state of things when they looked at Orchards Farm. She knew that under this smiling outside face lay hidden care and anxiety; for her brother, Farmer Greenways, was in debt and short of money. Folks shook their heads when it was mentioned, and said: What could you expect? The old people remembered the prosperous days at the farm, when the dairy had been properly worked, and the butter was the best you could get anywhere round. There was the pasture land still, and a good lot of cows, but since the Greenways had come there the supply of butter was poor, and sometimes the whole quantity sent to market was so carelessly made that it was sour. Whose fault was it? Mrs Greenways would have said that Molly, the one overworked maid servant, was to blame; but other people thought differently, and Mrs White was as usual outspoken in her opinions to her sister-in-law: It 'ull never be any different as long as you don't look after the dairy yourself, or teach Bella to do it. What does Molly care how the butter turns out?

But Bella tossed her head at the idea of working, as she expressed it, like a common servant", or indeed at working at all. She considered that her business in life was to be genteel, and to be properly genteel was to do nothing useful. So she studied the fashion books which Gusta sent from London, made up wonderful costumes for herself, curled her hair in the last style, and read the stories about dukes and earls and countesses which came out in the *Family Herald*.

The smart bonnets and dresses which Mrs Greenways and her daughters wore on Sundays in spite of hard times and poor crops and debt were the wonder of the whole congregation, and in Mrs White's case the wonder was mixed with scorn. Peter's the only one among 'em as is good for anything, she sometimes said, an' he's naught but a puzzle-headed sort of a chap. Peter was the farmer's only son, a loutish youth of fifteen, steady and plodding as his plough horses and almost as silent.

It was April again, bright and breezy, and all the cherry trees at the farm were so white with bloom that standing under them you could scarcely see the sky. The grass in the orchard was freshly green and sprinkled with daisies, amongst which families of fluffy yellow ducklings trod awkwardly about on their little splay feet, while the careful mother hens picked out the best morsels of food for them. This food was flung out of a basin by Agnetta Greenways, who stood there squarely erect uttering a monotonous Chuck, chuck, chuck, at intervals. Agnetta did not care for the poultry, or indeed for any of the creatures on the farm; they were to her only troublesome things that wanted looking after, and she would have liked not to have had anything to do with them. Just now, however, there was a week's holiday at the school, and she was obliged to use her leisure in helping her mother, much against her will. Agnetta had a stolid face with a great deal of colour in her cheeks; her hair was black, but at this hour it was so tightly done up in curl papers that the colour could hardly be seen. She wore an old red merino dress which had once been a smart one, but was now degraded to what she called "dirty work", and was covered with patches and stains. Her hands and wrists were very large, and looked capable of hard work, as indeed did the whole person of Agnetta from top to toe.

Chuck, chuck, chuck, she repeated as she threw out the last spoonful; then, raising her eyes, she became aware of a little figure in the distance, running towards her across the field at the bottom of the orchard.

Lor'! she exclaimed aloud, if here isn't Lilac White!

It was a slight little figure clothed in a cotton frock which had once been blue in colour, but had been washed so very often that it now approached a shade of green; over it was a long straight pinafore gathered round the neck with a string, and below it appeared blue worsted stockings, and thick, laced boots. Her black hair was brushed back and plaited in one long tail tied at the end with black ribbon, and in her hand she carried a big sunbonnet,

White Lilac

swinging it round and round in the air as she ran. As she came nearer the orchard gate, it was easy to see that she had some news to tell, for her small features worked with excitement, and her grey eyes were bright with eagerness.

Agnetta advanced slowly to meet her with the empty basin in her hand, and unlatched the gate.

Whatever's the matter? she asked.

Lilac could not answer just at first, for she had been running a long way, and her breath came in short gasps. She came to a standstill under the trees, and Agnetta stared gravely at her with her mouth wide open. The two girls formed a strong contrast to each other. Lilac's white face and the faded colour of her dress matched the blossoms and leaves of the cherry trees in their delicacy, while about the red-cheeked Agnetta there was something firm and positive, which suggested the fruit which would come later.

I came gasped Lilac at last, I ran I thought I must tell you

Well, said Agnetta, still staring at her in an unmoved manner, you'd better fetch your breath, and then you'll be able to tell me. Come and sit down.

There was a bench under one of the trees near where she had been feeding the ducks. The two girls sat down, and presently Lilac was able to say: Oh, Agnetta, the artist gentleman wants to put me in a picture!

Whatever do you mean, Lilac White? was Agnetta's only reply. Her slightly disapproving voice calmed Lilac's excitement a little.

This is how it was, she continued more quietly. You know he's lodging at the 'Three Bells?' and he comes an' sits at the bottom of our hill an' paints all day.

Of course I know, said Agnetta. It's a poor sort of an object he's copyin', too Old Joe's tumble-down cottage. I peeped over his shoulder t'other day 'taint much like.

Well, I pass him every day comin' from school, and he always looks up at me eager without sayin' nothing. But this morning he says, 'Little gal,' says he, 'I want to put you into my picture.'

Lor'! put in Agnetta, whatever can he want to paint *you* for?

So I didn't say nothing, continued Lilac, because he looked so hard at me that I was skeert-like. So then he says very impatient, 'Don't you understand? I want you to come here in that frock and that bonnet in your hand, and let me paint you, copy you, take your portrait. You run and ask Mother.'

I never did! exclaimed Agnetta, moved at last. Whatever can he want to do it for? An' that frock, an' that silly bonnet an' all! He must be a crazy gentleman, I should say. She gave a short laugh, partly of vexation.

But that ain't all, continued Lilac; just as I was turning to go he calls after me, 'What's yer name?' And when I told him he shouts out,, 'What!' with his eyes hanging out ever so far.

Well, I dare say he thought it was a silly-sounding sort of a name, observed Agnetta.

He said it over and over to hisself, and laughed right out 'Lilac White! White Lilac!' says he. 'What a subjeck! What a name! Splendid!' An' then he says to me quieter, 'You're a very nice little girl indeed, and if Mother will let you come I'll give you sixpence for every hour you stand.' So then I went an' asked Mother, and she said yes,

White Lilac

an' then I ran all the way here to tell you.

Lilac looked round as she finished her wonderful story. Agnetta's eyes were travelling slowly over her cousin's whole person, from her face down to the thick, laced boots on her feet, and back again. I can't mek out, she said at length, whatever it is that he wants to paint you for, and dressed like that! Why, there ain't a mossel of colour about you! Now, if you had my Sunday blue!

Oh, Agnetta! exclaimed Lilac at the mention of such impossible elegance.

And, pursued Agnetta, a few artificials in yer hair, like the ladies in our *Book of Beauty*, that 'ud brighten you up a bit. Bella's got some red roses with dewdrops on 'em, an' a caterpillar just like life. She'd lend you 'em p'r'aps, an' I don't know but what I'd let you have my silver locket just for once.

I'm afraid he wouldn't like that, said Lilac dejectedly, because he said quite earnest, '*Mind* you bring the bonnet'.

She saw herself for a moment in the splendid attire Agnetta had described, and gave a little sigh of longing.

I must go back, she said, getting up suddenly, Mother'll want me. There's lots to do at home.

I'll go with you a piece, said Agnetta; we'll go through the farmyard way so as I can leave the basin.

This was a longer way home for Lilac than across the fields, but she never thought of disputing Agnetta's decision, and the cousins left the orchard by another gate which led into the garden. It was not a very tidy garden, and although some care had been bestowed on the vegetables, the flowers were left to come up where they liked and how they liked, and the grass plot near the house was rank and weedy. Nevertheless it presented a gay and flourishing appearance with its masses of polyanthus in full bloom, its tulips, and Turk's head lilies, and lilac bushes. There was one particular bed close to the gate which had a neater appearance than the rest, and where the flowers grew in a well-ordered manner as though accustomed to personal attention. The edges of the turf were trimly clipped, and there was not a weed to be seen. It had a mixed border of forget-me-not and London pride.

How pretty your flowers grow! said Lilac, stopping to look at it with admiration.

Oh, that's Peter's bed, said Agnetta carelessly, snapping off some blossoms. He's allays mucking at it in his spare time not that he's got much, there's so much to do on the farm.

The house was now in front of them, and a little to the left the various, coloured roofs of the farm buildings, some tiled with weather-beaten bricks, some thatched, some tarred, and the bright yellow straw ricks standing here and there. Between these buildings and the house was a narrow lane, generally ankle-deep in mud, which led into the highroad.

Lilac was very fond of the farmyard and all the creatures in it. She stopped at the gate and looked over at a company of small black pigs routing about in the straw.

Oh, Agnetta! she exclaimed, you've got some toiny pigs; what peart little uns they are!

I can't abide pigs, said Agnetta with a toss of her curl-papered head; no more can't Bella, we neither of us can't. Nasty, vulgar, low-smelling things.

Lilac felt that hers must be a vulgar taste as Agnetta said so, but still she *did* like the little pigs, and would have been glad to linger near them. It was often puzzling to her that Agnetta called so many things common and vulgar,

White Lilac

but she always ended by thinking that it was because she was so superior.

Here, Peter! exclaimed Agnetta suddenly. A boy in leather leggings and a smock appeared at the entrance of the barn, and came tramping across the straw towards them at her call. Just take this into the kitchen, said his sister in commanding tones. Now, turning to Lilac, we can go t'other way across the fields. The lane's all in a muck.

Peter slouched away with the basin in his hand. He was a heavy-looking youth, and so shy that he seldom raised his eyes from the ground.

No one 'ud think, said Agnetta as the girls entered the meadow again, as Peter was Bella's and Gusta's and my brother. He's so dreadful vulgar-lookin' dressed like that. He might be a common ploughboy, and his manners is awful.

Are they? said Lilac.

Pa won't hear a word against him, continued Agnetta, cause he's so useful with the farm work. He says he'd rather see Peter drive a straight furrow than dress himself smart. But Bella and me we're ashamed to be seen with him, we can't neither of us abide commoners.

Common! there was the word again which seemed to mean so many things and yet was so difficult to understand. Common things were evidently vulgar. The pigs were common, Peter was common, perhaps Lilac herself was common in Agnetta's eyes. And yet, she reflected, lifting her gaze from the yellow carpet at her feet to the flowering orchards, the cherry blossoms and the buttercups are common too; would Agnetta call them vulgar?

She had not long to think about this, for her cousin soon introduced another and a very interesting subject.

Who's goin' to be Queen this year, I wonder? she said; there'll be a sight of flowers if the weather keeps all on so fine.

It'll be you, Agnetta, for sure, answered Lilac; I know lots who mean to choose you this time.

I dessay, said Agnetta with an air of lofty indifference.

Don't you want to be? asked Lilac.

The careless tone surprised her, for to be chosen Queen of the May was not only an honour, but a position of importance and splendour. It meant to march at the head of a long procession of children, in a white dress, to be crowned with flowers in the midst of gaiety and rejoicing, to lead the dance round the maypole, and to be first throughout a day of revelry and feasting. To Lilac it was the most beautiful of ceremonies to see the Queen crowned; to join in it was a delight, but to be chosen Queen herself would be a height of bliss she could hardly imagine. It was impossible therefore, to think her cousin really indifferent, and indeed this was very far from the case, for Agnetta had set her heart on being Queen, and felt tolerably sure that she should get the greatest number of votes this year.

I don't know as I care much, she answered; let's sit down here a bit.

They sat down one each side of a stile, with their faces turned towards each other, and Agnetta again fixed her direct gaze critically on her cousin's figure. Lilac twirled her sunbonnet round somewhat confusedly under these searching glances.

White Lilac

It's a pity you wear your hair scattled right off your face like that, said Agnetta at last; it makes you look for all the world like Daisy's white calf.

Does it? said Lilac meekly; Mother likes it done so.

I know something as would improve you wonderful, and give you a bit of style something as would make the picture look a deal better.

Oh, what, Agnetta?

Well, it's just as simple as can be. It's only to take a pair of scissors and cut yer hair like mine in front so as it comes down over yer face a bit. It 'ud alter you ever so. You'd be surprised.

Lilac started to her feet, struck with the immensity of the idea. A fringe! It was a form of elegance not unknown amongst the school-children, but one which she had never thought of as possible for herself.

There was Agnetta's stolid rosy face close to her, as unmoved and unexcited as if she had said nothing unusual.

Oh, Agnetta, *could* I? gasped Lilac.

Whyever not? said her cousin calmly.

Lilac sat down again. I dursn't, she said. I couldn't ever bear to look Mother in the face.

Has she ever told you not?

N-no, answered Lilac hesitatingly; leastways she only said once that the girls made frights of themselves with their fringes.

Frights indeed! said Agnetta scornfully; anyhow, she added, it 'ull grow again if she don't like it. So it would. That reflection made the deed seem a less daring one, and Lilac's face at once showed signs of yielding, which Agnetta was not slow to observe. Warming with her subject, she proceeded to paint the improvement which would follow in glowing colours, and in this she was urged by two motives one, an honest desire to smarten Lilac up a little, and the other, to vex and thwart her aunt, Mrs White; to pay her out, as she expressed it, for sundry uncomplimentary remarks on herself and Bella.

And supposing, was Lilac's next remark, as how I *was* to make up my mind, I couldn't never do it for myself. I should be scared.

This difficulty the energetic Agnetta was quite ready to meet. *She* would do it. Lilac had only to run down to the farm early next morning, and, after she was made fashionable, she could go straight on to the artist. And won't he just be surprised! she added with a chuckle. I don't expect he'll hardly know you.

You're *quite* sure it'll make me look better? said Lilac wistfully. She had the utmost faith in her cousin, but the step seemed to her such a terribly large one.

Ain't I? was Agnetta's scornful reply. Why, Gusta says all the ladies in London wears their hair like that now.

After this last convincing proof, for Gusta's was a name of great authority, Lilac resisted no longer, and soon discovered, by the striking of the church clock, that it was getting very late. She said good-bye to Agnetta,

White Lilac

therefore, and, leaving her to make her way back at her leisure, ran quickly on through the meadows all streaked and sprinkled with the spring flowers. After these came the dusty high-road for a little while, and then she reached the foot of the steep hill which led up to her home. The artist gentleman was there as usual, a pipe in his mouth, and a palette on his thumb, painting busily: as she hurriedly dropped a curtsy in passing, Lilac's heart beat quite fast.

Me in a picture with a fringe! she said to herself; how I do hope as Mother won't mind!

That afternoon, when she sat quietly down to her sewing, this great idea weighed heavily upon her. It would be the very first step she had ever taken without her mother's approval, and away from the influence of Agnetta's decided opinion it seemed doubly alarming a desperate and yet an attractive deed.

Now and then for a moment she thought it would be better to tell her mother, but when she looked up at the grave, rather sad face, bent closely over some needlework, she lacked courage to begin. It seemed far removed from such trifles as fringes and fashions; and though, as Lilac knew well, it could have at times a smile full of love upon it, just now its expression was thoughtful, and even stern.

She kept silence, therefore, and stitched away with a mind as busy as her fingers, until it was time to boil the kettle and get the tea ready. This was just done when Mrs Wishing, who lived still farther up the hill, dropped in on her way home from the village.

She was an uncertain, wavering little woman, with no will of her own, and a heavy burden in the shape of a husband, who, during the last few years, had taken to fits of drinking. The widow White acknowledged that she had a good deal to bear from Dan'l, and when times were very bad, often supplied her with food and firing from her own small store. But she did not do so without protest, for in her opinion the fault was not entirely on Dan'l's side. Maybe, she said, if he found a clean hearth and a tidy bit o' supper waitin' at home, he'd stay there oftener. An' if he worked reg'lar, and didn't drink his wages, you'd want for nothin', and be able to put by with only just the two of you to keep. But I can't see you starve.

Mrs Wishing fluttered in at the door, and, as she thought probable, was asked to have a dish of tea. Lilac bustled round the kitchen and set everything neatly on the table, while her mother, glancing at her now and then, stood at the window sewing with active fingers.

Well, you're always busy, Mrs White, said the guest plaintively as she untied her bonnet strings. I will say as you're a hard worker yourself, whatever you say about other folks.

An' I hope as when the time comes as I can't work that the Lord 'ull see fit to take me, said Mrs White shortly.

Dear, dear, you've got no call to say that, said Mrs Wishing, you as have got Lilac to look to in your old age. Now, if it was me and Dan'l, with neither chick nor child She shook her head mournfully.

Mrs White gave her one sharp glance which meant "and a good thing too", but she did not say the words aloud; there was something so helpless and incapable about Mrs Wishing, that it was both difficult and useless to be severe with her, for the most cutting speeches could not rouse her from the mild despair into which she had sunk years ago. I dessay you're right, but *I* dunno, was her only reply to all reproaches and exhortations, and finding this, Mrs White had almost ceased them, except when they were wrung from her by some unusual example of bad management.

An' so handy as she is, continued Mrs Wishing, her wandering gaze caught for a moment by Lilac's active little figure, an' that's all your up-bringing, Mrs White, as I was saying just now to Mrs Greenways.

White Lilac

Mrs White, who was now pouring out the tea, looked quickly up at the mention of Mrs Greenways. She would not ask, but her very soul longed to know what had been said.

She was talkin' about Lilac as I was in at Dimbleby's getting a bunch of candles, continued Mrs Wishing, sayin' how her picture was going to be took; an' says she, 'It's a poor sort of picture as she'll make, with a face as white as her pinafore. Now, if it was Agnetta,' says she, 'as has a fine nateral bloom, I could understand the gentleman wantin' to paint *her*.'

I s'pose the gentleman knows best himself what he wants to paint, said Mrs White.

Lor', of course he do, Mrs Wishing hastened to reply; and, as I said to Mrs Greenways, 'Red cheeks or white cheeks don't make much differ to a gal in life. It's the upbringing as matters.'

Mrs White looked hardly so pleased with this sentiment as her visitor had hoped. She was perfectly aware that it had been invented on the spot, and that Mrs Wishing would not have dared to utter it to Mrs Greenways. Moreover, the comparison between Lilac's paleness and Agnetta's fine bloom touched her keenly, for in this remark she recognised her sister-in-law's tongue.

The rivalry between the two mothers was an understood thing, and though it had never reached open warfare, it was kept alive by the kindness of neighbours, who never forgot to repeat disparaging speeches. Mrs White's opinions of the genteel uselessness of Bella and Gusta were freely quoted to Mrs Greenways, and she in her turn was always ready with a thrust at Lilac which might be carried to Mrs White.

When the widow had first heard of the artist's proposal, her intense gratification was at once mixed with the thought, 'What'll Mrs Greenways think o' that?'

But she did not express this triumph aloud. Even Lilac had no idea that her mother's heart was overflowing with pleasure and pride because it was *her* child, *her* Lilac, whom the artist wished to paint. So now, though she bit her lip with vexation at Mrs Wishing's speech, she took it with outward calmness, and only replied, with a glance at her daughter:

Lilac never was one to think much about her looks, and I hope she never will be.

Both the look and the words seemed to Lilac to have special meaning, almost as though her mother knew what she intended to do to-morrow; it seemed indeed to be written in large letters everywhere, and all that was said had something to do with it. This made her feel so guilty, that she began to be sure it would be very wrong to have a fringe. Should she give it up? It was a relief when Mrs Wishing, leaving the subject of the picture for one of nearer interest, proceeded to dwell on Dan'l and his failings, so that Lilac was not referred to again. This well-worn topic lasted for the rest of the visit, for Dan'l had been worse than usual. He had 'got the neck of the bottle?', as Mrs Wishing expressed it, and had been in a hopeless state during the last week. Her sad monotonous voice went grinding on over the old story, while Lilac, washing up the tea things, carried on her own little fears, and hopes, and wishes in her own mind. No one watching her would have guessed what those wishes were: she looked so trim and neat, and handled the china as deftly as though she had no other thought than to do her work well. And yet the inside did not quite match this proper outside, for her whole soul was occupied with a beautiful vision herself with a fringe like Agnetta! It proved so engrossing that she hardly noticed Mrs Wishing's departure, and when her mother spoke she looked up startled.

Yon's a poor creetur as never could stand alone and never will, she said. It was the same when she was a gal always hangin' on to someone, always wantin' someone else to do for her, and think for her. Well! empty sacks won't never stand upright, and it's no good tryin' to make 'em.

White Lilac

Lilac made no reply, and Mrs White, seizing the opportunity of impressing a useful lesson, continued:

Lor'! it seems only the other day as Hepzibah was married to Daniel Wishing. A pretty gal she was, with clinging, coaxing ways, like the suckles in the hedge, and everyone she come near was ready to give her a helping hand. And at the wedding they all said, 'There, now, she's got the right man, Hepzibah has. A strong, steady feller, and a good workman an' all, and one as'll look after her an' treat her kind.' But I mind what I said to Mrs Pinhorn on that very day: 'I hope it may be so,' I says, 'but it takes an angel, and not a man, to bear with a woman as weak an' shiftless as Hepzibah, and not lose his temper.' And now look at 'em! There's Dan'l taken to drink, and when he's out of himself he'll lift his hand to her, and they're both of 'em miserable. It does a deal o' harm for a woman to be weak like that. She can't stand alone, and she just pulls a man down along with her.

The troubles of the Wishings were very familiar to Lilac's ears, and, though she took her knitting and sat down on her little stool close to her mother, she did not listen much to what she was saying.

Mrs White, quite ignorant that her words of wisdom were wasted, continued admonishingly:

So as you grow up, Lilac, and get to a woman, that's what you've got to learn to trust to yourself; you won't always have a mother to look to. And what you've got to do now is, to learn to do your work jest as well as you can, and then afterwards you'll be able to stand firm on yer own two feet, and not go leaning up against other folk, or be beholden to nobody. That's a good thing, that is. There's a saying, 'Heaven helps them as helps themselves'. If that poor Hepzibah had helped herself when she was a gal, she wouldn't be such a daundering creetur now, and Dan'l, he wouldn't be a curse instead of a blessin'.

When Lilac went up to her tiny room in the roof that night, her head felt too full of confusing thoughts to make it possible to go to bed at once. She knelt on a box that stood in the window, fastened back the lattice, and, leaning on the sill, looked out into the night. The greyness of evening was falling over everything, but it was not nearly dark yet, so that she could see the windings of the chalky road which led down to the valley, and the church tower, and even one of the gable windows in Orchards Farm, where a light was twinkling. Generally this last object was a most interesting one to her, but to-night she did not notice outside things much, for her mind was too busy with its own concerns. She had, for the first time in her life, something quite new and strange to think of, something of her own which her mother did not know; and though this may seem a very small matter to people whose lives are full of events, to Lilac it was of immense importance, for until now her days had been as even and unvaried as those of any daisy that grows in a field. But to-morrow, two new things were to happen she was to have her hair cut, and to have her picture painted. A poor sort of picture, Mrs Greenways had said it would be, and, no doubt, Lilac agreed in her own mind Agnetta would make a far finer one Agnetta, who had red cheeks, and a fringe already, and could dress herself so much smarter. Would a fringe really improve her? Agnetta said so. And yet her mother was it worth while to risk vexing her? But it would grow. Yes, but in the picture it would never grow. The more she thought, the more difficult it was to see her way clear; as the evening grew darker and more shadowy, so her reflections became dimmer and more confused; at last they were suddenly stopped altogether, for a bat which had come forth on its evening travels flapped straight against her face under the eaves. Thoroughly roused, Lilac drew in her head, shut her window, and was very soon fast asleep in bed.

Night is said to bring counsel, and perhaps it did so in some way, although she slept too soundly to dream, for punctually at eleven o'clock the next morning she was at the meeting-place appointed by Agnetta at the farm.

This was a loft over the cows' stables, the only place when, at that hour, they could be sure of no interruption.

The proper place 'ud be my bedroom, Agnetta had said, where there's a mirror an' all; but it's Bella's too, you see, an' just now she's making a new bonnet, and she's forever there trying it on. But I'll bring the scissors and do it in a jiffy.

White Lilac

And here was Agnetta armed with the scissors, and a certain authority of manner she always used with her cousin.

Tek off yer bonnet and undo yer plaits, she said, opening and shutting the bright scissors with a snap, as though she longed to begin.

Lilac stood with her back against a truss of hay, rather shrinking away, for now that the moment had really come she felt frightened, and all her doubts returned. She had the air of a pale little victim before her executioner.

Come, said Agnetta, with another snap.

Oh, Agnetta, do you really think they'll like it? faltered Lilac.

What I really think is that you're a ninny, said the determined Agnetta; an' I'm not agoin' to wait here while you shilly-shally. Is it to be off or on?

Oh off, I suppose, said Lilac.

With trembling fingers she took off her bonnet, and unfastened her hair from its plait. It fell like a dark silky veil over her shoulders.

Lor'! said Agnetta, you have got a lot of it.

She stood for a second staring at her victim open-mouthed with the scissors upraised in one hand, then advanced, and grasping a handful of the soft hair drew it down over Lilac's face.

Oh, Agnetta, cried an imploring voice behind the screen thus formed, you'll *be* careful! You won't tek off too much.

Come nearer the light, said Agnetta.

Still holding the hair, she drew her cousin towards the wide open doors of the loft. Now, she said, I can see what I'm at, an' I shan't be a minute.

The steel scissors struck coldly against Lilac's forehead. It was too late to resist now. She held her breath. Grind, grind, snip! they went in Agnetta's remorseless fingers, and some soft waving lengths of hair fell on the ground. It certainly did not take long; after a few more short clips and snips Agnetta had finished, and there stood Lilac fashionably shorn, with the poor discarded locks lying at her feet.

It was curious to see how much Agnetta's handiwork had altered her cousin's face. Lilac's forehead was prettily shaped, and though she had worn her hair scattled off it, there were little waving rings and bits which were too short to be scattled", and these had softened its outline. But now the pure white forehead was covered by a lump of hair which came straight across the middle of it, and the small features below looked insignificant. The expression of intelligent modesty which had made Lilac look different from other girls had gone; she was just an ordinary pale-faced little person with a fringe.

There! exclaimed Agnetta triumphantly as she drew a small hand-glass from her pocket; now you'll see as how I was right. You won't hardly know yerself.

Lilac took it, longing yet fearing to see herself. From the surface of the glass a stranger seemed to return her glance someone she had never seen before, with quite a different look in her eyes. Certainly she was altered. Was it for the better? She did not know, and before she could tell she must get more used to this new Lilac White. At

White Lilac

present she had more fear than admiration for her.

Clump! clump! came the sound of heavy feet up the loft ladder. Lilac let the glass fall at her side, and turned a terrified gaze on Agnetta.

Oh, what's that? she cried. Let me hide don't let anyone see me!

Agnetta burst into a loud laugh.

Well, you *are* a ninny, Lilac White. Are you goin' to hide from everyone now you've got a fringe? You as are goin' to have your picture took. An' after all, she added, as a face and shoulders appeared at the top of the ladder. it's only Peter.

Peter's rough head and blunt, uncouth features were framed by the square opening in the floor of the loft. There they remained motionless, for the sight of Agnetta and Lilac where he had been prepared to find only hay and straw brought him to a standstill. His face and the tips of his large ears got very red as he saw Lilac's confusion, and he went a step lower down the ladder, but his eyes were still above the level of the floor.

Well, said Agnetta, still giggling, we'll hear what Peter thinks of it. Don't she look a deal better with her hair cut so, Peter?

Peter's grey-green eyes, not unkindly in expression, fixed themselves on his cousin's face. In her turn Lilac gazed back at them, half-frightened, yet beseeching mutely for a favourable opinion; it was like looking into a second mirror. She waited anxiously for his answer. It came at last, slowly, from Peter's invisible mouth.

No, he said, I liked it best as it wur afore. As he spoke the head disappeared, and they heard him go clumping down the ladder again. The words fell heavily on Lilac's ears. Best as it wur afore. Perhaps everyone would think so too. She looked dismally first at the locks of hair on the ground and then at Agnetta's unconcerned face.

Well, you've no call to mind what *he* says anyhow, said the latter cheerfully. He don't know what's what.

I most wish, said Lilac, as she turned to leave the loft, that I hadn't done it.

As she spoke, the distant sound of the church clock was heard. There was only just time to get to the foot of the hill, and she said a hurried good-bye to Agnetta, tying on her bonnet as she ran across the fields. She generally hated the sun-bonnet, but to-day for the first time she found a comfort in its deep brim, which sheltered this new Lilac White a little from the world. She almost hoped that the artist would change his mind and let her keep it on, instead of holding it in her hand.

Chapter Three. Uncle Joshua.

Let each be what he is, so will he be good enough for man himself, and God. *Lavater.*

Whilst all this was going on at the farm, Mrs White had been busy as usual in the cottage on the hill her mind full of Lilac, and her hands full of the Rectory washing. It was an important business, for it was all she and her child had to depend on beside a small pension allowed her by Jem's late employers; but quite apart from this she took a pride in her work for its own sake. She felt responsible not only for the unyielding stiffness of the Rector's round collars, but also for the appearance of the choristers' surplices; and any failure in colour or approach to limpness was a real pain to her, and made it difficult to fix her attention on the service. This happened very seldom,

White Lilac

however; and when it did, was owing to an unfortunate drying day or other accident, and never to want of exertion on her own part.

There was nothing to complain of in the weather this morning a bright sun and a nice bit of wind, and not too much of it. Mrs White wrung out the surplices in a very cheerful spirit, and her grave face had a smile on it now and then, for she was thinking of Lilac. Lilac sweetened all her life now, much in the same way that the bunch of flowers from which she took her name had sweetened the small room with its fragrance twelve years ago. As she grew up her mother's love grew too, stronger year by year; for when she looked at her she remembered all the happiness that her life had known when she spoke her name, it brought back a thousand pleasant memories and kept them fresh in her mind. And she looked forward too, for Lilac's sake, and saw in years to come her proudest hope fulfilled her child grown to be a self-respecting useful woman, who could work for herself and need be beholden to no one. She had no higher ambition for her; but this she had set her heart on, she should not become lazy, vain, helpless, like her cousins the Greenways. That was the pitfall from which she would strain every muscle to hold Lilac back. There were moments when she trembled for the bad influence of example at Orchards Farm. She knew Lilac's yielding affectionate nature and her great admiration for her cousins, and kept a watchful eye for the first unsatisfactory signs. But there were none. No one could accuse Lilac of untidy ways, or want of thoroughness in dusting, sweeping, and all branches of household work, and even Mrs White could find no fault.

