

Elizabeth's Story.

Whitby

'What a beautiful child.' It was a refrain I was used to hearing. You see I'd always been aware of my good looks. My skin has always been clear and ivory white, my eyes large and ocean blue. People would remark as they passed by - about my blonde hair in particular. When I was seven or eight years of age flaxen curls tumbled down my back making heads turn wherever I went. My mother was adamant I washed it weekly and unlike most children I was happy to comply. I remember a man once stopped my mother in the street and asked to buy my locks - he was a wig maker. Although we were dirt poor I was grateful she didn't give in to temptation. I'm not sure I would have shown such restraint in her position.

As I grew into a young woman the attention I received became even more pronounced. Now it wasn't just my face and hair which was remarked upon, my figure too was pleasing to the eye - the male eye in particular.

My Pa never noticed me however, or my brothers or sister. If it wasn't a bottle he wasn't interested. Pa, a fisherman, fished from Whitby for herring. It would have been a good living had he not drunk all his pay away. He was an early role model for me - of why a woman should never trust a man.

We lived on my mother's meagre earnings mainly, but as a fishwife her wages were seasonal. I know now, now that I'm older and wiser, the ribbons in my hair were paid for by her selling the only thing she had of value - herself. If Pa noticed Ma's louche ways he never said so.

As a young woman of fifteen it would have been easy to listen to sweet talking sailors, but I wasn't stupid. I'd seen my poor mother work like a dog by day and like a whore by night - and all for what? She'd been a good looking woman in her time, but six brats, a drunk for a husband and poverty had wiped the smile from her face and replaced it with worry lines, wrinkles and a frown. At thirty she looked twice her age.

I, Elizabeth Buchanan, was determined my life wouldn't be like Ma's. My fate was in my own hands and I wasn't going to miss any chance that came along.

'You've ideas above yer station my girl.' My Pa never ceased telling me. 'Get yer sen a job - who'd yer think yer are the Queen er Sheba.'

To be fair I'd been working since I was ten - picking up after Widow Wisewood, a down at heel old baggage who was largely bed ridden and smelled of piss. But to my Pa this wasn't 'real' work. My Ma hadn't wanted me to ruin my smooth, white hands gutting fish or making rope so had gotten me the position - such as it was. I hated it - and the rotting old widow, but I had to help put food on the table; there were eight hungry mouths to feed. I was

always my Ma's favourite and she did all she could to help me - I owed it to her to better myself - but how?

Then one summer's day a group of travelling players arrived in the market square. Their appearance that day changed my life - I'd found my vocation. I remember pushing my way to the front to get a better view.

'Have a seat my dear.' A grey haired gentleman moved along the bench to make room for me. It turned out the bench was for the local dignitaries and several of their ladies tutted as I took my seat. He kept his sweaty hand on my thigh throughout the play, Shakespeare as I recall, but it was a small price to pay - I was smitten. Not by the old letch, but by acting. I decided that day I would tread the boards.

By the age of sixteen I was on the stage. Not a very big stage and not a very big part, but it was a start - it was my route out of this God forsaken harbour town, or at least I hoped it would be. The Spa Theatre was where I made my debut. I turned up at the stage door and fluttered my eyelashes.

'I want to be an actress,' I told the man who said he was the stage manager.

'Do you now my lovely, had any experience?' His eyes devoured my young body.

'I'm a quick learner. I'll do anything, try any part. I can sing.' I sang him a little ditty I'd learnt from my little sister, Effie.

'Like a nightingale,' he laughed, 'come inside and let me show you what's what. Then I might try you out.'

I remember wondering why there was no one about, but the man seemed friendly enough; too friendly as it turned out. I gave him just enough encouragement to suggest there would be more to come if he took me on. He gave me the part of a chamber maid in some titillating little melodrama. The pay was a pittance and my maid's costume wouldn't have been allowed in any respectable house I've ever been in since, but I was on my way.

After six months of fending off the amorous advances of the stage manager, I realised the provinces weren't going to get me what I wanted - I needed to move on. For a time I contemplated Glasgow. I'd heard there was a growing audience for plays there - my father was a Scotsman, did I mention that? In the end I went to the only place a girl dreams of if she wants to become an actress.

London

I won't bore you with the details, but needless to say I quickly became sought after - and not just for my acting abilities. I smile as I think of those early roles. I was of the opinion I was the greatest actress who'd ever lived - at the time I'd never had anything other than bit parts in tawdry little plays or sketches - when in fact I was a young, beautiful face hired to bring in the punters. Did I say my face brought in the audiences? My body also drew the crowds. I was tall for my age with a figure men admired and women envied. My corseted waist could be spanned by men with their hands; the resulting spillage at the top of my corset were two smooth, pale domes. The costumes I wore were never very substantial and I always seemed to be showing my garters to the world, but I didn't care, I was an actress.

It wasn't long before I caught the eye of a 'Gentleman'. I thought Mr Hardy a fine catch; I was so gauche, so naive. How I smile now at the silly young girl I was back then, so full of optimism and hope. I thought him rich and he was in comparison to any man I'd met so far in my life. He started to send gifts to my dressing room. I say *my* dressing room it was a cupboard I shared with six other aspiring actresses. First there were flowers and then chocolates. I'd never eaten chocolate before. Back in Whitby if it didn't swim we didn't eat it. There was barely enough money for bread let alone sweets. That's when my love of violet creams began. I remember as if it were yesterday the explosion of sweet, scented cream as I bit into that first chocolate. 'Violets all the way from Parma' it said in gold lettering on the elegant beribboned box.

