

Taken Away

(1671-72)

Nine-year-old Mary and her six-year-old sister, Anne, stood still as Mrs Langford tied the ribbons on their cloaks and pulled up their hoods with more force than necessary. The girls exchanged fearful glances. Anne's little hand crept out of the fine woollen folds of her cloak and found Mary's. Together they stood back as their nurse heaved her short plump frame upward and resumed giving sharp orders to the ladies of the royal household.

'Make sure those boxes and trunks are well secured. Bessie, have you packed all the gowns and stockings? Mrs Leigh, stop dawdling and check the bedchamber for all the linens. Really, Mrs Walshingham, this is no time for tears.'

Mrs Langford, or Mam as the children called her, stood with hands on hips supervising like an army captain. Mary knew Mam wasn't angry with them, but they didn't want to get caught in the crossfire. The middle-aged woman had strong opinions and wasn't above voicing them even to her betters.

All at once Mary and Anne were herded out of the door of the royal nursery apartments and through the corridors of St James's Palace with Mrs Langford at

their head. The parade of people, boxes and trunks went down the wide staircase, through the entry hall and out across the park to the River Thames where the royal barge awaited them. Once more Mrs Langford barked out orders, until all were stowed aboard. Mary and Anne, as the daughters of the Duke of York, were seated on the cushioned bench under a brightly decorated canopy at the back of the long barge. From there they could watch the eight rowers as they began to move their oars back and forth in a steady rhythm to propel the vessel around the twists and turns of the wide river.

Mary, eager to calm her sister's fears, whispered, 'It will be all right, Anne, you'll see.' But would it? she silently wondered. What was so terrible about their father that his own brother, King Charles, would send them away from him?

Mary shielded her eyes from the afternoon sun that had peeked under the canopy, and watched as they left London behind. The scene slowly changed from buildings built on the river's edge to marshes and green fields beyond. Only a few weeks ago, Papa had promised that nothing would change, but he had been wrong.

Their father, the tall, elegantly dressed Duke of York, had come to the nursery apartments in St James's Palace to tell them at the end of March 1671 that their mother had died. 'She suffered much pain from her illness and it's as well she's gone,' he had said. Then he added, 'I won't be going to the funeral

and I don't think you girls should either.' Turning to Mrs Langford, he continued, 'Just have them dress in black for a while. That should be sufficient.' Then he gave both Mary and Anne a warm hug.

Mary had tried to remember the mother she hardly knew, but all she could recall was an enormous woman laughing at a dinner table surrounded by courtiers. Mary had lived with her nurse since she was a baby where Mrs Langford, her Mam, cared for all the royal children. Mary didn't remember her mother ever coming to visit the nursery.

'Now you're not to worry,' Papa had said. 'Nothing will change.'

But things did change within a month. A messenger from King Charles arrived and Mam had seen him in the reception room. Then she marched angrily into their playroom muttering, 'Jumped up woman! Thinks she's important now that her husband has been appointed as royal house and grounds keeper to all the king's residences.'

Mary and Anne laid down their dolls and stood up respectfully while exchanging confused glances.

'We're moving to Richmond Palace, where the king has arranged for you to have a new governess. Lady Frances Villiers,' Mam announced. 'Fortunately, the king realises how necessary I am to you, so I will go too.' Then the hurried preparation began.

That was all they had been told, and Mary had been too afraid to ask for more. Now a week later

Mary still didn't understand why the king thought his nieces should live with the Villiers family.

'Mary,' Anne was pulling at Mary's sleeve, breaking into her thoughts. 'I want to go back,' Anne whispered. 'What if they're mean?'

'Don't be a goose, Anne,' Mary replied with more certainty than she felt. 'They won't be mean to us. We're the duke's children.' She reached over and hugged her little sister. 'But I do hope they will be nice,' she whispered softly.

As they rounded yet another bend in the river, Richmond Palace came into sight and Mary's heart began to thud with renewed anxiety. The red and brown stone palace rose majestically from the midst of a large park and formal gardens. The three-storied palace had many round and octagonal towers capped with pepper-pot domes and an equally large number of windows.

The barge bumped gently against the wooden platform built by the water's edge as one of the oarsmen scrambled out to tie the vessel in place. The hard knot in Mary's stomach seemed to tighten up even more as Mam rose unsteadily to her feet, and began to order everyone about as they prepared to disembark. Mary stood up too, her sea legs sure, and turned to take her sister's hand to help her out.

'I won't go,' six-year-old Anne announced, her hood thrown back and the breeze blowing her long brown hair about her head. 'I want to go home. Now!'

Mary recognised that stubborn look on her sister's plump little face. When Anne made up her mind about something, there was no changing it. But Mary was more interested in their new home, so she turned away and climbed out of the gently rocking barge. Then she noticed some people coming down the pathway.