After all, she said to herself, it's natural in young things to like to be together, and there's nothing worse nor foolishness in Agnetta and Bella. So she allowed the visits to go on, and contented herself by many a word in season and many a pointed practical lesson. The Greenways were seldom mentioned, but they were, nevertheless, very often in the minds of both mother and daughter.

This morning she was thinking of a much more pleasant subject. How was the artist gentleman getting along with Lilac's picture? He must be well at it now, she thought, looking up at the loud-voiced American clock, an' her looking as peart and pretty as a daisy. White-faced indeed! I'd rather she were white-faced than have great red cheeks like a peony bloom. What will he do with the picture afterwards? Joshua Snell, through reading the papers so much, knew most things, and he had said that it would p'r'aps be hung up with a lot of others in a place in London called an exhibition, where you could pay money and go to see 'em. If he's right, concluded Mrs White, wringing out the last surplice, I do really think as how I must give Lilac a jaunt up to London, an' we'll go and see it. The last holiday as ever I had was fifteen years back, an' that was when Jem and me, we went Why, I do believe, she said aloud, here she is back a'ready!

There was a sound of running feet, which she had heard too often to mistake, then the click of the latch, and then Lilac herself rushed through the front room.

Mother, Mother, she cried, he won't paint me!

Mrs White turned sharply round. Lilac was standing just inside the entrance to the back kitchen, with her bonnet on, and her hands clasped over her face. To keep her bonnet on a moment after she was in the house struck her mother at once as something strange and unusual, and she stared at her for an instant in silence, with her bands held up dripping and pink from the water.

Whatever ails you, child? she said at length. What made him change his mind?

He said as how I was the wrong one, murmured Lilac under her closed hands.

The *wrong* one! repeated her mother. Why, how could he go to say such a thing? You told him you was Lilac White, I s'pose. There's ne'er another in the village.

He didn't seem as if he knew me, said Lilac. He looked at me very sharp, and said as how it was no good to paint me now.

White Lilac

Why ever not? You're just the same as you was.

I ain't, said Lilac desperately, taking away her hands from her face and letting them fan at her side. I ain't the same. I've cut my hair!

It was over now. She stood before her mother a disgraced and miserable Lilac. The black fringe of hair across her forehead, the bonnet pushed back, the small white face quivering nervously.

But though she knew it would displease her mother, she had very little idea that she had done the thing of all others most hateful to her. A fringe was to Mrs White a sort of distinguishing mark of the Greenways family, and of others like it. Not only was it ugly and unsuitable in itself, but it was an outward sign of all manner of unworthy qualities within. Girls who wore fringes were in her eyes stamped with three certain faults: untidiness, vanity, and love of dressing beyond their station. Beginning with these, who could tell to what other evils a fringe might lead? And now, her own child, her Lilac whom she had been so proud of, and thought so different from others, stood before her with this abomination on her brow. Bitterest of all, it was the influence of the Greenways that had triumphed, and not her own. All her care and toil had ended in this. It had all been in vain. If Lilac took pattern by her cousins in one way she would in another a straw can tell which way the wind blows. She would grow up like Bella and Agnetta.

Swiftly all this rushed into Mrs White's mind, as she stood looking with surprise and horror at Lilac's altered face. Finding her voice as she arrived at the last conclusion, she asked coldly:

What made yer do it?

Lilac locked her hands tightly together and made no answer. She would not say anything about Agnetta, who had meant kindly in what she had done.

I know, continued her mother, without you sayin' a word. It was one of them Greenways. But I did think as how you'd enough sense and sperrit of yer own to stand out agin' their foolishness let alone anything else. It's plain to me now that you don't care for yer mother or what she says. You'll fly right in her face to please any of them at Orchards Farm.

Still Lilac did not speak, and her silence made Mrs White more and more angry.

An' what do you think you've got by it? she continued scornfully. Do those silly things think it makes 'em look like ladies to cut their hair so and dress themselves up fine? Then you can tell 'em this from me: Vulgar they are, and vulgar they'll be all their lives long, and nothing they can do to their outsides will change 'em. But they might a left you alone, Lilac, for you're but a child; only I did think as you'd a had more sense.

Lilac was crying now. This scolding on the top of much excitement and disappointment was more than she could bear, but still she felt she must defend the Greenways from blame.

It was my fault, she sobbed. I thought as how it would look nicer.

The many and many times, pursued Mrs White, drying her hands vigorously on a rough towel, as I've tried to make you understand what's respectable and right and fitting! And it's all been no good. Well, I've done. Go to your Greenways and let them teach you, and much profit may you get. I've done with you you don't look like my child no longer.

She turned her back and began to bustle about with the linen, not looking towards Lilac again. In reality her eyes were full of tears and she would have given worlds to cry heartily with the child, for to use those hard words to

White Lilac

her was like bruising her own flesh. But she was too mortified and angry to show it, and Lilac, after casting some wistful glances at the active figure, turned and went slowly out of the room with drooping head.

Pulling her bonnet forward so that her forehead and the dreadful fringe were quite hidden, she wandered down the hill, hardly knowing or caring where she went. All the world was against her. No one would ever look pleasantly at her again, if even her mother frowned and turned away. One by one she recalled what they had all said. First, Peter: I liked it best as it wur afore. Then the artist he had been quite angry. You stupid little girl, he had said, you've made yourself quite commonplace. You're no use whatever. Run away. And now Mother that was worst of all: You don't look like my child. Lilac's tears fell fast when she remembered that. How very hard they all were upon her! She strayed listlessly onwards, and presently came to a sudden standstill, for she found that she was getting near the bottom of the hill, where the artist was no doubt still sitting. That would never do. At her right hand there branched off a wide grass-grown lane, one of the ancient roads of the Romans which could still be traced along the valley. It was seldom used now, for it led nowhere in particular; but here and there at long distances there were some small cottages in it, and in one of these lived the cobbler, Joshua Snell.

Now, Uncle Joshua, as she called him, though he was no relation to her, was a great friend of Lilac's, and the thought of him darted into her forlorn little mind like a ray of comfort. He would perhaps look kindly at her in spite of her fringe. There was no one else to do it except Agnetta, and to reach her the artist must be passed, which was impossible. Lilac could not remember that Joshua had ever been cross to her, even in the days when she had played with his bits of leather and mislaid his tools those old days when she was a tiny child, and Mother had left her with him to mind when she went out to work. And besides being kind he was wise, and would surely find some way to help her in her present distress. Perhaps even he would speak to Mother, who thought a deal of what he said, and that would make her less angry. A little cheered by these reflections Lilac turned down the lane, quickened her pace, and made straight for the cobbler's cottage.

It was a very small abode, with such a deep thatch and such tiny windows that it looked all roof. At right angles there jutted out from it an extra room, or rather shed, and in this it was possible, by peering closely through a dingy pane of glass, to make out the dim figure of Joshua bending over his work. This dark little hole, in which there was just space enough for Joshua, his boots and tools and leather, had no door from without, but could only be approached through the kitchen. As he sat at work he could see the fire and the clock without getting up, which was very convenient, and he was proud of his work-shed, though in the winter it was both chilly and dark. Joshua lived quite alone. He had come to Danecross twenty years ago from the north, bringing with him a wife, a collection of old books, and a clarionet. The wife, whose black bonnet still hung behind the kitchen door, had now been dead ten years, and he had only the books and the clarionet to bear him company. But these companions kept him from being dull and lonely, and gave him besides a position of some importance in the village. For by dint of reading his books many times over, and pondering on them as he sat and cobbled, he had gained a store of wisdom, or what passed for such, and a great many long words with which he was fond of impressing the neighbours. He was also considered a fine reader, and quite a musical genius; for although he now only played the clarionet in private, there had been a time, he told them, when he had performed in a gallery as one of the church choir.

It was now about four o'clock in the afternoon, and he sat earnestly intent on making a good job of a pair of boots which had been brought to him to sole. He was also anxious to make the most of the bright spring sunshine, a stray beam of which had found its way in at his little window and helped him greatly by its cheerful presence. All at once a shadow flitted across it, and glancing up he saw a well-known figure run hurriedly in at the cottage door. It's White Lilac, he said to himself with a smile but without ceasing his work, for Lilac was a frequent visitor, and he could not afford to waste his time in welcoming his guests. He did not even look round, therefore, but listened for her greeting while his hammer kept up a steady tack, tack, tack. It did not come. Joshua stopped his work, raised his head, and listened more intently. The kitchen was as perfectly silent as though it were empty. I cert'nly did see her, said he, almost doubting his eyesight; maybe she's playing off a game. He got up and looked cautiously round the entrance, quite expecting Lilac to jump out from some hiding-place with a laugh; but

White Lilac

a very different sight met his eyes. Lilac had thrown herself into a large chair which stood on the hearth, her head was bent, her face buried in her hands, and she was crying bitterly.

My word! exclaimed Joshua, suddenly arrested on the threshold.

He rubbed his hands in great perplexity on his leather apron. It was quite a new thing to see Lilac in tears, and they fell so fast that she could neither control herself nor tell him the cause of her distress. In vain he tried to coax and comfort her: she would not even raise her head nor look at him. Joshua looked round the room as if for counsel and advice in this difficulty, and fixed his eyes thoughtfully on the tall clock for some moments; then he winked at it, and said softly, as though speaking in confidence: Best let her have her cry out; then she'll tell me.

See here, he continued, turning to Lilac and using his ordinary voice. You've come to get Uncle's tea ready for him, I know, and make him some toast; that's what you've come for. An' I've got a job as I must finish afore tea-time, 'cause the owner's coming for 'em. So I'll go and set to and do it, and you'll get the tea ready like a handy maid as you are, and then we'll have it together, snug and cosy.

When he had settled himself to his work again, and the sound of his hammer mingled with the ticking of the tall clock as though they were running a race, Lilac raised her head and rubbed her wet eyes. There was something very soothing and peaceful in Uncle Joshua's cottage, and his kind voice seemed to carry comfort with it. She had a strong hope that he would help her in some way, though she could not tell how, for he had never failed to find a remedy for all the little troubles she had brought to him from her earliest years. Her faith in him, therefore, was entire, and even if he had proposed to make her hair long again at once, she would have believed it possible, because he knew so much.

Gradually, as she remembered this, she ceased crying altogether, and began to move about the room to prepare the tea, a business to which she was well used, for she had always considered it an honour to get Uncle Joshua's tea and make toast for him. The kettle already hung on its chain over the fire, and gave out a gentle simmering sound; by the time the toast was ready the water would boil. Lilac got the bread from the corner cupboard and cut some stout slices. Uncle liked his toast thick. Then she knelt on the hearth, and shielding her face with one hand chose out the fiercest red hollows of the fire. It was an anxious process, needing the greatest attention; for Lilac prided herself on her toast, and it was a matter of deep importance that it should be a fine even brown all over neither burnt, nor smoked, nor the least blackened. While she was making it she was happy again, and quite unconscious of the fringe, for the first time since she had felt Agnetta's cold scissors on her brow.

It was soon quite ready on a plate on the hearth, so that it might keep hot. Uncle Joshua was ready also, for he came in just then from his shed, carrying his completed job in his hand: a pair of huge hobnailed boots, which he placed gently on the ground as though they were brittle and must be handled with care.

Them's Peter Greenways' boots, he said, looking at them with some triumph, and a good piece of work they be!

It was a great relief to Lilac that neither then nor during the meal did Uncle Joshua look at her with surprise, or appear to notice that there was anything different about her. Everything went on just as usual, just as it had so often done before. She sat on one side of the table and poured out the tea, and Uncle Joshua in his high-backed elbow chair on the other, with his red-and-white handkerchief over his knees, his spectacles pushed up on his forehead, and a well-buttered slice of toast in his hand. He never talked much during his meals; partly because he was used to having them alone, and partly because he liked to enjoy one thing at a time thoroughly. He was fond of talking and he was fond of eating, and he would not spoil both by trying to do them together. So to-night, as usual, he drank endless cups of tea in almost perfect silence, and at last Lilac began to wish he would stop, for although she feared she yet longed for his opinion. She felt more able to face it now that she had eaten something, for without knowing it she had been hungry as well as miserable, and had quite forgotten that she had had no

White Lilac

dinner. She watched Uncle Joshua nervously. Would he ask for more tea. No. He wiped his mouth with the red handkerchief, looked straight at Lilac, and suddenly spoke:

And how's the picture going forrard then?

After this question it was easy to tell the whole story, from its beginning to its unlucky end. During its progress the cobbler listened with the deepest attention, gave now a nod, and now a shake of the head or a muttered Humph! and when it was finished he fingered his cheek thoughtfully, and said:

And so he wouldn't paint you eh? and Mother was angry?

She's dreadful angry, sighed Lilac.

Did you think it 'ud please her, now? asked Uncle Joshua.

N-no, answered Lilac hesitatingly; but I never thought as how she'd make so much fuss. And after all no one don't like it. Do you think as how it looks *very* bad, Uncle?

The cobbler put his spectacles carefully straight and studied Lilac's face with earnest attention. What I consider is this here, he said as he finished his examination and leant back in his chair. It makes you look like lots of other little gells, that's what it does. Not so much like White Lilac as you used to. I liked it best as it wur afore.

Peter, he said that too, said Lilac. No one likes it except Agnetta.

Ah! And what made Agnetta and all of 'em cut their hair that way? asked Uncle Joshua.

Because Gusta Greenways told Bella as how all the ladies in London did it, answered Lilac simply.

That's where it is, said Uncle Joshua. My little maid, there's things as is fitting and there's things as isn't fitting. Perhaps it's fitting for London ladies to wear their hair so. Very well, then let them do it. But why should you and Agnetta and the rest copy 'em? You're not ladies. You're country girls with honest work to do, and proud you ought to be of it. As proud every bit as the grandest lady as ever was, who never put her hand to a useful thing in her life. I'm not saying you're better than her. She's got her own place, an' her own lessons to learn, an' she's got to do the best she can with her life. But you're different, because your life's different, an' you'll never look like her whatever you put on your outside. If a thing isn't fit for what it's intended, it'll never look well. Now, here's Peter's boots I call 'em handsome.

He lifted one of them as he spoke and put it on the table, where it seemed to take up a great deal of room. Lilac looked at it with a puzzled air; she saw nothing handsome in it. It was enormously thick and deeply wrinkled across the toes, which were turned upwards as though with many and many a weary tramp.

I call 'em handsome, pursued Joshua. Because for why? Because they're fit for ploughin' in the stiffest soil. Because they'll keep out wet and never give in the seams. They're fit for what they're meant to do. But now you just fancy, he went on, raising one finger, as how I'd made 'em of shiny leather, and put paper soles to 'em, and pointed tips to the toes. How'd they look in a ploughed field or a muddy lane? Or s'pose Peter he went and capered about in these 'ere on a velvet carpet an' tried to dance. How'd he look?

The idea of the loutish Peter capering anywhere, least of all on a velvet carpet, made Lilac smile in spite of Uncle Joshua's great gravity.

White Lilac

Why, he'd look silly, he continued; as silly as a country girl, who's got to scrub an' wash an' make the butter, dressed out in silks an' fandangoes. She ought to be too proud of being what she is, to try and look like what she isn't. Give me down that big brown book yonder an' I'll read you something fine about that.

Lilac reached the book from the shelf with the greatest reverence; it was the only one amongst Joshua's collection that she often begged to look at, because it was full of curious pictures. It was Lavater's Physiognomy; having found the passage he wanted, Joshua read it very slowly aloud:

In the mansion of God there are to his glory vessels of wood, of silver, and of gold. All are serviceable, all profitable, all capable of divine uses, all the instruments of God: but the wood continues wood, the silver silver, the gold gold. Though the golden should remain unused, still they are gold. The wooden may be made more serviceable than the golden, but they continue wood. Let each be what he is, so will he be sufficiently good, for man himself, and God. The violin cannot have the sound of the flute, nor the trumpet of the drum.

He had just finished the last line, and still held one knotty brown finger raised to mark the important words, when there was a low knock at the door, and immediately afterwards it opened a little way and a head appeared, covered by a rusty-black wideawake. It was the second time that day that Lilac had seen it, for it was Peter Greenways' head. In a moment all the events of the unlucky morning came back to her, and his gruffly unfavourable opinion. Why had he come? This awkward Peter was always turning up when he was not wanted, and thrusting that large uncouth head in at unexpected places. She turned her back towards the door in much vexation, and Peter himself remained stationary, with his eyes fixed where he had first directed them on his own boot, which still stood on the table by Joshua's elbow. His first intention had evidently been to come in, but suddenly seized with shyness he was now unable to move.

Why, Peter, lad, said the cobbler, come in then; the boots is ready for you.

Thus invited Peter slowly opened the door a very little wider and squeezed himself into the room. He was indeed a very awkward-looking youth, and though he was broad-shouldered and strongly made, he was so badly put together that he did not seem to join properly anywhere, and moved with effort as though he were walking in a heavy clay soil. Everything about Peter, and even the colour of his clothes, made you think of a ploughed field, and he generally kept his eyes fastened on the ground as though following the course of a furrow. This was a pity, for his eyes were the only good features in his broad red face, and had the kindly faithful expression seen in those of some dogs.

As he stood there, ill at ease, with his enormous hands opening and shutting nervously, Lilac thought of Agnetta's speech: Peter's so common. If to be common was to look like Peter, it was a thing to be avoided, and she was dismayed to hear Uncle Joshua say:

Well, now, if you're not just in time to go home with Lilac here, seein' as how we've done our tea, and her mother'll be looking for her.

Oh, Uncle, I'd rather not, said Lilac hastily. Then she added, I want you to play me a tune before I go.

Joshua was always open to a compliment about his playing.

Ah! he said, you want a tune, do you? Well, and p'r'aps Peter he'd like to hear it too.

As he spoke he gave the boots to Peter, who was now engaged in dragging up a leather purse from some great depth beneath his gaberdine. This effort, and the necessity of replying, flushed his face to a deeper red than ever, but he managed to say huskily as he counted some coin into Joshua's hand:

White Lilac

No, thank you, Mr Snell. Can't stop tonight.

Nevertheless it was some moments before he could go away: he stood clasping his boots and staring at Joshua.

The money's all right, my lad, said the latter.

Well, said Peter, I must be goin'. But he did not move.

Well, good night, Peter, said Joshua, encouragingly.

Good night, Mr Snell.

Good night, Peter, said Lilac at length, nodding to him, and this seemed to rouse him, for with sudden energy he hurled himself towards the door and disappeared.

Yon's an honest lad and a fine worker, remarked the cobbler, but he do seem a bit tongue-tied now and then.

And now, after the tune was played, there was no longer any excuse to put off going home. For the first time in her life Lilac dreaded it, for instead of a smile of welcome she had only a frown of displeasure to expect from her mother. It was such a new thing that she shrank from it with fear, and found it almost as difficult to say goodbye as Peter had done. If only Uncle Joshua would go with her! Her face looked so wistful that he guessed her unspoken desire.

Now I shouldn't wonder, he said, carefully thrusting the clarionet into its green baize bag, as how you'd like me to go up yonder with you. And it do so happen as how I've got a job to take back to Dan'l Wishing, so I shall pass yours without goin' out of my way.

Accordingly, the door of the cottage being locked, the pair set out together a few moments later, Lilac walking very soberly by the cobbler's side, with one hand in his. Joshua's hand was rough with work, so that it felt like holding the bough of a gnarled elm tree, but it was so full of kindness that there was great comfort and support in it.

How would Mother receive them? Lilac hardly dared to look up when they got near the gate and saw her standing there, and hardly dared to believe her own ears when she heard her speak. For what she said was:

Run in, child, and get yer tea. I've put it by.

She stayed a long time at the gate talking to Uncle Joshua, and Lilac, watching them through the window, felt little doubt that they were talking of her. When her mother came in, and was quite kind and gentle, and behaved just as usual, she felt still more sure that it was Uncle Joshua's wonderful wisdom that had done it all. But if she could have heard the conversation she would have been surprised, for they dwelt entirely on the cobbler's rheumatics and the chances of rain, and said no word of either Lilac or her fringe. Mrs White had had time to repent of her harsh words, and when the hours went by, and Lilac did not come back, she had pictured her receiving comfort and encouragement from the Greenways the very people she wished her to avoid. Now she had driven her to them. I could bite my tongue out for talking so foolish, she said to herself as she ran out to the gate, over and over again. When at last she saw the two well-known figures approaching, she could only just restrain herself from rushing out to meet Lilac and covering her with kisses. The relief was almost too great to bear.

White Lilac

In her own home, therefore, Lilac heard nothing further on the unlucky subject. But this was not by any means the case in the village, where nothing was too small to be important. The fact of the Widow White's Lilac wearing a fringe was quite enough to talk of, and more than enough to stare at, for it was something new. Unfortunately everyone knew Lilac, and Lilac knew everyone, so there was no escape. Her acquaintances would draw up in front of her and gaze steadily for an instant, after which the same remarks always came:

My! you have altered yerself. I shouldn't never have known you, I do declare! And so you didn't have yer picter done after all?

Lilac wished she could hide somewhere until her hair had grown long again. And worst of all, when Mrs Leigh next saw her in school, she looked quite startled and said:

I'm so sorry you've cut your hair, Lilac; it looked much nicer before.

It was the same thing over and over again, no one approved the change but Agnetta, and Lilac's faith in her cousin was by this time a little bit shaken. She should not be so ready, she thought, the next time to believe that Agnetta must know best. One drop of comfort in all this was that the artist gentleman no longer sat painting at the bottom of the hill. He had packed up all his canvases and brushes and gone off to the station, so that Lilac saw him no more. She was very glad of this, for she felt that it would have been almost impossible to pass him every day and to see his keen disapproving glance fixed upon her. Slowly the picture that was to have been painted was forgotten, and Lilac White's fringe became a thing of custom. There were more important matters near at hand; May Day was approaching, an event of interest and excitement to both young and old.

Chapter Four. Who will be Queen?

When daisies pied and violets blue
And lady-smocks all silver-white
And cuckoo-buds of yellow hue
Do paint the meadows with delight.
Shakespeare.

On the top of the ridge of hills which rose behind Mrs White's cottage there was a great beech wood, which could be reached in two ways. One was by following a rough stony road which got gradually steeper and was terribly hard for both man and beast, and the other was to take a chalky track which led straight across the rounded shoulder of the downs.

This last was considerably shorter, and by active people was always preferred to the road, although in summer it was glaring and unshaded. But the scramble was soon over, and in the deep quiet shelter of the woods it was cool on the hottest day, for the trees held their leaves so thickly over your head that it was better than any roof. The sun could not get through to scorch or dazzle, but it lit up the flickering sprays on the low boughs, so that looking through them you saw a silvery shimmering dance always going on. In the valley there had not perhaps been a breath of air, but up here a little ruffling breeze had its home, and was ready to fan you gently and hospitably directly you arrived.

Under your feet a red-and-brown carpet of last year's leaves was spread, stirred now and then with sudden mysterious rustlings as the small wild creatures darted away at the sound of your step. These and the birds shared the woods in almost complete solitude, disturbed now and again by the woodcutters, or boys from the village. But there was one day in the year when this quiet kingdom was strangely invaded, when its inhabitants fled to their most retired corners and peeped out with terrified eyes upon a very altered scene and this was the first of May. Then everything was changed for a little while. Instead of the notes of the birds there were human voices calling

White Lilac

to each other, laughing, singing, shouting, and the music of a band; instead of great silent spaces, there were many brightly-coloured figures which ran and danced. In the midst, where a clearing had been made and the oldest trees stood solemnly round, there appeared the slim form of a maypole decked with gay ribbons; near it a throne covered with hawthorn boughs, on which, dressed in white with garland and sceptre, was seated the Queen of the May. There with great ceremony she was crowned by her court, and afterwards led the dance round the maypole. Songs and feasting followed until the sun went down, and then the gay company marched away to the sounds of *God save the Queen*. Quietness reigned in the woods again, and once more the wild creatures which lived there could roam and fly at their pleasure until next May Day.

Now this holiday, which was fast approaching again, was not only looked forward to with interest and excitement by the children, but was an event of importance to everyone in the village. The very oldest made shift somehow to get up to the woods and join in the rejoicing, and the most careworn and sorrowful managed to struggle out of their gloom for that one day, and to leave behind the dulness of their daily toil. Many, coming from distant parts of the parish, met for the only time throughout the year in the woods on May Day, and found the keenest pleasure in comparing the growth of their children, and talking of their neighbours' affairs. It was a source of pride and satisfaction, too, to fathers as well as mothers, to point out some child in the procession so bedecked with flowers that the real Johnnie was hardly visible, and say with a grin of delight:

Why, it's our Johnnie, I do declare! Shouldn't never a known him. As the time came round again, therefore, it was more or less in everyone's mind in some way. For one thing: Would it be fine? That affected everyone's comfort, for a cold wet May Day could be nothing but a miserable failure. Mr Dimbleby at the shop had his own anxieties, for it was his business to provide tea, bread and butter, and cake for the whole assembly, and to get it all up to the top of the hill no small matter. To do this it was necessary to keep his mind steadily fixed on May Day for a whole week beforehand, and not to allow it to relax for an instant. The drum-and-fife band, who felt themselves the pride and ornament of the occasion, had to practise new tunes and polish up *God save the Queen* to a great pitch of perfection, and the children thought themselves busier than anyone. Not only had they to wonder who would be Queen, but they must meet in the Vicarage garden and learn how to dance round the maypole, singing at the same time. Not only must they present themselves at all sorts of odd hours to have some wonderful costume tried on by Miss Ellen and Miss Alice, but above all they had to gather the flowers for the wreaths and garlands. Sometimes, if the season were cold and backward, it was difficult to get enough; but this year, as Lilac had noticed with delight, it had been so bright and mild that the meadows were thick with blossoms and there was no fear of any scarcity. She was always amongst the children chosen to gather; and there was more in this office than might at first appear, for there were good gatherers and bad gatherers. It might be done carelessly and in a half-hearted manner, or with full attention and earnest effort, and these results were evident when each child brought her own collection to the school room on May morning. The contents of the baskets were very different, for some showed plainly that as little trouble as possible had been taken. These flowers were picked anyhow, with short stalks or long stalks, in bud or too fully blown, faded or fresh, just as they happened to grow and could be most easily got. Others, again, you could see at the first glance, had been gathered with care and thought, the finest specimens chosen just at the right stage of blossoming, and tied in neat bunches with the stalks all of one length. You might be sure that the flowers in these baskets were quite as good at the bottom as those on the top. Now, Lilac White was a gatherer on whom you might depend, and the ladies at the Rectory who made the wreaths, and dressed the Queen, and arranged the festivities, considered her their best support in the matter of flowers. For, by reason of having had her eye upon them for weeks beforehand, she knew every spring where the finest grew, whether they were early or late, and whether they would be ready for the great occasion. When they had to be gathered she spared no trouble, but would get up at any hour so that they might be picked before the sun scorched them, walk any distance or climb the steepest hills to get the very finest possible. She was always appealed to when any question arose about the flowers. We must ask Lilac White whether the king-cups are out, Miss Ellen would say; and Lilac was always able to tell. She filled, therefore, a very pleasant and important post at these times, and took great pride in it; but her Cousin Agnetta looked at this part of the affair differently. To her there was neither pleasure nor profit in "mucking" about in the damp fields, as she said, getting her feet wet, and spoiling her frock in stooping about after the flowers. She wished Mrs Leigh would let

White Lilac

them wear artificials, which were quite as pretty to look at, and did not fade or get messy, and were no bother at all. You could wear 'em time after time. Agnetta felt quite sure she should be Queen this year, and although she did not like the trouble beforehand she looked forward to the event itself very much indeed. There were many agreeable things about it: the white dress, the crown, the crowd of people looking on, and the fact of being first amongst her companions. It was a little vexing that Lilac was quicker to learn the steps of the dance Miss Ellen was teaching them, and could sing the May-Day song better than she could. Agnetta always sang out of tune, and tumbled over her own feet in the dance; but she consoled herself by remembering how well she should look as Queen dressed all in white, with her red cheeks and frizzy black hair. Meanwhile the Queen was not yet chosen, but would be voted for in the school a week beforehand.

Who would be chosen? It was a question which occupied a good many minds just then, and amongst them one which was not supposed to trouble itself about such matters, or to have anything to do with merry-making. This was Peter Greenways' mind. He was so dull and silent, and worked so very hard all the year, that it was an ever fresh surprise to see him appear with the rest on May Day, and came natural to say, What, you here, Peter! although he had never missed a single occasion. He expressed no pleasure, and showed no outward sign of enjoyment; but he always went, to the great vexation of his sisters, who were heartily ashamed of him. His face was red, his figure was loutish it was impossible to smarten him up or make him look like other folks; he continued, in spite of all their efforts, to be just plain Peter dreadful vulgar in his appearance. And the worst of it was, that you could not overlook him in the crowd. This might have been the case if he had been allowed to wear his ordinary working-clothes, but Peter in his best was an object which seemed to stand out from all others, and to be present wherever the eye turned.