I was flattered like any aspiring sixteen year old would be. After all I was only on stage for five minutes in the first act. During the run he came to see me every evening. The gifts continued to arrive, but now he brought them himself.

As I slipped out of the stage door one night a tall, debonair young man handed a bouquet of white carnations to me.

'Good evening Miss Buchanan. You were magnificent as always.'

I was flattered he even knew my name. I took the proffered flowers. 'Well thank you Sir - you're most kind.'

I'd been trying to shed my Yorkshire accent by mimicking the other actors in the company. In this gentleman's company I sounded like my Ma - I remember feeling mortified. His cultured tones made me feel inadequate - for a split second - until I remembered he was the one seeking *me* out and not the other way about. It wasn't the first time I used my looks - and my body to get what I wanted and it certainly wouldn't be the last.

'Would you do me the honour of taking supper with me? My carriage is at your disposal.'

'That would be lovely Sir, but sadly I have a previous engagement.'

‘Surely not. You are perfection personified. Would you have me beg Miss Buchanan for I have my heart set on you?’

And not only his heart it later transpired.

‘Sir I’m promised to another this evening, but I’m sure I can squeeze you in tomorrow after the matinee.’

I’d decided not to be too easy; I was young but I’d seen how men lost interest when they’d taken what they wanted. It couldn’t hurt to play the coquette, he was already on the hook.

That was the start of our brief, but lucrative liaison. For a few glorious weeks I was showered with attention and gifts. Gone were the flowers to be replaced with jewellery, trinkets and silk stockings so fine you could see straight through them. He was the man who introduced me to champagne; an acquaintance which over the years has turned into a firm friendship. I was in heaven.

Actually I was in a well appointed little mews where he put me up in some style - for a price. For several weeks he wined and dined me and showed me a good time. I’ll always be grateful to Ned - he taught me how to behave in polite society. Stopped me from showing myself up for the Northern lass I was.

Then the novelty of me wore off. He’d got what he came for. After all I was just a callow girl and Ned was a rich young man sowing his wild oats in this vast city heaving with girls and possibilities. Once his eye began to wander my days were numbered.

Like the little fool I was I’d given up my role at the playhouse so when he turned me out into the filthy streets I had nowhere to go.

Covent Garden

‘Say the line again and speak it to the Gods - you’re muttering child.’

Whether by good fortune or by my good looks I managed to land a part, a speaking part no less, in a play in Covent Garden. It was A Midsummer Night’s Dream and I was a wood nymph with three lines. As it turned out it was enough to get me noticed.

I’d had to sell the presents Ned had given me to survive of course - it turned out the jewels were paste - but the sale of them helped keep the wolf from the door until I secured work. By day I worked in a chop house waiting tables and by night I trod the boards of The Gaiety Theatre.

‘Miss Margery has gone down with - well I don’t know who or what she’s gone down with, but you need to understudy the understudy in case she goes down with the same thing,’ Dickie Deakin told me.

‘I know the lines already Mr Deakin, Sir. All I need is a chance I’ll not let you down.’

‘I know you won’t child.’ He lifted a curl and wrapped it around his long, bony finger. ‘I wonder how grateful you will be if you get the starring role Lizzy?’

‘I’ll be very grateful indeed Sir,’ I said looking up at him through my lashes.’

‘That’s good. I thought you would be accommodating. In that case let me show you which dressing room you might have. We could run lines - in private. Should you like that my dear?’

‘I would Mr Deakin - I’ll wager there’s a comfortable couch in Miss Margery’s room.’

Not a week later the understudy was sacked. I was to be Titania! It was my big break.

After that I never looked back.

Belgravia

‘You are the toast of the town my dear,’ Lord Hemsworth laughed raising his glass of champagne and then refilling my own. The crystal glinted in the gas light. His ruddy face glowed red.

‘Again - it’s becoming a bore is it not?’

By the grand old age of one and twenty I’d had many successful roles under my belt, but none more so than my latest; Cleopatra. I was the talk of the town, a big star. With my name on the billboard audiences were guaranteed. I could name my price, and I did.

Lord Hemsworth was my latest beau and my best chance so far at security. He owned half of Belgravia it seemed. I was earning good money don’t get me wrong, more in a week than Ma earned in a year most likely. But I wanted more than to be famous; I wanted never to go to bed with an empty belly ever again. The one role I was eager to get - that of a wife - seemed to elude me despite my best efforts.

He wasn’t the handsomest, but he was the richest man to show an interest in me, and believe me there had been a long line of admirers since Ned Hardy.

Harry took in my gown which left little to the imagination.

‘I’m glad we decided to dine alone’, I said running my finger down the sleeve of his frock coat which was as soft as silk though I knew it was the finest wool.

‘As am I.’ He traced a finger down the back of my neck. I’d once made the mistake of telling him I liked it and now he over played his hand at every opportunity. I stifled a yawn.

‘Shall we finish this in my chamber?’ he raised the champagne bottle in the air; it was the third one to be opened that night. I was already tipsy and didn’t want to become totally intoxicated - that’s how accidents happened. A slip of the tongue, an ex lover’s name called out in the heat of passion or worse falling asleep before precautions had been taken. I knew I had to be careful - I’d already made one mistake last year, but luckily every actress worth her salt knows a back street ‘female physician’.

