

I

SWARDESTON



Mrs. Cooke generally looked as if someone was pinching her. Her small mouth was consistently pursed, and her brown hair was pulled back so tightly that her forehead always seemed unhappy. But she had come highly recommended.

“I think she has some deep, dark secret hidden away in the nape of her neck,” Louisa whispered to Frederick when they first visited Swardeston.

Frederick merely patted her hand without responding. The truth of it was that they could afford Mrs. Cooke. She fit nicely into their meager budget of three hundred pounds a year.

Swardeston was part of a circle of five small and rather poor parishes southwest of Norwich, the others being Intwood, Keswick, East Carleton, and Ketteringham. Swardeston, a hamlet of some three hundred people, possessed no vicarage and, consequently, Frederick and Louisa settled into a red-brick Georgian farmhouse on the village common. Sheltered in a bit of a hollow, the house stood alone. Great, majestic oaks surrounded it, trees that pointed their mighty fingers

at the sky. Often when it stormed, small branches broke off and littered the yard. Frederick would then gather them into a pile behind the house to be burned.

“I’m no gardener,” Mrs. Cooke told him the first time the wind raged about the house, her lips even more pursed than usual and her calloused hands pushed indignantly into her skirt pockets, “and I won’t be cleaning up around outside and such.”

But although she was no gardener, Mrs. Cooke was a jewel of a housekeeper. Her large and comfortable kitchen had a fireplace with a hob, and there was always a kettle simmering on it. She poured fragrant tea, baked wonderful ginger biscuits, cooked well, and kept the house spotless. In no time at all, Louisa doted on the woman and, in spite of her rather severe appearance, Mrs. Cooke was also fond of Louisa.

When Frederick accepted the living in Swardeston, Louisa’s mother, Mrs. Warming, chose to stay in London. She had no desire, she told her daughter and son-in-law, to live in a small village, even though they assured her that Swardeston was only five miles south of the cathedral town of Norwich.

“And what would I be doing at my age walking five miles to get to civilization?” she asked in jest. “No, I prefer to stay where my friends are. I prefer to be where I can get to lots of shops and visit the markets. And young people like yourselves,” she added, “should live alone.”

There was no arguing with her, and, truth be told, Louisa rather enjoyed cutting loose the apron strings.

On an early morning in December 1865, the year the Civil War ended in the United States, Louisa became aware that

her first child would soon make his or her appearance. It was going to be a freezing day. She knew it as soon as she woke up because her feet were cold. The wind whistled past the windowpanes, and she snuggled next to Frederick, curling her toes up against his warm legs. Frederick was always warm. She felt strange, a bit queasy and a trifle apprehensive. The baby was not due for another week; at least that is what they had thought. She wiggled her toes, and Frederick groaned, shifting a bit.

“Frederick?” she half whispered. The tiles on the roof rattled ominously. Feeling unprepared and immature, she wished that her mother were there.

“Frederick?” It was a cry now, and he answered in a voice thick with sleep.

“What’s the matter? Are you cold?”

Putting his right arm around her, he pulled her close. But she didn’t want him to touch her. The feeling of unease grew greater, and she pushed away the covers even though it was so cold that she could see her breath when she spoke.

“I think . . . I don’t feel that well. Oh, Frederick!”

Abruptly awake, he was out of bed in an instant. In his hurry, he collided with the night table, and Louisa laughed in spite of herself. Ruefully rubbing his thigh, he grimaced at Louisa.

“Accidents will occur in the best-regulated families, as Dickens says.”

Still smiling weakly, she leaned back against the pillows, pulling the covers back on. He sat down on the edge of the bed. “Are you feeling poorly, my dear? Is it . . . ? Is it . . . ?”

She nodded, and in an attempt at comfort, he awkwardly patted the round tummy bulging out the covers.

“Well, I’ll get dressed and go for—”

“No, no,” Louisa answered vehemently. “I don’t want anyone just yet.”

Turning over, she hid her face under the blankets. Uncertain, Frederick stood up and walked to the chair next to the dressing table. Quickly he began to put on his clothes, continually peering into the mirror to monitor his wife. Much to his consternation, she started breathing rather heavily after a few moments. Fumbling with his necktie, his fingers shook. Finally done, he walked over to the fire grate, kneeling to coax the coals into flame. Satisfied that the fire would keep going, he stood up, uneasily eyeing Louisa’s form.

“I’ll be back shortly, my dear. Just rest easy. I’ll send Mrs. Cooke up with a nice cup of tea.”

But Louisa kept her head under the covers, giving absolutely no indication that she had heard anything he had said. Closing the door quietly behind him, Frederick left.

