

Chapter Fifteen

Some Trials and Tribulations

Winter came early that year. It descended upon London at the end of October in the unwelcomed shape of a dense freezing fog which drifted slowly up the river and engulfed everything that lay in its path. And once having taken possession, it proved reluctant to yield, doing so only to the bitterest of winds that blew down from the Arctic Ocean. If there was one thing that everyone in London agreed upon at that time, it was the unseasonable nature of the weather.

Ruth, of course, on the strength of her account of the Hebridean storm, had been allocated everything associated with the climate as one of her topics, and was able to write of its effects and deprivations at first hand. She had no doubt that it was one of the hardest in living memory when she sat in her lodgings and tried to eke out the less than generous amount of coal she was able to afford after she had paid her way and sent a small amount to her mother. She noted with dismay that as the cold deepened, no amount of money spent on coal or any other combustible material was sufficient to reach the extremities of her room or dispel the ice that thickened on the inside of the windows. She wrote authoritatively, in a hand that was shaking and barely able to grip the pen, of the icicles that hung like the teeth of prehistoric tigers from the windows, of the water that froze in the bedroom basin, of the taps that were run dry, of the pumps that no longer pumped. In time she found herself writing of the graves that could no longer be dug to bury those who had succumbed and grew fearful that she might be numbered amongst them.

Then, to Mrs Tucker's delight, the snow came. Ruth noted that her landlady appeared to take delight in experiencing the extremes of climatic conditions and would declare that next to a drought and dawn to dusk sunshine, there was nothing in the weather that she enjoyed more than a really heavy snowfall. She was not to be disappointed this Winter, it seemed. It was of no encouragement to Ruth when, upon returning from her daily attendance at the office and having witnessed a bony horse struggling desperately to drag its heavy load through the street only to sliver, slip, fall and expire at her feet, Mrs Tucker would greet her, rubbing her violet hands together, and declare what a glorious, God-given, day it was!

She wrote to her mother saying that she trusted she was spending sufficient of the money she sent on kindling and logs, and that she keeping warm and not going out unnecessarily. She would say how snug and warm she recalled the cottage could be, and would hint at the difficulty she experienced. But she took care to never say enough to allow her mother to realise how bad it really was. She did not want to be told that she had brought all this upon herself or, worse, for her mother to return some of the money that she had been sent. In her turn, Mrs Mottram wrote back to her daughter, but never in friendly, maternal, terms. Every letter asked Ruth whether she had heard from or seen her sister and it soon became plain that Victoria rarely communicated with her mother. Ruth grew weary of writing that her sister was probably very busy, partly because she did not wish to keep repeating herself, but also because she did not believe that was the true reason for her silence. Victoria had changed, but how was Ruth to say that to their mother without provoking a host of questions that she was in no position to answer?

She wrote less frequently to Hazleton Court Hall. There was a change there as the letters written personally by her uncle became less regular, shorter, and then she received a letter from Mr Twigg, saying that he was writing on her uncle's behalf as he was indisposed. It was a letter that, sat before her uncle's image at the writing desk, she re-read several times before replying, asking for the particulars of his indisposition. Mr Twigg's reply was not that informative, but she was left with the impression that the ailment was temporary and would soon be dispelled. So, in her next letter it was understandable that she made only a passing reference to it and, apart from a short commentary on the weather which, as she observed, her

uncle could read of in the Daily Pitch which covered the matter as well as, if not better than, any other publication, she concentrated on her successes because she thought that would cheer him.

And she was having success. There was no doubt of that. She mentioned little of it to her mother on account of the sensitivity of the issue, but she was free to report every detail to her uncle. She told him how she had maintained a steady flow of short stories and that these had been well received by both Mr Braithwaite and Mr Sunbury. She stated that she now felt that she was becoming proficient at writing reports on the topics she had been given, praising the guidance she had received at the hands of Mr Spruce although she confessed she still did not think favourably of him as a man. In fact, she was now producing unsupervised items and hoped that she would soon be entirely independent of his influence. But best of all, she had started on a novel which was being serialised in *The Vesuvius*. Of course, he would be aware of that and she hoped he would not only read it, but he would be patient and not expect her to reveal details of the plot before it was published although, she went on to explain, she was now writing some four or five instalments in advance of that already published.

