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The Great Stink – *Spotlight* 09/20

I can scarce believe it! At long last, I'm to visit London. When Aunt Beryl and Uncle Percy invited me to visit them in the capital, I was certain Mama would refuse. But she relented, after a lengthy correspondence with Beryl, who convinced her of the urgent need to find me a "suitable husband" before it was "too late".

Mama despairs of my "bluestocking ways". I want to be a writer, like Charlotte Brontë. But Papa gambled away our publishing firm in Rochester, so now it falls to me to revive the family fortunes through marriage. I shall pretend to go along with Aunt Beryl's schemes. But, like a butterfly fluttering over summer pastures, I will seek out my own adventures.

London will truly be a breath of fresh air.

Monday 14 June, 1858

Evening

Did I say a breath of fresh air?

I finally arrived this evening. The journey was arduous, but my spirits soared as we approached the brick kilns on the outskirts of the city, which glowed brightly in the sunset. Soon, however, this magical shimmer revealed itself to be something far more sinister – a hot fog of pestilence, offensive to the senses.

In the city centre, the smell was so overpowering that I barely noticed the elegant curvature of Regent Street. Turning onto Sackville Street, I began to feel faint. Aunt Beryl appeared not to notice my state. Instead, she expressed horror at my bloomers – the latest fashion for independently minded ladies.

"Jane Crawley! What on earth are you wearing?" she said.

"Never mind my attire, dear Aunt. What on earth is this abominable air?" I spluttered, acrid smoke from a nearby pyre catching in my throat.

"It's just burning tar," she said. "Purifies the atmosphere. By tomorrow I hope it will have cleared sufficiently for us to go shopping." She eyed my bloomers pointedly.

Inside the luxurious townhouse, I visited the Water Closet. Uncle Percy is so proud of his flushing throne. He acquired it after seeing the toilets at the Great Exhibition of 1851. As I flushed, I felt relieved to be in a clean house, free of the evil vapours on the street.

Tuesday 15 June, 1858

Morning

The night had been unbearably hot. I was roused from a fitful sleep by two maids, one bearing a tray of meats, the other a bowl of warm water and some flannels.

They opened the damask drapes, allowing the sun to stream through the lace curtains. Sighing contentedly, I dipped my flannel in the water, only to recoil in disgust at the sight of water so brown, you'd have thought the entire household had bathed in it.

I remarked upon the water to Aunt Beryl, who was getting ready in the hall, her plump face encased in an ornate bonnet resembling a fruit bowl.

"It's perfectly normal for city water to be a little cloudy," she said, handing me a fragrant handkerchief. "But, rest assured, the water company filters it through sand."

Outside, it was clear that the tar had failed to purify the air, now so laden with putrefaction that I retched into the handkerchief, doused with bergamot and lemon perfume.

A man in a crimson housecoat waved from a house across the street. "Madame Beryl, where you are off to this morning?" he intoned. "You're a brave woman, venturing out into the Great Stink!"

"Oh, hello Doctor Snow," said Beryl, with a breezy wave. She gripped my arm tightly. "Insufferable man," she hissed. "Let's be off, or he'll bore us for hours with his scientific theories."

The doctor shrugged his shoulders and returned inside.

The Great Stink. As we boarded a hansom cab, I confronted my aunt. "Beryl, is there something you're not telling me?"

"I was certain it would lift before you arrived," she wailed. "It's the Thames, now so full of waste that it has unleashed this hellish miasma upon us. The summer heat has only worsened matters."

"Oh, well, I suppose it's only a smell," I said, aware that I would still much rather be in London than Rochester. Though "smell" seemed too feeble a term to describe such a foul pong.

"That's the spirit," said my aunt. "Though I'd advise you to hold your handkerchief to your nose, lest you catch something. Some believe the miasma carries ..."

"Carries what, Beryl?"

"Erm, cholera."

"Cholera?"

Afternoon

We alighted at Burlington Arcade, built in 1819 by Lord George Cavendish, who wanted a safe place for his wife to shop. Inside, the air reeked of lavender. We entered a boutique, my aunt making a beeline for a pink dress, with a skirt at least six feet wide.