On the day which was to decide the important question, Peter had been ploughing in a part of his father's land called the High Field. All the rest lay level on the plain round about the farm, but this one field was on the shoulder of the downs, so that from it you looked far over the distant valley, with its little clusters of villages dotted here and there. Immediately below was the grey church of Danecross, the rectory, the school-house, and a group of cottages all nestling sociably together; farther on, Orchards Farm peeped out from amongst the trees, which were still white with blossom, and above all this came the cold serious outline of the chalk hills, broken here and there by the beech woods. Peter never felt so happy as when he was looking at this from the High Field, with his dinner in his pocket and the prospect of a long day's work before him. It was so far away from all that disturbed and worried; no one to scold, no one to call him clumsy, no one to look angrily at him, no sounds of dispute. Only the voice of the wind, which blew so freshly up here and seemed to cheer him on, and the song of the larks high above his head, and for companions his good beasts with no reproof in their patient eyes, but only obedience and kindness. Peter was master in the High Field. No one could do a better day's work or drive a straighter furrow, and he was proud of it, and proud of his team three iron-greys, with white manes and tails, called Pleasant", Old Pleasant", and Young Pleasant . Yet though he did his ploughing well, it by no means occupied all his mind. As he trudged backwards and forwards with bent head, and hands grasping the handles, with now and then a shout to his horses, and now and then a pause for rest, his thoughts were free as the wind, flying about to an sorts of subjects. For this silent Peter had always something to wonder about. He never asked questions now as he had done at school: he had been laughed at so much then, that he knew well enough by this time that he only wondered so much because he was more stupid than other folks; it must be so, for the most common things which he saw every day, and which wise people took as a matter of course, were enough to puzzle him and fill his mind with wonder. The stars, the flowers, the sunset, the sound of the wind, the very pebbles turned up by the ploughshare, gave him strange feelings which he did not understand and which he carefully hid. They would have been explained, he knew, if he had expressed them, by the sentence, Peter's not all there ; and he was sometimes quite inclined to think that this was really the case. To-day his thoughts had been fixed on the approaching holiday, and on all the delights of the past one. It was to him a most beautiful and even solemn occasion, and he could recall the very smallest detail of it from year to year: even the uncertain squeaks and flourishes of the drum and fife band were something to be remembered with pleasure. As his eye rested on the school-house, a small red dot in the distance, he wondered if they had settled on the Queen yet, and whether Agnetta would be chosen. She'll be rarely vexed if she ain't, he thought seriously. So the day went by, and after

White Lilac

five o'clock had sounded from the church tower Peter and his beasts left off work and went leisurely down the hill towards home; two of the Pleasants in front with their harness clanking and flapping loosely about them, and their master following, seated sideways on the back of the third. Peter had done a long day's work and was hungry, but he did not go into the house till he had seen his horses attended to by Ben Pinhorn, who was in the yard when they arrived. Even after this he was further delayed, for as he was crossing the lane which separated the farm buildings from the house an ugly cat ran to meet him, rubbed against his legs, and mewed.

Jump, then, Tib, said Peter encouragingly; and Tib jumped, arriving with outspread claws on the front of his waistcoat and thence to his shoulder. Thus accompanied he went to the kitchen window and tapped softly, which signal brought Molly the servant girl with a saucer of skim milk.

There's your supper, Tib, said Peter as he set it on the ground, and stood looking heavily down at the cat till she had lapped up the last drop. And in this there was reason; for Sober the sheepdog, lying near, had his eye on the saucer, and only waited for Tib to be undefended to advance and finish the milk himself.

Being now quite ready for his own refreshment Peter made his way through the back kitchen into the general living-room of the family, which also, much to Bella's disgust, had the appearance of a kitchen. It was large and comfortable, with three windows in it, looking across the garden to the orchard, but, alas! it had a great fireplace and oven, where cooking often went on, and an odious high settle sticking out from one corner of the chimney. This was enough to deprive it of all gentility, without mentioning the long deal table at which in former times the farmer had been used to dine with his servants. They were banished now to the back kitchen, but this was the only reform Bella and Gusta had been able to make. Nothing would induce their father to sit in the parlour, where there was a complete set of velvet-covered chairs, a sofa, a piano, a photograph-book, and a great number of anti-macassars and mats. All these elegances were not enough to make him give up his warm corner in the settle, where he could stretch out his legs at his ease and smoke his pipe. Mrs Greenways herself, though she was proud of her parlour, secretly preferred the kitchen, as being more handy and comfortable, so that except on great occasions the parlour was left in chilly loneliness. When Peter entered there were only his mother and Bella in the room. The latter stood at the table with a puzzled frown on her brow, and a large pair of scissors in her hand; before her were spread paper patterns, fashion-books, and some pieces of black velveteen, which she was eyeing doubtfully, and, placing in different ways so that it might be cut to the best advantage. Bella was considered a fine young woman. She had a large frame like all the Greenways, and nature had given her a waist in proportion to it. She had, however, fought against nature and conquered, for her figure now resembled an hour-glass very wide at the top, and suddenly very small in the middle. Like Agnetta she had a great deal of colour, frizzy black hair, and a good-natured expression, but her face was just now clouded by some evident vexation.

Lor', Bella, said her mother, turning round from the hearth, put away them fal-lals do. Here's Peter wanting his tea, and your father'll be along from market directly. Bella did not answer, partly because her mouth was full of pins, and Mrs Greenways continued: You might hurry and get the tea laid just for once. I'm clean tired out.

Where's Molly? muttered Bella indistinctly.

Molly indeed! exclaimed her mother impatiently. It's Molly here and Molly there. One 'ud think she had a hundred legs and arms for all you think she can do. Molly's scrubbing out the dairy, which she ought to a done this morning.

It won't run to it after all! exclaimed Bella, dashing her scissors down on the table; not by a good quarter of a yard.

An' you've been and wasted pretty nigh all the afternoon over it, said Mrs Greenways. I do wish Gusta wouldn't send you them patterns, that I do.

White Lilac

I've cut up the skirt of my velveteen trying to fashion it, said Bella, looking mournfully at the plate in Myra's Journal, so now I'm ever so much worse off than I was afore. Lor', Peter! she added, as her eye fell on her brother, do go and take off that horrid gaberdine and them boots. You look for all the world like Ben Pinhorn, there ain't a pin to choose between you.

You oughtn't to speak so sharp, said her mother, as Peter slouched out of the room. I know what it is to feel spent like that after a day's work. You just come in and fling down where you are and as you are, boots or no boots.

As she spoke the rattle of wheels was heard outside, and then the click of a gate.

There now! she exclaimed, starting up; there *is* yer father. Back already, and a fine taking he'll be in to see all this muss about and no tea ready. He's short enough always when he's bin to market, without anything extry to vex him. She swept Bella's scraps, patterns, and books unceremoniously into a heap, and directly afterwards the tramp of heavy feet sounded in the passage, and the farmer entered. His first glance as he threw himself on the settle was at the table, where Bella was hurriedly clearing away her confused mass of working materials.

Be off with all that rubbish and let's have tea, he said crossly. Why can't it be ready when I come in?

You're a bit earlier than usual, Richard, said his wife; but you'll have it in no time now. The kettle's on the boil.

She made anxious signs to Bella to quicken her movements, for she saw that the farmer was in a bad humour. Things had not gone well at market.

And what did you see at Lenham? she asked, as she began to put the cups and saucers on the table.

Nawthing, answered Mr Greenways, staring at the fire.

What did you hear then? persisted his wife.

Nawthing, was the answer again.

Mother and daughter exchanged meaning looks. The farmer jerked his head impatiently round.

What I want to see is summat to eat, and what I want to hear is no more questions till I've got it. So there!

He thrust out his legs, pushed his hands deep down in his pockets, and with his chin sunk on his breast sat there a picture of moody discontent.

After a good deal of clatter and bustle, and calls for Molly, the tea was ready at last a substantial meal, but somewhat untidily served and Peter, having changed the offensive gaberdine for a shiny black cloth coat, having joined them, the party sat down. It was a very silent one, for no one dared to address another remark to the farmer until he had satisfied his appetite, which took some time. At last, however, as he handed his cup to his wife to be refilled, he asked:

Who made the butter this week?

Why, Molly, as always makes it, answered Mrs Greenways. Wasn't it good. I thought it looked beautiful.

White Lilac

Well, all I know is, said the farmer moodily, that Benson told me to-day that if this lot was like the last he wouldn't take no more.

Lor', Richard, you don't really mean it! said Mrs Greenways, setting down the teapot with a thump. Whatever shall we do if Benson won't take the butter?

You can't expect him to take it if it ain't good, answered the farmer. I don't blame him; he's got to sell it again.

It's that there good-for-nothing Molly, said Mrs Greenways. I'm always after her about the dairy, yet if my head's turned a minute she'll forget to scald her pans, and that gives the butter a sour taste.

All I know is, it's a hard thing, that with good pasture and good cows, and three women indoors, the butter can't be made so as it's fit to sell, said Mr Greenways, hitting the table with his fist.

What's the use of Bella and Agnetta, I should like to know?

Bella tossed her head and smiled. Lor', Pa, how you talk! she said mincingly.

They've never been taught nothing of such things, said Mrs Greenways; and besides, Agnetta's got her schooling yet awhile.

Fancy me, said Bella with a giggle, making the butter with my sleeves tucked up like Molly. I hope I'm above that sort of thing. I didn't go to Lenham finishing school to *learn* that.

I can't find out what it was you did learn there, growled her father, except to look down on everything useful. I'll not have Agnetta sent there, I know. Not if I had the money, I wouldn't. It's bad enough to have bad seasons and poor crops to do with out-of-doors, without having a set of dressed-up lazy hussies in the house, who mar more than they make. Where to turn for money I don't know, and there's going on for three years' rent owing to Mr Leigh.

He got up as he spoke and left the room, followed by Peter. Bella continued her tea placidly. Father was always cross on market days, and it did not impress her in the least to be called lazy; she was far more interested in the fate of her velveteen dress than in the quality of the butter. But this was not the case with Mrs Greenways. To hear that Benson had threatened not to take the butter was a real as well as a new trouble, and alarmed her greatly. The rent owing and the failing crops were such a very old story that she had ceased to heed it much, but what would happen if the butter was not sold? The dairy was one of their largest sources of profit, and, as the farmer had said, the pasture was good and the cows were good. There was no fault out-of-doors. Whose fault was it? Molly's without doubt. But then, reflected Mrs Greenways, she have got a sight to do, and you can't hurry butter; you must have care and time. She sighed as she glanced at Bella's strong capable form. Perhaps it would have been better after all, as Mrs White had so often said, to bring up her girls to understand household matters, instead of being stylishly idle. I did it for their good, thought poor Mrs Greenways; and anyhow, it's too late to alter 'em now. They'd no more take to it than ducks to flying. She was startled out of these reflections by the sudden entrance of Agnetta, who burst into the room with a hot excited face, and flung her bag of books into a corner.

Well, said Bella, looking calmly at her, I s'pose you're to be Queen, ain't you?

No! exclaimed Agnetta angrily, I ain't Queen; and it's a shame, so it is.

Why, whoever is it, then? asked Bella, open-mouthed.

White Lilac

They've been and chosen Lilac White; sneaking little thing! said Agnetta.

Well, now, surely, I am surprised, said her mother. I made sure they'd choose you, Agnetta; being the oldest, and the best lookin', and all. I do call it hard.

It's too bad, continued Agnetta, thus encouraged; after I've been such a friend to her, and helped her cut her hair. It's ungrateful. She might have told me.

Why, I don't suppose she knew it, did she? said Bella.

She went all on pretending she wanted me Queen, said Agnetta, as innocent as you please. And she must a known there were a lot meant to vote for her. I call it mean.

Never you mind, Agnetta, said her mother soothingly; come and get yer tea, and here's a pot of strawberry jam as you're fond of. She'll never make half such a good Queen as you, and I dessay you'll look every bit as fine now, when you're dressed.

I don't want no strawberry jam, said Agnetta sullenly, kicking at the leg of the table.

Mercy me! said poor Mrs Greenways with a sigh, everything do seem to go crossways today.

Chapter Five. May Day.

But I must gather knots of flowers, and buds and garlands gay,
For I'm to be Queen of the May, mother, I'm to be Queen of the May!
Tennyson.

Agnetta had been quite wrong in saying that Lilac had any idea of being Queen. At the school that afternoon, when amidst breathless silence the Mistress had counted up the votes and said: "Lilac White is chosen Queen", it had been such a surprise to her that she had stood as though in a dream. Her companions nudged her on either side. It's you that's Queen, they whispered; and at length she awoke to the wonderful fact that it was not Agnetta or anyone else who had the most votes, but she herself, Lilac White. She was Queen! Looking round, still half-puzzled to believe such a wonderful thing, she saw a great many pleased faces, and heard Mrs Leigh say: "I think you have chosen very well, and I am glad Lilac will be Queen this year. It was, then, really true. How pleased Mother'll be!" was her first thought; but her second was not so pleasant, for her eye fell on Agnetta. It was the only sullen face there; disappointment and vexation were written upon it, and there was no answering glance of sympathy from the downcast eyes. Lilac was an impulsive child, and affection for her friend made her forget everything else for the moment. She left her place, went up to Mrs Leigh, who was talking to the schoolmistress, and held one arm out straight in front of her.

Well, Lilac, said Mrs Leigh kindly, what is it?

Please, ma'am, said Lilac, dropping a curtsy, if they don't mind, I'd rather Agnetta Greenways was Queen.

Oh, that's quite out of the question, said Mrs Leigh decidedly; when the Queen's been once chosen it can't be altered. Why, I should have thought you would have been pleased.

Lilac hung her head, and went back to her place rather abashed. She was pleased, and she did not like Mrs Leigh to think she did not care. Her whole heart was full of delight at receiving such an honour, but at the same time it was hard for Agnetta, who had so set her mind on being Queen. If only she could be Queen too! That being

White Lilac

impossible, Lilac had done her best in offering to give it up, and it was disappointing to find that her friend, far from being grateful, was cross and sulky with her and quite out of temper. When the other children crowded round Lilac with pleased faces Agnetta held back, and had not one kind word to say, but refusing an advances flung herself away from her companions and rushed home full of wrath. Lilac looked after her wistfully; it hurt her to think that Agnetta could behave so. After all, she said to herself, I couldn't help them choosing me, and I did offer to give it up.

Everyone else was glad that she was Queen, and ready with a smile and a nod when they met her. If Agnetta had only been pleased too Lilac's happiness would have been perfect, but that was just the one thing wanting. However, even with this drawback there was a great deal of pleasure to look forward to, and when she went to the Rectory to have the white dress fitted on she was almost as excited as though it was really a royal robe.

It's a pity about the fringe, Lilac, said Miss Ellen as she pinned and arranged the long train; it's not nearly so becoming. Then seeing the excited face suddenly downcast she added: Never mind; I dare say the crown will partly hide it.

Her arrangements finished, she called her sister, and they both surveyed Lilac gravely, who, a little abashed by such business-like observation, stood before them shyly in her straight white gown, with the train fastened on her shoulders.

I think she'll do very nicely, said Miss Alice, when she gets the flowers on. They make all the difference. What will she wear?

Miss Ellen's opinion was decided on that point. It ought to be white lilac, and plenty of it, she said, nothing would suit the Queen so well. Then came a difficulty: there was none nearer than Cuddingham. Could it be got in time?

Lilac was doubtful, for Cuddingham was a long way off, but she promised to do her best, and Miss Ellen's last words to her were:

Bring moon daisies if you can't get it, but remember I should like white lilac much the best.

Lilac herself thought the moon daisies would be prettier, with their bright yellow middles; but Miss Ellen's word was law, and as she had set her heart on white lilac, some way of going to Cuddingham must be found since it was too far to walk. There were only two days now to the great event, and during them Lilac did her best to make her wants known everywhere. In vain, however. No one was going to or coming from that place; always the same disappointing answers:

Cuddingham! No, thank goodness; I was there last week. I don't want to see that hill again yet a while. Or, Well now, if I'd known yesterday I might a suited you. And so on.

Lilac began to despair. She thought of Orchards Farm, but she had not courage to ask any favour there while Agnetta was so vexed with her. Even Uncle Joshua, who had always helped her at need, had nothing to suggest now, and did not even seem to think it of much importance. He dropped in to see Mrs White on the evening before May Day, and with her usual faith in him Lilac at once began to place her difficulty before him. But for once he was not ready to listen, and she was obliged to wait impatiently while he carried on a long conversation with her mother. They had a great deal to talk of, and it was most uninteresting to Lilac, for it was all about things of the past in which she had had no share. She might have liked it at another time, but just now she was full of the present, and she became more and more impatient as Uncle Joshua went on. He had to call back the first celebration of May Day which he minded", and the smallest event connected with it; and when he had done Mrs White took up the tale, dwelling specially on Jem's musical talent, and how he had been the very soul of the

White Lilac

drum-and-fife band.

They're all at sixes and sevens now, to my thinking, she said. Jem, he kep' 'em together and made 'em do their best.

Aye, that's where it is, said the cobbler with an approving nod; that's what we've all on us got to do.

His eye rested as he spoke on Lilac's eager face, and seizing the opportunity of a pause she rushed in with what she had so much on her mind:

Oh, Uncle Joshua! to-morrow's the day, and I can't get no white lilac for Miss Ellen to make my garland with. What shall I do?

But Joshua was in a moralising mood, and though Lilac's question gave him another subject to discourse on, he was more bent on hearing himself talk than in getting over her difficulty. He raised one finger and began to speak slowly, and when Mrs White saw that, she paused with the kettle in her hand and stood quite still to listen. Joshua was going to say something good.

It don't matter a bit, he said, what you make your garland of. Flowers is all perishin' things and they'll be dead next day, and wear what you will, they won't make you into a real Queen. But there's things as will always make folks bow down when they see 'em, May Day or no May Day, and them's the things you ought to seek for, early and late till you find 'em. You take a lot of pains to get flowers to deck your outsides, but you don't care much for the plants I'm thinking of; you leave 'em to chance, and so sometimes they're choked out by the weeds. An' yet they're worth takin' trouble for, and if you once get 'em to take root and grow they're fit to crown the finest Queen as ever was; and they won't die either, but the more you use 'em the fresher and sweeter they'll be. There's Love now; you can't understand anyone, not the smallest child, without that. There's Truth; you can't do anything with folks unless they trust you. There's Obedience; you can't rule till you know how to serve. There's three plants for you, and there's a whole lot more, but that's enough for you to bear in mind, and I must be going along.

Joshua departed much satisfied with his eloquence, leaving Mrs White equally impressed.

Lor'! she exclaimed, there's a gifted man. It's every bit as good as being in church to hear him. And I hope, Lilac, as how you'll lay it to heart and mind it when you get to be a woman.

But Lilac did not feel in the least inclined to lay it to heart. She was vexed with Uncle Joshua, who had not been the least help in her perplexity; for once he had failed her, and she was glad he had gone away so that she could think over a plan for to-morrow. It was of no use evidently to reckon on white lilac any longer, the only thing to be done now was to get up very early the next morning and pick the best moon daisies she could find for Miss Ellen. This determination was so strong within her when she fell asleep, that she woke with a sudden start next morning as the daylight was just creeping through her lattice. Had she overslept herself? No, it was beautifully early, it must be an hour at least before her usual time. She dressed herself quickly and quietly, so as not to disturb her mother in the next room, and then pushing open her tiny window gave an anxious look at the weather. Would it be fine? At present a thin misty grey veil was spread over everything, but she could see the village below, which looked fast, fast asleep, with no smoke from its chimneys and nothing stirring. There was such a stillness everywhere that it seemed wrong to make a noise, as though you were in church. And the birds felt it too, for they twittered in a subdued manner, keeping back their full burst of song to greet someone who would come presently. Lilac knew who that was. She knew as well as the birds that very soon the sun would thrust away the misty veil and show his beaming face to the valley. It would be fine. It was May Day, and she was Queen!

She drew a deep breath of delight, went downstairs on tiptoe, found a basket and a knife, tied on her bonnet, and unlatched the door; but there she stopped short, checked on the threshold by a sight so surprising that for a

White Lilac

moment she could not move. For at her feet, on the doorstep, lying there purely white as though it had fallen from the clouds, was a great mass of white lilac. There were branches and branches of it, so that the air was filled with its gentle delicate scent, and it was so fresh that all its leaves were moist with dew. Someone had been up earlier even than herself. The question was who?

Uncle Joshua of course; he had not failed after all, though how even such a very clever man could have got to Cuddingham and back since last night was more than Lilac could tell. That did not matter. There it was, and what a fine lot of it! He must have brought away nigh a whole bush, she said to herself. Miss Ellen will be rare and pleased, surely. She gathered up the sweet-smelling boughs at last, and put them into one of her mother's washing-baskets. There was no need to pick moon daisies now, and as she swept and dusted the room and lit the fire she gave many looks of admiration at her treasure, and many grateful thoughts to Uncle Joshua. Mrs White also had no doubt that he had managed it somehow; and she was so moved by the fact of his kindness, and by Lilac being Queen, and by a hundred past memories, that her usual composure left her, and she threw her apron over her head and had a good cry.

There! she said when it was over, I can't think what makes me so silly. But Jem he would a been proud to have seen you he always liked the laylocks.

But now came the question as to how it was to be carried down the hill to the school room. Lilac could not lift the great basket, and it was at last found best to pile up the branches in her long white pinafore, which she held by the two corners. When all was ready she looked seriously across the fragrant burden, which reached up to her chin, and said:

You'll be sure and be up there in time, won't you, Mother, or you won't see me crowned?

No fear, said Mrs White as she held the gate open. Mind and walk steady or you'll drop some, and you can't pick it up if you do.

Lilac nodded. She was almost too excited to speak. If it felt like this to be Queen of the May, she wondered what it must be like to be a real Queen!

It was a glorious morning. The mist had gone, the sun had come, and all the birds were singing their best tunes to welcome him. To Lilac they sounded more than usually gay, as though they were telling each other all sorts of pleasant things. The sun is here it is May Day Lilac is Queen. All the trees too, as they bent in the breeze, seemed to talk together with busy murmurs and whisperings: they tossed their heads and threw up their hands as if in surprise at some news, and then bowed low and gracefully before her, for what they had heard was Lilac White is Queen!

Her heart danced so to listen to them that it was quite difficult to keep her feet to a measured step, but when she reached the turn of the hill something made her feel that she must look back. She turned slowly round. There was Mother waving her hand at the gate. When they next met it would be up in the woods, and Lilac would wear crown and garland. She could not wave her hand or even nod in return, but she made a sort of little curtsy and went on her way.

At the bottom of the hill she met Mrs Wishing, who, bent nearly double by a heavy bundle, was crawling up from the village.

Well, you look happy anyhow, Lilac White, she said mournfully. And you haven't forgotten to bring enough flowers with you either.

I can't stop, said Lilac, I've got to go and put these on Father first. It's so far for Mother to come.

White Lilac

She gave a movement of her chin towards the primrose wreath which Mrs White had added at the last moment to the heap of flowers.

Ah! well, sighed Mrs Wishing, in the midst of life we are in death. I haven't much heart for junketing myself, but I shall be up yonder this afternoon if I'm spared.

Lilac passed quickly on, nodding and smiling in return to the greetings which met her. At the door of the shop stood Mr Dimbleby, his face heavier than usual with importance, and a little farther on she saw her Uncle Greenways' wagon and team waiting in charge of Ben, who leant lazily against one of the horses. Mr Greenways always lent a wagon on May Day so that the very old people and small children might drive up the worst part of the hill. Certainly it was there in plenty of time, for it would not be wanted till the afternoon; but it is always well not to be hurried on such occasions, and many of the people had to walk from outlying hamlets.

Lilac laid her primroses on her father's grave, and turned back towards the school-house just as the clock struck twelve. There were now many other little figures hurrying in the same direction with businesslike step, and all carrying flowers. Primroses, daisies, buttercups, cowslips, and honeysuckle were to be seen, but there was nothing half so beautiful as the heap of white lilac. Agnetta saw it as she passed into the school room, and gave an astonished stare and a sniff of displeasure: she had only brought a basket of small daisies, and had taken no trouble about them, so that her offering was not noticed or praised at all. Then Lilac advanced, and dropping her little curtsy stood silently in front of Miss Ellen and Miss Alice holding out her pinafore to its widest extent. There were exclamations of admiration and surprise from everyone, and Agnetta stamped her foot with vexation to hear them.

It's *exquisite!* said Miss Ellen at last. Where did you get such a beautiful lot of it?

Please, ma'am, I don't know, said Lilac. I found it on the doorstep.

Agnetta's wrath grew higher every moment. No one paid her any attention, and here was her insignificant cousin Lilac the centre of everyone's interest. She overheard a whisper of Miss Alice's: She'll make far the loveliest Queen we've ever had.

What could it be they admired in Lilac? Agnetta stood with a pout on her lips, idle, while all round the busy work and chatter went on.

Now, Agnetta, said Miss Ellen, bustling up to her, there's plenty to do. Get me some twine and some wire, and if you're very careful you may help me with the Queen's sceptre.

It was a hateful office, but there was no help for it, and Agnetta had to humble herself in the Queen's service for the rest of the morning. To kneel on the floor, pick off small sprays from the bunches of lilac, and hand them up to Miss Ellen as she wove them into garland and sceptre. While she did it her heart was hot within her, and she felt that she hated her cousin. The work went on quickly but very silently inside the schoolroom. There was no time to talk, for the masses of flowers which covered table, benches, and floor had all to be changed into wreaths and garlands before one o'clock, for the Queen and her court. Outside it was not so quiet. An eager group had gathered there long ago, composed of the drum-and-fife band, which broke out now and then into fragments of tunes, the boy with the maypole on his shoulder, and bearers of sundry bright flags and banners. To these the time seemed endless, and they did their best to shorten it by jokes and laughter; it was only the close neighbourhood of the schoolmaster which prevented the boldest from climbing up to the high window and hanging on by his hands to see how matters were going on within. But at last the latch clicked, the door opened wide: there stood the smiling little white Queen with her gaily dressed court crowding at her back. There was a murmur of admiration, and the band, gazing open-mouthed, almost forgot to strike up *God save the Queen*. For there was something different about this Queen to any they had seen before. She was so delicately white, so like a flower herself, that

White Lilac

looking out from the blossoms which surrounded her she might have been the spirit of a lilac bush suddenly made visible. The white lilac covered her dress in delicate sprays, it bordered the edge of her long train, it twined up the tall sceptre in her hand, it was woven into the crown which was carried after her. At present the Queen's head was bare, for she would not be crowned till she reached her throne in the woods.

Then the procession began its march, band playing, banners fluttering bravely in the wind, through the village first, so that all those who could not get up the hill might come to their doors and windows to admire. Then leaving the highroad it came to the steep ascent, and here the wind blowing more freshly almost caught away the Queen's train from the grasp of her two little pages. The band, in spite of gallant struggles, became short of breath, so that the music was wild and uncertain; and the smaller courtiers straggled behind unable to keep up with the rest.

It made its way, however, notwithstanding these difficulties, and from the top of the hill where crowds of people had now gathered it was watched by eager and interested eyes. First it looked in the distance like a struggling piece of patchwork on the hillside, then it took shape and they could make out the maypole and the flags, then, nearer still, the sounds of the three tunes which the band played over and over again were wafted to their ears, and at last the small white figure of the Queen herself could plainly be distinguished from the rest. It did not take long after this to reach level ground, and as the procession moved along with recovered breath and dignity to the music of "God save the Queen", it was followed by admiring remarks from all sides:

See my Johnnie! Him in the pink cap. Bless his 'art, how fine he looks! Or There's Polly Ann with the wreath of daisies!

Well now, said Mrs Pinhorn, I will say Lilac looks as peart and neat as a little bit of waxworks.

She wants colour, to my thinking, said Mrs Greenways, to whom this was addressed.

The Greenways stood a little aloof from the general crowd, dressed with great elegance. Bella rather looked down on the whole affair. It's so mixed, she said; but we have to go, because Papa don't wish to offend Mr Leigh.

I call that a real pretty sight, said Joshua Snell, turning to his neighbour, who happened to be Peter Greenways. They've dressed her up very fitting in all them lilac blooms. But wherever did they get such a sight of 'em?

Peter had been forced into a shiny black suit of clothes, a stiff collar, and a bright blue necktie, that he might not disgrace the stylish appearance of his mother and sisters. In this attire he felt even less at his ease than usual, and his arms hung before him as helplessly as those of a stuffed figure. Perhaps it was owing to this state of discomfort that he made no other answer to Joshua's remark than a nervous grin.

I don't see the Widder White anywheres, continued Joshua, looking round; but there's such a throng one can't tell who's who.

Lilac, too, had been looking in vain for her mother amongst the groups of people she had passed through, and as she took her seat on the hawthorn-covered throne she gazed wistfully to right and left. No, Mother was not there. Plenty of well-known faces, but not the one she wanted most to see.

She *promised* to be in time, she said to herself, and now she'll miss the crowning. It was a dreadful pity, for Lilac could only be Queen once in her life, and it seemed to take away the best part of the pleasure for Mother not to be there. She had been looking forward to it for so long. What could have kept her away? The Queen's eyes filled with tears of disappointment, and through them the form of Peter Greenways seemed to loom unnaturally large, his face redder than ever above his blue neckcloth, his mouth and eyes wide open. Lilac checked her tears

White Lilac

and remembered her exalted position. She must not cry now; but directly the crowning and the dance were over she resolved to search for her mother, and if she were not there to go home and see what had prevented her coming.

This determination enabled her to bear her honours with becoming dignity, and to put aside her private anxiety for the time like other royal personages. She danced round the maypole with her court, and led the May-Day song as gaily as if her pleasure had been quite perfect. But it was not; for all the while she was wondering what could possibly have become of her mother.

At last, her public duties over, the Queen found herself at liberty. The crowd had dispersed now, and was broken up into little knots of people chatting together and waiting for the next excitement tea-time.

Through these Lilac passed with always the same question: Have you seen Mother? Sometimes in the distance she fancied she saw a shawl of a pattern she knew well, but having pursued it, it turned out to belong to someone quite different. She had just made up her mind to go home, when one of her companions ran up to her with an excited face:

Come along, she cried; they're just agoin' to start the races.

