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heart-warming'

Woman & Home

Gypsy
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Gypsy
by
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Chapter One

1893, Liverpool

‘Stop playing that Devil’s music and come and help me,’ Alice Bolton yelled angrily from the kitchen.

Fifteen-year-old Beth smirked at her mother’s description of her fiddle playing and was tempted to continue louder and wilder. But Alice had been very irritable recently and was likely to come in and snatch the fiddle, so Beth put it back into its battered case and left the parlour to do as she was asked.

She had only just reached the kitchen when a thud, quickly followed by the sound of heavy objects falling, came from the shop below their flat.

‘What on earth was that?’ Alice exclaimed, turning round from the stove with the teapot in her hand.

‘I expect Papa knocked something over,’ Beth replied.

‘Well, don’t just stand there, go and see,’ her mother snapped.

Beth paused on the landing, looking down over the banisters on to the staircase which led to the shop. She could hear something rolling around down there, but there was no sound of the cursing that usually accompanied any accidents.

‘Are you all right, Papa?’ she called out.

It was dusk, and although they hadn’t yet lit the gas lights upstairs, Beth was surprised to see no glow at the bottom of the stairs from the lights in the shop. Her father was a shoemaker, and as he needed good light for close work he always lit the lamps well before daylight began to fade.

‘What’s the clumsy oaf done now?’ her mother bellowed.

‘Tell him to leave his work for tonight. Supper’s nearly ready anyway.’

Church Street, one of Liverpool’s main shopping streets, had few carts or carriages upon it at seven in the evening, so her father should have heard his wife’s insulting remark clearly. When he didn’t respond to it, Beth thought he must be out in the privy in the backyard, and maybe a stray cat had got into the shop and knocked something over. The last time this had happened the contents of a glue pot ran all over the floor and it had taken hours to clean up the mess, so she ran down quickly to check.

Her father wasn’t in the privy as the door out to the yard was bolted on the inside, and when she went into the shop she found it in semi-darkness as the blinds had been pulled down.

‘Where are you, Papa?’ she called out. ‘What was all the noise about?’

There was no sign of a cat, or indeed anything out of place. The street door was locked and bolted; furthermore, he’d swept the floor, tidied his work bench and hung his leather apron up on the peg just as he did every evening.

Puzzled, Beth turned and looked towards the storeroom where her father kept his supplies of leather, patterns and other equipment. He had to be in there, but she couldn’t imagine how he could see anything with the door shut for even in bright daylight it was gloomy.

A strange sense of foreboding made her skin prickle and she wished her brother Sam was home. But he had gone out to deliver some boots for a customer a few miles away, so he wouldn’t be back for some time. She didn’t dare call her mother for fear of getting a clout for being ‘fanciful’, the expression Alice always used when she considered Beth was overreacting. But then her mother felt that a fifteen-

year-old should have nothing more on her mind than improving her sewing, cooking and other domestic skills.

‘Papa!’ Beth called out as she turned the storeroom door knob. ‘Are you in there?’ The door only opened a crack, as if something was behind it, so she put her shoulder to it and pushed. She could hear a scrape on the flagstone floor, maybe a chair or box in the way, so she pushed harder until it opened enough to see round it. It was far too dark to make anything out, but she knew her father was inside, for she could smell his familiar odour, a mixture of glue, leather and pipe tobacco.

‘Papa! Whatever are you doing? It’s pitch dark,’ she exclaimed, but even as she spoke it struck her that he might have been knocked out by something falling on him. In panic she rushed back across the shop to light the gas. Even before the flame rose enough to illuminate the glass mantle and bathe the shop in golden light, she was back at the storeroom.

For a second or two she thought she was seeing a large sack of leather in front of the storeroom window, but as the shop light grew brighter, she saw it was no sack, but her father.

He was suspended from one of the hooks on the ceiling, with a rope around his neck.

She screamed involuntarily and backed away in horror. His head was lolling to one side, eyes bulging, and his mouth was wide open in a silent scream. He looked like a hideous giant puppet.

