



“Violets! Lovely violets! Buy a posy for your lady, sir?”

The little flower girl picked up a neatly tied bunch of blooms from the tray around her neck. She smiled appealingly.

“Only tuppence, sir. Only tuppence a bunch... Thank you, kind sir.”

Across the street a sinister figure watched from inside a black carriage and raised one gloved hand in a signal.

The girl walked on. She hardly noticed the van as it drew up alongside her. There was nothing unusual about a delivery van – the streets of London were full of delivery vans. She had to stop and wait as the driver and his mate hopped down and swung open the rear doors, blocking the pavement for a moment.

There was a sudden flurry of activity, hidden by the open doors before they were closed again and the van drove off. Across the street, the black carriage moved quietly away in the opposite direction. Where the van had stood, a few posies and nosegays lay scattered in the gutter. But there was no sign of the girl.

She had disappeared.



LOOKING FOR LILY

The morning mist floated in the air like smoke from a bonfire as Rosie trudged through the streets of London carrying her empty flower tray. She had left HQ early as usual, while the rest of the Baker Street Boys were still sleeping – except for Queenie, that is. Queenie, as usual, had left her bed to make sure Rosie had a drink of water and a piece of bread to nibble before she set out on her daily walk to Covent Garden market.

“It’s a long way, there and back,” Queenie always told her. “If you don’t have somethin’ to keep your strength up, you’ll be tired out afore the day’s really started.”

The streets near HQ were all quiet as Rosie left. In the houses, curtains were drawn and shutters closed as people slept. The only traffic was a

few early shopkeepers, already on their way back from market with the day's fresh fish or meat or vegetables. Rosie passed the old lamplighter reaching up with his long pole to turn off the gas in the street lamps, and the postman making his first delivery of the day. PC Higgins, looking enormous in his tall helmet and heavy cape, gave her a wave and a cheery greeting – he was happy to be heading back to the police station after a long night alone on his beat. But there was no sign yet of the crowds of people who would throng the pavements later in the day, nor of the carriages and cabs and carts that would pack the roadways.

There was no sign either of Rosie's friend Lily, another flower girl, who was about the same age as herself and almost as pretty. In fact they looked so alike that people sometimes confused them with each other, though Lily's fair hair was straight and she wore it tied back in a pony-tail, while Rosie's tumbled down to her shoulders in golden curls. The two girls liked to walk to and from the market together each morning, chatting and joking, and Lily was usually waiting for Rosie

on the corner near the Baker Street Bazaar. Today, however, she was nowhere to be seen. Rosie waited for a few minutes, looking up and down the street, but then shrugged and set off on her own. She did not want to be late, or the best flowers would have gone.

As Rosie got closer to Covent Garden, the streets became busier. All through the night, hundreds of carts and vans and wagons had trundled in from the countryside, piled high with fruit and vegetables. Each cart brought a fresh splash of colour to the scene – green cabbages, lettuces, peas and beans, milky-white turnips, parsnips and cauliflowers, bright orange carrots, shiny red apples and cherries. Only the potatoes, still caked with dirt, were dull and brown in their coarse muddy sacks. There were no flowers to be seen, though. They came to the market separately, in closed vans. Many of them had arrived in London by train from faraway parts of England, packed in boxes or baskets to protect them from harm.

Porters had been working hard all night, unloading the produce and carrying it into the

great market halls, where traders sold it to green-grocers and hotels and restaurants. Now the empty carts were leaving, heading back to their farms before the city woke up. The big horses were eager to get home, and they moved faster with no heavy loads to pull. Rosie had to dodge between the carts, sometimes flattening herself against a building or ducking into a doorway to avoid being squashed or run over by the big wooden wheels with their iron rims grinding on the cobblestones.

In the Piazza, the big square in front of the market halls, there was less danger from the heavy wagons. But Rosie still had to keep her wits about her as she threaded her way between the hundreds of smaller carts and vans and barrows, coming and going in all directions, pulled and pushed by horses, donkeys and men. Somewhere a donkey started braying, a loud, hoarse *bee-haw* that was answered by all the other donkeys, drowning out every other sound in the noisy square.