Lilac hesitated. I can't, she said; I've got to go and look after Mother.

Well, it'll be on your way, said the other; and you needn't stop no longer nor you like. Come along.

She seized Lilac's arm and they ran on together to the flat piece of ground on the edge of the wood, where the races were to take place. The steep side of the down descended abruptly from this, and Lilac knew that by taking that way, which was quite an easy one to her active feet, she could very quickly reach home. So she stayed to look first at one race and then at another, and they all proved so amusing that the more she saw the more she wanted to see, though she still said to herself: I'll go after this one. She was laughing at the struggling efforts of the boys in a sack race, when suddenly, amidst the noise of cheers and shouting which surrounded her, she heard her own name spoken in an urgent entreating voice: Lilac Lilac White!

Who is it wants me! she said, starting up and trying to force her way through the crowd. I'm here; what is it? The people stood back to let her pass.

It's Mrs Leigh wants you, said a woman. She's standing back yonder.

It was strange to see Mrs Leigh's beaming face look so grave and troubled, and it gave Lilac a sense of fear when she reached her.

Is Mother here, ma'am? was her first question. Does she want me, please?

Mrs Leigh did not answer quite at once, then she said very seriously:

Your mother is at home, Lilac. You must go with me at once. She is ill.

Self-reproach darted through Lilac's heart. Why had she put off going home? But she must do the best she could now, and she said at once:

Hadn't I best send someone for the doctor first, ma'am?

He is there, answered Mrs Leigh. He was sent for some time ago; Daniel Wishing went.

White Lilac

The next thing was to get back to Mother as quickly as possible, and Lilac turned without hesitation to the way she had meant to take straight down the side of the hill. But Mrs Leigh stopped aghast.

You're not going down there, surely? she said.

It's as nigh again as going round, ma'am, said Lilac eagerly; and it's not to say difficult if you do it sideways.

Mrs Leigh still hesitated. It was very steep; the smooth turf was slippery. There was not even a shrub or anything to cling to, and a slip would certainly end in an awkward tumble. At another time she would have turned from it with horror, but she looked at Lilac's upturned anxious face and was touched with pity.

After all, she said, grasping her umbrella courageously, if you can help me a little, perhaps it won't be so bad as it looks.

So they started, hand in hand, Lilac a little in front carefully leading the way; but she was soon sorry that they had not gone round by the road. This was a short distance for herself, but it proved a long one now that she had Mrs Leigh with her. A slip, a stop, a slide, another stop it was a very slow progress indeed. As they went jerking along the flowers fell off Lilac's dress one by one and left a white track behind her. She had taken off her crown and held it in her hand; its blossoms were drooping already, and its leaves folded up and limp. How short a time it was since they had been fresh and fair, and she had marched up the hill so bravely, full of delight. Now, poor little discrowned Queen, she was leaving her kingdom of mirth and laughter behind her with every step, and coming nearer to the shadowy valley where sadness waited. After many a sigh and gasp Mrs Leigh and her guide reached the bottom in safety. They were on comparatively level ground now, with gently sloping fields in front of them and the sharp shoulder of the hill rising at their back. There, within a stone's throw stood the Wishings' cottage, and a little farther on Lilac's own home. How quiet, how very still it all looked! Now and then there floated in the calm air a shout or a sudden burst of laughter from the distant merry-makers, but here, below, it was all utterly silent. The two little white cottages had no light in their windows, no smoke from their chimneys, no sign of life anywhere.

Mother's let the fire out, said Lilac.

Mrs Leigh came to a sudden standstill. Lilac, she said, my poor child

Lilac looked up frightened and bewildered. Mrs Leigh's eyes were full of tears, and she could hardly speak. She took Lilac's hand in hers and held it tightly. My poor child, she repeated.

Oh, please, ma'am, cried Lilac, let's be quick and go to Mother. What ails her?

Nothing ails her, said Mrs Leigh solemnly; nothing will ever ail her any more. You must be brave for her sake, and remember that she loves you still; but you will not hear her speak again on earth.

The revels on the hill broke up sooner than usual that night, and those who had to pass the cottage on their way home trod softly and hushed their children's laughter. For ill news travels fast, and before nightfall there was no one who did not know that the Widow White was dead.

And thus Lilac's May-Day reign held in its short space the greatest happiness and the greatest sorrow of her life. Joy and smiles and freshly-blooming flowers in the morning; sadness and tears and a withered crown at night.

Chapter Six. Alone.

The spirit of a man will sustain his infirmity, but a wounded spirit who can bear? *Proverbs.*

A few days after this Lilac sat on her little stool in her accustomed corner, listening in a dreamy way to the muffled voices of Mrs Pinhorn and Mrs Wishing. They spoke low, not because they did not wish her to hear, but because, having just come from her mother's funeral, they felt it befitted the occasion. As they talked they stitched busily at some black which they were helping her to make, only pausing now and then to glance round at her as though she were some strange animal, shake their heads, and sigh heavily. Lilac had not cried much since her mother's death, and was supposed by the neighbours to be taking it wonderful easy-like. For the twentieth time Mrs Wishing was entering slowly and fully into every detail connected with it of all the doctor had said of its having been caused by heart disease, of all she had said herself, of all Mr Leigh had said; and if she paused a moment Mrs Pinhorn at once asked another question. For it was Mrs Wishing, who, running in as usual to borrow something, had found Mrs White on May morning sitting peacefully in her chair, quite dead.

And it do strike so mournful, she repeated, to think of the child junketing up on the hill, and May Queen an' all, an' that poor soul an alone.

It's a thing one doesn't rightly understand, that is, said Mrs Pinhorn, why both Lilac's parents should have been took so sudden. She gave a sharp glance round the room I suppose, she added, the Greenways'll have the sticks. There's a goodish few, and well kep'. Mary White was always one for storing her things.

I never heard of no other kin, said Mrs Wishing.

Lilac's lucky to get a home like Orchards Farm. But there! Some is born lucky.

The conversation continued in the same strain until Mrs Wishing discovered that she must go home and get Dan'l's supper ready.

An' it's time I was starting too, added Mrs Pinhorn. I've got a goodish bit to walk.

They both looked hesitatingly at Lilac.

You'll come alonger me and sleep, won't you, dearie? said Mrs Wishing coaxingly. It's lonesome for you here.

But Lilac shook her head. I'd rather bide here, thank you, was all she said; and after trying many forms of persuasion the two women left her unwillingly and took their way.

Lilac stood at the open door and watched them out of sight, but she was not thinking of them at all, though she still seemed to hear Mrs Wishing's words: It's lonesome for you here. Her head felt strange and dizzy, almost as though she had been stunned, and it was stranger still to find that she could not cry although Mother was dead. She knew it very well, everyone had talked of it to her. Mr Leigh had spoken very kind, and Mrs Leigh had given her a black frock, and all the neighbours at the church that morning had groaned and cried and pitied her; but Lilac herself had hardly shed a tear, though she felt it was expected of her, and saw that people were surprised to see her so quiet. She tried every now and then to get it into her head, and to understand it, but she could not. It seemed to be someone else that folks spoke of, and not Mother. As she stood by the open door, each thing her eye rested on seemed to have something to do with her and to promise her return. There was the hill she had toiled up so often: surely she would come again with a tired footstep, but always a smile for Lilac. There was the little garden and the sweet-peas she had sown, just showing green above the earth: would she never see them bloom?

White Lilac

There on the window sill were her knitting-pins and a half-finished stocking: was it possible that Lilac would never hear them click again in her busy fingers? There, most familiar object of all, was the clothes line. Lilac could almost fancy she saw her mother's straight active figure, as she had done scores of times, stretching up her arms to fasten the clothes with wooden pegs, her skirt tucked up, her arms bare, her sunbonnet tilted over her eyes. No it was quite impossible to feel that she would really never come back; it seemed much more likely that by and by she would walk in at the door and sit down by the window in her high-backed Windsor chair, and take up the unfinished knitting. As Lilac was thinking thus, a figure did really appear at the top of the hill, a short square figure with a gaily trimmed hat on its head her cousin Agnetta.

For the first time in all her life Agnetta was feeling not superior to Lilac as usual, but shy of her. She did not know what to say to her nor even whether she should be welcome, for she was conscious of having been very ill-tempered lately. Now that Lilac was in trouble, cast down from her high position as Queen, she no longer felt angry with her, and would even have liked to make herself pleasant if she could. As she came near, however, and stood staring at her cousin, she felt that somehow there was a great difference in her, something which she could not understand. There was a look in Lilac's small white face which made it impossible to speak to her in the old patronising tone; it was as though she had been somewhere and seen something to which Agnetta was a stranger, and which could never be explained to her. It made her uncomfortable, and almost afraid to say anything; and yet, she remembered, Lilac was very low down in the world now there was less reason than ever to stand in awe of her. She was only poor little Lilac White, with nothing in the world she could call her own, an orphan, and dependent for a home on Agnetta's father. So after these reflections she took courage and spoke: Mamma said I was to tell you that she'll be up to-morrow morning to look at the furniture, and you must be ready in the afternoon to come down alonger Ben when he brings the cart.

Lilac nodded, and the two girls stood silently on the doorstep for a moment; then Agnetta spoke again:

I s'pose you're glad you're coming to live at the farm, ain't ye?

No, answered Lilac, I don't know as I be. I'd rather bide here.

Agnetta had recovered her courage with her voice. She stepped uninvited past Lilac into the room and cast a curious look round.

Lor'! she said, don't it look mournful! I should think you'd be glad to get away.

Lilac did not answer.

What's this? asked Agnetta, pouncing on the needlework which the two women had left on the table.

It's a frock for me, said Lilac. Mrs Leigh give it to me.

Agnetta held the skirt out at arm's length and looked at it critically.

Well! she exclaimed with some scorn in her voice, I should a thought you'd a had it made different now.

Different? said Lilac enquiringly.

Why, there's no reason you shouldn't have it cut more stylish, is there, now there's no one to mind?

No one to mind! Lilac looked at her cousin with dazed eyes for a moment, as if she hardly understood then she took the stuff out of her hand.

White Lilac

I'll never have 'em made different, she cried with a sudden flash in her eyes; I never, never will. And then to Agnetta's great surprise she suddenly burst into tears.

Agnetta stood staring at her, puzzled. She was sorry, only what had made Lilac cry just now when she had been quite calm hitherto?

Don't take on so, she ventured to say presently; and you'll spoil your black. It'll stain dreadful.

But Lilac took no more notice than if she had not been there, and soon, feeling that she could do nothing, Agnetta left her and took her way home. She had accomplished something by her visit, though she did not know it, for she had made Lilac feel now that it really was true. Mother would not come back. She was alone in the world. There was no one, as Agnetta had said, to mind.

She began to understand it now, and the clearer it was the harder it was to bear. So she bowed her head on the table, amongst the black stuff in spite of Agnetta's caution, and cried on. And presently another thing, which she had not realised till now, stood out plainly before her. She was to go away to-morrow and live at Orchards Farm. Orchards Farm, which she had always fancied the most beautiful place in the world, and beside which her own home had seemed poor and small! Now all that had changed, and the more she thought of it the more she felt that she did not want to leave the cottage. It had suddenly become dear and precious; for all the things in it, even the meanest and smallest, seemed full of her mother's voice and presence. Orchards Farm was a strange country now, with nothing in it that her mother had loved or that loved her, and to go there would be like going still farther from her. Raising her eyes she looked round at the familiar room, at her mother's chair, at her own little stool, at the plants in the window. They all seemed to say: Don't go, Lilac. It is better to stay here. Must she go? Then suddenly she caught sight of the lilac crown lying dusty and withered in a corner. It reminded her of a friend. I'll ask Uncle Joshua, she said to herself; I'll go early to-morrow morning and ask him. *He'll* know.

Joshua had a very decided opinion on the question placed before him next day: Could Lilac live alone at the cottage and take in the washing as her mother used to do?

I can reach the line quite easy if I stand on a stool, she said anxiously; and Mrs Wishing, she'd help me wring.

Bless you, my maid, he said, you're not old enough to make a living, or strong enough, or wise enough yet. The proper place for you is your Uncle Greenways' house, till such time as you come to be older.

Mother, she always said, 'Don't be beholden to no one. Stand on your own feet.' That's what she said ever so often, faltered Lilac.

The cobbler smiled as he looked at the slight little figure. Well, you must wait a bit. If Mother could speak to you now, she'd say as I do. And you won't be no farther from her at the farm; wherever and whenever you think of her and mind what she said, and how she liked you to act, that's her voice talking to you still. You listen and do as she bids, and that'll make her happier and you too.

Joshua set to work again with feverish haste as he finished. He did not like parting with Lilac, and it was difficult to say goodbye. She lingered, looking wistfully at him.

You'll come and see me down yonder, won't you, Uncle Joshua?

Why, surely, surely, replied Joshua hastily; and you'll come and see me. It ain't so far after all. Bless me! he added with a testy glance at the dusty pane in front of him, what ails the window this morning? It don't give no light whatever.

White Lilac

In a moment Lilac had fetched a duster and rubbed the little window bright and clear. It was a small office she had often performed for the cobbler.

It wasn't, not to say very dirty, she said; but you'll have to do it yourself next time, Uncle Joshua.

When she got back to the cottage, she felt a little comforted by the cobbler's words, although he had not fallen in with her plan. What could she do at once, she wondered, that would please her mother? She looked round the room. It had a forlorn appearance. The doorstep, trodden by so many feet lately, was muddy, there was dust on the furniture, and the floor had not been swept for days. Mother certainly would not like that, and Lilac felt she could not leave it so another minute. With new energy she seized broom, brushes, and pail and went to work, going carefully into all the corners, and doing everything just as she had been taught. Very soon it all looked like itself again, bright and orderly, and with a sigh of satisfaction she went upstairs to put herself straight before her aunt came.

When there another idea struck her, for the moment she looked at the glass she remembered how Mother had hated the fringe. Surely she could brush it back now that her hair had grown longer. No, brush as hard as she would it fell obstinately over her forehead again. But Lilac was not to be conquered. She scraped it back once more, and tied a piece of ribbon firmly round her head; then she nodded triumphantly at herself in the glass. It was ugly, but anyhow it was neat.

She had just finished this arrangement when a noise in the room below warned her of Mrs Greenways' approach, and running downstairs she found her seated breathless in the high-backed chair. One foot was stretched out appealingly in front of her, and she was so fatigued that at first she could only nod speechlessly at Lilac.

I'm fairly spent, she said at last, with that terr'ble hill. I can't wonder myself that your poor mother was taken so sudden with her heart, though she was always a spare figure.

Lilac said nothing; the old feeling came back to her that it was someone else and not Mother who was spoken of.

Mrs Greenways looked thoughtfully round the room; her eye rested on each piece of furniture in turn. They're good solid things, and well kept, she said. I will say for Mary White as she knew how to keep her things. We can do with a good many of 'em at the farm, she went on after a pause; but I don't want to be cluttered up with furniture, and the rest we must sell as it stands.

Lilac's heart sank. She could not bear to think of any of Mother's things being sold, but she was too much in awe of her aunt to say anything.

So I've come up this morning, pursued Mrs Greenways, producing an old envelope and a stumpy pencil; just to jot down what I want to keep. And when I've done here, and fetched my breath a little, I'll go upstairs and have a look round.

Mrs Greenways made her list, and then with a businesslike air tied pieces of tape on all the things she had chosen. Lilac saw with dismay that her own little stool and the high-backed chair were left out. It was almost like leaving two old friends behind.

Have you packed your clothes? asked Mrs Greenways.

No, Aunt, not yet, said Lilac.

Well, I shall have to send Ben up with the cart this afternoon for your box, so you may as well come alonger him. And mind this, Lilac. Don't you go bringin' any litter and rubbish with you. Jest your clothes and no more,

White Lilac

and your Bible and Prayer Book. And now I'll go upstairs.

Mrs Greenways went upstairs, followed meekly by Lilac. She watched passively while her aunt punched all the mattresses, placed a searching finger beneath every sheet and blanket, sat down in the chairs, and finally examined every article of Mrs White's wardrobe. 'Tain't any of it much good to me, she said, holding up a cotton gown to the light. They're all cut so antiquated, and she was never anything of a figure. You may as well keep 'em, Lilac, and they'll come in for you later.

It made Lilac's heart ache sorely to see her mother's clothes in Mrs Greenways' hands turned about and talked over. There was one gown in particular, with a blue spot. Mrs White had worn it on that last May morning when she had stood at the gate, and it seemed almost a part of her. When her aunt dropped it carelessly on the ground after her last remark, Lilac picked it up and held it closely to her.

And her Sunday bonnet now, continued Mrs Greenways discontentedly. All the ribbons is fresh and it's a good straw, but I don't suppose I shall look anything but a scarecrow in it.

She perched it on her head as she spoke, and turned about before the glass.

'Tain't so bad, she murmured, with a glance at Lilac for approval. There was no answer; for to her great surprise Mrs Greenways found that her niece had hidden her face in the blue cotton gown she held to her breast, and was sobbing quietly.

Mrs Greenways was a kind-hearted woman in spite of her coarse nature. She could not exactly see what had made Lilac cry just now, but she went up to her and spoke soothingly.

There, there, she said, it's natural to take on, but you'll be better soon, when you get down to the farm alonger Agnetta. You must think of all you've got to be thankful for. And now I should relish a cup o' tea, for I started away early; so we'll go down and you'll get it for me, I dessay. I brought a little in my pocket in case you should be out of it. I shouldn't wonder if Bella was able to give this a bit of style, taking off the bonnet. She's wonderful clever with her fingers.

Mrs Greenways drank her tea, made Lilac take some and eat some bread and butter, which she wished to refuse but dared not.

Now you feel better, don't you? she said good-naturedly. And before I start off home, Lilac, I've got a word to say, and that is that I hope you're proper and thankful for all your uncle's going to do for you.

Yes, Aunt, said Lilac.

If it wasn't for him, you know, there'd only be the house for you to go to. Just think o' that! What a disgrace it 'ud be! It's a great expense to have an extry mouth to feed and a growing girl to clothe in these bad times, but we must put up with it.

I can work, Aunt, said Lilac. I can do lots of things.

Well, I hope you'll do what you can, replied Mrs Greenways. Because, as you haven't a penny of your own, you ought to do summat in return for your uncle's charity. That's only fair and right, isn't it?

Her mother's words came into Lilac's mind: Don't be beholden to no one.

I don't mind work, Aunt, she repeated more boldly. I'd rather work. Mother, she always taught me to.

White Lilac

Well, that's a good thing, said Mrs Greenways. Because, now you're left so desolate, you've got nothing to look to but your own hands and feet. But as to being any help you're small and young, you see, and you can't be anything but a burden to us for years to come.

A burden! That was a new idea to Lilac.

And so, finished Mrs Greenways, rising, I hope as how you'll be a good gal, and grateful, and always remember that if it wasn't for us you'd be on the parish, instead of at Orchards Farm.

She made her way out of the door, and stopped at the garden gate to call back over her shoulder:

Mind and bring no rubbish along with you. Nothing but clothes.

Lilac's tears dropped fast into the painted deal box as she packed her small stock of clothes. But she felt that she must not wait to cry; she must be ready by the time Ben came, and her aunt's visit had been so long that it was already late. When she had finished she went downstairs to take a last look round. There stood all the well-known pieces of furniture, dumb, yet full of speech; they had seen and heard so much that was dear to her, that it seemed cruel to leave them to strangers. Above all she looked wistfully at a small twisted cactus in a pot standing on the window ledge. Mrs White had been fond of it, and had given it much care and attention. Might she venture to take it with her? How pleased Mother had been, she remembered, when the cactus had once rewarded her by producing two bright-red blossoms. That was long ago, and it had never done anything so brilliant again. Content with its one effort it had since remained unadorned, yet as it stood there, with its fat green leaves and little bunches of prickles, it had the air of saying to itself, I have done it once, and if I liked I could do it a second time. Even now as she bent tenderly over it Lilac thought she could make out the faint beginning of a bud.

I do wish I could take it, she said to herself. If it was only in bloom maybe they'd like it.

But the cactus was very far from blooming, and perhaps had no intention of doing so; in its present condition it would certainly be considered rubbish at Orchards Farm.

Lilac turned from it with a sigh, and glancing through the window was startled to see that the cart with Ben sitting in it was already at the gate. Ben looked as though he might have been waiting there for some hours, and was content to wait for any length of time. She ran out in alarm.

Oh, Ben! she cried, I never heard you. Have you been here long?

Not I, said Ben; on'y just come. Missus she give orders as how I was to fetch down some cheers alonger you, so as to lighten the next load a bit.

By the time he had slowly stacked the chairs together, and disposed them round Lilac's box in the cart, which cost him much painful thought, there was not much room left.

Now then, missie, he said at length, that's the lot, ain't it?

Where am I to sit, Ben? asked Lilac doubtfully. Ben took off his hat to scratch his head. He had a perfectly round, foolish face, with short dust-coloured whiskers.

That's so, he said. I clean forgot you was to go too.

A corner was at last found amongst the chairs, and Ben having hoisted himself on to the shaft they started slowly on their way. Lilac kept her eyes fixed on the cottage until a turn of the road hid it from her sight. It was just there

White Lilac

she had turned to look at Mother on May Day. What a long, long time ago, and what a different Lilac she felt now! Grave and old, with all manner of cares and troubles waiting for her, and no one to mind if she were glad or sorry. No one to want her much or to be pleased at her coming. A burden instead of a blessing. She clung to the hope that Agnetta at least would not think her so, but would welcome her to her new home and be kind to her; but she was the only one of whom she thought without shrinking. Her aunt and uncle, Bella and Peter, above all the last, were people to be afraid of.

Here's the young master, said Ben, suddenly turning his face round to look at her. He be coming up to fetch the rest of the sticks.

Lilac peeped out through the various legs of chairs which surrounded her; towards her, crawling slowly up the hill, came a wagon drawn by three iron-grey horses, and by their side a broad-shouldered, lumbering figure. It was her Cousin Peter. Of course it was Peter, she thought impatiently, turning her head away. No one else would walk up the hill instead of riding in the empty wagon. The descent now becoming easier Ben whipped up his horse, and they soon jolted past Peter and his team.

There's been a sight o' deaths lately in the village, he resumed cheerfully, having once broken the silence. I dunno as I can ever call to mind so many. The bell's forever agoin'. It's downright mournful.

He was kindly disposed towards Lilac, and having hit upon this lucky means of entertaining her he dwelt on it for the rest of the way, fortunately requiring no answering remarks. It seemed long before they reached the farm, and Lilac was cramped and tired in her uneasy position when they had at last driven in at the yard gate. There was no one to be seen; but presently Molly, the servant girl, having spied the arrival from the back kitchen, came and stood at the door. When she discovered Lilac almost hidden by the chairs, she hastened out and held up a broad red hand to help her down from the cart.

You've brought yer house on yer back like a hoddy-dod, she said with a grin.

Lilac clambered down with difficulty, and stood by the side of the cart uncertain where to go. A forlorn little figure in her straight black frock, clasping her mother's large old cotton umbrella. She wished she could see Agnetta, but she did not appear. Soon her aunt and Bella came into the yard, but their attention was immediately fixed on the chairs, which Ben had now unloaded and placed in a long row by Lilac's side. Where were they to go? asked Molly. In the living-room, Mrs Greenways thought, where they were short of chairs. In the bedrooms, said Bella contemptuously. Common-looking things like them. We could do with 'em in the kitchen, added Molly.

The dispute continued for some time, but in the end Bella carried the day, and Mrs Greenways found time to notice the newcomer.

Well, here you are, Lilac, she said. Come along in, and Agnetta shall show where you've got to sleep.

Agnetta led the way up the steep stairs to the top of the house. She had rather a condescending manner as she threw open the door of a small attic in the roof.

This is it, she said; and Mamma says you've got to keep it clean yerself.

I'd rather, said Lilac hastily. I've always been used to.

She looked round the room. It was very like her old one at the cottage, and its sloping ceiling and bare white walls seemed familiar and homelike; it was a comfort, too, to see that its tiny window looked towards the hills. As she observed all this she took off her bonnet, and was immediately startled by a loud laugh from Agnetta.

White Lilac

Well! she exclaimed, You have made a pretty guy of yourself.

Lilac put her hand quickly up to her head.

Oh, I forgot my hair, she said.

Whatever made you do it? asked Agnetta, planting herself full in front of her cousin and staring at her.

It's neater, said Lilac, avoiding the hard gaze. I shall wear it so till it gets longer. I'm not agoin' to have a fringe no more.

Well! repeated Agnetta, lost in astonishment; then she added:

You do look comical! Just like a general servant. If I was you I'd wear a cap!

With this parting thrust she clattered downstairs giggling. So this was Lilac's welcome. She went to the window, leant her arms on the broad sill, and looked forlornly up at the hill. There was not a single person who wanted her here, or who had taken the trouble to say a kind word. How could she bear to live here always?

Li-lack! shrieked a voice up the stairs, you're to come to tea.

Through the meal that followed Lilac sat shyly silent, feeling that every morsel choked her, and listening to the clatter of voices and teacups round her but hardly hearing any words. The farmer had noticed her presence by a nod, and then resumed his newspaper. He meant to do his duty by Mary's girl until she was old enough to go to service, but no one could expect him to be glad of her arrival. Another useless member of the family to support, where there were already too many. Peter was not there at first, but when the meal was nearly over Lilac heard the wagon roll heavily into the yard, and soon afterwards its master came almost as heavily into the room and took his place at the table. When there he eat largely and silently, taking huge draughts of tea out of a great mug. This was one of his many vulgarities, which Bella deplored but could not alter, for he required so much tea that a cup was a ridiculous and useless thing to him, and had to be filled so often that it gave a great deal of trouble in this therefore he was allowed to have his way.

When Lilac got into her attic that night she found that her deal box had been carried up and placed in one corner, and as she began to undress in the half-light she caught sight of something else which certainly had not been there before. Something standing in the window twisted and prickly, but to her most pleasant to look upon. Could it really be the cactus? She went up to it, half afraid to find that she was mistaken. No, it was not fancy, the cactus was there, and Lilac was so pleased to see its ugly friendly face that tears came into her eyes. She had found a little bit of kindness at last at Orchards Farm, and it no longer felt quite so cold and strange. Peter no doubt had brought the plant down from the cottage, but who had told him to do it? Her aunt, or Agnetta, or perhaps after all it was Uncle Joshua as usual.

Whoever it was Lilac felt very grateful, and went to sleep comforted with the thought that there was something in the room which had lived her old life and known her mother's care, though it was only a cactus plant.

Chapter Seven. Orchards Farm.

For a crowd is not company, and faces are but a gallery of pictures, and talk but a tinkling cymbal where there is no love. *Bacon.*

I like this one best, said Lilac.

White Lilac

She was looking in at the shed where Ben was milking the cows at Orchards Farm.

Inside it was dusky and cool. There was a sweet smell of hay and new milk, and it was very quiet, the silence only disturbed when an impatient cow stamped her foot or swished her tail at the flies, and was reproved by Ben's deep-toned 'Woa then, stand still'. But outside it was very different, for the afternoon sun was still hot and dazzling, and all the farmyard creatures were conversing cheerfully together in many keys and voices. A tall white cock had perched himself tiptoe on a gate, crowing in a shrilly triumphant manner, the ducks were quacking in a sociable chorus, and Chummy, the great black sow, lying stretched on her side in the sun, kept up an undertone of deeply comfortable grunts.

Lilac leant against the doorpost, now looking in at Ben and his cows, and now at the sunshiny strawyard. She felt tired and languid, as she very often did at the end of the day, although the work at Orchards Farm was no harder than she had always been used to at home. There, however, it had been done in peace and quietness, here all was hurry and confusion. It was a new and distracting thing to live in the midst of wrangling disputes, to be called here, shouted after there, to do bits of everyone's business, and to be scolded for leaving undone what she had never been told to do. Altogether a heavy change from her old peaceful life, and she could not settle her mind to it with any comfort. 'Tain't the work, it's the worry I mind,' she said once to Agnetta; but Agnetta only stared and laughed. There was no consolation at all to be found in her, and all Lilac's hopes concerning her were disappointed as time went on. She was the same and Orchards Farm was the same as they had been in the old days when Lilac had worshipped them from a distance; but somehow, seen quite near this glory vanished, and though the stylish Sunday frocks and bangles remained, they were worth nothing compared to a little sympathy and kindness. Alas! these were not to be had. Lilac must stand on her own feet now, as her mother had told her: everyone was too full of their own troubles and interests and enjoyments to have any thought for her. What could she need beyond a roof over her head, food to eat, and clothes to wear? Mrs Greenways and all the neighbours thought her a lucky child, and told her so very often; but Lilac did not feel lucky, she felt sad and very lonely. After one or two attempts to talk to Agnetta, she resolved, however, to keep her troubles to herself, for Agnetta did not understand. Who was there now to understand? None in the wide world but Uncle Joshua, and from him she felt as far distant as though he were in another country. She became in this way, as time went on, more silent, graver, and more what her cousins called old-fashioned; and though at heart she was far more childlike than they, she went about her work with serious application like one of twice her years. Mrs Greenways did not disapprove of this, and though she lost no occasion of impressing upon Lilac her smallness and uselessness, she soon began to find her valuable in the house: it was a new thing to have someone there who was steady and thorough in her work, and might be depended on to do it without constant reproof. She was satisfied, too, that Lilac had quite got over her grief, and did not seem to miss her mother so much as might have been expected. It would be troublesome to see the child fret and pine, and as no sign of this appeared she concluded it was not there. Mrs Greenways was accustomed to the sort of sorrow which shows itself in violent tears and complaints, and she would have been surprised if she could have known how Lilac's lonely little heart ached sometimes for the sound of her mother's voice or the sight of her face; how at night, when she was shut safely into her attic, she would stretch out her arms towards the cottage on the hill, and long vainly for the days to come back which she had not loved half well enough while they were passing. But no one knew this, and amidst the turmoil and bustle of the day no one guessed how lonely she was or thought of her much in any way. She was only little Lilac White, an orphan who had been fortunate enough to get a good home. So she lived her own life, solitary, although surrounded by people; and while she worked her mind was full of her mother's memory sometimes she even seemed to hear her words again, and to see her smile of pleasure when she had done anything particularly well. She was careful, therefore, not to relax her efforts in the least, and though she got no praise for the thoroughness of her work, it was a little bit of comfort at the end of the day to think that she had pleased Mother.