Ruth had grown accustomed to seeing Christmas as a time for some celebration, but this was not so in Mrs Tucker's house. Instead, the landlady would dress in black and observe it as an occasion for some solemnity. This was not solely on account of the religious significance which, Mrs Tucker reminded her lodgers at the table that Christmas Day, was not to be overlooked, but was in remembrance of Mr Tucker who had been most cruelly taken from her some twenty-two years since. At this announcement Miss Stern looked across the table at Ruth and shook her head. She took the opportunity of Mrs Tucker's temporary absence from the room to lean forward and whisper that it was not so. "It is not true," she hissed. "Emily and I discovered that it was nineteen years ago, not twenty-two. We have noted that Mrs Tucker adds a year or two to the total now and then. And that is not all. Mr Tucker departed a few weeks before Christmas. Furthermore he was taken from her by no-one other than a pretty little actress who was appearing at the Canterbury Music Hall which is not the kind of place one might have expected a husband of Mrs Tucker to have frequented. Is this not so, Emily?"

"It is," said Miss Stern. "Without a word of a lie, her husband absconded with this actress and disappeared off the face of the Earth. There has not been sight or sound, nor word of either him or the woman from that day forward. But our good landlady has canonised his memory and associated it with Christmas and as we like to humour her, we observe it as well. It is no hardship and it seems to settle the memories, at least for another year."

"But is such a mystery!" hissed Miss Cramm. "Perhaps you could incorporate it into one of your stories?"

"Or even your novel?" suggested Miss Stern. "We are following it avidly, but of course we will not ask you what happens."

"I am not entirely sure myself," said Ruth. "Oh, I have worked out the main events and I know where the plot has to head. But as for the detail, well, I tackle that as it arises."

"Oh, but it is so very good, and so much like real life," said Miss Cramm. "Especially the account of the storm. I mean, reading it was second only to being there oneself!"

"Oh yes!" exclaimed Miss Stern. "I read that passage over and over again, but would it not be a good idea if -"

"Sarah!" said Miss Cramm, disapprovingly. "We agreed that we would not tax Miss Mottram with our ideas as to how her plots should develop. She is more than capable of performing that deed herself. You see, Miss Mottram, how involved we have become in your story, but we must not usurp the privilege of living in the same household as the authoress that the whole of London is beginning to talk off!"

"Oh, I am sure that is not true," said Ruth, feeling the blood running to her cheeks, yet feeling also that this was the best Christmas present she had ever received.

"Well," said Miss Stern, "if it is not yet true, it soon will be, and with good justification!"

If inclement weather was required to lift Mrs Tucker's spirits, it was clearly absent on Christmas Day itself which was unexpectedly mild and overcast, but well before the four

ladies had assembled in the sitting room with the intention of welcoming in the New Year as announced by the grandfather clock that had been the property of Mrs Tucker's mother, the snow was falling heavily again. It might have had the desired effect on the landlady, but Ruth was dismayed by the sight of it and was not lifted until after midnight when the front door was opened onto a black, star-filled, night. But she went to her bed for the first time on that New Year feeling warm and content.

It was natural that when she awoke later she would look out on the small part of London that she could see from her window to see if there had been any further falls of snow to delight her landlady. There was the church and the churchyard, the gravestones and monuments shrouded and indistinct. And there was also something there that made her start and step back. In the white and pristine snow, clear and black, was a track of footprints which traversed the ground from the front of the church in an arc coming to a halt beneath her window. From the way the snow there was trampled whoever had left the tracks had stood there for a little while. Then it was clear that the person had retraced his path back to the way he had come in. Someone had come during the night, after the snow storm had finished, and stood beneath her window! There was no doubt of it!