“Oi! Mind yer bloomin’ back! Outta the way!”

The shout came from a lean young man who

was trotting past, balancing a tower of nine or ten circular baskets on his head. Because of the din the donkeys were making, Rosie had not heard him coming.

“Wotcha, Charlie!” Rosie called. “Sorry, mate!”

Charlie gave her a cheerful wave but did not slow down or stop. The tower of baskets swayed gracefully as he swerved round her, but it stayed upright. Such a balancing act would have earnt a round of applause on the stage of Mr Trump’s Imperial Music Hall. But here in Covent Garden no one took any notice – it was just how all the porters carried baskets and boxes. All over the market, men and boys were doing the same thing, trotting busily along without using their hands to hold or even to steady their loads. For all their bustle and haste, they never seemed to drop anything.

Rosie hurried across the Piazza to the Floral Hall, where flowers were bought and sold. Many other girls and women were heading there too, and Rosie kept hoping to see Lily among them. But there was no sign of her friend as she entered the hall, with its high glass roof and walls, and

elegant green ironwork shaped like a huge lady's fan. Inside, the smell was overpowering as the scent from thousands and thousands of blooms mingled together. There were flowers and plants everywhere, stacked high on stalls waiting to be sold, or moving along the aisles on trolleys and barrows as florists wheeled them away to stock their shops.

“Wotcha, me little Rosie! 'Ow's it goin', then?” an older girl greeted her with a grin. This was Eliza, who must have been sixteen or even seventeen and wore a battered black straw hat perched on top of her head like a lost bird, and a tartan shawl around her shoulders. Eliza had been selling flowers for years, from the steps of St Paul's Church on the Piazza, where she could shelter under the porch when it was raining and didn't have far to walk. She lived in an alley off the market with her father, a dustman who beat her when he was drunk – which was most of the time. But she was always cheerful, and all the other girls looked up to her as their leader.

“On your own today?” Eliza asked. “Where's Lily, then?”

“Dunno,” Rosie replied. “Thought she might be here already.”

“No. Ain’t seen hide nor hair of her. And I would have, if she was here. Eliza don’t miss much in this ’ere market.”

“P’raps she’s took sick,” Rosie said.

“Yeh, p’raps there’s somethin’ goin’ round. There’s two or three other girls ain’t turned up this last day or two wivout a word.”

“Is that right?” Rosie was sorry to think of Lily being ill. “I’ll look in at her place on my way home,” she said, “to see if she’s all right.”

“Good girl,” said Eliza, heading for the door. “She’s lucky to have a chum like you. You take care of yourself now.”

Rosie moved through the market stalls, choosing small flowers which she would make into nosegays and posies for ladies, and button-holes for gentlemen. All the time she kept an eye open for Lily, hoping to see her come hurrying into the hall. But Lily did not appear, and when Rosie had filled her tray and spent all the money she had saved for her stock, she set off to walk back home on her own.

Back at HQ, the secret cellar where they all lived, the rest of the Boys were finishing breakfast when Rosie stumbled down the steps with tears streaming down her face. They all looked at her in alarm, and Queenie and Beaver quickly got up and hurried over.

“Why, Rosie, love! What’s up?” Queenie said, putting an arm round her.

“Has somebody hurt you?” Beaver asked, looking concerned.

“It’s Lily,” Rosie sobbed. “Somethin’ terrible’s happened to her. I know it has.”

“What?” asked Beaver.

“I dunno. That’s the trouble. I dunno.” And she wept even harder as Queenie hugged her and tried to comfort her.

Wiggins roused himself from his special chair and went to her.

“Now then, now then!” he said. “Can’t have this. You better tell me all about it, and we’ll see what’s to be done. Right?”

Rosie nodded, sniffed and wiped her eyes and nose on her sleeve.

"It's Lily," she began.

"Yeah, you said that already. What about her?"

"Well, we always look out for each other. And we always walks to Covent Garden together of a mornin' to buy our stock. Always."