It was all too clear now what the sound they’d heard earlier had been. As he’d kicked away the chair he’d been standing on, it had knocked a box of oddments, tins of shoe polish and bottles of leather dye, on to the floor.

It was early May, and just a few hours ago Beth had been grumbling to herself as she walked to the library because

her father wouldn't allow her to get a job. She had finished with school the previous year, but he insisted daughters of 'gentlefolk' stayed at home helping their mothers until they married.

Sam, her brother and senior by one year, was also disgruntled because he was apprenticed to their father. What Sam wanted was to be a sailor, a stevedore, a welder, or to do almost any job where he could be outside in the fresh air and have the company of other lads.

But Papa would point out the sign above the door saying 'Bolton and Son, Boot and Shoemaker', and he expected Sam to be just as proud now to be that 'Son' as he himself had been when his father had the sign made.

Yet however frustrating it was to have their lives planned out for them, both Beth and Sam understood their father's reasons. His parents had fled from Ireland to Liverpool in 1847 to escape slow starvation during the potato famine. For years they lived in a dank cellar in Maiden's Green, one of the many notorious, squalid slum 'court's that abounded in the city. Frank, Sam and Beth's father, had been born there a year later, and his earliest recollections were of his father going from door to door in the better parts of Liverpool with his little cart to find shoes and boots to mend, and his mother going out each day to work as a washerwoman.

By the time Frank was seven he was helping both his parents by collecting and delivering boots for his father or turning the handle of the mangle for his mother. It was impressed on him, even when he was hungry, cold and tired, that the only way out of poverty was to work hard until they had saved enough money to get a little cobbler's shop of their own.

Alice, Sam and Beth's mother, had an equally tough childhood, for she had been abandoned as a baby and brought

up in the Foundling Home. At twelve she was sent out to be a scullery maid, and the stories she told of the exhausting work and the cruelty of the cook and housekeeper was the stuff of nightmares to Beth.

Frank was twenty-three when he met sixteen-year-old Alice, by which time he and his parents had achieved their goal and had a tiny shop with two small rooms above. Alice had often said with a smile that her wedding day was the happiest day of her life because Frank took her to live with his parents. She still had to work just as hard, but she didn't mind that, for the purpose was to get even better premises where her father-in-law and husband could make shoes instead of just repairing old ones.

The hard work finally paid off and brought them here to Church Street, with two floors above the shop, where both Sam and Beth were born. Beth couldn't remember her grandmother, as she'd been only a baby when she died, but she had adored her grandfather and it was he who taught her to play the fiddle.

Since Grandfather's death five years ago, Papa's shoe-making skills had become well known and now he made shoes and boots for some of the wealthiest people in Liverpool. He still worked extremely hard, from first light until dusk, and most nights he fell asleep the moment he had eaten his supper, but until tonight Beth had always thought he was a very happy man.

'What on earth is going on down there? I heard you scream,' her mother called peevishly from the top of the stairs. 'Is it a rat again?'

Beth was brought up with a start. Appalled and terrified as she was, her instinct was to protect her mother.

'Don't come down,' she called back. 'I'll get Mr Craven.'

‘You can’t disturb neighbours when they’re having their supper. Surely your father can deal with it?’

Beth didn’t know how to answer that, so she went to the stairs and looked up at her mother, hoping something would come to her.

Alice Bolton was thirty-eight but looked far younger for she was tiny, with blonde hair, wide, pale blue eyes and the kind of delicate features and complexion that suggested frailty.

Sam had inherited her blonde hair and blue eyes, but he was nearly six feet tall, with his father’s vigour and strong features. It was said that Beth was a double of her Irish grandmother, with her curly black hair, dark blue eyes and impertinent manner that would get her into trouble one day.

‘For goodness’ sake don’t stand there looking so gormless,’ Alice snapped. ‘Just tell your father to come now or the supper’ll be ruined.’

Beth gulped, all too aware that lies and attempted smoke screens wouldn’t help in something like this. ‘He can’t come, Mama,’ she blurted out. ‘He’s dead.’