It began soon to be a pleasure, too, when work was finished, to go out amongst the creatures in the farmyard. Here she forgot her troubles and her loneliness for a little while, and made many satisfactory friendships in which there were no disappointments. True, there was plenty of noise and bustle here as well as indoors, and family quarrels were not wanting amongst the poultry; but unlike the sharp speeches of Bella and Agnetta they left no bad feeling

White Lilac

behind, and were soon settled by a few pecks and flaps. Lilac was sure of a welcome when she appeared at the gate to distribute the small offerings she had collected for her various friends during the day; bits of bread, sugar, or crusts nothing came amiss, and even the great lazy Chummy would waddle slowly across to her from the other end of the yard. By degrees Lilac began to look forward to the end of the day, when she should meet these friends, and found great comfort in the thought that they expected her and looked out for her coming. Especially she liked to be present at milking-time, and as often as she possibly could she stole out of the house at this hour to spend a few quiet moments with Ben and his cows.

On this particular afternoon she saw that there was one among them she had not noticed before a little cream-coloured Alderney, with slender black legs and dark eyes.

I like that one best of all, she said, pointing to it.

Ben's voice sounded hollow as he answered, and seemed to come out of the middle of the cow, for his head was pressed firmly against her side.

Ah, she's a sort of a little fancy coo, she is, he said; she belongs to the young master. He thinks a lot of her. 'We'll call this one None-so-pretty,' says he, when he brung her home.

Why does it belong to him, asked Lilac, more than the other cows?

Well, it were like this 'ere, said Ben, who was fond of company and always willing to talk. This is how it wur. None-so-pretty she caught cold when she'd bin here a couple of weeks, and the master he sent for coo-doctor. And coo-doctor come and says: 'She's in a pretty plight,' says he; 'information of the lungs she's got, and you'll never get her through it. A little dillicut scrap of a animal like that,' he says; 'she ain't not to say fit for this part of the country! An' so he goes away, and the coo gets worse, so as it's a misery to see her.

Ben stopped so long in his story to quiet None-so-pretty, who wanted to kick over the pail, that Lilac had to put another question.

How did she get well?

It wur along of the young master, answered Ben, as sat up with her a week o' nights, and poured her drink down her throat, and poletissed her chest, and cockered her up like as if she'd bin a human Christian. And he brung her through. Like a skilliton she wur at fust, but she picked up after a bit and got saucy again. An' ever sin that she'll foller him and rub her head agin' him, and come to his whistle like a dog. An' so the old master, he says: 'The little cow's yer own now, Peter, to do as you like with,' he says; 'no one else'd a had the patience to bring her through. An' if you'll take my advice you'll sell her, for she'll never be much good to us.'

But Peter wouldn't sell her, I suppose? asked Lilac eagerly.

No fear, replied Ben's muffled voice; he's martal fond of None-so-pretty.

Lilac looked with great interest at the little cow. An odd pair of friends she and Peter and as unlike as they could possibly be, for None-so-pretty was as graceful and slender in her proportions as he was clumsy and awkward-limbed. It was a good thing that there was someone to admire and like Peter, even if it were only a cow; for Lilac had not been a month at the farm without beginning to feel a little pity for him. He was uncouth and stupid, to be sure, but it was hard, she thought, that he should be so incessantly worried and jeered at. From the moment he entered the house to the moment he left it, there was something wrong in what he said or did. If he sat down on the settle and wearily stretched out his long legs, someone was sure to tumble over them: Peter, how stupid you are! If he opened his mouth to speak he said something laughable, and if to eat, there was something

White Lilac

vulgar in his manners which called down a sharp reproof from Bella, who considered herself a model of refinement and good taste. He took all this in unmoved silence, and seldom said a word except to talk to his father on farming matters; but Lilac, looking on from her quiet corner, often felt sorry for him, as she would have done to see any large, patient animal ill-treated and unable to complain.

Anyhow, she said to herself as she stood with her eyes fixed on None-so-pretty after Ben had done his story, if he is common he's kind.

Her reflections were disturbed by Ben's voice making another remark, which came from the side of a large red cow named Cherry:

There's not a better lot of coos, nor richer milk than what they give, this side Lenham. Lilac made no answer.

An' if so be as the dairy wur properly worked they'd most pay the rent of this 'ere farm, with the poultry thrown in.

Lilac glanced at the various feathered families outside; they were supposed to be Bella's charge, she knew, but she generally gave them over to Agnetta, who looked after them when she was inclined, and often forgot to search for the eggs altogether.

They wants care, continued Ben, as well as most things. I don't name no names, but the young broods had ought to be better looked after in the spring. And they're worth it. There's ducks now chancy things is early ducks, but they pay well. Git 'em hatched out early. Feed 'em often. Keep 'em warm and dry at fust. Let 'em go into the water at the right time. Kill 'em and send 'em up to Lunnon, and there you are a good profit. Why, you'll git 15 shillings the couple for ducklings in March! That's not a price to sneeze at, that isn't. I name no names, he repeated mysteriously, but them as don't choose to take the pains can't expect the profit.

At supper that night Lilac remembered this conversation with Ben, and examined Peter's countenance curiously as he sat opposite to her with his whole being apparently engrossed by the meal. She could not, however, discover any kind or pleasant expression upon it. If it were there at all, it was unable to struggle through the thick dull mask spread over it. Bella meanwhile had news to tell. She had heard at Dimpleby's that afternoon that there was to be a grand fête in Lenham next week. Fireworks and a balloon, and perhaps dancing and a band. Charlotte Smith said it would be splendid, and she was going to have a new hat on purpose.

Well, I haven't got no money to throw away on new hats and suchlike, said Mrs Greenways, but I s'pose you and Agnetta'll want to go too.

How'll we get over there? asked Bella, looking fixedly at Peter, who did not raise his eyes from his plate. Mrs Greenways turned her glance in the same direction, and said presently:

Well, perhaps Peter he could drive you over in the spring cart.

Hay harvest, muttered Peter, deep down in his mug; couldn't spare time.

Oh, bother, said Bella. Then we must do with Ben.

Couldn't spare him neither, was Peter's answer. Heavy crop. Want all the hands we can get.

Bella pouted and Agnetta looked on the edge of tears. Mrs Greenways, anxious to settle matters comfortably, made another suggestion.

White Lilac

Well, you must just drive yourselves then, Bella. The white horse is quiet. I've drove him often.

Couldn't spare the horse neither, said Peter, nor yet the cart, and having finished both his meal and the subject he got up and went out of the room.

The farmer, roused by the sound of the dispute from a nap in the window seat, now enquired what was going on, and was told of the difficulty.

What's to prevent 'em walking? he asked; it's only five miles. If they're too proud to walk they'd better stop at home, and then he too left the room.

You don't catch *me* walking! exclaimed Bella; if I can't drive I shan't go at all. Getting all hot and dusty, and Charlotte Smith driving past us on the road with her head held up ever so high.

No more shan't I, said Agnetta, with a toss of her head.

Well, there, we'll see if we can't manage somehow, said Mrs Greenways coaxingly. If the weather's good for the hay harvest your father'll be in a good temper, and we'll see what we can do. Lilac! she added, turning sharply to her niece, Molly's left out some bits of washing in the orchard, jest you run and fetch 'em in.

Lilac picked up her sunbonnet and went out, glancing at Agnetta to see if she were coming too, but she did not move. It was a cool, still evening after a very hot day, and all the flowers in the garden were holding up their drooping heads again, and giving out their sweetest scent as if in thankfulness for the change. There were a great many in bloom now, for it was June, more than a whole month since that happy, miserable day when Lilac had been Queen, and as she passed Peter's own little bit of ground she stopped to look admiringly at them. They seemed to grow here better than in other places with a willing luxuriance as though in return for the affection and care which was evidently spent on them. Pansies, columbines, white-fringed pinks, and sweet-peas all mixed up together, and yet keeping a certain order and not allowed to intrude upon each other. Lilac passed on through a little gate which led into the kitchen garden, and as she did so became aware that the owner of the flowers was quite near. She paused and considered within herself as to whether she should speak to him. He was sitting on the stump of a cherry tree, which had been cut down to a convenient height from the ground; on this was placed a square piece of turf, so that it formed a cushion, and was evidently a customary seat. Near him was a row of beehives, under a slanting thatch, and their busy inhabitants, returning in numbers from their day's labour, hummed and buzzed around him, much to the annoyance of Sober, the old sheep dog, who lay stretched at his feet. Tib, the ugly cat, had taken up a discreet position at a little distance from the hives, and sat very wide awake, with the only eye she possessed on the alert for any stray game that might pass that way.

Neither Peter nor his companions saw Lilac; they all appeared absorbed in their own reflections, and the former had fixed his gaze vacantly on the copse beyond the orchard. A little while ago she would have passed quickly on without a moment's hesitation, but now she felt a sort of sympathy with Peter. She was lonely, and he was lonely; besides, he had been kind to None—so—pretty. So presently she made a little rustle, which roused Sober from his slumbers. He raised his head, and finding that it was a friend wagged his bushy tail and resumed his former position; but this roused Peter too, and he slowly turned his eyes upon Lilac and stared silently. Knowing that it would be useless to wait for him to speak, she said timidly:

How pretty your pinks grow!

Peter got up from his seat and looked seriously over the railing at the pinks.

They're well enough, he said; but the slugs and snails torment 'em so.

White Lilac

I think they're as pretty as can be, said Lilac; and that sweet you can smell 'em ever so far. We had some up yonder, she added, with a nod towards the hills, but they never had such blooms as yours.

Maybe you'd like a posy, said Peter, suddenly blurting out the words with a great effort.

Receiving a delighted answer in the affirmative he fumbled for some time in his pocket, and having at last produced a large clasp knife bent over his flower bed.

The conversation having got on so far, Lilac felt encouraged to continue it, and looked round her for a subject.

This is a nice, pretty corner to sit in, she said; but don't the bees terrify you?

Peter straightened himself up with the flowers he had cut in one hand, and stared in surprise.

The bees! he repeated.

He strode up to the hives, took up a handful of bees and let them crawl about him, which they did without any sign of anger.

Why ever don't they sting yer? asked Lilac, shrinking away.

They know I like 'em, answered Peter, returning to his flowers. They know a lot, bees do.

I s'pose they're used to see you sitting here? said Lilac.

Peter nodded. They're rare good comp'ny too, he said, when you can follow their carryings on, and know what they're up to.

Lilac watched him thoughtfully as his large hand moved carefully amongst the flowers, cutting the best blossoms and adding them to the nosegay, which now began to take the shape of a large fan.

While he had been talking of the bees his face had lost its dullness; he had not looked stupid at all, and scarcely ugly. She would try and make him speak again.

The blossoms is over now, she remarked, looking at the trees in the orchard; but there's been a rare sight of 'em this year.

There has so, answered Peter. It'll be a fine season for the fruit if so be as we get sun to ripen it. The birds is the worst, he went on. I've seen them old jaypies come out of the woods yonder as thick as thieves into the orchard. I don't seem to care about shootin' 'em, and scarecrows is no good.

What a long sentence for Peter!

Do they now? said Lilac sympathisingly. An' I s'pose, stroking Tib on the head, they don't mind Tib neither?

Not they, said Peter, with something approaching a chuckle. They're altogether too many for *her*.

She's not a *pretty* cat, said Lilac doubtfully.

White Lilac

Well, n–no, said Peter, turning round to look at Tib with some regret in his tone. She ain't not to say exactly pretty, but she's a rare one for rats. Ain't ye, Tib?

As if in reply Tib rose, fixed her front claws in the ground, and stretched her long lean body. She was not pretty, the most favourable judge could not have called her so. Her coat was harsh and wiry, her head small and mean, with ears torn and scarred in many battles. Her one eye, fiercely green, seemed to glare in an unnaturally piercing manner, but this was only because she was always on the lookout for her enemies the rats. To complete her forlorn appearance she had only half a tail, and it was from this loss that her friendship with Peter dated, for he had rescued her from a trap.

He seemed now to feel that her character needed defence, for he went on after a pause:

She'll sit an' watch for 'em to come out of the ricks by the hour, without ever tasting food. Better nor any tarrier she is at it.

Ben says the rats is awful bad, said Lilac. They're that bold they'll steal the eggs, and scare off the hens when they're setting.

They do that, replied Peter, shaking his head. The poultry wants seeing to badly; but Bella she don't seem to take to it, nor yet Agnetta, and our hands is full outside.

I like the chickens and ducks and things, said Lilac. I wish Aunt'd let me take 'em in hand.

Peter reared himself up from his bent position, and holding the big nosegay in one hand looked gravely down at his cousin.

It was a good long distance from his height to Lilac, and she seemed wonderfully small and slender and delicately coloured as she stood there in her straight black frock and long pinafore. She had taken off her sun bonnet, so that her little white face with all the hair fastened back from it was plainly to be seen. It struck Peter as strange that such a small creature should talk of taking any more work in hand besides what she had to do already.

You hadn't ought to do hard work, he said at length; you haven't got the strength.

I don't mind the work, said Lilac, drawing up her little figure. I'm stronger nor what I look. 'Taint the work as I mind. She stopped, and her eyes filled suddenly with tears.

Peter saw them with the greatest alarm. Somehow with his usual stupidity he had made his cousin cry. All he could do now was to take himself away as quickly as possible. He went up to Sober and touched him gently with his foot.

Come along, old chap, he said. We've got to look after the lambs yonder.

Without another word or a glance at Lilac he rolled away through the orchard with the dog at his heels, his great shoulders plunging along through the trees, and Lilac's gay bunch of flowers swinging in one hand. He had quite forgotten to give it to her.

She looked after him in surprise, with the tears still in her eyes. Then a smile came.

He's a funny one surely, she said to herself. Why ever did he make off like that?

There was no one to answer except Tib, who had jumped up into a tree and looked down at her with the most complete indifference.

Anyway, he means to be kind, concluded Lilac, and it's a shame to flout him as they do, so it is.

Chapter Eight. Only a Child!

Who is the honest man?
He who doth still and strongly good pursue,
To God, his neighbour and himself most true,
Whom neither force nor fawning can
Unpin or wrench from giving all his due.
G. Herbert.

Joshua Snell had by no means forgotten his little friend Lilac. There were indeed many occasions in his solitary life when he missed her a great deal, and felt that his days were duller. For on her way to and from school she had been used to pay him frequent visits, if only for a few moments at a time, dust his room, clean the murky little window, and bring him a bunch of flowers or a dish of gossip.

In this way she was a link between him and the small world of Danecross down below; and in spite of his literary pursuits Joshua by no means despised news of his neighbour's affairs, though he often received it with a look of indifference. Besides this, her visits gave him an opportunity for talking, which was a great pleasure to him, and one in which he was seldom able to indulge, except on Saturdays when he travelled down to the bar of the Three Bells for an hour's conversation. He was also fond of Lilac for her own sake, and anxious to know if she were comfortable and happy in her new home.

He soon began, therefore, to look out eagerly for her as he sat at work; but no little figure appeared, and he said to himself, I shall see her o' Sunday at church. But this expectation was also disappointed, and he learned from Bella Greenways that Lilac and Agnetta were to go in the evenings, it was more convenient. Joshua could not do that; it had been his settled habit for years to stay at home on Sunday evening, and it was impossible to alter it. So it came to pass that a whole month went by and he had not seen her once. Then he said to himself, If so be as they won't let her come to me, I reckon I must go and see her. And he locked up his cottage one evening and set out for the farm. Joshua was a welcome guest everywhere, in spite of his poverty and lowly station; even at the Greenways', who held their heads so high, and did not "mix", as Bella called it, with the poor people. This was partly because of his learning, which in itself gave him a position apart, and also because he had a certain dignity of character which comes of self-respect and simplicity wherever they are found. Mrs Greenways was indeed a little afraid of him, and as anxious to make the best of herself in his presence as she was in that of her rector and landlord, Mr Leigh.

Why, you're quite a stranger, Mr Snell, she said when he appeared on this occasion. Now sit down, do, and rest yourself, and have a glass of something or a cup of tea.

Joshua being comfortably settled with a mug of cider at his elbow she continued:

Greenways is over at Lenham, and Peter's out on the farm somewheres, but I expect they'll be in soon.

The cobbler waited for some mention of Lilac, but as none came he proceeded to make polite enquiries about other matters, such as the crops and the live stock, and the chances of good weather for the hay. He would not ask for her yet, he thought, because it might look as though he had no other reason for coming.

White Lilac

And how did you do with your ducks this season, Mrs Greenways, ma'am? he said.

Why, badly, replied Mrs Greenways in a mortified tone; I never knew such onlucky broods. A cow got into the orchard and trampled down one. Fifteen as likely ducklings as you'd wish to see. And the rats scared off a hen just as she'd hatched out; and we lost a whole lot more with the cramp.

H'm, h'm, h'm, said the cobbler sympathisingly, that was bad, that was. And you ought to do well with your poultry in a fine place like this too.

Well, we don't, said Mrs Greenways, rather shortly; and that's all about it.

They want a lot of care, poultry does, said Joshua reflectively; a lot of care. I know a little what belongs to the work of a farm. Years afore I came to these parts I used to live on one.

Then p'r'aps you know what a heart-breaking, back-breaking, wearing-out life it is, burst out poor Mrs Greenways. All plague an' no profit, that's what it is. It's drive, drive, drive, morning, noon, and night, and all to be done over again the next day. You're never through with it.

Ah! I dessay, said Joshua soothingly; but there's your daughters now. They take summat off your hands, I s'pose? And that reminds me. There's little White Lilac, as we used to call her, you find her a handy sort of lass, don't you?

She's well enough in her way, said Mrs Greenways. I don't never regret giving her a home, and I know my duty to Greenways' niece; but as for use she's a child, Mr Snell, and a weakly little thing too, as looks hardly fit to hold a broom.

Well, well, well, said Joshua, every little helps, and I expect you'll find her more use than you think for. Even a child is known by its doings, as Solomon says.

Mrs Greenways interposed hastily, for she feared the beginning of what she called Joshua's preachments.

You'd like to have seen her, maybe; but she's gone with Agnetta to the Vicarage to take some eggs. Mrs Leigh likes to see the gals now and then.

Joshua made his visit as long as he could in the hope of Lilac's return, but she did not appear, and at last he could wait no longer.

Well, I'll go and have a look round for Peter, he said; and p'r'aps you'll send Lilac up one day to see me. She was always a favourite of mine, was Lilac White. And I'd a deal of respect for her poor mother too. Any day as suits your convenience.

Oh, she can come any day as for that, Mr Snell, replied Mrs Greenways with a little toss of her head. It doesn't make no differ in a house whether a child like that goes or stays. She's plenty of time on her hands.

That's settled then, ma'am, said Joshua, and I shall be looking to see her soon.

He made his farewell, leaving Mrs Greenways not a little annoyed that no mention had been made of Agnetta in this invitation.

Not that she'd go, she said to herself, but he might a asked her as well as that little bit of a Lilac.

White Lilac

It was quite a long time before she found it possible to allow Lilac to make this visit, for although she was small and useless and made no differ in the house, there were a wonderful number of things for her to do. Lilac's work increased; other people beside Mrs Greenways discovered the advantage of her willing hands, and were glad to put some of their own business into them.

Thus the care of the poultry, which had been shuffled off Bella's shoulders on to Agnetta, now descended from her to Lilac, the number of eggs brought in much increasing in consequence. Lilac liked this part of her daily task; she was proud to discover the retired corners and lurking-places of the hens, and fill her basket with the brown and pink eggs. Day by day she took more interest in her feathered family, and began to find distinguishing marks of character or appearance in each, she even made plans to defeat the inroads of the rats by coaxing her charges to lay their eggs in the barn, where they were more secure. Hens is sillier than most things, said Ben, when she confided her difficulties to him; what they've done once they'll do allers, it's no good fightin' with 'em. He consented, however, to nail some boards over the worst holes in the barn, and by degrees, after infinite patience, Lilac succeeded in making some of the hens desert their old haunts and use their new abode. All this was encouraging. And about this time a new interest indoors arose which made her life at Orchards Farm less lonely, and was indeed an event of some importance to her. It happened in this way. Ever since her arrival she had watched the proceedings of Molly in the dairy with great attention. She had asked questions about the butter-making until Molly was tired of answering, and had often begged to be allowed to help. This was never refused, although Molly opened her eyes wide at the length of time she took to clean and rinse and scour, and by degrees she was trusted with a good deal of the work. The day came when she implored to be allowed to do it all just for once. Molly hesitated; she had as usual a hundred other things to do and would be thankful for the help, but was such a bit of a thing to be trusted? On the whole, from her experience of Lilac she concluded that she was.

You won't let on to the missus as how you did it? she said. And this being faithfully promised, Lilac was left in quiet possession of the dairy. She felt almost as excited about that batch of butter as if her life depended on it. Suppose it should fail? But there! she said to herself, I won't think of that; I mill make it do, and she set to work courageously. And now her habits of care and neatness and thoroughness formed in past years came to her service, as well as her close observation of Molly. Nothing was hurried in the process, every small detail earnestly attended to, and at last trembling with excitement and triumph she saw the result of her labours. The butter was a complete success. As she stood in the cool dark dairy with the firm golden pats before her, each bearing the sharply-cut impression of the stamp, Lilac clasped her hands with delight. She had not known such a proud moment in all her life, except on the day when she had been Queen. And this was a different sort of pride, for it was joy in her own handiwork something she herself had done with no one to help her. Oh, she said to herself, if Mother could but see that, how rare an' pleased she'd be! Maybe she did, but how silent it was without her voice to say "Well done", and how blank without her face to smile on her child's success.

There was no one to sympathise but Molly, who came in presently with loud exclamations of surprise.

So you've got through? Lor'-a-mussy, what a handy little thing it is! And you won't ever let on to missus or any of 'em?

Lilac never did let on. She kept Molly's secret faithfully, and saw her butter packed up and driven off to Lenham without saying a word. And from this time forward the making up of the butter, and sometimes the whole process, was left in her hands. It was not easy work, for all the things she had to use were too large and heavy for her small hands, and she had to stand on a stool to turn the handle of the big churn. But she liked it, and what she lacked in strength she made up in zeal; it was far more interesting than scrubbing floors and scouring saucepans. Molly, too, was much satisfied with this new arrangement, for the dairy had always brought her more scolding from her mistress than any part of her work, and all now went on much more smoothly. Lilac wondered sometimes that her aunt never seemed to notice how much she was in the dairy, or called her away to do other things; she always spoke as if it were Molly alone who made the butter. In truth Mrs Greenways knew all about it,

White Lilac

and was very content to let matters go on as they were; but something within her, that old jealousy of Lilac and her mother, made it impossible for her to praise her niece for her services. She could not do it without deepening the contrast between her own daughters and Lilac, which she felt, but would not acknowledge even to herself. So Lilac got no praise and no thanks for what she did, and though she found satisfaction in turning out the butter well for its own sake, this was not quite enough. A very small word or look would have contented her. Once when her uncle said: 'The butter's good this week, she thought her aunt must speak, and glanced eagerly at her, but Mrs Greenways turned her head another way and no words come. Lilac felt hurt and disappointed.

It was a busier time than usual at the farm just now, though there was always plenty for everyone to do. It was hay harvest and there were extra hands at work, extra cooking to do, and many journeys to be made to and from the hayfield. Lilac was on the run from morning till night, and even Bella and Agnetta were obliged to bestir themselves a little. In the big field beyond the orchard where the grass had stood so tall and waved its flowery heads so proudly, it was now lying low on the ground in the bright hot sun. The sky was cloudless, and the farmer's brow had cleared a little too, for he had a splendid crop and every chance of getting it in well.

To-morrow's Lenham fête, said Agnetta to Lilac one evening.

It's a pity but what you can go, answered Lilac.

We are going, said Agnetta triumphantly, spite of Peter and Father being so contrary; and we ain't a-going to walk there neither!

How are you goin' to get there, then? asked Lilac.

Mr Buckle, he's goin' to drive us over in his gig, said Agnetta. My I shan't we cut a dash? Bella, she's goin' to wear her black silk done up. We've washed it with beer and it rustles beautiful just like a new one. And she's got a hat turned up on one side and trimmed with Gobelin.

What's that? asked Lilac, very much interested.

It's the new blue, silly, answered Agnetta disdainfully. Then she added: My new parasol's got lace all round it, ever so deep. I expect we shall be about the most stylish girls there. Won't Charlotte Smith stare!

I s'pose it's summat like a fair, isn't it? asked Lilac.

Lor', no! exclaimed Agnetta; not a bit. Not near so vulgar. There's a balloon, and a promnade, and fireworks in the evening.

All these things sounded mysteriously splendid to Lilac's unaccustomed ears. She did not know what any of them meant, but they seemed all the more attractive.

You've got to be so sober and old-fashioned like, continued Agnetta, that I s'pose you wouldn't care to go even if you could, would you? You'd rather stop at home and work.

I'd like to go, answered Lilac; but Molly couldn't never get through with the work to-morrow if we was all to go. There's a whole lot to do.

Oh, of course you couldn't go, said Agnetta loftily. Bella and me's different. We're on a different footing.

Agnetta had heard her mother use this expression, and though she would have been puzzled to explain it, it gave her an agreeable sense of superiority to her cousin.

White Lilac

In spite of soberness and gravity, Lilac felt not a little envious the next day when Mr Buckle drove up in his high gig to fetch her cousins to the fête. She could hear the exclamations of surprise and admiration which fell from Mrs Greenways as they appeared ready to start.

Well, she said with uplifted hands, you do know how to give your things a bit of style. That I *will* say.

Bella had spent days of toil in preparing for this occasion, and the result was now so perfect in her eyes that it was well worth the labour. The silk skirt crackled and rustled and glistened with every movement; the new hat was perched on her head with all its ribbons and flowers nodding. She was now engaged in painfully forcing on a pair of lemon-coloured gloves, but suddenly there was the sound of a crack, and her smile changed to a look of dismay.

There! she exclaimed, if it hasn't gone, right across the thumb.

Lor', what a pity, said her mother. Well, you can't stop to mend it; you must keep one hand closed, and it'll never show.

Agnetta now appeared. She was dressed in the Sunday blue, with Bella's silver locket round her neck and a bangle on her wrist. But the glory of her attire was the new parasol; it was so large and was trimmed with such a wealth of cotton lace, that the eye was at once attracted to it, and in fact when she bore it aloft her short square figure walking along beneath it became quite a secondary object.

Lilac watched the departure from the dairy window, which, overgrown with creepers, made a dark frame for the brightly-coloured picture. There was Mr Buckle, a young farmer of the neighbourhood, in a light-grey suit with a blue satin tie and a rose in his buttonhole. There was Bella, her face covered with self-satisfied smiles, mounting to his side. There was Agnetta carrying the new parasol high in the air with all its lace fluttering. How gay and happy they all looked! Mrs Greenways stood nodding at the window. She had meant to go out to the gate, but Bella had checked her. Lor', Ma, she said, don't you come out with that great apron on you're a perfect guy.

When the start was really made, and her cousins were whirled off to the unknown delights of Lenham, leaving only a cloud of dust behind them, Lilac breathed a little sigh. The sun was so bright, the breeze blew so softly, the sky was so blue it was the very day for a holiday. She would have liked to go too, instead of having a hard day's work before her.

Where's Lilac? called out Mrs Greenways in her high-pitched worried voice. What on earth's got that child? Here's everything to do and no one to do it. Ah! there you are, as Lilac ran out from the dairy. Now, you haven't got no time to moon about to-day. You must stir yourself and help all you can.

Bees is swarmin'! said Ben, thrusting his head in at the kitchen door, and immediately disappearing again.

Bother the bees! exclaimed Mrs Greenways crossly. But on Molly the news had a different effect. It was counted lucky to be present at the housing of a new swarm. She at once left her occupation, seized a saucepan and an iron spoon, and regardless of her mistress rushed out into the garden, making a hideous clatter as she went.

There now, look at that! said Mrs Greenways with a heated face. She's off for goodness knows how long, and a batch of loaves burning in the oven, and your uncle wanting his tea sent down into the field. Why ever should they want to go swarmin' now in that contrary way?

She opened the oven door and took out the bread as she spoke.

Now, don't you go running off, Lilac, she continued. There's enough of 'em out there to settle all the bees as ever was. You get your uncle's tea and take it out, and Peter's too. They won't neither of 'em be in till supper.

White Lilac

Hurry now.

The last words were added simply from habit, for she had soon discovered that it was impossible to hurry Lilac. What she did was well and thoroughly done, but not even the example which surrounded her at Orchards Farm could make her in a bustle. The whole habit of her life was too strong within her to be altered. Mrs Greenways glanced at her a little impatiently as she steadily made the tea, poured it into a tin can, and cut thick hunches of bread and butter. I could a done it myself in, half the time, she thought; but she was obliged to confess that Lilac's preparations if slow were always sure, and that she never forgot anything.

Lilac tilted her sunbonnet well forward and set out, walking slowly so as not to spill the tea. How blazing the sun was, though it was now nearly four o'clock. In the distance she could see the end of her journey, the big bare field beyond the orchard full of busy figures. As she passed the kitchen garden, Molly, rushing back from her encounter with the bees, almost ran against her.