'Look, Mam,' Mary called back over her shoulder. Behind her she could hear their nurse urging Anne to move, but to no avail. In the end, Mrs Langford followed Mary out of the barge in time to be greeted by Colonel and Lady Villiers.

'Lady Mary,' the older gentleman said, bowing to her. He was richly dressed in brown satin breeches, vest and overcoat trimmed with silver buttons. He then introduced himself and his wife, Lady Frances.

'I bid you welcome.'

Mary nervously pushed back the hood of her woollen cloak, allowing her chestnut brown hair to tumble out, and gave a curtsy. 'Thank you, Colonel,' she managed through suddenly dry lips.

Lady Frances, younger than her husband and wearing a soft green silk bodice and skirt, stepped past her husband and swept Mary up in a hug. 'Welcome, my dear. You must be tired and worried with this sudden move. Please know that I'm truly glad that you and your sister are joining our family.'

All at once Mary relaxed into her new governess's arms, the anxiety of the last few days melting away. Whatever the reason they were here, at least the king

had sent them to a kind woman. Stepping back from the embrace, Lady Villiers said to Mary, 'Your sister seems a little overwhelmed with all of this. Would she like a hug too?'

'I think so, although she is awfully stubborn,' Mary warned.

The governess smiled. 'I have six daughters and I think I know a little about young girls' ways. Mrs Langford,' Lady Frances continued, 'please go with my husband and take Lady Mary and the rest up to the house. I will bring Lady Anne.'

Mam gave a slight incline of her head and replied coldly, 'Yes, my lady.' Then taking Mary firmly by the hand she all but pulled Mary along up the pathway. 'Uppity woman,' Mary heard her mutter.

Mary never knew how their governess persuaded Anne, but before long both were at the door of their new apartment in the south wing of the house. A subdued Anne handed her cloak to Bessie, and then followed Lady Frances, Mary and Mrs Langford into the small receiving room. They settled themselves on some ornate cane-back chairs.

The room contained an empty stone fireplace on one wall and the remainder of the walls were panelled and decorated with paintings. Several large windows let in the afternoon sun, making patterns on the wooden floor from the window panes. A number of doors led to the other rooms where the girls and their household would sleep.

‘Again, let me welcome you to my family,’ Lady Frances said with a smile. Mary found herself smiling back and then caught the look of disapproval on Mam’s face. Mary froze, unsure as to how she should behave, not wanting to offend either Mam or Lady Frances.

Lady Frances continued, ‘I’m not sure if you have been told why you are here, so let me explain. The king has allowed my family to live at Richmond House and take you into my household to make sure you are properly schooled in the things that young ladies need to know, and in your religion.’ Mrs Langford shifted noisily in her chair, which Lady Frances ignored. ‘My daughters are already being tutored and you will join them in their classes along with a few other young ladies that the king has chosen as your companions. As for your religious education, Dr Lake has been appointed as your chaplain and he will instruct you in the Protestant faith.’ Again, Mam shifted, purposely rustling the folds of her black silk gown.

This time Lady Frances spoke to the nurse. ‘Mrs Langford, you are only here because the king didn’t wish to distress his nieces with too many changes all at once. However, I must make one thing very clear. You may not discuss your Catholic beliefs at any time with Lady Mary or Lady Anne. You know very well that the Duke of York has converted to the Catholic religion and that this is the reason for removing the girls from their father’s care. The king will not allow any interference with his nieces’ religion.’

Mary straightened in her chair, trying to sort it all out. Mam was Catholic and now her father was. Yet the king was Protestant and he wanted them to be also. Why did it matter? They all went to church to worship God. But Mary sensed this was not the time to ask. Mam looked very angry and Lady Frances very stern.

‘Will you agree to this?’ Lady Frances demanded.

‘This is really too much.’ Mrs Langford complained. ‘I’m the royal nurse. Have I not always taken good care of Lady Mary and Lady Anne?’

Both Mary and Anne cringed as Lady Frances rose from her chair. ‘Mrs Langford, the king has given me the authority to care for his nieces and their household. You will do as I say, or you will be dismissed. Now let that be an end to it.’ Turning once more to Mary and Anne, Lady Frances’ face softened. ‘We will dine shortly and you can meet my daughters. Then we will assemble for evening prayer in the chapel. You are to come to me at any time you have need and I will always listen.’ She gave each girl a kiss on the cheek and left the room.

All at once Mary felt very tired and wished she could go to bed, but she obediently went downstairs to dinner with Anne deliberately lagging behind. The rest of the day passed in a cloud of weariness. The six Villiers girls, ranging in age from six to sixteen, eyed Mary and Anne silently over their dinner of duck and chicken pies. Mary was too tired for conversation,

so the girls talked among themselves as if she wasn't there at all. Afterward, Mary unintentionally dozed during the evening prayer service and remembered very little.

Falling into bed beside an already sleeping Anne, Mary failed to say goodnight to Mam or say her usual prayers. She didn't even take time to wonder if their father was missing them.