Some are to be avoided like the plague of course; they’re little better than butchers. Mrs Bird, ‘abortionist to the gentry’, used abortifacient herbs with some success rather than the use of sharpened implements. Luckily I’d realised early on there had been a ‘mistake’ so acted quickly and disaster had been averted; I’d barely missed a matinee. I did not however want to get caught again, that was the one way to rid myself of Lord Hemsworth - or any man, and I wasn’t about to abort him. He’d been my meal ticket, my ardent protector for six months now and he was I was sure of it, about to set me up in a not so little Pied a Terre of my own. In six months he had been most generous with his presents - as had I. From here on in I hoped it would be a short hop to the altar and a life of ease and comfort.

Then disaster struck.

I was about to roll off his considerable bulk when he let out a gasp and clutched his chest. Beads of sweat streamed down his flaccid cheeks. He made a strange gurgle not unlike a cock having its neck rung then laid there inert. He was dead and so alas, were my hopes and dreams.

Not Belgravia

In my line of work you learn how to roll with the punches, but this was a mighty blow indeed. Again I was forced to retrench. For days I ranted and raved. Elspeth, my dresser cum maid took the full brunt of my anger.

‘How dare he leave me!’

‘He hardly had a choice in the matter. You possibly over exerted him; he wasn’t a young man after all.’

‘Are you saying I killed him?’

‘Of course not, but a man of his bulk... you only had to look at him to know he was a cannonball waiting to go off.’

‘Well aren’t you all full of knowledge. What a pity you didn’t warn me before the event, we could have sold tickets,’ I fumed.

‘These cufflinks and the cravat pins will fetch a good bit of coin, so all’s not lost. I’m glad to see the tragedy didn’t stop your quick thinking Elizabeth. Pity you couldn’t have lifted a bit more, but I suppose you were sensible only to take a few, precious pieces as keepsakes. If you’d liberated too much gold it would have been missed. You could hardly leave with the family silver under your arm,’ Elspeth grinned.

The way Harry died had been hushed up by his brother so at least my good name as an actress wasn’t tarnished. And as Elspeth pointed out Harry had good taste; the diamond cravat pins, the emerald cufflinks and the loose guineas lying about were soon put to use or turned into ready money. Thankfully Elspeth was a resourceful woman and knew how to haggle the best prices at the pawn broker. This money would tide us over, but we were forced to make the necessary economies to try to maintain standards. We were now reduced to our old rooms in a place I will only say wasn’t Belgravia, but I knew I wouldn’t be alone for long.

My run as Cleopatra was coming to an end. I was casting about for two new roles; one in Covent Garden and the other as mistress to another rich gentleman. Casting just the right man was important and auditions were proving to be interesting to say the least. Jockeying for position were a Lord, a Sir, two members of parliament and several rich entrepreneurs. The latter were ‘New Money’ but what did I care so long as they spent it on me. I set myself criteria and judged each one on what they could provide for me. No point in wasting time with a handsome face if the pudgy one was more generous with his coin. I was thrilled to see they vied with each for my favours and showered me with gifts. Oh halcyon days!

But the incident with Harry had taught me a salutary lesson; never fully rely on a man. They always let you down one way or another. I grew up that year and stopped believing one of my rich suitors would marry me and take me away from all this. I actually liked ‘all this’ actually. I was famous, lauded over and men were queuing up to be my next suitor.

‘Why would I want a husband anyway? All he’d do is make me give up the limelight. I adore my public and they adore me. I don’t want to sit at home waiting for him to come home after he’s wined, dined and played hide the sausage with some floozy. I know men - they only want what they can’t have. Once there’s a ring on my finger it may as well be through my nose - he’d lead me wherever he wanted without even asking my permission. I may as well become a brood mare. Why would I do that? The last thing I want is a brat in my belly to ruin my figure. Imagine sticky little fingers everywhere, a little monster wailing all night long, the stench of milk and worse.’ I shuddered at the thought.

Elspeth agreed. ‘It’s as you say - better off the mistress rather than the wife. At least then you can keep on working and come and go as you please. Marriage is for fools.’

‘True enough Elspeth,’ I nibbled the dark chocolate from a violet cream. ‘These are the last box Harry will ever buy me,’ I sighed, ‘but never mind there are many more suitors just begging me to cast a look in their direction.’

‘I see Sir Walter Grange is sniffing about you. He’s in the market for a new love interest I hear - he’s tired of his latest trollope. He’d be a good replacement; he’s not old and I doubt he’s about to keel over like Harry.’

‘Ah yes but he is a pervert,’ rumours spread like the plague in my world, ‘I draw the line at sharing my bed with... well let’s just say I’m not so desperate as to want to go down that path. I’ve my eye on someone more suitable, more attractive and wealthier.’

‘Who - you’d not make a play for Lord Trent?’

‘Elspeth my dear you should know by now *I* don’t make a play for any man.’

Two months later after a short period of ‘resting between jobs’ I once again landed a plum role; this time in a play by Honorè de Balzac. The role would validate me as a well respected, serious actress. I needed a suitor of stature to complete the role. There were any amount of tiresome young bucks fawning in my spacious, well appointed dressing room every evening, each vying with the other for the chance to take me to dine. Once, two silly young things fought a duel over me. Can you imagine?