"Yes?"

"Well, this mornin' she didn't come."

"P'raps she fancied a day off," Sparrow said.

"Couldn't be bothered to wake up," Shiner chipped in. "I know 'ow she feels."

"P'raps she's took sick," Gertie suggested. "She never looks strong to me."

"That's what Eliza at the market said," Rosie replied. "So I called round at her place on my way home. She wasn't there. Her ma said she never come home last night."

"Oh, lawks," said Queenie. "That don't sound good."

"Hang on," said Wiggins. "We don't know nothing yet. She might have run away."

"That's right," agreed Beaver. "She might have. I did. That's how I come to be here. And if she's run off, she wouldn't have gone home last night, would she? 'Cos she wouldn't want to, so she'd

have gone somewhere else, and if she'd gone somewhere else..."

"Beaver!" Wiggins stopped him before he got completely carried away.

"Oh, sorry. I just thought..."

"No, no," sobbed Rosie. "She wouldn't have run away. Not without telling me. I'm her friend. She tells me everything."

"I bet somebody's bashed her over the head and took her flower money," Shiner said with a mischievous glint in his eye.

Rosie burst into fresh tears at the thought of her friend lying hurt and alone.

"Shiner!" Queenie snapped. "That's enough. Rosie's upset enough without you makin' it worse."

Shiner shrugged and snatched the last piece of bread from the table before grabbing his box of shoe brushes and boot polish and heading out of the door to start work.

"Just keep your eyes open for any sign of Lily!" Queenie shouted after him.

"And that goes for everybody, right?" said Wiggins. "We'll all look out for her."

“There,” Queenie told Rosie, “dry your eyes now and get on with makin’ your posies and buttonholes. If you don’t sell ’em, you won’t have no money to buy no more tomorrow, will you?”

Rosie shook her head, sat down at the table and picked up the fine wire she used to tie the flowers together in her own special way. In a moment, her nimble fingers were fashioning them into little bunches, the prettiest to be found anywhere on the streets of London. Being busy helped her to stop thinking quite so much about what might have happened to Lily – as Queenie had known it would. But she didn’t forget her, and when Rosie walked along the street with her tray round her neck later that morning, she kept looking in all directions, hoping to see some sign of her chum.

As Rosie was so worried about Lily, Wiggins sent the other Boys off to look around and to ask if anyone had seen her. He and Beaver went to find Lily’s mother, to see if they could find out any more from her.

“That’s what Mr Holmes would do,” Wiggins said. “He’d ask lots and lots of questions, and then he’d know what was going on.”

“What *is* goin’ on?” asked Beaver.

“I don’t know, do I?” Wiggins sighed heavily. “That’s why I gotta ask the questions.”

“Oh. Right. What questions?”

“Never mind.” Wiggins sighed again. “Just leave the talking to me. And while I’m talking, I want you to keep your eyes peeled and see if you can spot any clues.”

Beaver nodded eagerly, pleased to be given something useful to do. Then his face clouded again.

“What sort of clues?” he asked.

“How should I know? Anything what don’t look right. Right?”

“Right.”

“OK, then. Here we go.”

They had arrived at the house where Rosie had told them Lily lived in one room with her mother and brothers and sisters. It was a rickety old building that looked ready to be pulled down – if it didn’t fall down first. A woman was leaning

against the open front door, holding a small child on her hip. From inside the house came the sounds of other children crying and fighting.

“Are you Lily’s ma?” asked Wiggins.

The woman stared at him suspiciously, through dull eyes that seemed too big for her thin, tired face.

“Who wants to know?” she replied.

“We do. I’m Wiggins, he’s Beaver. We’re pals of Rosie – you know Rosie, Lily’s friend?”

“Yeah, I know Rosie. She’s a good girl, she is. She wouldn’t run off and leave her poor old ma like my Lily has, selfish little cow.”

“How d’you know she’s run off, Mrs er...?”

“Pool. Mrs Pool. Well, she never come ’ome last night, did she? And I ain’t heard a word from her since.”