There was two on 'em, she cried, her good-natured face shining with triumph and the heat of her exertions; and we've housed 'em both beautiful. Lor'! ain't it hot?

She stood with her iron weapons hanging down on each side, quite ready for a chat to delay her return to the house. Molly was always cheerfully ready to undertake any work that was not strictly her own. Lilac felt sorry, as they went on their several ways, to think of the scolding that was waiting for her; but it was wasted pity, for Molly's shoulders were broad, and a scolding more or less made no manner of difference to them.

There were all sorts and sizes of people at work in the hayfield as Lilac passed through it. Machines had not yet come into use at Danecross, so that the services of men, women, and children were much in request at this busy time. The farmer, remembering the motto, was determined to make his hay while the sun shone, and had collected hands from all parts of the neighbourhood. Lilac knew most of them, and passed along exchanging greetings, to where her uncle sat on his grey cob at the end of the field. He was talking to Peter, who stood by him with a wooden pitchfork in his hand.

Lilac thought that her uncle's face looked unusually good-tempered as she handed up his meal to him. He sat there eating and drinking, and continued his conversation with his son.

Well, and what d'ye think of Buckle's offer for the colt?

Pity we can't sell him, answered Peter.

Can't sell him! repeated the farmer; I'm not so sure about that. Maybe he'd go sound now. He doesn't show no signs of lameness.

Wouldn't last a month on the roads, said Peter.

The farmer's face clouded a little. Well, he said hesitatingly, that's Buckle's business. He can look him over, and if he don't see nothing wrong

We hadn't ought to sell him, said Peter in exactly the same voice. He's not fit for the roads. Take him off soft ground and he'd go queer in a week.

He might or he mightn't, said the farmer impatiently; all I know is I want the cash. It'd just pay that bill of Jones's, as is always bothering for his money. I declare I hate going into Lenham for fear of meeting that chap.

White Lilac

Peter had begun to toss the hay near him with his pitchfork. He did not look at his father or change his expression, but he said again:

Knowing what we do, we hadn't ought to sell him.

The farmer struck his stirrup-iron so hard with his stick that even the steady grey pony was startled.

I wish, he said with an oath, that you'd never found it out then. I'd like to be square and straight about the horse as well as anyone. I've always liked best to be straight, but I'm too hard up to be so particular as that comes to. It's easy enough, he added moodily, for a man to be honest with his pockets full of money.

I could get the same price for None-so-pretty, said Peter after a long pause. Mrs Grey wants her over at Cuddingham. Took a fancy to her a month ago.

I'll not have her sold, said the farmer quickly. What's the good of selling her? She's useful to us, and the colt isn't.

She ain't not exactly so *useful* to us as the other cows, said Peter. She's more of a fancy.

Well, she's yours, answered the farmer sullenly. You can do as you like with her of course; but I'm not going to be off my bargain with Buckle whatever you do.

He shook his reins and jogged slowly away to another part of the field, while Peter fell steadily to work again with his pitchfork. Lilac was packing the things that had been used into her basket, and glanced at him now and then with her thoughts full of what she had just heard. Her opinion of Peter had changed very much lately. She had found, since her first conversation with him, that in many things he was not stupid but wise. He knew for instance a great deal about all the animals on the farm, their ways and habits, and how to treat them when they were ill. There were some matters to be sure in which he was laughably simple, and might be deceived by a child, but there were others on which everyone valued his opinion. His father certainly deferred to him in anything connected with the live stock, and when Peter had discovered a grave defect in the colt he did not dream of disputing it. So Lilac's feeling of pity began to change into something like respect, and she was sure too that Peter was anxious to show her kindness, though the expression of it was difficult to him. Since the day when he had gone away from her so suddenly, frightened by her tears, they had had several talks together, although the speech was mostly on Lilac's side. She shrank from him no longer, and sometimes when the real Peter came up from the depths where he lay hidden, and showed a glimpse of himself through the dull mask, she thought him scarcely ugly.

Would he sell None-so-pretty? She knew what it would cost him, for since Ben's history she had observed the close affection between them. There were not so many people fond of Peter that he could afford to lose even the love of a cow and yet he would rather do it than let the colt be sold!

As she turned this over in her mind Lilac lingered over her preparations, and when Peter came near her tossing the hay to right and left with his strong arms, she looked up at him and said:

I'm sorry about None-so-pretty.

Peter stopped a moment, took off his straw hat and rubbed his hot red face with his handkerchief.

Thank yer, he answered; so am I.

Is it *certain sure* you'll sell her? asked Lilac.

White Lilac

Peter nodded. She'll have a good home yonder, he said; a rare fuss they'll make with her.

She'll miss you though, said Lilac, shaking her head.

Well, answered Peter, I shouldn't wonder if she did look out for me a bit just at first. I've always been foolish over her since she was ill.

But if Uncle sells the colt I s'pose you won't sell her, will you? continued Lilac.

He *won't* sell him, was Peter's decided answer, as he turned to his work again.

Now, nothing could have been more determined than Mr Greenways' manner as he rode away, but yet when Lilac heard Peter speak so firmly she felt he must be right. The colt would not be sold and None—so—pretty would have to go in his place. She returned to the farm more than ever impressed by Peter's power. Quiet, dull Peter who seemed hardly able to put two sentences together, and had never an answer ready for his sisters' sharp speeches.

That evening when Bella and Agnetta returned from Lenham, Lilac was at the gate. She had been watching for them eagerly, for she was anxious to hear all about the grand things they had seen, and hoped they would be inclined to talk about it. As they were saying goodbye to Mr Buckle with a great many smiles and giggles, the farmer came out.

Stop a bit, Buckle, he said, I want a word with you about the colt. I've changed my mind since the morning.

Lilac heard no more as she followed her cousins into the house; but there was no need. Peter had been right.

During supper nothing was spoken of but the fête the balloon, the band, the fireworks, and the dresses, Charlotte Smith's in particular. Lilac was intensely interested, and it was trying after the meal was over to have to help Molly in taking away the dishes, and lose so much of the conversation. This business over she drew near Agnetta and made an attempt to learn more, but in vain. Agnetta was in her loftiest mood, and though she was full of private jokes with Bella, she turned away coldly from her cousin. They had evidently some subject of the deepest importance to talk of which needed constant whispers, titters from Bella, and even playful slaps now and then. Lilac could hear nothing but He says She says, and then a burst of laughter, and go along with yer nonsense . It was dull to be left out of it all, and she wished more than ever that she had gone to the fête too.

Lilac, said her aunt, just run and fetch your uncle's slippers.

She was already on her way when the farmer took his pipe out of his mouth and looked round. He had been moody and cross all supper-time, and now he glanced angrily at his two daughters as they sat whispering in the corner.

It's someone else's turn to run, it seems to me, he said; Lilac's been at it all day. You go, Agnetta. And as Agnetta left the room with an injured shrug, he continued:

Seems too as if Lilac had all the work and none of the fun. You'd like an outing as well as any of 'em wouldn't you, my maid?

Lilac did not know what to make of such unexpected kindness. As a rule her uncle seemed hardly to know that she was in the house. She did not answer, for she was very much afraid of him, but she looked appealingly at her aunt.

White Lilac

I'm sure, Greenways, said the latter in an offended tone, you needn't talk as if the child was put upon. And your own niece, and an orphan besides. I know my duty better. And as for holidays and fêtes and such, 'tisin't nateral to suppose as how Lilac would want to go to 'em after the judgment as happened to her directly after the last one. Leastways, not yet awhile. There'd be something ondacent in it, to my thinking.

Well, there! it doesn't need so much talking, replied the farmer. I'm not wanting her to go to fêtes. But there's Mr Snell he was asking for her yesterday when I met him. Let her go tomorrow and spend the day with him.

If there is a busier day than another, it's Thursday, said Mrs Greenways fretfully.

Why, as to that, she's only a child, and makes no differ in the house, as you always say, remarked the farmer; anyhow, I mean her to go to-morrow, and that's all about it.

Lilac went to bed that night with a heart full of gratitude for her uncle's kindness, and delight at the promised visit; but her last thought before she slept was: I'm sorry as how None-so-pretty has got to be sold.

Chapter Nine. Common Things.

. . . . Find out men's wants and will
And meet them there, all earthly joys grow less
To the one joy of doing kindnesses.
George Herbert.

Lilac could hardly believe her own good fortune when nothing happened the next morning to prevent her visit, not even a cross word nor a complaint from her aunt, who seemed to have forgotten her objections of last night and to be quite pleased that she should go. Mrs Greenways put a small basket into her hand before she started, into which she had packed a chicken, a pot of honey, and a pat of fresh butter.

There, she said, that's a little something from Orchards Farm, tell him. The chick's our own rearing, and the honey's from Peter's bees, and the butter's fresh this morning.

She nodded and smiled good-naturedly; Joshua should see there was no stint at the farm. Be back afore dusk, she called after Lilac as she watched her from the gate.

So there was nothing to spoil the holiday or to damp Lilac's enjoyment in any way, and she felt almost as merry as she used to be before she came to live in the valley, and had begun to have cares and troubles. For one whole day she was going to be White Lilac again, with no anxieties about the butter; she would hear no peevish voices or wrangling disputes, she would have kindness and smiles and sunshine all round her, and the blue sky above. In this happy mood everything along the well-known road had new beauties, and when she turned up the hill and felt the keener air blow against her face, it was like the greeting of an old friend. The very flowers in the tall overgrown hedges were different to those which grew in the valley, and much sweeter; she pulled sprays of them as she went along until she had a large straggling bunch to carry as well as her basket, and so at last entered Joshua's cottage with both hands full.

Now, Uncle Joshua, she said, when the first greetings over he had settled to his work again, I've come to dinner with you, and I've brought it along with me, and until it's ready you're not to look once into the kitchen. You couldn't never guess what it is, so you needn't try; and you mustn't smell it more nor you can help while it's cooking.

It was a proud moment for Lilac when, the fowl being roasted to a turn, the table nicely laid, and the bunch of

White Lilac

flowers put exactly in the middle, she led the cobbler up to the feast. Even if Joshua had smelt the fowl he concealed it very well, and his whole face expressed the utmost astonishment, while Lilac watched him in an ecstasy of delight.

My word! he exclaimed, its fit for a king. I feel, looking down at his clothes, as if I ought to have on my Sunday best.

Lilac was almost too excited to eat anything herself, and presently, when she saw Joshua pause after his first mouthful, she enquired anxiously:

Isn't it good, Uncle?

Fact is, he answered, it's *too* good. I don't really feel as how I ought to eat such dillicate food. Not being ill, or weak, or anyway picksome in my appetite.

I made sure you'd say that, said Lilac triumphantly; and I just made up my mind I'd cook it without telling what it was. You've got to eat it now, Uncle Joshua. You couldn't never be so ungrateful as to let it spoil.

There's Mrs Wishing now, said Joshua, stilt hesitating, a sickly ailing body as 'ud relish a morsel like this.

It was not until Lilac had set his mind at rest by promising to take some of the fowl to Mrs Wishing before she returned, that he was able to abandon himself to thorough enjoyment. Lilac knew then by his silence that her little feast was heartily appreciated, and she would not disturb him by a word, although there were many things she wanted to say. But at last Joshua had finished.

A fatter fowl nor a finer, nor a better cooked one couldn't be, he said, as he laid down his knife and fork. Not a bit o' dryness in the bird: juicy all through and as sweet as a nut.

Ready now for a little conversation, he puffed thoughtfully at his pipe while Lilac stood near washing the dishes and plates.

It's thirty years ago, he said, speaking in a jerky voice so as not to interfere with the comfort of his pipe, since I had a fowl for dinner and I mind very well when it was. It was my wedding-day. Away up in the north it was, and parson gave the feast.

Was that when you used to play the clar'net in church, Uncle? asked Lilac.

Joshua nodded.

We was a clar'net and a fiddle and a bass viol, he said reflectively. Never kept time the bass viol didn't. Couldn't never get it into his head. He wasn't never any shakes of a player and he was a good feller too.

Did they play at your wedding? asked Lilac.

They did that, he answered; in church and likewise after the ceremony. Lor'! to hear how the bass viol did tag behind in *Rockingham*. I can hear him now. 'Twas like two solos being played, as one might say. No unity at all. I never hear that tune now but what it carries me back to my wedding-day and the bass viol; and the taste of that fowl's done the same thing. It's a most pecooliar thing, is the memory.

Lilac liked to hear Joshua talk about old days, but she was eager too to tell her own news. There was so much that he did not know: all about hay-harvest, and her butter-making, about Lenham fête, and her cousins, and, finally,

White Lilac

all about None—so—pretty and Peter. I do think, she added, as how I like him best of any of 'em, for all they say he's so common.

Common or uncommon, they'd do badly without him, muttered Joshua. He's the very prop and pillar of the place, is Peter; if a wall's strong enough to hold the roof up, you don't ask if it's made of marble or stone.

Are common things bad things? asked Lilac suddenly.

Joshua took his pipe out of his mouth and looked at her in some surprise.

Common things eh? he repeated.

Yes, Uncle, said Lilac hesitatingly, and trying to think of how to make it clear. But she could only add:

They call the pigs common too.

Well, as to pigs, said Joshua, I wish they was commoner still. I don't despise a bit of bacon myself. I call that a good thing anyhow. When one comes to look at it, he continued after a few puffs at his pipe, the best things of all is common. The things as is under our feet and nigh to our hand and easy to be got. There's the flowers now the common ones which grow so low as any child can pick 'em in the fields, daisies and such. There's the blue sky as we can all see, poor as well as rich. There's rain and sunshine and air and a heap else as belongs to all alike, and which we couldn't do without. The common things is the best things, don't you make any mistake about that. There's your own name now Lilac. It's a common bush lilac is; it grows every bit as wen in a little bit of garden nigh the road as in a grand park, and it hasn't no rare colours to take the eye. And yet on a sunshiny day after rain the folks passing'll say, 'Whatever is it as smells so beautiful?' Why it's just the common lilac bush. You ought to be like that in a manner of speaking not to try and act clever and smart so as to make folks stare, but to be good—tempered and peaceful and loving, so as they say when you leave 'em, 'What made the place so pleasant? Why, it was Lilac White. She ain't anything out of the common, but we miss her now she's gone '

The frequent mention of her name reminded Lilac of something she wanted to say, and she broke in suddenly:

Why, I've never thought to thank you, Uncle, for all that bloom you got me on May Day. What a long way back it do seem!

Joshua looked perplexed.

What's the child talking on? he said. I didn't get no flowers.

Whoever in all the world could it a been then? said Lilac slowly. You're sure you haven't forgotten, Uncle Joshua?

Sertain sure!

You didn't ask no one to get it?

Never mentioned a word to a livin' bein'. Lilac stared thoughtfully at the cobbler, who had now gone back to his little shed and was hard at work.

Pr'aps, then, she said, 'twarn't you neither who sent Mother's cactus down to the farm?

Similarly, replied he, it certainly was *not*; so you've got more friends than you reckoned for, you see.

White Lilac

Lilac stood in the doorway, her bonnet dangling in one hand, her eyes fixed absently on Joshua's brown fingers.

I made sure, she said, as how it was you. I couldn't think as there was anybody else to mind.

It was getting late. Without looking at the clock she knew that her holiday would soon be over, because through Joshua's little window there came a bright sun beam which was never there till after five. She tied on her bonnet, prepared a choice morsel of chicken for Mrs Wishing, and set out on her further journey after a short farewell to the cobbler. Joshua never liked saying goodbye, and did it so gruffly that it might have sounded sulky to the ear of a stranger, but Lilac knew better. She had a goodish step before her, as she called it to herself, and if she were to get back to the farm before dusk she must make haste. So she hurried on, and soon in the distance appeared the two little white cottages side by side, perched on the edge of the steep down. The one in which she had lived with her mother was empty, and as she got close to it and stopped to look over the paling into the small strip of garden, she felt sorry to see how forlorn and deserted it looked. It had always been so trim and neat, and its white hearthstone and open door had invited the passer-by to enter. Now the window shutters were fastened, the door was locked, the straggling flowers and vegetables were mixed up with tall weeds and nettles it was all lifeless and cold. It was a pity. Mother would not have liked to see it. Lilac pushed her hand through the palings and managed to pick some sweet-peas which were trailing themselves helplessly about for want of support, then she went on to the next gate. Poor Mrs Wishing was very lonely now that her only neighbour was gone; very few people passed over that way or came up so far from Danecross. Sometimes when Dan'l had a job on in the woods he was away for days and she saw no one at all, unless she was able to get to the cobbler's cottage, and that was seldom. Lilac knocked gently at the half-open door, and hearing no answer went in.

Mrs Wishing was there, sitting asleep in a chair by the hearth with her head hanging uncomfortably on one side; her dress was untidy, her hair rough, and her face white and pinched. Lilac cast one glance at her and then looked round the room. There were some white ashes on the hearth, a kettle hanging over them by its chain, and at Mrs Wishing's elbow stood an earthenware teapot, from which came a faint sickly smell; and when Lilac saw that she nodded to herself, for she knew what it meant. The next moment the sleeper opened her large grey eyes and gazed vacantly at her visitor.

It's me, said Lilac. It's Lilac White.

Mrs Wishing still gazed without speaking; there was an unearthly flickering light in her eyes. At last she muttered indistinctly:

You're just like her.

Not in the least alarmed or surprised at this condition, Lilac glanced at the teapot and said reproachfully:

You've been drinking poppy tea, and you promised Mother you wouldn't do it no more.

Mrs Wishing struggled feebly against the drowsiness which overpowered her, and murmured apologetically:

I didn't go to do it, but it seemed as if I couldn't bear the pain.

Lilac set down her basket, and opened the door of a cupboard near the chimney corner.

Where's your kindlin's? she asked. I'll make you a cup of real tea, and that'll waken you up a bit. And Uncle Joshua's sent you a morsel of chicken.

Ha'n't got no kindlin's and no tea, murmured Mrs Wishing. Give me a drink o' water from the jug yonder.

White Lilac

No tea! That was an unheard-of thing. As Lilac brought the water she said indignantly:

Where's Mr Wishing then? He hadn't ought to go and leave you like this without a bit or a drop in the house.

Mrs Wishing seemed a little refreshed by the water and was able to speak more distinctly. She sat up in her chair and made a few listless attempts to fasten up her hair and put herself to rights.

'Tain't Dan's fault this time, she said; he's up in the woods felling trees for a week. They're sleeping out till the job's done. He did leave me money, and I meant to go down to the shop. But then I took bad and I couldn't crawl so far, and nobody didn't pass.

And hadn't you got nothing in the house? asked Lilac.

Only a crust a' bread, and I didn't seem to fancy it. I craved so for a cup a' tea. And I had some dried poppy heads by me. So I held out as long as I could, and nobody didn't come. And this morning I used my kindlin's and made the tea. And when I drank it I fell into a blessed sleep, and I saw lots of angels, and their harps was sounding beautiful in my head all the time. When I was a gal there was a hymn it was about angels and golden crowns and harps, but I can't put it rightly together now. So then I woke and there was you, and I thought you was a sperrit. Seems a pity to wake up from a dream like that. But *I* dunno.

She let her head fall wearily back as she finished. Lilac was not in the least interested by the vision. She was accustomed to hear of Mrs Wishing's angels and harps, and her mind was now entirely occupied by earthly matters.

What you want is summat to eat and drink, she said, and I shall just have to run back to Uncle Joshua's for some bread and tea. But first I'll get a few sticks and make you a blaze to keep you comp'ny.

Mrs Wishing's eyes rested on her like those of a child who is being comforted and taken care of, as having collected a few sticks she knelt on the hearth and fanned them into a blaze with her pinafore.

You couldn't bide a little? she said doubtfully, as Lilac turned towards the door.

I'll be back in no time, said Lilac, and then you shall have a nice supper, and you mustn't take no more of this, pointing to the teapot. You know you promised Mother.

I didn't *go to*, repeated Mrs Wishing submissively; but it seemed as if I couldn't bear the gnawing in my inside.

It did not take long for Lilac, filled with compassion for her old friend, to run back to the cobbler's cottage; but there she was delayed a little, for Joshua had questions to ask, although he was ready and eager to fill her basket with food. The return was slower, for it was all uphill and her burden made a difference to her speed, so that it was long past sunset when she reached Mrs Wishing for the second time. Then, after coaxing her to eat and drink, Lilac had to help her upstairs and put her to bed like a child, and finally to sit by her side and talk soothingly to her until she dropped into a deep sleep. Her duties over, and everything put ready to. Mrs Wishing's hand for the next morning, she now had time to notice that it was quite dusk, and that the first stars were twinkling in the sky. With a sudden start she remembered her aunt's words: Be back afore dusk, and clasped her hands in dismay. It was no use to hurry now, for however quickly she went the farm would certainly be closed for the night before she reached it. Should she stay where she was till the morning? No, it would be better to take the chance of finding someone up to let her in. Mrs Wishing would be all right now that Joshua knew about her; and anyway, I'm glad I came, said Lilac to herself, even if Aunt does scold a bit.

White Lilac

With this thought to console her, she stepped out into the cool summer night, and began her homeward journey. It was not very dark, for it was midsummer near Saint Barnabas Day, when there is scarcely any night at all

Barnaby Bright
All day and no night!

Lilac had often heard her mother say that rhyme, and she remembered it now. It was all very, very still, so that all manner of sounds too low to have been noticed amongst the noises of the day were now plainly to be heard. A soft wind went whispering and sighing to itself in the trees overhead, carrying with it the sweetness of the hayfields and the honeysuckle in the hedges, owls hooted mysteriously, and the frogs croaked in some distant pond. Creatures never seen in the daytime were now awake and busy. As Lilac ran along, the bats whirred close past her face, and she saw in the grass by the wayside the steady little light of the glow-worms. It was certainly very late; there was hardly a glimmer of hope that anyone would be up at the farm. It was equally certain that, if there were, a scolding waited for Lilac. Either way it was bad, she thought. She wanted to go to bed, for she was very tired, but she did not want to be scolded to-night; she could bear that better in the morning. When she reached the house, therefore, and found it all silent and dark, with no light in any window and no sound of any movement, she hardly knew whether to be glad or sorry. But presently, as she stood there forlornly, with only the sky overhead full of stars blinking their cold bright eyes at her, she began to long to creep in somewhere and rest. Her limbs ached, her head felt heavy, and her hard little bed seemed a luxury well worth the expense of a scolding. Should she venture to knock at the door? She had almost determined on this bold step, when quite suddenly a happy idea came to her. There would perhaps be some door open in the outbuildings, either in the loft or the barn or the stables, where she could get in and find shelter for the night. It was worth trying at any rate. With renewed hope she ran across the strawyard and tried the great iron ring in the stable door. It was not locked. Here were shelter and rest at last, and no one to scold!

She crept in, and was just closing the heavy door when towards her, across the rickyard, came the figure of a man. His head was bent so that she could not see his face, but she thought from his lumbering walk that it must be Peter, and in a moment it flashed across her mind that he had just got back from Cuddingham. While she stood hesitating just within the door the man came quite close, and before she could call out the key rattled in the lock and heavy footsteps tramped away again. Then it was Peter. But surely he must have seen her, and if so why had he locked her in? Anyhow here she was for the night, and the next thing to do was to find a bed. She groped her way past the stalls of the three Pleasants, whose dwelling she had invaded, to the upright ladder which led to the loft. The horses were all lying down after their hard day's work, and only one of them turned his great head with a rattle of his halter, to see who this small intruder could be. Lilac clambered up the ladder and was soon in the dark fragrant-smelling loft above, where the trusses of hay and straw were mysteriously grouped under the low thick beams. There was no lack of a soft warm nest here, and the close neighbourhood of the Pleasants made it feel secure and friendly; nothing could possibly be better. She took off her shoes, curled herself up cosily in the hay, and shut her weary eyes. Presently she opened them drowsily again, and then discovered that her lodging was shared by a companion, for on the rafters just above her head, her single eye gleaming in the darkness, sat Peter's cat Tib. Lilac called to her, but she took no notice and did not move, having her own affairs to conduct at that time of night. Lilac watched her dreamily for a little while, and then her thoughts wandered on to Peter and became more and more confused. He got mixed up with Joshua, and the cactus and None-so-pretty and heaps of white flowers. The common things are the best things, she seemed to hear over and over again. Then quite suddenly she was in Mrs Wishing's cottage, and the loft was filled with the heavy sickly smell of poppy tea: it was so strong that it made her feel giddy and her eyelids seemed pressed down by a firm hand. After that she remembered nothing more that night.

Chapter Ten. The Credit of the Farm.

Many littles make a mickle. *Scotch Proverb.*

She was awakened the next morning by trampling noises in the stable below, and starting up could not at first make out where she was. The sun was shining through a rift in the loft door, Tib was gone, cocks were crowing outside, all the world was up and busy. She could hear Ben's gruff voice and the clanking of chains and harness, and soon he and the three horses had left the stable and gone out to their day's work. It must be late, therefore, and she must lose no time in presenting herself at the house. Perhaps it might be possible, she thought, to get up to her attic without seeing anyone, and tidy herself a bit first; she should then have more courage to face her aunt, for at present with her rough hair and pieces of hay and straw clinging to her clothes, she felt like some little stray wanderer. She approached the house cautiously and peeped in at the back door before entering, to see who was in the kitchen. Bella was there talking to Molly, whose broad red face was thrust eagerly forward as though she were listening to something interesting. They were indeed so deeply engaged that Lilac felt sure they would not notice her, and she took courage and went in.

It's a mercy she wasn't killed, Molly was saying. She's no light weight to fall, isn't the missus.

It's completely upset me, said Bella in a faint voice, with one hand on her heart. I tremble all over still.

And to think, said Molly, as it was only yesterday I said to myself, 'I'll darn that carpet before I'm an hour older'.

Well, it's a pity you didn't, said Bella sharply; just like your careless ways.

Molly shook her head.

'Twasn't to *be*, she said. 'Twasn't for nothing that I spilt the salt twice, and dreamt of water.

The doctor says it's a bad sprain, continued Bella; and it's likely she'll be laid up for a month. Perfect rest's the only thing.

I had a cousin, said Molly triumphantly, what had a similar accident. A heavy woman she was, like the missus in build. Information set in with *her* and she died almost immediate.

Lilac did not wait to hear more; she made her escape safely to her attic, and soon afterwards found Agnetta and learnt from her the history of the accident. Mrs Greenways had had a bad fall; she had caught her foot in a hole in the carpet and twisted her ankle, and the doctor said it was a wonder she had not broken any bones. Everyone in the house had so much to say, and was so excited about this misfortune, that Lilac's little adventure was passed over without notice, and the scolding she had dreaded did not come at all. Poor Mrs Greenways had other things to think of as she lay groaning on the sofa, partly with pain and partly at the prospect before her. To be laid up a month! It was easy for the doctor to talk, but what would become of things? Who would look after Molly? Who would see to the dairy? It would all go to rack and ruin, and she must lie here idle and look on. Her husband stood by trying to give comfort, but every word he said only seemed to make matters worse.

Why, there's Bella now, he suggested; she ought to be able to take your place for a bit.

And that just shows how much you know about the indoors work, Greenways, said his wife fretfully; to talk of Bella! Why, I'd as soon trust the dairy to Peter's cat as Bella partikler now she's got that young Buckle in her head. She don't know cream from buttermilk.

White Lilac

Why, then, you must just leave the butter to Molly as usual, and let the girls see after the rest, said Mr Greenways soothingly.

Oh, it's no use talking like that, said his wife impatiently; it's only aggravating to hear you. I suppose you think things are done in the house without heads or hands either. Girls indeed! There's Agnetta, knows no more nor a baby, and only that little bit of a Lilac as can put her hand to anything.

Finding his efforts useless, Mr Greenways shrugged his shoulders and went out, leaving his wife alone with her perplexities.

The more she thought them over the worse they seemed. To whom could she trust whilst she was helpless? Who would see that the butter was ready and fit for market? Not Bella, not Agnetta, and certainly not Molly. Really and truly there was only that little bit of a Lilac, as she called her, to depend on she would do her work just as well whether she were overlooked or not, Mrs Greenways felt sure. It was no use to shut her eyes to it any longer, Lilac White was not a burden but a support, not useless but valuable, only a child, but more dependable than many people of twice her years. It was bitter to poor Mrs Greenways to acknowledge this, even to herself, for the old jealousy was still strong within her.

I s'pose, she said with a groan, there was something in Mary White's upbringing after all. I'm not agoin' to own up to it, though, afore other folks.

When a little later Lilac was told that her aunt wanted her, she thought that the scolding had come at last, and went prepared to bear it as wen as she could. It was, however, for a surprisingly different purpose.

Look here, Lilac, said Mrs Greenways carelessly, you've been a good deal in the dairy lately, and you ought to have picked up a lot about it.

I can make the butter all myself, Aunt, replied Lilac, without Molly touching it.

Well, I hope you're thankful for such a chance of learning, said Mrs Greenways; not but what you're a good child enough, I've nothing to say against you. But what I want to say is this: Molly can't do everything while I'm laid by, and I think I shall take her from the dairy—work altogether, and let you do it.

Lilac's eyes shone with delight. Her aunt spoke as though she were bestowing a favour, and she felt it indeed to be such.

Oh! thank you, Aunt, she cried. I'm quite sure as how I can do it, and I like it ever so much.

With Agnetta to help you I dessay you'll get through with it, said Mrs Greenways graciously, and so the matter was settled. Lilac was dairymaid! No longer a little household drudge, called hither and thither to do everyone's work, but an important person with a business and position of her own. What an honour it was! There was only one drawback there was no mother to rejoice with her, or to understand how glad she felt about it. Lilac was obliged to keep her exultation to herself. She would have liked to tell Peter of her advancement, but just now he was at work on some distant part of the farm, and she saw him very seldom, for her new office kept her more within doors than usual. The good-natured Molly was, however, delighted with the change, and full of wonder at Lilac's cleverness.