Hurriedly and nervous she dressed and went down to breakfast. She found the thought that someone had taken the trouble to scale the railings with the intention of spying on her quite disturbing and she felt uncomfortable and self conscious when she went to the office to write that day's copy, repeatedly looking around her to see if anyone was watching her. The footprints were still visible when she returned to her room later in the day, a lasting testament to her mysterious voyeur. But their presence and the excitement she felt inspired a short story concerning a young girl who is stalked by Death and only becomes aware of his presence when she sees the footprints left in the snow. She submitted it the next day to Mr Braithwaite for publication in *The Etna* and was delighted when he declared it to be her best work yet and asked if she would contribute regular stories of the supernatural for the magazine. "You will find a very bulky file on psychic phenomena, if you are in need of material," he told her. He also gave her the Finsbury Park address of the secretary of the London Society for Investigation into the Paranormal, adding that their fact was far stranger than fiction, but she never pursued this lead. However she did provide her Editor with what he sought.

A day after "Footprints in the Snow" appeared in the magazine, a small envelope was delivered by hand to her lodgings. There was something mysterious about this, too, as no-one had seen who had brought it nor the manner in which they had travelled. Ruth's first reaction was that perhaps it was from Victoria, but she did not recognise the elaborate script writing of the address. Inside was a plain white card on which, written in the same flamboyant hand were the words, "*It was Love, not Death, who visited and left his footprints in the Snow*". Below the message was written a short poem which, when she read it, enflamed her cheeks.

She mentioned the card and its message at dinner that evening. She did not mention the poem. "Well, my dear," said Mrs Tucker, "Tis plain to me that you've a secret admirer."

"I doubt that I have any admirers," said Ruth.

"Oh you must have," said Miss Stern. "I am sure that you have dozens and dozens."

"But not ones who come around and stand in the snow in the middle of the night!" said Ruth.

"It takes all sorts," said Miss Cramm.

"It's definitely an admirer," said Mrs Tucker. "No-one else would do such a thing or send such a message." Ruth was not convinced and said that it could equally be a practical joke. The next day she mentioned the incident to Mr Spruce in the possibility that it might be him.

"It appears you have earned yourself an admirer, Miss Mottram," he said, making her feel annoyed.

"My fellow lodgers think I may have many," she said.

"I dare say they are right," he said, seeming quite unconcerned. "Amongst your many readers you are likely to have as many admirers as you have enemies."

"Oh! I trust I have no enemies!"

“I would not place any reliance in it. All writers earn their enemies.”

“Well, I cannot imagine what I will have done to deserve as such!”

“Being moderately successful,” he said. “That is enough.”

Back in her room, Ruth wondered on which side Mr Spruce saw himself encamped. On the whole she would rather have him as an ally rather than an enemy. She placed the card next to her uncle’s image on the writing desk. It must have come from someone who knew her or at least knew where she lodged. It must have come from the very person who had stood beneath her window in the dark and cold. But who could it be?

It did occur to her, in a moment of wishful fancy, that it might have been Matthew. Indeed, if it was to be anyone, her preference was for it to have been him, but there were too many improbabilities. How would he have found out where she lodged? That was known to only a handful of people. For certain her mother would not have told him, and nor would he have learnt her address from Victoria. Perhaps he was acquainted with someone who worked for the Daily Pitch but even were this so, what was he doing there, in London, and on New Year’s Eve in particular? And the largest improbability of all was that he would have come to the church, climbed over the railings, and simply stood there below her window and silently serenade her, he who had not once revealed the slightest degree of affection towards her. Yes, if it had been Matthew, it was only because she willed that it was so.

The following day it snowed again and the evidence was obliterated. It was still there, she told herself, and capable of being archeologically revealed, but neither she nor anyone else were inclined to go out and dig to reveal even one of the footprints. “One would probably be apprehended and charged with desecration or body-snatching if one tried,” she told herself. So her only link remained the card which she would regularly take down, examine, and replace. Whoever it had been, it appeared the visit was not repeated or, if it was, she was not aware of it because although she would peer out during the day and into the darkness, she rarely saw anyone in the churchyard and none of those she did see directed their attention towards her windows.