She coughed, a hollow, racking cough that shook her bony shoulders inside her threadbare grey dress and creased her face with pain. She dabbed at her mouth with the end of the sack that was tied around her waist to serve as an apron. The noise of children fighting turned into screams. Mrs Pool turned and walked wearily

into the house. Wiggins and Beaver followed her.

“Stop it! Stop it, all of you!” she cried.

The noise did not stop.

“Stop it!” she repeated. “Please!” Her face crumpled and she began to cry.

There was a confused heap of children piled on the floor of the bare room. Legs, arms, elbows, heads were sticking out of it, bobbing and flailing, wrestling and punching, kicking and biting. It was impossible to tell just how many children there were, but none of them paid any attention to their mother’s cries – even if they could hear them over their own yells and screams. Wiggins and Beaver looked at Mrs Pool, standing weeping and helpless. Wiggins took a deep breath and shouted as loudly as he knew how.

“QUIET!!”

Wiggins’s voice filled the room, echoing off the walls and stunning the fighting children into silence. He and Beaver bent over them, disentangling limbs, separating them from each other and hauling them to their feet. When they had done, they found that there were four children, two boys and two girls, who stared at them with

open mouths, shocked at the sudden appearance of the big boys.

“That’s more like it,” said Beaver. “Couldn’t hear meself think with all that racket.”

“Right,” said Wiggins. “Now stand over there and don’t say nothing till I says you can.”

Beaver lined them up along the wall and inspected them. They looked as though they were aged between six and about nine or ten, though they were all small and skinny, with hollow cheeks in pale faces. Their clothes were ragged and none of them had any shoes or stockings on their feet. But although they were dusty from rolling on the floor, they were generally clean and their eyes were bright.

“Blimey, missus,” said Wiggins, turning to Mrs Pool. “Are they always like that?”

The mother nodded sadly. “Truth is,” she said, “I can’t control ’em, not since my old man left me on my own. ’Specially wiv me bein’ not so well.” And she coughed again, holding her chest to stop the pain.

“P’raps that’s why Lily done a bunk,” said Beaver. “I mean, if this lot are always fightin’ and

screamin', p'raps she couldn't stand it no more. And if she couldn't stand it no more, she might have thought, you know... I mean, if she thought, well ... and then she might have thought..."

"No," Mrs Pool interrupted him. "Lily's always been real good wiv the little 'uns. Ain't that right, kids?"

"Yeah," the older girl said. "We loves our Lily. And she loves us."

Mrs Pool started crying again. "I dunno what I'm gonna do wivout her," she sobbed. "Or her flower money. Oh, if only I hadn't spoke so sharp to her yesterday mornin'..."

The four children rushed over, hugging her tight and tugging at her skirt.

"Don't cry, Ma," the older girl said. "It weren't your fault."

"Yes, it was. It was – I should never have told her off like that."

"Shouted at her, did you?" asked Wiggins. "What was it about?"

"Nothin', really. I told her to get a move on or she'd miss the best flowers."

"But she was upset?"

“No more than usual.”

“Did she threaten to run away?”

“She was always threatenin’ to run away. Every time we had cross words. Didn’t mean nothin’.”

“Did she say where she might go?”

“Only the usual. Said if I wasn’t careful she’d go and live with some gang she knew about. Where there weren’t no grown-ups to boss her about.”

Wiggins and Beaver exchanged glances.

“Did she say what this gang was called?”

“Oh, I can’t remember. Something to do with Baker Street, I think.”

“The Baker Street Boys?”

“That’s it! The Baker Street Boys. Though why my little girl should want to go with a gang of boys beats me.”

“Well, as it ’appens,” Wiggins told her, “three of the Boys are girls, if you know what I mean.”

“No, I don’t.” Mrs Pool looked puzzled. “How d’you know?”

“’Cos we’re the Baker Street Boys,” said Beaver proudly. “Or at least, we’re two of ’em. See, there’s another five of us and...”

“And you don’t have to fret no more about Lily,” Wiggins said. “Not now you’ve got the Baker Street Boys on the case. We’ll soon find her for you.”