‘Why on earth would young Lord Beavers and Lieutenant Shore think I’d look twice at them? If only they’d asked me first I would have saved them the trouble, told them they were wasting their time, silly boys.’

The rakehells need not have bothered; the loser took a shot to his manly shoulder and I turned away the winner. He was far too hot headed and not at all as wealthy as I would have liked. By now you will see I had my standards. They were nice to play with, amusing and gallant, but nothing more.

Then one evening as I was changing Elspeth handed me a gold edged calling card. ‘Ah now that’s more like it,’ I smiled.

Belgravia Revisited.

The card had been from a French Count. We had five years together; most of them pleasant, but then once again my luck ran out. It had been good while it lasted. The Count was handsome in a foreign, foppish sort of way and if not loyal then at least he was exciting - as a lover that is. He taught me things which would come in useful later.

I’d always known I wasn’t his only lover, but what did I care? The French are far more liberated about such things than we British; in fact I learnt it could be used to my advantage. The situation suited the both of us so I often played the field too, discreetly of course. I needed light relief from time to time from his posturing. The Count could be

temperamental and moody like most foreigners. Sometimes he became possessive and hot tempered. I soon learnt when to lay low. So even though a little light flirtation with another gentleman kept me happy I had to tread carefully. Sometimes he was abroad for months at a time, with his slut no doubt. What did he expect I'd do while he was gone? Sit by the fire with my embroidery!

We got on relatively well together, but once I remember he 'surprised' me and returned unexpectedly. There was a bit of a rumpus, but at least he didn't mark my face. It was irritating having some jealous, impetuous man posturing about the place, but he was paying the bills I suppose.

The Count wasn't overly generous either it has to be said. He did take care of my day to day expenses and a carriage and four was always at my disposal, but luckily other lovers were still open handed so it mattered not so much. When he was in a good mood I could always wheedle a diamond brooch or bracelet out of him so long as I paid in kind later. The exchange rate was fair.

Then on a trip to Venice he contracted typhoid fever and left me high and dry. Thankfully I'd learnt my lesson after Harry passed so I'd saved myself a nice little nest egg over the years. With monies set aside I now had my own establishment, enough jewels to stock a shop, a cook, housekeeper and another lover already lined up. In the Count's absence I'd taken quite a shine to one of my other paramours.

This one was minor aristocracy, married of course - and by far the richest man I'd caught yet. He had estates in the north - in my old neck of the woods as it happened. He was also very amusing, even tempered and sweet. More to the point I actually liked him which is more than could be said for the majority of my old lovers. Lord Fredrick Seabrooke was also extremely handsome. He was tall and broad shouldered. His flaxen hair and dark, hooded eyes were very much to my liking; the Count had begun to let himself go towards the end so Freddy being young, just eight and twenty, was a treat.

'You need to hang onto this one, you aren't getting any younger.' Elspeth folded her arms across her flat chest.

'Thank you Elspeth for your advice. Should I need further guidance I shall know where to come.'

'I'm just saying. It's a while since any good role came your way - the younger chits seem to take their pick of the juiciest parts.'

I remember quite distinctly the noise she made as my silver backed hairbrush slapped the back of her head.

'Unlike 'juicy parts' maids are to be got for two a penny - I'll thank you to mind your own business in future - or look for a new role for yourself.'



Freddy lay next to me and smiled. He had the loveliest of smiles.

‘I have to go to the country. My estate needs my attention.’

‘How long will you be gone - we could still meet. I’ll miss you my love.’

I actually meant it too. Usually when my lovers went away I was relieved to see the back of them, but not with Freddy. He was different. I even thought I may have been a little bit in love with him.

‘A month at most, but there’s something else. My wife will come with me - into confinement.’

My mouth made a silent ‘o’.

‘I see. No matter my love I’ll still be here when you return. I’m not going anywhere.’

It was true enough. The only roles I’d been offered of late were below my standards - and not in London. I hated to admit it but Elspeth was right - the best parts were going to twenty year olds and I was, well, older. I was still beautiful, much more than some of the young, drop- ringletted little madams, and I was the better actress too. People still talked of my death scene in Cleopatra.

When Freddy did come back to me, seven weeks and three days later, he was, I’m pleased to say, as pleased to see me as I was to see him.

I squealed as he threw me on the bed. ‘How desolate I’ve been without you my lovely Lizzy. Come here and show me how much you’ve missed me.’

After I’d shown him just what he’d missed we lay in each other’s arms.

‘You can have me all to yourself now my sweet. My wife outdid herself. Not only has she produced an heir she’s also thrown in a spare for good measure.’

He saw the puzzled look on my face then the penny dropped.

‘She’s had twin boys you mean?’

‘She has indeed. That means of course we have both done our duty; both families have nothing to complain of and now I, and indeed Sarah for all I care, can please ourselves.’

He’d told me at the beginning of our liaison that like most aristocrats his marriage was arranged - his family had sought her out for her dowry; he didn’t love her. He barely liked her he’d said. Now with the birth of an heir and a spare his estate was secure and they could please themselves. I smiled sweetly.

‘From now on my marriage will be in name only, thank the Good Lord. Lying with her was like sleeping with a block of ice. So long as we’re both discreet Lizzy we can carry on unhindered. I’ll still have to show up from time to time, escort her about in the season, but

generally she'll stay in Yorkshire looking after the twins.' He laid back a contented smile on his handsome face. 'You know I love you Lizzy,' he said to the ceiling.