There had been nothing, Frederick reflected fifteen minutes later as he walked down Swardston’s main road as quickly as he could, to prepare him for the birth of a child. He had not, in the two years that he had been vicar here, even baptized one. Five women in the parish had given birth, that was true, but all five babies had died. The thought made him lengthen his already long strides. There were very few people about. A farm laborer passed him, nodding curiously at the parson. The wind picked up in force, blowing Frederick’s hat off, and for some moments he was totally preoccupied in extricating it from a hedge. He fancied there were people watching him from behind the cottage windows, laughing. They all probably knew, he thought, that he was on his way to fetch Annie

Hyde, the midwife; they all probably speculated that Louisa was in labor. Poor Louisa! He began to sweat even though the temperature was below freezing. What if Annie was not home? Pondering that possibility made his feet strike the cobblestones even more rapidly, and he wondered what course of action he would take if she was not. Unexpectedly his pace was broken and he found himself down flat on the rounded stones.

“Hello, Vicar.”

The weather-beaten face of John Oldham, a day laborer at one of the local farms, grinned into his own. The man reeked of gin.

“John . . .”

“You have to watch where you’re going, Vicar. I was having a bit of a rest here on the road. Figured this place was as good as any for a snooze.”

“You’ve been drinking, John.”

Frederick sat up. His trousers were covered in dirt, and his right knuckles were bleeding. John laughed out loud, stood up, and offered the vicar a solid, calloused hand. The road they were on, a road that struck off to Norwich, was rife with pubs—pubs that competed for the pay of many local workers.

“Aye, I’ve been drinking!”

Taking the man’s hand, Frederick painfully stood up.

“You could have frozen to death sitting here, man! Why don’t you go home? Besides, you shouldn’t waste money on drink. Think of your poor wife and children in need of food and warm clothes.”

“They’ll always be needing that. Life’s cold and hard, Vicar. Every now and then a man needs a pint to warm his innards.”

Grinning, John lolled about before he began walking the wrong way. In God's strange providence he often makes mockery of plans. The upshot of it was that Frederick felt compelled to backtrack, and he saw John safely home before he resumed his way to Annie's house.

Annie lived in a small stone cottage just outside of Swardeston. Following a country lane and from there turning onto a well-worn mud path, Frederick breathed a sigh of relief when he finally reached her door. The small home stood among acres of plowed fields and grazing land. In the summer it was covered with honeysuckle and surrounded by roses, but on this cold December day it was a dreary, forsaken little place. Though Frederick knocked loudly and insistently, no one answered. After a few moments, he opened the door.

"Annie! Are you home? Annie!"

A cat rubbed about his ankles, and ashes glowed in the fire grate, but it was painfully obvious that there was no one about. Frederick stood for a few seconds, undecided. Then, turning around, he half-walked, half-ran to the nearest farmhouse and from there to another and from there back to Swardeston, for neither farmer could tell him where Annie might be.

It was almost midmorning by the time he returned to Swardeston. Jogging past the village common, much to the amusement of several women on their way to the greengrocers, he did not stop or raise his hat to greet them. Running across the gravel walkway toward the red brick house, he almost fell through the front door. Mrs. Cooke met him in the hallway.

"Oh, you're back, sir," she said as she took his coat and hat, her usually severe face wreathed in smiles.

“Yes, how is . . . ?”

“Mrs. Vicar, sir? She’s fine, and so is the little one.”

“The . . . the . . . the little one?”

“Yes, indeed. A fine little girl, sir. A bonny babe.”

Frederick was not listening. He was already halfway up the stairs, his mud-spattered shoes leaving stains on the carpet. Mrs. Cooke tutted after him, but he paid no heed.

Louisa had her eyes closed when he walked in. Next to her, tucked into the hollow of the bed where he usually slept, was a little bundle. Kneeling down by the bed, he was about to touch his wife when a hand grasped his shoulder.

“Shh! She’s worked hard, poor girl! Don’t wake her!”

He turned and looked into the dark brown eyes of Annie Hyde.

“Annie?”

“Yes, it’s myself,” she whispered.

“How,” he asked, standing up as softly as he could, “How did you—?”

She interrupted him, a twinkle in her eyes.

“Well, I was out for an early morning walk when I saw you take John Oldham by the arm. I supposed you went to take that drunkard home. Now why, I asked myself, would the vicar be out so early? So I decided to have a look-see at the house and sure enough, Mrs. Cooke was happy I came. And so,” she added as an afterthought, “was Mrs. Vicar.”

Louisa stirred, half-opening her eyes. Frederick knelt down again and kissed her. She ran her fingers through his thick, black hair. “You’ve a daughter, Frederick Cavell, a beautiful daughter.”

He lifted his head and smiled at her. “It’s Edith then, isn’t it, my dear—Edith Louisa.”

Louisa nodded, her eyes glowing with happiness. Getting up, he walked over to the dresser and took out a book. “I’ve a present for you,” he said, handing her the volume.

“*Alice in Wonderland*,” Louisa read out loud.

“Yes, it’s just been published, and it’s by a clergyman named Carroll, Lewis Carroll. He wrote it for the children of a friend, and I thought . . . well, maybe, when little Edith is a little older . . . well, that . . .”

Louisa smiled, put the book down on the blanket, and lifted up the swaddled baby lying next to her. Gingerly taking the bundle, he stared into big, wide-open, gray eyes.

“Hello, Edith Louisa, my firstborn child, my gift,” he said. “May God bless you, and may you grow up to serve him in some special way.”