**England, 1849**

by Esme

Clara woke with a jolt that morning. It was a dismal, gloomy morning and the rain was almost floating in the cold air. A sense of grief overwhelmed the thirteen-year old girl, although she didn’t understand why. The cold was biting at her bare trembling arms. She lay in her bed for a while, listening to the rain softly beating on her window. Eventually, reality entered her mind and she sighed as she realised that she would have to get out of bed sooner or later. Clara dreaded her day at work in the cramped cotton mill.

Clara heaved on her scruffy clothes and shoved on her heavy ankle boots. She then trudged down the rickety old stairs. The old house was quiet. Clara had no siblings, so the house often had a sense on emptiness lingering over it. Clara assumed that her mother had left for work already, and as for her father, he was dead. Clara’s father had died twelve days after she had been born.

As she made her way into the kitchen, she glanced at the ancient clock which sat upon one of the kitchen surfaces. Clara had to leave in five minutes, as the consequences of being late were severe. Master Black could not tolerate unpunctuality. Clara had no reason what so ever to believe that the words mercy or pity lay within Master Black’s vocabulary. This would become apparent to anyone who met him immediately as he was cruel, mean and vile.

Clara whipped a slice of bread from the cupboard and slammed the door behind her as she set off.

Clara skipped along the stone path, carefully dodging grumpy passers-bye. The street was becoming increasingly busy. Clara bounded along, in and out of the crowd. Clara eventually made it to the cotton mill.

That day flew quickly. One odd thing was that Clara’s best friend James had not turned up for work that day. Clara considered this strange as James had seemed perfectly fine the day before.

When the end of the day promptly arrived, Clara decided to make a visit to James’ house to investigate this odd situation.

Clara arrived at James’ house later that afternoon. She skipped up the steps to reach a wooden door in which a large door knocker was embedded. Clara had always wondered how they had such a magnificent house considering they were quite poor.

The door loomed over Clara, somehow threateningly as if it would come alive at any moment. Clara swallowed her fear and rapped on the door. A few seconds later, James’ mother arrived at the door. She pulled it open with a weary look on her face.

“Oh Clara!” She gasped. Clara was sure that she’d caught a glimpse of tears in her eyes.

“Hello Mrs Anderson,” Clara replied.

“Have you seen James?”

“Not since he left this morning.”

“He wasn’t at work today.” The tension rising in the air implied that they were both getting increasingly worried.

“Well the last time I saw him was this morning,” said Mrs Anderson, the worry in her voice emitting from her words.

“Whatever shall we do?” asked Clara?

“Search,” Mrs Anderson murmured.

Clara could tell that Mrs Anderson was upset.

“Ok,” Clara whispered, struggling to hold back the tears in her eyes.

A terrible thought had just passed through Clara’s mind which startled her greatly. Recently Clara had been hearing rumours and tales about people, specifically men, who had been kidnapping young children. Local called these people various different names although Clara had heard a particular name for this which she thought was the most appropriate for them: snatchers.

Clara tried to push this thought to the back of her racing mind.

“Wait there,” Mrs Anderson said. Mrs Anderson then disappeared into her house. Soon she emerged wearing a large coat and a woollen scarf.

Clara and Mrs Anderson walked side by side when Clara asked

“Where exactly are we going?” with a tone of curiosity in her voice.

“I think we ought to check around the Mill first,” Mrs Anderson declared.

As the two of them walked along, Clara glanced at newspapers standing in stalls. Many of them were bearing headlines to do with Queen Victoria. Soon enough they arrived at the mill.

“Right, I believe we should take a look around. Stay close to me Clara.” Clara shuffled forward. Then the pair set off. They strolled around looking in various different places, but no luck. After Clara and Mrs Anderson had been looking for half an hour or so, the afternoon began to merge into a chilly damp evening. Clara could smell smoke as it swirled around in the cold air. By now, darkness had fallen. Clara was sensible and was not usually afraid of the dark, but in the Victorian streets, anything could happen so Clara and Mrs Anderson both had the right to be slightly frightened, especially in these circumstances.

Both of them decided that it would be best to start searching elsewhere. “Maybe near the stalls and markets,” suggested Clara.

“Yes perhaps we ought to search there.”

They set off and when they arrived at their destination it was practically pitch black. Even the silvery moon seemed to be hiding away. As they passed various stalls, they came across a stall selling inks and quills. The old man running it seemed to have drifted off. Two lanterns stood confidently by the stall. When Mrs Anderson was absolutely sure no-one was watching, she swept her wrinkly hand down and gracefully swooped up one of the two lanterns. Clara wasn’t entirely sure why Mrs Anderson had been so cautious while taking the lantern, as many of the stalls were unoccupied with no more products standing in them. The only beings they were aware of were the elderly man and a small rabbit which had just bounded into a nearby bush.

Whilst Clara was searching she realised she had done something awful, something so mean. Her mother had always wished for her daughter to be independent. The one thing her mother had told Clara despite wishing Clara to be an independent girl, was that Clara should be home for dinner at 5 o’clock. It had long past that time. As Clara predicted her mother was worried sick. Clara decided to speak to Mrs Anderson.

 “Mrs Anderson. I hope you understand that I care greatly for James, but I really must go home as it is getting late.”

 “Yes, I completely understand. I shall continue searching.”

After Clara had said her goodbyes and goodnights to Mrs Anderson, she quickly retreated back to her house. When Clara arrived home, she hastily shoved open the door to her sobbing mother. Clara ran to her mother and hugged her tightly, then Clara explained everything. The next morning, although she was exhausted from the previous night’s events, Clara woke early. It was rainy and windy and Clara didn’t want to rise from bed, but she knew she had to. Instead of going straight to work that morning, she went to Mrs Anderson’s grand house. When Clara managed to make her way to the Anderson’s house, Mrs Anderson answered the door.

Tears were gliding down her red face. Clara didn’t really need to ask whether or not she had found James, but she did anyway.

“Did you manage to find James?” Clara asked shyly. Mrs Anderson shook her head so harshly that Clara was surprised she hadn’t hurt her neck.

“I searched a majority of last night, but nothing.” Mrs Anderson cried dramatically. Clara was quite startled by this sudden reaction.

“What on earth shall we do?” Mrs Anderson cried somehow even more dramatically than her previous sentence. Mrs Anderson stood on the threshold of the large door, wailing uncontrollably.

It took quite a while to calm down Mrs Anderson, but Clara succeeded eventually. Clara and Mrs Anderson strolled briskly through the small town. After a while they ended up walking along the side of river. Suddenly an awful scream issued from Mrs Anderson’s mouth. She pointed a trembling finger towards the river. Clara turned on the spot on immediately. No one knows what happened next. Some say that they witnessed James’ dead body floating down the river, but whatever happened that unfortunate morning we will never know, as Clara nor Mrs Anderson were ever seen again.