I snuggled in close. 'How would I? You've never told me.'

I smiled as he pulled me into his arms. 'Well I'm telling you now. You are my wife in all but name my sweet. I only wish we could be together - be married, but you know that's not possible. You deserve more.'

And I got more.

From then on we were inseparable and I gave up all my other beaux. We danced together, supped together went to house parties together. There were carriage rides in the park and days at the races. Indeed when he wasn't at his club he was with me. Of course we were judicious when we ventured out - we kept to the circle of friends who knew the score, many of whom were in the same position. Private house parties, dinners and small gatherings were all enjoyed. I wore the latest styles courtesy of Freddy and ate the finest foods. He had a great sense of fun and we laughed every day.

He showered me with gifts. Not always expensive presents, sometimes trinkets he thought I'd like or a book he knew I wanted to read. He made sure to send a box of my favourite violet creams every Friday along with a note professing his undying love. For the first time in my life I was truly happy.

I hadn't worked for almost a year. Firstly I hadn't been offered anything I liked and secondly I wanted to be with Freddy, though I must admit I missed my public. I still received attention nevertheless. We couldn't go out to dine without some fan sending over a bottle of champagne or a fine cognac.

One evening after Freddy and I had been together for eighteen months or so I attended a ball with a group of friends. Sir Charles Grant, a new acquaintance, was in the group. He'd been making a play for me for some weeks and when I'd told him Freddy was away on business overnight he'd invited himself along. He was good fun, but my days of playing the field were over; I had no interest in Charles other than as a friend. Hard to believe I know.

We were chatting and Charles was flirting outrageously when he suddenly grinned wolfishly and said, 'Isn't that Freddy across the dance floor?'

I glanced over - not for a minute did I believe Charles. I thought it a joke, a jest to make me look.

But I was wrong. It was Freddy talking animatedly with a chestnut haired beauty. At that moment the dance ended and it was like the parting of the Red Sea; the dance floor emptied and we saw each other across the empty space. Freddy affected a stilted bow and a half smile. The woman's eyes followed his - she looked daggers at me; there was no mistaking she knew who I was. There was also no mistaking I knew who she was.

Of course I'd wondered what Sarah, his wife, looked like, but as Freddy had made it clear she wasn't to his taste I'd never given it too much thought. Not many women could hold a candle to me I knew so I'd never worried she might be a beauty. And besides hadn't he said she was frigid? Sarah was nothing like he'd led me to believe. She was far from the country mouse I'd pictured. She wasn't a traditional beauty, but she was I had to admit, striking. Her chestnut hair was stylishly dressed, her gown the very latest design. She was tall with long limbs and a long elegant neck. I watched as Freddy led her to the refreshment room.

'I thought you said he was away on business Elizabeth? Odd sort of business.' Charles was enjoying himself.

I remembered I was an actress. 'Charles, do you think after all this time I don't know Lord Seabrooke's every move. He sent a note over earlier telling me he was back and would be here with his wife. You can't imagine I'm jealous of a country matron? Her children clearly ruined her figure irrevocably.'

'I thought all women suffered from the feeling, especially when their opponent is as ravishing as Sarah. She doesn't look a country bumpkin to my eyes.'

'I was unaware you knew her. Where did you meet?' I tried to make my voice light and carefree as if I were asking a question of little consequence.

'Last month in Yorkshire at Freddy's estate. Sarah is a good hostess; she's also charming and great fun. It was a house party for a dozen or so people.'

'When was this exactly?' I was trying to tally the dates in my head that Freddy had been away.

'Are you sure you're not the tiniest bit envious? Allow me to take your mind off it my dear Elizabeth, I can be diverting when I put my mind to it,' he grinned.

I wanted to leave the ball, but could think of no good reason to make my excuses. I felt sick and the ground seemed to be shifting beneath my feet. If I said I was unwell Charles would know for sure this situation had rocked my world - it would be the talk of the town.

'Will you excuse me Charles?' I made my way to the ladies restroom - I needed time to think and calm my wretched nerves.

I sat on a chaise; thankfully apart from the attendant the room was empty. I sat thinking, trying to come up with a reason why Freddy would have lied to me. I saw them in my mind's eye the split second before Freddy had seen me. He didn't look like a man 'who barely liked' his wife. His hand had been cradling her elbow and their heads had been close together, intimately together. They were talking together like young lovers.

The restroom door opened and Freddy's wife stepped in. She shot me a look of pure venom. Her surprisingly young face was unamused. As she moved toward me her silk gown rustled, showing the outline of her body.

It was then I noticed. She was with child.



Freddy arrived early the next morning. I'd hardly slept so kept him waiting for the longest time. My eyes were red and puffy, my face blotchy

'For God's sake Elspeth can't you do better than that? I look like death warmed up!'

'I'm doing my best - if you can do any better then feel free to have a go.'

I was in no mood for her lip. I snatched the powder puff from her hand. 'Get my blue organza - I'll wear that,' I said dismissing the cream silk she'd laid out. 'I'll look like a corpse in that monstrosity.'

As she helped me to dress she asked, 'What are you going to do? Don't be over hasty Elizabeth. He was out with his wife not another floozy so don't go laying down the law. Remember you aren't in a position to complain. I'm only surprised you haven't run into her before.'