It's really wonderful, she said; and what beats me is that it allus turns out the same.

With this praise Lilac had to be content, and she busied herself earnestly in her own little corner with increasing pride in her work. Sometimes, it is true, she looked enviously at Agnetta, who seemed to have nothing to do but

White Lilac

enjoy herself after her own fashion. Since Lenham fête Bella and she had had some confidential joke together, which they carried on by meaning nods and winks and mysterious references to Charlie. They were also more than ever engaged in altering their dresses and trimming their hats, and although Lilac was kept completely outside all this, she soon began to connect it with the visits of young Mr Buckle. She thought it a little unkind of Agnetta not to let her into the secret, and it was dull work to hear so much laughter going on without ever joining in it; but very soon she knew what it all meant.

Heard the news? cried Agnetta, rushing into the dairy, then, without waiting for an answer, Bella's goin' to get married. Guess who to?

Young Mr Buckle, said Lilac without a moment's hesitation.

As soon as ever Ma's about again the wedding's to be, said Agnetta exultingly. I'm to be bridesmaid, and p'r'aps Charlotte Smith as well. Lilac, who had stopped her scrubbing to listen, now went on with it, and Agnetta looked down at her kneeling figure with some contempt.

What a lot of trouble you take over it! she said. Molly used to do it in half the time.

If I ain't careful, answered Lilac, the butter'd get a taste.

I'll help you a bit, said her cousin condescendingly. I'll rinse these pans for you.

Lilac was glad to have Agnetta's company, for she wanted to hear all about Bella's wedding; but Agnetta's help she was not so anxious for, because she usually had to do the work all over again. Agnetta's idea of excellence was to get through her work quickly, to make it look well outside, to polish the part that showed and leave the rest undone. Speed and show had always been the things desired in the household at Orchards Farm not what *was* good but what *looked* good, and could be had at small expense and labour. Beneath the smart clothing which Mrs Greenways and her daughters displayed on Sundays, strange discoveries might have been made. Rents fastened up with pins, stains hidden by stylish scarves and mantles, stockings unmended, boots trodden down or in holes. A feather in the hat, a bangle on the arm, and a bunched-up dress made up for these deficiencies. If it don't show it don't matter, Bella was accustomed to say. Agnetta paused to rest after about two minutes.

Bella won't have nothing of this sort to do after she's married. she said. Charlie says she needn't stir a finger, not unless she likes. She'll be able to sit with her hands before her just like a lady.

I shouldn't care about being a lady if that's what I had to do. said Lilac. I should think it would be dull. I'd rather see after the farm, if I was Bella.

You don't mean to tell me you *like work*? said Agnetta, staring. You wouldn't do it, not if you weren't obliged? 'Tain't natural.

I like some, said Lilac. I like the dairy work and I like feeding the poultry. And I want to learn to milk, if Ben'll teach me. And in the spring I mean to try and get ever such a lot of early ducks.

Well, I hate all that, said Agnetta. Now, if I could choose I wouldn't live on a farm at all. I'd have lots of servants, and silk gownds and gold bracelets and broaches, and satting furniture, and a carriage to drive in every day. An' I'd lie in bed ever so late in the mornings and always do what I liked.

Time went on and Mrs Greenway's ankle got better, so that although still lame she was able to hobble about with a stick, and find out Molly's shortcomings much as usual. During her illness she had relied a good deal on Lilac and softened in her manner towards her, but now the old feeling of jealousy came back, and she found it

White Lilac

impossible to praise her for the excellence of the dairy-work. I can't somehow bring my tongue to it, she said to herself; and the better she behaves the less I can do it. One day the farmer came back from Lenham in a good humour.

Benson asked if we'd got a new dairymaid, he said to his wife; the butter's always good now. Which of 'em does it?

Oh, said Mrs Greenways carelessly, the girls manage it between 'em, and I look it over afore it goes.

Lilac heard it, for she had come into the room unnoticed, and for a second she stood still, uncertain whether to speak, fixing a reproachful gaze on her aunt. What a shame it was! Was this her reward for all her patience and hard work? Never a word of praise, never even the credit of what she did! On her lips were some eager angry words, but she did not utter them. She turned and ran upstairs to her own little attic. Her heart was full; she could see no reason for this injustice: it was very, very hard. What would they do, she went on to think, if she left the butter to Bella and Agnetta to manage between them? What would her aunt say then?

Trembling with indignation she sat down on her bed and buried her face in her hands. At first she was too angry to cry, but soon she felt so lonely, with such a great longing for a word of comfort and kindness, that the tears came fast. After that she felt a little better, rubbed her eyes on her pinafore, and looked up at the small window through which there streamed some bright rays of the afternoon sun. What was it that lighted the room with such a glory? Not the sunshine alone. It rested on something in the window, which stood out in gorgeous splendour from the white bareness of its surroundings the cactus had bloomed! Yes, the cactus had really burst into two blossoms, of such size and brilliancy that with the sunlight upon them they were positively dazzling to behold. Lilac sat and blinked her red eyes at them in admiration and wonder. She had watched the two buds with tender interest, and feared they would never unfold themselves. Now they had done it, and how beautiful they were! How Mother would have liked them!

Her next thought was, as she went closer to examine them, that she must tell Peter. She remembered now, that, occupied with her own affairs and interests, she had never thanked him for two kind things he had done. She was quite sure that he had got the flowers for her on May Day, and had brought the cactus down from the cottage, yet she had said nothing. How ungrateful she had been! She knew now how hard it was not to be thanked for one's services. Did Peter mind? He must be pretty well used to it, for certainly no one ever thanked him for anything, and as for praise that was out of the question. If, as Uncle Joshua had said, he was the prop of the house, it was taken for granted, and no one thought of saying, Well done, Peter!

Yet he never complained. He went patiently on in his dull way, keeping his pains and troubles to himself. How seldom his face was brightened by pleasure, and yet Lilac remembered when he had been talking to her about his animals or farming matters, that she had seen it change wonderfully. Some inner feeling had beamed out from it, and for a few minutes Peter was a different creature. It was a pity that he did not always look like that; no one at such times could call him stupid or ugly. Anyway, concluded Lilac, he's been kind, and I'll thank him as soon as ever I can.

Her sympathy for Peter made her own trouble seem less, and she went downstairs cheerfully with her mind bent on managing a little talk with him as soon as possible. Supper-time would not do, because Bella and Agnetta were there, and afterwards Peter was so sleepy. It must be to-morrow. As it happened things turned out fortunately for Lilac, and required no effort on her part, for Mrs Greenways discovered the next day that someone must do some shopping in Lenham. There were things wanted that Dimpleby did not keep, and the choice of which could not be trusted to a man.

I wonder, she said, if I could make shift to get into the cart but if I did I couldn't never get in and out at the shops.

She looked appealingly at her elder daughter.

The cart's *going* in with the butter, she added.

But Bella was not inclined to take the hint.

You don't catch me driving into Lenham with the cart full of butter and eggs and such, she said. Whatever'd Charlie say? Why shouldn't Lilac go? She's sharp enough.

There seemed no reason against this, and it was accordingly settled that Lilac should be entrusted with Mrs Greenways' commissions. As she received them, her mind was so full of the dazzling prospect of driving into Lenham with the butter that it was almost impossible to bring it to bear on anything else. It would be like going into the world. Only once in her whole life had she been there before, and that was when her mother had taken her long ago. She was quite a little child then, but she remembered the look of it still, and what a grand place she had thought it, with its broad market square and shops and so many people about.

When her aunt had finished her list, which was a very long one, Bella was ready with her wants, which were even more puzzling.

I want this ribbon matched, she said, and I want a bonnet shape. It mustn't be too high in the crown nor yet too broad in the brim, and it mustn't be like the one Charlotte Smith's got now. If you can't match the ribbon exactly you must get me another shade. A kind of a sap green, I think but it must be something uncommon. And you might ask at Jones's what's being worn in hats now feathers or artificials. Oh, and I want some cream lace, not more than sixpence a yard, a good striking pattern, and as deep as you can get for the money. Agnetta having added to this two ounces of coconut rock and a threepenny bottle of scent, Lilac was allowed to get ready for her expedition. The cart was waiting in the yard with the baskets packed in at the back, and Ben was buckling the last strap of the harness. She expected that he was going with her, and it was quite a pleasant surprise when Peter came out of the house with a whip in his hand and took the reins. Nothing could have happened more fortunately, she thought to herself as they drove out of the gate, for now there would be no difficulty at all in saying what she had on her mind. This and the excitement of the journey itself put her in excellent spirits, so that though some people might have called the road to Lenham dull and flat, it was full of charms to Lilac. It was indeed more lively than usual, for it was market day, and as they jogged along at an easy pace they were constantly greeted by acquaintances all bent in the same direction. Some of these were on foot and others in all kinds of vehicles, from a wagon to a donkey cart. Mr Buckle presently dashed by them in a smart gig, and called out, How's yourself, Peter? as he passed; and farther on they overtook Mrs Pinhorn actively striding along in her well-known checked shawl.

Peter answered all greetings in the same manner a wag of the head towards the right shoulder but Lilac felt so proud and pleased to be going to Lenham with her own butter that she sat up very straight, and smiled and nodded heartily to those she knew. It seemed a wonderfully short journey, and she saw the spire of Lenham church in the distance before she had said one word to Peter, or he had broken silence except to speak to his horse. This did not disturb her, for she was used to his ways now, and she made up her mind that she would put off any attempt at conversation until their return. And here they were at Lenham, rattling over the round stones with which the marketplace was paved. It was full of stalls, crowded together so closely that there was scarcely room for all the people passing up and down between them. They struggled along, jostling each other, pushing their way with great baskets on their arms, and making a confusion of noises. Scolding, laughter, shouting filled the air, mixed up with the clatter of crockery, cracking of whips, and the shrill cries of the market women. Such a turmoil Lilac had never heard, and it was almost a relief when Peter turned a little away from it and drew up at the door of Benson's shop, where the butter was to be left. It was a large and important shop, and though the entrance was down a narrow street it had two great windows facing the market square, and there was a constant stream of people bustling in and out. Lilac's heart beat fast with excitement. If she had known that the butter was to be displayed in

White Lilac

such a grand beautiful place as this, and seen by so many folks, she would hardly have dared to undertake it. Sudden fear seized her that it might not be so good as usual this time: there was perhaps some fault in the making-up, some failure in the colour, although she had thought it looked all right when she packed up at the farm. She followed Peter into the shop with quite a tremor, and was glad when she saw Mr Benson could not attend to them just yet, for he and his boy were both deeply engaged in attending to customers. Lilac had plenty of time to look round her. Her eye immediately fell on some rolls of butter on the counter, and she lifted a corner of the cloth which covered her own and gave an anxious peep at it, then nudged Peter and looked up at him for sympathy.

It's a better colour nor that yonder, she whispered.

Peter stood stolidly unconscious of her excitement, but he turned his quiet eyes upon the eager face lifted to his, and nodded kindly. Mr Benson caught sight of him and bustled up.

Morning, Peter, he said briskly. How's your mother?

Middling, thank you, said Peter, and without any further words he pointed at the basket on the counter.

Butter eh? said the grocer. Well, I hope it's as good as the last. He unpacked the basket and proceeded to weigh the butter, talking all the time.

It's an odd thing to me how your butter varies. Now, the last month it's been as good again as it used to be. Of course in the winter there will be a difference because of the feed, I can understand that; but I can't see why it shouldn't be always the same in the summer. I don't mind telling you, he continued, leaning forward and speaking in a confidential tone, that I'd made up my mind at one time to give it up. People won't buy inferior butter, and I don't blame 'em.

It's good this time, anyhow, said Peter.

It's prime, said Mr Benson. Is it the cows now, that you've got new, or is it the dairymaid?

The cows isn't new, nor yet the dairymaid, said Peter.

Well, whichever it is, said the grocer, the credit of the farm's coming back. Orchards Farm always had a name for its dairy in the old days. I remember my father talking of it when I was a boy.

Mrs Pinhorn, who had been standing near during this conversation, now struck sharply in:

They *do* say there was a brownie at the farm in those days, but when it got into other hands he was angered and quitted.

That's a curious superstition, ma'am, said the grocer politely.

There's folks in Danecross who give credit to it still, continued Mrs Pinhorn. Old Grannie Dunch'll tell you ever so many tales about the brownie and his goings-on.

Well, if we didn't live, so to say, within the pale of civilisation, said the grocer, sticking his thumbs in his waistcoat pockets, we might think you'd got him back again at the farm. What do you say to that, Peter?

Everyone knew that Peter believed in all sorts of crazy things, and when Mr Benson put this jocular question to him several people turned to see how he took it.

White Lilac

Lilac looked eagerly up at him also, for she had a faint hope that he might somehow know that she was dairymaid, and would tell them so. That would be a triumph indeed. At any rate he would stop all this silly talk about the brownie. She had heard Grannie Dunch's stories scores of times, and they were very interesting, but as to believing them Lilac felt far above such folly, and held them all in equal contempt, whether they were of charms, ghosts, brownies, or other spirits. It was therefore with dismay that she saw Peter's face get redder and redder under the general gaze, and heard him instead of speaking up only mutter, I don't know nothing about it.

Moved by indignation at such foolishness, and at the mocking expression on Mr Benson's round face, she ventured to give Peter's sleeve a sharp pull. No more words came, he only shuffled his feet uneasily and showed an evident desire to get out of the shop.

Well, well, said the grocer, turning his attention to some money he was counting out of a drawer, never you mind, Peter. If you've got him you'd better keep him, for he knows how to make good butter at any rate.

Everyone laughed, as they always did at Mr Benson's speeches, and in the midst of it Peter gathered up his money and left the shop with Lilac. She felt so ruffled and vexed by what had passed, that she could hardly attend to his directions as he pointed out the different shops she had to go to. They were an ironmonger's, a linendraper's, and a china shop, and in the last he told her she must wait until he came to fetch her with the cart in about an hour's time. Lilac stood for a moment looking after him as he drove away to put up his horse at the inn. She was angry with Mr Benson, angry with the people who had laughed, and angry with Peter. No wonder folks thought him half-silly when he looked like that. And yet he knew twice as much as all of 'em put together. Only that morning when Sober had cut his foot badly with broken glass, it was Peter with his clumsy-looking gentle fingers who had known how to stop the bleeding and bind up the wound in the best way. But in spite of all this he could stand like a gaby and let folks make a laughing-stock of him? It was so provoking to remember how silly he had looked, that it was only by a determined effort that Lilac could get it out of her head, and bend her attention on Bella's ribbons and her aunt's pots and pans. When she had once began her shopping, however, she found it took all her thoughts, and it was not till she was seated in the china shop, her business finished, and her parcels disposed round her, that the scene came back to her again. Could it be possible that Peter put any faith in such nonsensical tales?

Grannie Dunch believed them; but then she was very ignorant, over ninety years old, and had never been to school. When Grannie Dunch was young perhaps folks did believe such things, and she had never been taught better; there were excuses for her. On one point Lilac was determined. Peter's mind should be cleared up as to who made the butter. What had Mr Benson said about it? The credit of the farm's coming back. She repeated the words to herself in a whisper. What a grand thing if she, Lilac White, had helped to bring back the credit of the farm!

At this point in her reflections the white horse appeared at the door, and Lilac and all her belongings were lifted up into the cart. Very soon they were out of the noisy stony streets of Lenham, and on the quiet country road again. She took a side glance at her companion. He looked undisturbed, with his eyes fixed placidly on the horse's ears, and had evidently nothing more on his mind than to sit quietly there until they reached home. It made Lilac feel quite cross, and she gave him a sharp little nudge with her elbow to make him attend to what she had to say.

Why ever did you let 'em go on so silly about the brownie? she said. You looked for all the world as if you believed in it.

Peter flicked his horse thoughtfully.

There's a many cur'ous things in the world, he said; cur'ouser than that.

White Lilac

There ain't no such things as brownies, though, said Lilac, with decision; nor yet ghosts, nor yet witches, nor yet any of them things as Grannie Dunch tells about.

Peter was silent.

Is there? she repeated with another nudge of the elbow.

I don't says as there is, he answered slowly.

Of course not! exclaimed Lilac triumphantly.

And I don't say as there isn't, finished Peter in exactly the same voice.

This unexpected conclusion quite took Lilac's breath away. She stared speechlessly at her cousin, and he presently went on in a reflective tone with his eyes still fixed on the horse's ears:

It's been a wonderful lucky year, there's no denying. Hay turned out well, corn's going to be good. More eggs, more milk, better butter, bees swarmed early.

But, put in Lilac, Aunt sprained her ankle, and the colt went lame, and you had to sell None—so—pretty. That wasn't lucky. Why didn't the brownie hinder that?

Peter shook his head.

I don't say as there *is* a brownie at the farm, he said.

But you think he helps make the butter, said Lilac scornfully.

Peter turned his eyes upon his companion; her face was hidden from him by her sunbonnet, but her slender form and the sound of her voice seemed both to quiver with indignation and contempt.

Well, then, who *does*? he asked.

But Lilac only held her head up higher and kept a dignified silence; she was thoroughly put out with Peter, and if he was so silly it really was no use to talk to him.

Conscious that he was in disgrace, Peter fidgeted uneasily with his reins, whipped his horse, and cast some almost frightened glances over his shoulder at the silent little figure beside him, then he coughed several times, and finally, with an effort which seemed to make his face broader and redder every minute, began to speak:

I'd sooner plough a field than talk any day, but but I'll tell you something if I can put it together. Words is so hard to frame, so as to say what you mean. Maybe you'll only think me stupider after I'm done, but this is how it was

He stopped short, and Lilac said gently and encouragingly, How was it, Peter?

I've had a sort of a queer feeling lately that there's something different at the farm. Something that runs through everything, as you might say. The beasts do their work as well again, and the sun shines brighter, and the flowers bloom prettier, and there's a kind of a pleasantness about the place. I can't set it down to anything, any more than I know why the sky's blue, but it's there all the same. So I thought over it a deal, and one day I was up in the High field, and all of a sudden it rapped into my head what Grannie Dunch says about the brownie as used to work at

White Lilac

the farm. 'Maybe,' I says to myself, 'he's come back.' So I didn't say nothing, but I took notice, and things went on getting better, and I got to feel there was someone there helping on the work but I wasn't not to say *certain* sure it was the brownie, till one night

When? said Lilac eagerly as Peter paused.

It was last Saint Barnaby's, and I'd been up to Cuddingham with None—so—pretty. It was late when I got back, and I remembered I hadn't locked the stable door, and I went across the yard to do it

Well? said Lilac with breathless interest.

So as I went, it was most as light as day, and I saw as plain as could be something flit in at the stable door. 'Twasn't so big as a man, nor so small as a boy, and its head was white. So then I thought, 'Surely 'tis the brownie, for night's his working time,' and I'd half a mind to take a peep and see him at it. But they say if you look him in the face he'll quit, so I just locked the door and left him there. When Benson talked that way about the credit of the farm, I knew who we'd got to thank. Howsomever, added Peter seriously, you mustn't thank him, nor yet pay him, else he'll spite you instead of working for you.

As he finished his story he turned to his cousin a face beaming with the most childlike faith; but it suddenly clouded with disappointment, for Lilac, no longer gravely attentive, was laughing heartily.

I thought maybe you'd laugh at me, he said, turning his head away ashamed.

Lilac checked her laughter. Here's a riddle, she said. The brownie you locked into the stable that night always makes the butter. He isn't never thanked nor yet paid, but you've looked him in the face scores of times.

Peter gazed blankly at her.

You're doing of it now! she cried with a chuckle of delight; you're looking at the brownie now! Why, you great goose, it's me as has made the butter this ever so long, and it was me as was in the stable on Saint Barnaby's!

It was only by very slow degrees that Peter could turn his mind from the brownie, on whom it had been fixed for weeks past, to take in this new and astonishing idea. Even when Lilac had told her story many times, and explained every detail of how she had learnt to be dairymaid, he broke out again:

But how *could* you do it? You didn't know before you came, and there's Bella and Agnetta was born on the farm, and doesn't know now. Wonderful quick you must be, surely. And so little as you are and quiet, he went on, staring at his cousin. You don't make no more clatter nor fuss than a field—mouse.

'Tisn't only noisy big things as is useful, said Lilac with some pride.

It's harder to believe than the brownie, went on Peter, shaking his head; a deal more cur'ous. I thought I had got hold of him, but I don't seem to understand this at all.

He fell into deep thought, shaking his head at intervals, and it was not until the farm was in sight that he broke silence again.

The smallest person in the farm, he said slowly, has brought back the credit of the farm. It's downright amazing. I'm not agoin' to say 'thank you,' though, he added with a smile as they drove in at the gate.

White Lilac

A sudden thought flashed into Lilac's mind. Oh, Peter, she cried, the flowers was lovely on May Day, and the cactus is blooming beautiful! Was it the brownie as sent 'em, do you think?

Peter made no reply to this, and his face was hidden, for he was plunging down to collect the parcels in the back of the cart. Lilac laughed as she ran into the house. What a funny one he was surely, and what a fine day's holiday she had been having!

Chapter Eleven. The Concert.

But I will wear my own brown gown
And never look too fine.

Months came and went. August turned his beaming yellow face on the waving cornfields, and passed on leaving them shorn and bare. Then came September bending under his weight of apples and pears, and after him October, who took away the green mantle the woods had worn all the summer, and gave them one of scarlet and gold. He spread on the ground, too, a gorgeous carpet of crimson leaves, which covered the hillside with splendour so that it glowed in the distance like fire. Here and there the naked branches of the trees began to show sharply against the sky soon it would be winter. Already it was so cold, that although it was earlier than usual Miss Ellen said they must begin to think of warming the church, and to do this they must have some money, and therefore the yearly village concert must be arranged.

It was the new curate as come to me about it, said the cobbler to Mr Dimpleby one evening. 'You must give us a solo on the clar'net, Mr Snell,' says he.

He's a civil-spoken young feller enough, remarked Mr Dimpleby, but he's too much of a boy to please me. The last was the man for my money.

Time'll mend that, said Joshua. And what I like about him is that he don't bear no sort of malice when he's worsted in argeyment. We'd been differing over a passage of Scripture t'other day, and when he got up to go, 'Ah, Mr Snell,' says he, 'you've a deal to learn.' 'And so have you, young man,' says I. Bless you, he took it as pleasant as could be, and I've liked him ever since.

He turned to Bella Greenways, who had just entered.

And what's *your* place in the programme, Miss Greenways?

Bella always avoided speaking to the cobbler if she could, for while she despised him as a low person, she feared his opinion, and knew that he disapproved of her. She now put on her most mincing air as she replied:

Agetta and me's to play a duet, the 'Edinburgh Quadrilles,' and Mr Buckle accompanies on the drum and triangle.

Why, you'd better fall in too with the clar'net, Mr Snell, suggested Mr Dimpleby. That'd make a fine thing of it with four instruments.

Joshua shook his head solemnly.

Mine's a solo, he said. A sacred one: 'Sound the loud timbrel o'er Egypt's dark sea.' That'll give a variety.

Mr Buckle's going to recite a beautiful thing, put in Bella: 'The Dream of Eugene Aram'. He's been practising

White Lilac

it ever so long. He's going to do it with action.

I don't know as I can make much of that reciting, said Joshua doubtfully. Now a good tune, or a song, or a bit of reading, I can take hold of and carry along, but it's poor sport to see a man twist himself, and make mouths, and point about at nothing at all. I remember the first time the curate did it. He stares straight at me for a second, and then he shakes his fist and shouts out suddenly: 'Wretch!' or 'Villain!' or summat of that sort. I was so taken aback I nearly got up and went out. Downright uncomfortable I was.

It's all the fashion now. But of course, said Bella disdainfully, it isn't everybody as is used to it. I'm sure it's beautiful to hear Charlie! It makes your blood run cold. There's a part where he has to speak it in a sort of a hissing whisper. He's afraid the back seats won't hear.

And a good thing for 'em, muttered Joshua. It's bad enough to see a man make a fool of himself without having to hear him as well.

But after all, continued Bella, without noticing this remark, it's only the gentry as matter much, and they'll be in the two front rows. Mrs Leigh's going to bring some friends.

And what's Lilac White going to do? said Joshua, turning round with sudden sharpness. She used to sing the prettiest of 'em all at school.

Oh, I dare say she'll sing in the part songs with the other children, said Bella carelessly. They haven't asked her for a solo.

But although this was the case Lilac felt quite as interested and pleased as though she were to be the chief performer at the concert. When the programme was discussed at the farm, which was very often, she listened eagerly, and was delighted to find that Mrs Leigh wished her to sing in two glees which she had learnt at school. The concert would be unusually good this year, everyone said, and each performer felt as anxious about his or her part as if its success depended on that alone. Mr Buckle, next to his own recitation, relied a good deal on the introduction of a friend of his from Lenham, who had promised to perform on the banjo and sing a comic song if possible.

If you can get Busby, he repeated over and over again, it'll be the making of the thing, and so I told Mrs Leigh.

What did she say? enquired Bella.

Well, she wanted to know what he would sing. But, as I said to her, you can't treat Busby as you would the people about here. He moves in higher circles and he wouldn't stand it. You can't tie him down to a particular song, he must sing what he feels inclined to. After all, I don't suppose he'll come. He's so sought after.

Well, it is awkward, said Bella, not being certain because of the programme.

Oh, they must just put down, *Song, Mr Busby*, and leave a blank. It's often done.

Each time Mr Buckle dropped in at the farm just now he brought fresh news relating to Mr Busby.

He could, or could not come to the concert, so that an exciting state of uncertainty was kept up. As the day grew nearer the news changed. Busby would certainly *come*, but he had a dreadful cold so that it was hardly probable he would be able to sing. Lilac heard it all with the greatest sympathy. The house seemed full of the concert from morning till night. As she went about her work the strains of the Edinburgh Quadrilles sounded perpetually

White Lilac

from the piano in the parlour. Sometimes it was Agnetta alone, slowly pounding away at the bass, and often coming down with great force and determination on the wrong chords; sometimes Bella and Agnetta at the same time, the treble dashing along brilliantly, and the bass lumbering heavily in the distance but contriving to catch it up at the end by missing a few bars; sometimes Mr Buckle arriving with his drum and triangle there was a grand performance of all three, when Lilac and Molly, taking furtive peeps at them through the half-open door, were struck with the sincerest admiration and awe. It was indeed wonderful as well as deafening to hear the noise that could be got out of those three instruments; they seemed to be engaged in a sort of battle in which first one was triumphant and then another.

It's a *little* loud for this room, observed Mr Buckle complacently, but it'll sound very well at the concert. Bella felt sure that it would be far the best thing in the programme, not only because the execution was spirited and brilliant but on account of the stylish appearance of the performers. Mr Buckle had been persuaded to wear his volunteer uniform on the occasion, in which, with his drum slung from his shoulders and the triangle fastened to a chair, so that he could kick it with one foot, he made a very imposing effect.

Agnetta and Bella had coaxed their mother into giving them new dresses of a bright blue colour called "electric", which, being made up by themselves in the last fashion, were calculated to attract all eyes.

These preparations, whilst they excited and interested Lilac, also made her a little envious. She began to wish she had something pretty to put on in honour of the concert, and even to have a faint hope that her aunt might give her a new dress too. But this did not seem even to occur to Mrs Greenways, and Lilac soon gave up all thoughts of it with a sigh. Her Sunday frock was very shabby, but after all just to stand up amongst the other children it would not show much. She took it out of her box and looked at it: perhaps there was something she could do to smarten it up a little. It certainly hung in a limp flattened manner across the bed, and was even beginning to turn a rusty colour; nothing would make it look any different. Would one of her cottons be better, Lilac wondered anxiously. But none of the children would wear cottons, she knew they all put on their Sunday best for the concert. The black frock must do. She could put a clean frill in the neck, and brush her hair very neatly, but that was all. There was no one she remembered to take much notice what she wore, so it did not matter.

The evening came. Everyone had practised their parts and brought them to a high pitch of perfection; and except Mr Busby, whose appearance was still uncertain, everyone was prepared to fill their places in the programme.

You won't find two better-looking girls than that, said Mrs Greenways to her husband, looking proudly at her two daughters. That blue does set 'em off, to be sure!

La! said Bella with a giggle, I feel that nervous I know I shall break down. I'm all of a twitter.

Well, it's no matter how you *play* as long as you look well, said Mrs Greenways; with Charlie making all that noise on the drum, you only hear the piano now and again. But where's Lilac! she added. It's more than time we started.

Lilac had been ready long ago, and waiting for her cousins, but just before they came downstairs she had caught sight of Peter looking into the room from the garden, and making mysterious signs to her to come out. When she appeared he held towards her a bunch of small red and white chrysanthemums. Here's a posy for you, he said. Stick it in your front. They're a bit frost-bitten, but they're better than nothing.

Lilac took the flowers joyfully; after all she was not to be quite unadorned at the concert.

You ain't got a new frock, he continued, looking at her seriously when she had fastened them in her dress. You look nice, though.

White Lilac

Ain't you coming? asked Lilac. She felt that she should miss Peter's friendly face when she sang, and that she should like him to hear her.

Presently, he said. Got summat to see to first.

When the party reached the school-house it was already late. The Greenways were always late on such occasions. The room was full, and Mr Martin, the curate, who had the arrangement of it all, was bustling about with a programme in his hand, finding seats for the audience, greeting acquaintances, and rushing into the inner room at intervals to see if the performers had arrived.

All here? he said. Then we'd better begin. Drum and fife band!

The band, grinning with embarrassment and pleasure, stumbled up the rickety steps on to the platform. The sounds of their instruments and then the clapping and stamping of the audience were plainly heard in the green room, which had only a curtain across the doorway.