Her mother never grasped anything quickly. This time was no exception; she just stared at Beth blankly.

‘He’s hanged himself, Mama,’ Beth said, fighting back tears and mounting hysteria. ‘That’s why I wanted to get Mr Craven. You go back up into the kitchen.’

‘He can’t possibly be dead. He was fine when he came up for his tea.’

Beth was controlling the desire to scream the place down, and her mother’s disbelief almost made her lose that control. Yet it was true what her mother said, her father *had* appeared perfectly normal at teatime. He’d remarked on how good the seed cake was, and he’d told them that he’d finished the boots he was making for Mr Greville.

It didn't seem possible that he'd gone back downstairs, finished his work for the day, tidied his bench and then calmly taken his own life knowing his wife and daughter were just upstairs.

'He *is* dead, Mama. He's hanged himself in the storeroom,' Beth said bluntly.

Her mother shook her head and started down the stairs. 'You're a wicked girl to say such a thing,' she said indignantly, brushing Beth aside as she got to the bottom. 'I'll deal with you later.'

Beth caught hold of her arms and tried to prevent her from going into the shop. 'You mustn't go in there, Mama,' she begged. 'It's horrible.'

But her mother wouldn't be deterred; she thrust Beth aside, rushed over to the storeroom and wrenched the door open. Her scream when she saw her husband reverberated through the whole building. But the scream was shut off abruptly as she slumped to the floor in a faint.

An hour later Sam arrived home to find the shop was not in darkness as he'd expected. Through the window he saw rotund Dr Gillespie and burly Mr Craven, their neighbour, but even before they opened the door to him, he knew something was seriously wrong.

It was the doctor who explained that Beth had run to Mr Craven when her mother collapsed. Mr Craven sent his son to fetch the doctor, and came back with Beth to cut Papa's body down. When Gillespie arrived he had told Beth to take her mother upstairs, give her some brandy and put her to bed.

Sam was a tall, lanky boy of sixteen. He swayed on his feet at the news, the colour draining from his face and the shock of it almost making him collapse too. His father's

body was on the floor, covered in a blanket, all except for one hand which was stained brown with leather dye. If it hadn't been for that hand Sam might have refused to believe what the men told him, but Frank's hand was as familiar to him as his own.

He asked why his father had done such a thing, but they couldn't tell him. Mr Craven scratched his head and said it was a mystery to him as only that morning he'd dropped into the shop for a chat, and Frank had been in good spirits. Dr Gillespie was equally baffled and spoke of how well respected in the community Frank was. It was clear both men were as horrified and shocked as Sam.

The doctor caught hold of both Sam's arms, looking right into his eyes. 'The mortuary cart will be here soon,' he said gently. 'There has to be an inquest in situations like this. You must be the man of the house now, Sam, and take care of your mother and sister.'

Sam felt as if a trapdoor had opened beneath his feet and he had fallen into a place he didn't recognize. For as far back as he could remember, there had always been order and absolute certainty in his life. He had often baulked at the dullness of the daily routine, with his father working in the shop from seven in the morning till late in the evening, and his mother cooking and cleaning upstairs. Yet he had always felt safe in the knowledge that if he did fall flat on his face while seeking out a more adventurous life for himself, everything would remain the same here and he could come back to it.

But at a stroke all that precious certainty was gone.

How could such a mild-mannered, thoughtful and kind-hearted man have such demons lurking inside him? And why didn't those closest to him ever catch a glimpse of

them? Just that morning Sam had watched his father go to the foot of the stairs and listen while Beth was playing her fiddle. He made no comment, but his face had been alight with pride in her talent. Later, when Sam had finished repairing a pair of boots, Frank had clapped him on the shoulder and praised his work.

Time and again both he and Beth had witnessed the loving way their father looked at their mother, seen him holding her and kissing her. If they all meant that much to him, why did he want to leave them?

And what would happen to the family now, without the man who had been their provider, their rock and comforter?