She possibly regretted the lecture she'd seen fit to deliver. She deftly dodged the vase of lilies I hurled her way.

'Why did no one think to tell me his wife was ... attractive and young. She can hardly be twenty years old. Are all our friends aware she's with child? He lied to me. 'Barely liked' her indeed. I might have known he'd turn out to be like all the rest, damn him!'

Down in the morning room Freddy sat reading a newspaper, his long legs crossed by the fire. He looked like nothing had happened.

'My sweet how are you. I thought we might go for a carriage ride, it's a beautiful morning is it not?'

'A carriage ride would be lovely Freddy. I'll get my cloak - after you've explained a little matter.'

'Last night do you mean? Yes that was a little unfortunate. Sarah was none too pleased either.'

'Unfortunate. None too pleased?' It needed all my acting skills to stay calm.

I know what you're thinking my sweet. I told you I was going away on business and I was, but then Sarah came up to town unexpectedly so I was forced to cancel. She had news to impart it seems.'

'Pray what news would that be my love?' It was only because I was a great actress I could keep the irony from my voice.

'It's not how it looks - Lizzy listen to me.' He took both my hands in his and looked at me with soulful eyes. 'As you no doubt saw last night Sarah is with child, but it isn't my

child.’ He lifted my hands and kissed my fingers. ‘She too has a lover - it’s his brat not mine. Of course she wanted to make sure I’ll support her, stand by the deal we’d made after the twins were born. That is to say make out it’s my child - pretend to family that I’m the father. Of course I said I would.’

The weight of the world was lifted from my shoulders. I sank into his arms and instantly forgave him. How could I have been such a little fool? Didn’t he prove every day how much he loved me? I knew he didn’t sleep with his wife - how could he - he was nearly always with me, but I’d never trusted a man before and it was all too easy to cast him in the role of villain. But he wasn’t a villain he was still my leading man.

Whitby

I left Elspeth to supervise the unloading of the luggage as I stared out at the grey North Sea. The wind was blowing a hooley as usual. Being back in Whitby was going to seem like a prison sentence.

‘Send a note to The Angel saying I’ll go to see my sister in the morning,’ I said petulantly. I resented having to be here but what choice did I have.

I hadn’t been back to Whitby in five years and I only came then for Ma’s funeral. Pa had died the year before, but I’d been starring in Covent Garden at the time and made that the excuse for my not making the journey north. None of my brothers lived hereabouts; indeed I’d not seen them since leaving for London almost fifteen years ago. We were never close. The only sibling I’d kept in touch with, and even then it was sporadically, was my younger sister Effie. She was married to the landlord of The Angel, a coaching inn down by the harbour.

‘I think we’ll be comfortable here Elizabeth. It’s a good house,’ Elspeth looked about the large, well appointed sitting room, ‘I can see it’s as fashionable as Whitby gets - tis just a pity it’s not London.’

A Londoner through and through Elspeth was suspicious of Northerners. ‘Are you sure your sister will help. Why not do what others have done before you and farm them out?’

‘I know what I’m doing thank you Elspeth. My way will suit all concerned.’

‘If you say so.’

‘I do say so.’

‘At least Lord Seabrooke coughed up - decent of him I suppose.’

‘You suppose wrongly as usual. He has as you so politely put it ‘coughed up’ but, oh never mind. Fetch my grey cloak and the matching fur muff, we’re in the frozen north now remember. And make sure you unpack while I’m out, don’t be sitting about twiddling your

thumbs. And tell the cook my likes and dislikes - no fish tell her not unless she wants it returned to the kitchen in a different form.'



The private sitting room at The Angel had a view out over the busy harbour. I watched as the men unloaded a cart and rolled beer barrels down a chute into the cellar of the inn. Ships were docked cheek by jowl as sailors, dockers and men in smart naval uniforms went about their daily tasks. Whitby hadn't changed at all. The sea and the sky were still grey; they matched my mournful mood.

'So Lizzy what brings yer here, yer were a bit vague in your letter. Winter's a funny time to visit.'

'Can't I come and see my little sister? Do I have to have a reason?'

Effie was no fool. She looked me up and down. She inclined her head then pursed her lips into a thin line.

'Lizzy, it's me yer talkin' to. I know you and know yer don't do anything without good reason. Come on - out wi' it, I can't sit about drinking tea all day like some I could mention. Jim'll be wanting a hand when the mail coach arrives.'

Jim was her husband and the landlord of the coaching inn. They were an odd couple. They had met at a dance and he always maintained, to everyone's amusement, it had been love at first sight for him. For a large brute of a man he had a soft heart and he adored her. He was a gentle giant who treated Effie like a princess. He gave her everything she wanted ... or so I hoped under present circumstances.

'I've taken a house for six months on West Cliff,' I said brightly.

'And - go on.'

I knew I may as well get straight to the point. 'And while I'm here I'll give birth - to twins.'

'Twins! Lord love us one would be enough but two!'

I saw the look pass across her face. Effie always wanted children, but it had never happened for her. It was the only thing Jim couldn't give her it seemed.

'Dare I ask about the father?'

'He's abroad at the moment. He has business in Geneva.'

'So he'll be joining yer later then, when he gets back an' you'll be getting wed?'

'As he already has a wife I think not, but we shall see each other after I've...'

'Does he 'ave a name this man er yours?'

‘He does, but as I doubt you’ll ever meet him it’s of no consequence.’