Lor'! said Bella, pulling it a little on one side and peeping through at the audience, there *is* a lot of people! Packed just as close as herrings. There's a whole row from the Rectory. How I do palpitate, to be sure! I wish Charlie was here!

Mr Buckle soon arrived with vexation on his brow. No sign of Busby! He was down twice in the programme, and there was hardly a chance he would turn up. It was too bad of Busby to throw them over like that. He might at least have *come*.

Well, if he wasn't going to sing I don't see the good of that, said Bella; but it *is* a pity.

It just spoils the whole thing, said Mr Buckle, and the other performers agreed. But to Lilac nothing could spoil the concert. It was all beautiful and glorious, and she thought each thing grander than the last. Uncle Joshua's solo almost brought tears to her eyes, partly of affection and pride and partly because he extracted such lovely and stirring sounds from the clar'net. It made her think of her mother and the cottage, and of so many dear old things of the past, that she felt sorrowful and happy at once. Next she was filled with awe by Mr Buckle's recitation, which, however, fell rather flat on the rest of the assembly; and then came the "Edinburgh Quadrilles", in which the performers surpassed themselves in banging and clattering. Lilac was quite carried away by enthusiasm. She stood as close to the curtain as she could, clapping with all her might. The programme was now nearly half over, and Mr Busby's first blank had been filled up by someone else. Mr Martin came hurriedly in.

Who'll sing or play something? he said. We must fill up this second place or the programme will be too short.

His glance fell upon Lilac.

Why, you're the little girl who was Queen? You can sing, I know. That'll do capitally come along.

Lilac shrank back timidly. It was an honour to be singled out in that way, but it was also most alarming. She looked appealingly at her cousin Bella, who at once came forward.

I don't think she knows any songs alone, sir, she said; but I'll play something if you like.

Oh, thank you, Miss Greenways, said Mr Martin hastily, we've had so much playing I think they'd like a song. I expect she knows some little thing don't you? to Lilac.

White Lilac

Lilac hesitated. There stood Mr Martin in front of her, eager and urgent, with outstretched hand as though he would hurry her at once to the platform; there was Bella fixing a mortified and angry gaze upon her; and, in the background, the other performers with surprise and disapproval on their faces. She felt that she *could* not do it, and yet it was almost as impossible to disoblige Mr Martin, the habit of obedience, especially to a clergyman, was so strong within her. Suddenly there sounded close to her ear a gruff and friendly voice:

Give 'em the 'Last Rose of Summer', Lilac. You can sing that very pretty. It came from Uncle Joshua.

The very thing! exclaimed Mr Martin. Couldn't possibly be better, and I'll play it for you. Come along!

Without more words Lilac found herself hurried out of the room, up the steps, and on to the platform, with Mr Martin seated at the piano. Breathless and frightened she stood for a second half uncertain whether to turn and run away. There were so many faces looking up at her from below, and she felt so small and unprotected standing there alone in front of them. Her heart beat fast, her lips were as though fastened together, how could she possibly sing? Suddenly in the midst of that dim mass of heads she caught sight of something that encouraged her. It was Peter's round red face with mouth and eyes open to their widest extent, and it stood out from all the rest, just as it had done on May Day. Then it had vexed her to see it, now it was such a comfort that it filled her with courage. Instead of running away she straightened herself up, folded her hands neatly in front of her, and took a long breath. When Mr Martin looked round at her she was able to begin, and though her voice trembled a little it was sweet and clear, and could be heard quite to the end of the room. Very soon she forgot her fears altogether, and felt as much at her ease as though she were singing in Uncle Joshua's cottage as she had done so often. The audience kept the most perfect silence, and gazed at her attentively throughout. It was a very simple little figure in its straight black frock, its red and white nosegay, and thick, laced boots, and it looked all the more so after the ribbons and finery of those which had come before it; yet there was a certain dignity about its very simplicity, and the earnest expression in the small face showed that Lilac was not thinking of herself, but was only anxious to sing her song as well as she could. She finished it, and dropped the straight little curtsy she had been taught at school. After all it had not been so bad, she thought with relief, as she turned to go away in the midst of an outburst of claps and stamps from the audience. But she was not allowed to go far, for it soon became evident that they wanted her to sing again; nothing in the whole programme had created so much excitement as this one little simple song. They applauded not only in the usual manner but even by shouts and whistling, and through it all was to be heard the steady thump, thump, thump of a stick on the floor from the middle of the room where Peter sat. Lilac looked round half-frightened at Mr Martin as the noise rose higher and higher, and made her way quickly to the steps which led from the platform.

They won't leave off till you sing again, he said, following her, though we settled not to have any encores. You'd better sing the last verse.

So it turned out that Lilac's song was the most successful performance of the evening; it was impossible to conceal the fact that it had won more applause than anything, not even excepting the Edinburgh Quadrilles. This was felt to be most unjust, for she had taken no trouble in preparing it, and was not even properly dressed to receive such an honour.

I must own, said Mrs Greenways in a mortified tone, that I did feel disgraced to see Lilac standing up there in that old black frock. I can't think what took hold of the folks to make so much fuss with her. But there! 'Tain't the best as gets the most praise.

I declare, added Bella bitterly, it's a thankless task to get up anything for the people here. They're so ignorant they don't know what's what. To think of passing over Charley's recitation and encoring a silly old song like Lilac's. It's a good thing Mr Busby *didn't* come, I think he wouldn't 'a been appreciated.

White Lilac

'Twasn't only the poor people though, said Agnetta. I saw those friends of Mrs Leigh's clapping like anything.

Ah, well, said Mrs Greenways, Lilac's parents were greatly respected in the parish, and that's the reason of it. She hasn't got no cause to be set up as if it was her singing that pleased 'em. Lilac had indeed very little opportunity of being set up. After the first glow of pleasure in her success had faded, she began to find more reason to be cast down. Her aunt and cousins were so jealous of the applause she had gained that they lost no occasion of putting her in what they called her proper place, of showing her that she was insignificant, a mere nobody; useless they could not now consider her, but she had to pay dearly for her short triumph at the concert. The air just now seemed full of sharp speeches and bitterness, and very often after a day of unkind buffets she cried herself to sleep, longing for someone to take her part, and sore at the injustice of it all.

'Tain't as if I'd wanted to sing, she said to herself. They made me, and now they flout me for it.

But her unexpected appearance in public had another and most surprising result.

About a week after the concert, when the excitement was lessening and the preparations for Bella's wedding were beginning to take its place, Mrs Greenways was sent for to the Rectory Mrs Leigh wished to speak to her.

I shouldn't wonder, she said to her husband before she started, if it was to ask what Bella'd like for a present. What'd you say?

I shouldn't wonder if it was nothing of the kind, replied Mr Greenways. More likely about the rent.

But Mrs Greenways held to her first opinion. It would not be about the rent, for Mrs Leigh never mentioned it to her.

No. It was about the present; and very fitting too, when she called to mind how long her husband had been Mr Leigh's tenant. To be sure he had generally owed some rent, but the Greenways had always held their heads high and been respected in spite of their debts.

On her way to the Rectory, therefore, she carefully considered what would be best to choose for Bella and Charlie. Should it be something ornamental a gilt clock, or a mirror with a plush frame for the drawing-room? They would both like that, but she knew Mrs Leigh would prefer their asking for something useful; perhaps a set of tea-things would be as good as anything.

These reflections made the distance short, yet an hour later, when her interview over, Mrs Greenways reappeared at the farm, her face was lengthened and her footstep heavy with fatigue. What could have happened? Something decidedly annoying, for she snapped even at her darling Agnetta when she asked questions.

Don't bother, she said, let's have tea. I'm tired out.

During the meal her daughters cast curious glances at her and at each other, for it was a most unusual thing for their mother to bear her troubles quietly. As a rule the more vexed she was the more talkative she became. It must therefore be something out of the common, they concluded; and before long it appeared that it was the presence of Lilac that kept Mrs Greenways silent. She threw angry looks at her, full of discontent, and presently, unable to control herself longer, said sharply:

When you've finished, Lilac, I want you to run to Dimbleby's for me. I forgot the starch. If you hurry you'll be there and back afore dusk.

Chapter Twelve. Lilac's Choice.

A stone that is fit for the wall will not be left in the way. *Old Proverb.*

As the door closed on Lilac, the news burst forth from Mrs Greenways in such a torrent that it was difficult at first to follow, but at length she managed to make clear to her astonished hearers all that had passed between herself and Mrs Leigh. It was this: A lady staying at the Rectory had seen Lilac at the concert, and asked whom she was. Whereupon, hearing her history and her present occupation at Orchards Farm, she made the following suggestion. She wanted a second dairymaid, and was greatly pleased with Lilac's appearance and neat dress. Would Mrs Leigh find out whether her friends would like her to take such a situation? She would give her good wages, and raise them if she found her satisfactory. It's a great opportunity for a child like Lilac, Mrs Leigh had said to Mrs Greenways; but I really think from what I hear of her that she is quite fit to take such a place.

Well, as to that, said Mr Greenways slowly when his wife paused for breath, I suppose she is. If she can manage the dairy alone here, she can do it with someone over her there.

Now I wonder who *could* 'a told Mrs Leigh that Lilac made our butter, said Mrs Greenways; somehow or other that child gets round everyone with her quiet ways.

Most likely that interfering old Joshua Snell, said Bella, or Peter maybe, or Ben. They all think no end of Lilac.

Well, I don't see myself what they find in her, said Mrs Greenways; though she's a good child enough and useful in her way. I should miss her now I expect; though, of course, with a glance at her husband, she wouldn't leave us, not so long as we wanted her.

That's for *her* to say, said the farmer. I'm not going to take a chance like that out of her mouth. She's a good little gal and a credit to her mother, and it's only fair and right she should choose for herself. Go or stay, I won't have a word said to her. 'Tain't every child of her age as has an offer like that, and she's deserved it.

And who taught her all she knows? said Mrs Greenways wrathfully. Who gave her a home when she wanted one, and fed and kep' her? And now as she's just beginning to be a bit of use, she's to take herself off at the first chance! I haven't common patience with you, Greenways, when you talk like that. It's all very well for you; and I s'pose you're ready to pay for a dairymaid in her place. But I know this: If Lilac's got a drop of gratitude in her, and a bit of proper feeling, she'll think first of what she owes to her only relations living.

Well, you ought to 'a told her how useful she was if you wanted her to know it, said Mr Greenways. You've always gone on the other tack and told her she was no good at all. I shouldn't blame her if she wanted to try if she could please other folks better.

There was so much truth in this, that in spite of Mrs Greenways' anger it sank deeply into her mind. Why had she not made more of Lilac? What should she do, if the child, with the consent of her uncle and encouraged by Mrs Leigh, were to choose to leave the farm? It was not unlikely, for although she had not been actively unkind to Lilac she had never tried to make her happy at the farm; her jealousy had prevented that. And then, the money that would be a great temptation; and the offer of it seemed to raise Lilac's value enormously. In short, now that someone else wanted her, and was willing to pay for her services, she became twice as important in Mrs Greenways' eyes. One by one the various duties rose before her which Lilac fulfilled, and which would be left undone if she went away. She sat silent for a few minutes in moody thought.

I didn't say nothing certain to Mrs Leigh, she remarked at length, but I did mention as how we'd never had

White Lilac

any thought of Lilac taking service, no more nor Agnetta or Bella.

Lor', Ma! said Bella, the ideer!

All the same, said the farmer, when we first took Lilac we said we'd keep her till she was old enough for a place. The child's made herself of use, and you don't want to part with her. That's the long and the short of it. But I stand by what I say. She shall settle it as she likes. She shall go to Mrs Leigh and hear about it, and then no one shan't say a word to her, for or against. When's she got to decide?

In a week, answered his wife. But you're doing wrong, Greenways, you hadn't ought to put it on the child's shoulders; it's us as ought to decide for her, us as are in the place of her father and mother. She's too young to know what's for her good.

I stand by what I say, repeated the farmer, and he slapped the table with his hand. Mrs Greenways knew then that it was useless to oppose him further, and the conversation came to an end.

Now, when the matter was made known to Lilac, it seemed more like a dream than anything real. She had become so used to remain in the background, and go quietly on at her business without notice, that she could not at first believe in the great position offered to her. She was considered worth so much money a year! It was wonderful.

After she had seen Mrs Leigh, and heard that it really was true and no dream, another feeling began to take the place of wonder, and that was perplexity. The choice, they told her, was to remain in her own hands, and no one would interfere with it. What would be best? To go or stay? It was very difficult, almost impossible, to decide. Never in her short life had she yet been obliged to choose in any matter; there had always been a necessity which she had obeyed: Do this, Go there. The habit of obedience was strong within her, but it was very hard to be suddenly called to act for herself. And the worst of it was that no one would help her; even Mrs Leigh only said: I shan't persuade you one way or the other, Lilac, I shall leave it to you and your relations to consider. Uncle Joshua had no counsel either. You must put one against the other and decide for yourself, my maid, he said; there'll be ups and downs wherever you go. She studied her aunt's face wistfully, and found no help there. Mrs Greenways kept complete and gloomy silence on the question.

Thrown back upon herself, Lilac's perplexity grew with each day. If she went to sleep with her mind a little settled to one side of the matter, she woke up next morning to see many more advantages on the other. To leave Orchards Farm, and the village, and all the faces she had known since she could remember anything, and go to strangers! That would be dreadful. But then, there was the money to be thought of, and perhaps she might find the strangers kinder than her own relations. It's like weighing out the butter, she said to herself; first one side up and then t'other. If only someone would say you *must* go, or you *must* stay.

During this week of uncertainty many things at the farm looked pleasanter than they had ever done before, and she was surprised at the interest everyone in the village took in her new prospects. They all had something to say about them, and though this did not help her decision but rather hindered it, she was pleased to find that they cared so much for her.

And so you're goin' away, said poor Mrs Wishing, fluttering into the farm one day and finding Lilac alone. Seems as if I was to lose the on'y friend I've got. But I dunno. There was your poor mother, she was took, and now I shan't see you no more. 'Tain't as I see you often, but I know you might drop in anywhen and there's comfort in that. Lor'! I shouldn't be standing here now if you hadn't come in that night I was pretty nigh gone home that time. Might a been better p'r'aps for me and Dan'l too if I had. But you meant it kind.

Maybe I shan't go away after all, said Lilac soothingly.

White Lilac

You're one of the lucky ones, continued Mrs Wishing. I allers said that. Fust you get taken into a beautiful home like this, and then you get a place as a gal twice your age would jump at. Some gets all the ups and some gets all the downs. But *I* dunno!

She went on her way with a weary hitch of the basket on her arm, and a pull at her thin shawl. Then Bella's voice sounded beseechingly on the stairs:

Oh, *do* come here a minute, Lilac.

Bella was generally to be found in her bedroom just now, stitching away at various elegancies of costume. She turned to her cousin as she entered, and said with a puzzled frown:

I'm in ever such a fix with this skirt. I can't drape it like the picture do what I will, it hangs anyhow. And Agnetta can't manage it either.

Agnetta stood by, her face heated with fruitless labour, and her mouth full of pins.

Lilac examined the skirt gravely.

You haven't got enough stuff in it, she said. You'll have to do it up some other way.

Pin it up somehow, then, and see what you can do, said Bella. I'm sick and tired of it.

Lilac was not quite without experience in such things, for she had often helped her cousins with their dressmaking, and she now succeeded after a few trials in looping up the skirt to Bella's satisfaction.

That's off my mind, thank goodness! she exclaimed. You're a neat-fingered little thing; I don't know what we shall do without you.

It was a small piece of praise, but coming from Bella it sounded great.

Lilac's affairs, her probable departure from the farm and how she would be much missed there, were much talked of in the village just now. The news even reached Lenham, carried by the active legs and eager tongue of Mrs Pinhorn, who, with many significant nods, as of one who could tell more if she chose, gave Mr Benson to understand that he might shortly find a difference in the butter. It was not for *her* to speak, with Ben working at the farm since a boy, but So even the great and important Mr Benson was prepared to be interested in Lilac's choice.

She often wondered, as day after day went by so quickly and left her still undecided, what her mother would have advised her to do. But then, if her mother had been alive, all this would not have happened. She tried nevertheless to imagine what she would have said about it, and to remember past words which might be of help to her now.

Stand on your own feet and don't be beholden to anyone. Certainly by taking this situation she would follow that advice, and child though she was, she knew it might be the beginning of greater things. If she filled this place well she might in time get another, and be worth even more money. But then, could she leave the farm? the home which had sheltered her when she had been left alone in the world. Who would take her place? No one could deny now that she would leave a blank which must be filled up. She could hardly bear to think of a stranger standing in her accustomed spot in the dairy, handling the butter, looking out of the little ivy-grown window, taking charge of the poultry. They'll feed 'em different, maybe, she thought; and they won't get half the eggs, I know they won't. How hard it would be, too, to leave the faces she had known from childhood, all so familiar, and some of them so dear: not human faces alone, but all sorts of kind and friendly ones, belonging to the dumb animals, as she called them. She would miss the beasts sorely, and they would miss her: the cows she was learning to milk,

White Lilac

the great horses who jingled their medals and bowed their heads so gently as she stood on tiptoe to feed them, the clever old donkey who could unfasten any gate and let all the animals out of a field: the pigs, even the sheep, who were silliest of all, knew her well and showed pleasure at her coming. She looked with affection, too, at the bare little attic, out of whose window she had gazed so often with eyes full of tears at the white walls of her old home on the hillside. How hard it had been to leave it, and now it made her almost as sad to think of going away from the farm.

But then there was the money, and although Mrs Leigh said nothing in favour of her going to this new place, Lilac had a feeling that she really wished it, and would be disappointed if she gave it up. Everyone said it was such a chance!

It was not altogether a fancy on Lilac's part that everyone at the farm looked at her kindly just now, for the idea of losing her made them suddenly conscious that she would be very much missed. Mrs Greenways watched her with anxiety, and there was a new softness in her way of speaking; her old friends, Molly and Ben, were eager in showing their goodwill, and Agnetta, in spite of the approaching excitement of Bella's wedding, found time to enquire many times during the day if Lilac had made up her mind.

Of course you meant to go from the first, she said at length. Well, I don't blame you, but you might 'a said so to an old friend like me.

The only person at the farm who was sincerely indifferent to Lilac's choice was Bella.

It won't make any matter to me whether you're here or there, she said candidly; but there's no doubt it'll make a difference to Ma. There's some as would call it demeaning to go out to service, but I don't look at it like that. Of course if it was me or Agnetta it wouldn't be thought of; but I agree with Pa that it's right you should choose for yourself.

So no one helped Lilac, and the days passed and the last one came, while she was still as far as ever from deciding. Escaping from the chatter and noises inside the house she went out towards evening into the garden for a little peace and quietness. She wanted to be alone and think it over for the last time; after that she would go to Mrs Leigh and tell her what she meant to do, and then all the worry would be over. She strolled absently along, with the same tiresome question in her mind, through the untidy bushy garden, past Peter's flower bed, gay with chrysanthemums and Michaelmas daisies, until she came to the row of beehives, silent, deserted-looking dwellings now with only one or two languid inhabitants to be seen crawling torpidly about the entrances. Lilac sat down on the cherry-tree stump opposite them, and, for a moment leaving the old subject, her mind went back to the spring evening when Peter had cut the bunch of flowers for her, and let the bees crawl over his fingers. She smiled to herself as she remembered how suddenly he had gone away without giving her the nosegay at all. Poor Peter! she understood him better now. As she thought this there was a click of the gate leading into the field, she turned her head, and there was Peter himself coming towards her with his dog Sober at his heels.

During this past week Peter as well as Lilac had been turning things over a great deal in his mind. Not that he was troubled by uncertainty, for he felt sure from the first that she would go away from the farm. And it was best she should. From outward ill-treatment he could have defended her: he was strong in the arm, but with his tongue he was weaker than a child. Many a time he had sat in silence when hard or unkind speeches had been cast at her, but none the less he had felt it sorely. After the concert, when she had sung as pretty as a bird, how they had flouted her. It was a hard thing surely, and it was best she should go away to folks as would value her better. But he felt also that he must tell her he was sorry. That was a trial and a difficulty. How should he frame it? Though he could talk more easily to Lilac than anyone else in the world, speech was still terribly hard, and when he suddenly came upon her this evening his first instinct was to turn and go back. Sober, however, pricked his ears and ran forward when he saw a friend, and this example encouraged Peter.

White Lilac

As like as not, he said to himself, I shall say summat quite different the minute I begin, but I'll have a try at it; so he went on.

There was a touch of frost in the air, and the few remaining leaves, so few that you could count them, were falling every minute or so gently from the trees. A scarlet one from the cherry tree overhead had dropped into Lilac's lap, and lay there, a bright red spot on her white pinafore. As Peter's eye fell on it it occurred to him to say gruffly: The leaves is nearly all gone.

Pretty nigh, said Lilac, looking up into the bare branches of the cherry tree. We'll soon have winter now.

There was silence. Peter took off his hat and rubbed his forehead with his coat sleeve.

There's lots will be sorry when you go, he burst out suddenly. The beasts'll miss you above a bit.

Lilac did not answer. She saw that he wanted to say something more, and knew that it was best not to confuse his mind by remarks.

Not but what, he went on, you're in the right. Why should you work for nothing here and get no thanks? You're worth your wages, and there you'll get 'em. There's justice in that. Only the farm'll be different.

There's only the dairy, said Lilac. Someone else'll have to do that if I go. And I should miss the beasts too.

She put her hand on Sober's rough head as he sat by her.

It's a queer thing, said Peter after another pause, what a lot I get in my head sometimes and yet I can't speak it out. You remember about the brownie, and me saying the farm was pleasanter and that? Well, what I want to say now is, that when you're gone all that'll be gone mostly. It'll be like winter after summer. Anyone as could use language could say a deal about that, but I can't. I don't want you to stay, but I've had it in my mind to tell you that I shall miss you as well as the beasts above a bit. That's all.

Sober now seemed to think he must add something to his master's speech, for he raised one paw, placed it on Lilac's knee, and gazed with a sort of solemn entreaty into her face. She knew at once what he wanted, for though he could not use language any more than Peter, he was quite able to make his meaning clear. In the course of many years' faithful attention to business he had become rheumatic, and this paw, in particular was swollen and stiff at the joint. Lilac had found that it gave him ease to rub it, and Sober had got into the habit of calling her attention to it in this way at all times and seasons. Now as she took it in her hand and looked into his wise affectionate eyes, it suddenly struck her that here were two people who would really miss her, and want her if she were far away. No one would rub Sober's paw, no one would take much notice of her other dumb friend, Peter. She could not leave them. She placed the dog's foot gently on the ground and stood up.

I'm not going away, she said, I'm going to bide. And I shall go straight in and tell Aunt, and then it'll be settled.

Indoors, meanwhile, the same subject had been discussed between different people. In the living room, where tea was ready on the table, Mrs Greenways and her two daughters waited the coming of the farmer, Agnetta eyeing a pot of her favourite strawberry jam rather impatiently, and Bella, tired with her stitching, leaning languidly back in her chair with folded arms.

Lilac ain't said nothing to either of you, I s'pose? began Mrs Greenways.

White Lilac

I know she means to go, though, said Agnetta.

Well, I must look about for a girl for the dairy, I s'pose, said Mrs Greenways sadly. I won't give it to Molly again. And a nice set they are, giggling flighty things with nothing but their ribbons and their sweethearts in their heads.

Lor! Ma, don't fret, said Bella consolingly; you got along without Lilac before, and you'll get along without her again.

I shan't ever replace her, continued her mother in the same dejected voice; she doesn't care for ribbons, and she's not old enough for sweethearts. I do think it's not acting right of Mrs Leigh to go and entice her away.

If here isn't Mr Snell coming in alonger Pa, said Agnetta, craning her neck to see out of the window. He's sure to stay to tea. She immediately drew her chair up to the table and helped herself largely to jam.

And of all evenings in the week I wish he hadn't chosen this, said Mrs Greenways. Poking and meddling in other folks' concerns. Now mind this, girls, don't you let on as if I wanted to keep Lilac, or was sorry she's going. Do you hear?

It did not at first appear, however, that this warning was necessary, for Joshua said no word of Lilac or her affairs; he seemed fully occupied in drinking a great deal of tea and discussing the events of the neighbourhood with the farmer, and it was not till the end of his meal that he looked round the table enquiringly, and asked the dreaded question.

And what's Lilac settled to do about going?

You know as much about that as we do, Mr Snell, replied Mrs Greenways loftily.

There's no doubt, continued the cobbler, fixing his eye upon her, as how Mrs Leigh's friend is going to get a prize in Lilac White. She's only a child, as you once said, ma'am, but I know what her upbringing was: 'As the twig is bent, the tree's inclined'. There's the making of a thorough good servant in her. Well worth her wages she'll be.

She's been worth more to us already than ever I knew of, or counted on, till lately, put in the farmer. Just now, I met Benson, and says he: 'You're losing your dairymaid by what I hear, and I can but wish you as good a one.'

That's not so easy, said Joshua, shaking his head. Good workers don't grow on every bush. It's a pity, too, just when your butter was getting back its name.

I'd half a mind, said the farmer, to offer the child wages to stop, but then I thought it wouldn't be acting fair. She ought to have the chance of bettering herself in a place like that. If she goes she's bound to rise, and if she stays she won't, for I can't afford to give her much.

And what's your opinion, ma'am? asked Joshua politely of Mrs Greenways.

Oh, it isn't worth hearing, Mr Snell, she replied with a bitter laugh; its too old-fashioned for these days. I should 'a thought Lilac owed summat to us, but my husband don't seem to take no count of that at all. Not that it matters to me.

White Lilac

As she spoke, with the colour rising in her face and a voice very near tears, the door opened and Lilac came quickly in. The conversation stopped suddenly, all eyes were fixed on her; perhaps never since she had been Queen had her presence caused so much attention: even Agnetta paused in her repast, and looked curiously round to see what she would do or say.

Without giving a glance at anyone else in the room, Lilac walked straight up to where Mrs Greenways sat at the head of the table:

Aunt, she said rather breathlessly, I've come to say as I've made up my mind.

Mrs Greenways straightened herself to receive the blow. She knew what was coming, and it was hard to be humiliated in the presence of the cobbler, yet she would put a brave face upon it. With a great effort she managed to say carelessly:

It don't matter just now, Lilac. Sit down and get your tea.

But Mr Greenways quite spoilt the effect of this speech.

No, no, he called out. Let her speak. Let's hear what she's got to say. Here's Mr Snell'd like to hear it too. Speak out, Lilac.

Thus encouraged, Lilac turned a little towards her uncle and Joshua.

I've made up my mind as I'd rather bide here, please, she said.

The teapot fell from Mrs Greenways' hands with such a crash on the tray that all the cups rattled, the air of indifference which she had struggled to keep up vanished, her whole face softened, and as she looked at the modest little figure standing at her side tears of relief came into her eyes. Uncle Joshua and her old feelings of jealousy and pride were forgotten for the moment as she laid her broad hand kindly on the child's shoulder:

You're a good gal, Lilac, and you shan't repent your choice, she said; take my word, you shan't.

And that's your own will, is it, Lilac? said her uncle. And you've thought it well over, and you won't want to be altering it again?

No, Uncle, said Lilac. I'm quite sure now. Her aunt's kind manner made her feel more firmly settled than before.

It's a harassing thing is a choice, said Mr Greenways. I know what it is myself with the roots and seeds. Well, I won't deny that I'm glad you're going to stop, but I hope you've done the best for yourself, my maid.

Lor', Greenways, don't worry the child, interrupted his wife, who had recovered her usual manner. She knows her own mind, and I'm glad she's shown so much sense. You sit down and get your tea, Lilac, and let's be comfortable and no more about it.

Lilac slipped into the empty place between the cobbler and Agnetta, rather abashed at so much notice. Agnetta pushed the pot of jam towards her.

I'm glad you're going to stop, she said. Have some jam.

White Lilac

Joshua had not spoken since Lilac's entrance, but Mrs Greenways, eyeing him nervously, felt sure he was preparing to preachify . She went on talking very fast and loud in the hope of checking this eloquence, but in vain; Joshua, after a few short coughs, stood upright and looked round the table.

Friends, he said, I knew Lilac's mother well, and I call to mind this evening what she often said to me: 'I want my child to grow up self-respecting and independent. I want to teach her to stand alone and not to be a burden on anyone.' And then, poor soul, she died sudden, and the child was left on your hands. And she couldn't but be a burden at first, seeing how young she was and how little she knew. And now look at it! How it's all changed. 'Tain't long ago, and she isn't much bigger to speak of, and yet she's got to be something as you value and don't want to part with. She's made her own place, and she stands firm in it on her own feet, and no one would fill it as well. It's wonderful that is, how small things may help big ones. Look at it! said Joshua, spreading out the palms of his hands. You take a little weak child into your house and think she's of no count at all, either to help or to hinder; she's so small and the place is so big you hardly know she's there. And then one day you wake up to find that she's gone quietly on doing her best, and learning to do better, until she's come to be one of the most useful people on the farm. Because for why? It's her mother's toil and trouble finding their fruit; we oughtn't to forget that. When folks are dead and gone it's hard on 'em not to call to mind what we owe 'em. They sowed and we reap. Lilac's come to be what she is because her mother was what she was, and I expect Mary White's proud and pleased enough to see how her child's valued this day. And so I wish the farm luck, and all of you luck, and we'll all be glad to think as we're not going to lose our little bit of White Lilac as is growing up amongst us.

Lilac's eyes had been fixed shyly on her plate. It was like being Queen a second time to have everyone looking at her and talking of her. As Joshua finished there was a sound at the door of gruff assent, and she looked round. It came from Peter, who stood there with all his features stretched into a wide smile of pleasure.

They're all glad I'm going to bide, she said to herself, and so am I.