I saw Effie haul in a long breath. I wasn’t pulling the wool over her eyes I could tell.

She looked more like Pa than Ma or me; her dark curls were tucked untidily under her mob cap. She wasn’t blonde and blue eyed like me and Ma, but she was still a good looking woman. Her best feature were her dimples which bracketed her Cupid’s bow mouth when she smiled, and as she was so good natured she smiled often. I knew she would turn heads in the bar downstairs. Her figure was fuller than mine - well fuller than mine used to be - my belly was big now even though I was only four months gone.

‘So you’ve come here to give birth? Why so soon, how far gone are yer?’

‘I don’t want my public to see me like this. Being an actress is about creating an illusion and an actress who looks like a waddling duck is not the picture I want them to see.’

Effie sniffed dismissively. She’d never had much of an imagination.

‘If yer say so.’

‘I do say so.’

‘So what’ll yer do wi’ the bairns - shall yer give up the stage?’

Effie knew me better than most and knew babies were never on my agenda.

‘That’s where I thought you might come in Effie.’



‘Well, what did she say?’

‘Elspeth let me get in the door before you start interrogating me for pity’s sake. Send for tea and loosen my stays before I burst.’

With my stays loser and fortified with tea I sank back on the velvet sofa. The house itself was quite appealing; it was just its location, Whitby, I didn’t like. ‘She will have to speak with Jim of course, but I knew it was the perfect plan. Effie will make a wonderful mother - unlike me who would only resent the little horrors.’ I stuffed a cushion behind my back. The brats were already causing me grief.

‘Will she adopt legally or are you just to hand them over?’

‘We haven’t got that far into the nitty gritty yet. Elspeth build the fire up, it’s draughty in here is it not?’ I shivered. ‘I wanted to give her time to digest taking on my, my burden - before getting into the fine detail. Just please God let Jim get on board with the plan. I’ve told her I intend to be financially responsible for them no matter what. I have money, some of which was thoughtfully donated by Freddy of course, but money isn’t an issue. I don’t want my sister and her husband to be out of pocket, they make a good living but still I don’t want my children dragged up.’ Like I was I thought. ‘To my way of thinking I’m doing them the

greatest favour. Effie has always longed for a family so if she takes my brats she'll have everything she's ever wanted and all without losing her waistline.'

'You're all heart Elizabeth, do you know that?'

I contemplated kicking her scrawny behind with my foot as she bent over the fire, but I couldn't quite reach without moving. The effort was too much for me to bother so I sat back and sent up a prayer Effie and Jim would agree to my plan.



After two agonising days of waiting Effie agreed to take on the responsibility of bringing up the twins; the relief was tremendous.

'That's that settled then.' Elspeth put away the curling tongs.

'It is I'm pleased to say.' I looked in the mirror. Even my cheeks appeared fatter. I sucked them in unbecomingly and then sighed. 'I don't know why I'm bothering with my hair. No one is going to see me – well no one of any worth anyway. What on earth am I going to do for the next five months? I shall possibly die of boredom. Pass me a chocolate Elspeth.'

'We could go for a walk?'

'A walk. A walk! Why on earth would I go for a walk? What's there to see? *Who* is there to see more to the point and anyway it's raining - again. My hair will spoil.'

Elspeth huffed and left me to my own devices. I got up and watched the rain splash against the window. Truth be told I'd never had to entertain myself. There had always been a steady stream of gentlemen to keep me occupied and amused. I let out a long slow breath. I missed Freddy. I'd been certain he was the only man I'd ever known who wouldn't abandon me. How wrong I had been. It was my own fault; I'd broken my own cardinal rule; I'd trusted him. If I hadn't I wouldn't have been in this mess now.

When I found I was with child I'd done what I've done before - more than once, and sought out my 'Lady Physician.' But it seemed she'd moved on ... or been arrested? I'd been forced to go to another woman, a raggedy old hag who said drinking a foul tasting concoction would do the trick. It did not. Then another woman was recommended so I hopped along to her, but she proved to be just as useless as the first one. In desperation I'd tried a man. I might have known a man would do no good. He'd suggested the use of an assortment of sharp implements which wouldn't have looked out of place in a torture chamber. Fearing for my life I'd left before he could fatally wound me. Then more in hope than expectation Elspeth provided a large quantity of gin and a scalding hot bath. I had a hangover for days, but the brats refused to be dislodged and hung on. I almost admired their tenacity, but not enough to keep them.

There was nothing else for it. Freddy loved me; he'd stand by me I was sure of it. I decided to tell him he was going to be a father.

‘This is some surprise is it not Lizzy,’ he said haltingly, ‘I thought you had all that side of things organised.’

‘It seems there was a mistake my love, but no matter I’ll disappear to the country and come back when it’s all over. No one will be any the wiser. We’ll simply tell everyone I’m “resting.” No one will think anything of it; I’ve rested between jobs before.’

‘But you’ve not been near a stage for months.’ He looked me up and down like he was judging a prize sow at a show. ‘Such a pity to ruin that beautiful body of yours my sweet, you know how I love your perfect figure. Aren’t there things you can do to get rid of it? Surely you don’t want it?’ Of course at this early stage I was unaware there was double the trouble. I hadn’t yet seen a doctor who would tell me I was expecting twins.

‘Of course I don’t want it. I’ve tried everything and now it’s too late.’ Men, even Freddy, could be so exasperating. ‘I’ll go to the country as I say - you needn’t see me then,’ I said calmly as though I hadn’t a care in the world. ‘When I come back it will be like it never happened. I’ll sort something out - pay someone to take it off my hands. Elspeth tells me there are ways, discreet way, these blunders can be managed.’

‘Good, that’s settled then. When shall you go? I’ll miss you my sweet.’

‘In a week or two perhaps. As soon as I can make the arrangements.’ A thought suddenly occurred to me. ‘Don’t you have a house in Sussex?’

‘I do, but alas it’s tenanted on a long lease.’

‘But I thought you said ... oh never mind. I’ll think of somewhere.’

‘I know you will my lovely Lizzy, you’re always so clever and inventive. I love you dearly my love, but I must dash. I’m expected at my club.’

He kissed me ardently and then left me to think of where to go for my confinement. That’s when I realised the answer was staring me in the face. I had Elspeth make our travel arrangements.

‘Whitby! In winter, we’ll die of cold.’

‘Then my problem will be solved will it not. Make sure to lease somewhere big enough - I’ll be forced to stay at home all the time. I couldn’t be seen out looking like a ship in full sail. I suppose I could take the spa waters for the first month or so, but after that I’ll be confined to barracks and not a soldier in sight,’ I moaned. Not that I wanted a soldier. I only wanted Freddy

A few days later Sir Charles Grant paid me an unexpected visit.

‘Charles this is a lovely surprise. I thought you were abroad. And you’ve brought my favourites.’ I snatched the violet creams greedily from his hand. I’d developed such a ravenous appetite of late.

‘I was abroad - nursing a broken heart after you rejected me yet again.’

I rolled my eyes and gave him my most alluring smile. ‘You’re such a flirt. You know I’d jump at the chance if Freddy and I weren’t as one, but there you are. Poor Charles! Come, sit beside me and tell me what the ladies are wearing in Paris this season.’

He smirked knowingly making me feel just a little uneasy.

‘What is it? Are you planning on seducing me – you are persistent. I usually like that in a man, a little tenacity is beguiling, but you know it’s a waste of time. Still flirting is one of my favourite hobbies and if it amuses you...’

Charles handed me a letter. I recognised Freddy’s sloping scrawl.

Freddy hadn’t been in touch since I’d delivered the dire news I was going to have his child. I’d told myself he needed time to digest the information. I knew he loved me, but there was something in the way Charles was leering at me which made me wary, uneasy.

‘What’s this,’ I quipped, ‘have you written me a poem or is it a love letter?’

‘I suspect it’s neither. Freddy asked me to give it to you.’

‘Freddy! When? Where?’

‘I saw him at Whites the day before yesterday - he asked me to pass it on when next I saw you.’

‘And you didn’t think to bring it before now?’

‘He said ... well let’s just say he wanted a little time.’

‘Time! Time for what?’

‘I think you should read the letter Elizabeth.’

‘Why? Do you know what it contains?’ I was shaking, trembling with agitation and something else - fear.



Charles left me to read my letter. When I’d read it I threw it on the fire, picked up a vase and flung it at the wall then sank to my knees and sobbed.

The door burst open and Elspeth rushed to my side.

‘What in God’s name ...?’

‘He’s left me!’ I sobbed. ‘Gone abroad with the wife - the wife he ‘barely likes’. Why? He said he loved me?’

‘Elizabeth get up. This isn’t the end of the world. Where’s your dignity?’ Elspeth’s voice was calm, authoritative. ‘Your eyes will be red rimmed and your face will blotch. Stand up. Get a hold of yourself.’

I sniffed and considered slapping her for speaking to me in such a way, then blew my nose on a handkerchief she handed to me. I got up, checked my appearance in the mirror and then sat down on the sofa. Elspeth rang for tea.

London

A plum role has just landed in my lap. I’m back where I belong, back with my adoring public. Back treading the boards front and centre. My waist has snapped back into shape, my hair is as shiny as a dewdrop on a leaf and my face is just as beautiful as ever. I know this by looking in my mirror, but Sir Charles tells me it’s true every day and it’s always nice to hear a compliment don’t you think?

It’s been ten months since I gave birth to not one, but two babies, both girls, and nine months since Effie became a mother. April and May are the image of me - beautiful, blonde, china dolls. They’re chips off the proverbial block. Not that I’ve seen them recently, work commitments don’t you know, but Effie writes, too often to my mind, to tell me how they progress. What on earth is there to say about babies? They feed, they sleep, they ... the very thought turns my stomach. Thankfully Elspeth found an efficient wet nurse to deal with that end of the business so I never had to lift a perfectly manicured finger. My baby girls were attractive I must admit; when they were quiet. How could they not be beautiful with me as their - Aunt? They bear no resemblance to their father and for that I shall be eternally grateful.

The stage manager puts his head around the door deferentially.

‘This is your five minute call Miss Buchanan. Break a leg.’

I look longingly at the violet creams on my dressing table.

‘You should leave them alone a while longer,’ Elspeth sneers, ‘that costume’s a bit snug if you ask me.’

‘I didn’t ask you, you wizened old hag.’ I breathe deeply then take one last look in the mirror and pat a perfect blonde curl. Perfection personified. Everyone says so and who am I to disagree. Even Elspeth can’t sour my mood. I’m back. My adoring audience awaits me. I wonder how many encores I’ll receive tonight.