"Do you plan to set sail?" I asked my aunt.

"It's for you," she said, causing me to blanch.

I persuaded her to buy me a red carpet bag instead. As we left the shop, I swung it to and fro, ready for adventure – even if the prospect seemed unlikely.

Back in the hansom, I saw Buckingham Palace for the first time. Queen Victoria and Albert had been forced to abandon a leisurely cruise on the Thames. "Rich or poor, this stink blights all our lives," said my aunt, face darkening.

She insisted on crossing Belgravia towards the festering river, so she could show me Westminster, still in the process of being rebuilt after the fire in 1834. The heatwave had caused the water levels of the Thames to drop, revealing a huge pile of waste next to the mother of parliaments.

I could hardly believe my eyes. "It looks like"

"Yes, darling, it's poo. Human poo," said my aunt. "Neither swan nor salmon can survive here now."

Early evening

We met Uncle Percy at Ye Olde Cheshire Cheese, a public house on Fleet Street, popular among journalists and publishers. Mercifully, the air in the pub was thick with brown stout and cigar smoke.

Percy had been drinking with Thomas Winslow of the Winslow & Son publishing firm. My aunt winked and smiled broadly at me. "Surely not!" I mouthed back at her. So this was her "suitable husband". The young man seemed entirely devoid of personality.

Just then, a tankard of ale landed on our table with a thud.

"What brings you here, Percy?" said a merry voice, distinctly Irish.

"Oscar Dooley!" said my uncle. "Aren't you supposed to be at work?"

"This is work!" said Oscar, a journalist at The Times, dashing in a slapdash sort of way, with unruly black curls and an unbuttoned collar. He squeezed in next to me, to the clear disapproval of my aunt.

"The smell is so bad, there's talk of moving Parliament to Oxford," said my uncle.

"Anything to avoid doing their jobs," said Oscar. "The newspaper has been campaigning for our time-wasting lawmakers to fix the sewage problem for over a decade. If only they'd listen to Doctor Snow."

"Doctor John Snow? Why he's our neighbour!" exclaimed my aunt.

"The very same," said Oscar. "He believes the sewage is infecting our drinking water, spreading cholera. He did an experiment on Broad Street*, removed the handle from a water pump, cutting off the water supply. Suddenly, people stopped dying."

"But it's scientific fact that cholera is transmitted through the air, not water," said my uncle.

"Everyone knows Doctor Snow is a crank," said my aunt, rather uncharitably.

"I think Snow will be proven right," said Oscar. "Meanwhile, long may the Great Stink continue, if it gets those whiffle-whaffles in Parliament to move their backsides."

I snorted with laughter. To my surprise, he asked me how long I was staying in London.

"Maybe I can show you around," he said.

"The miasma has reached dangerous levels. I think it would be best if we stay at home tomorrow," said my aunt, butting in hastily.

I groaned inwardly as she invited Winslow to the house for high tea the next day.

Wednesday 16 June, 1858

Morning

The townhouse was like an oven this morning, the walnut wall panelling radiating heat. But I cared not a jot, for I had made a thrilling discovery after breakfast. Organising my new carpetbag, I found a scribbled note from none other than Oscar Dooley.

“Miss Bloomer. See you midday at the plane tree at the corner of Wood Street and Cheapside.” it read.

The tone was rather presumptuous. But I knew I must go. Anything to avoid high tea with Winslow. This was my one shot at adventure. What did I have to lose other than an arranged marriage?

My aunt, who is as nosy as she is meddlesome, had heard rumours that Doctor Snow was ailing, and hastened across the road to pry. I slipped out in her absence, hailing a cab from Piccadilly. The stench was worse than the day before, but somehow I didn't seem to care.

Early afternoon

Standing under the plane tree, a magnificent specimen, with branches reaching high above the surrounding buildings, I sweltered in the 35C heat. Oscar arrived ten minutes late, bounding up to me, as if oblivious to the boiling miasma.

“This is the most ancient plane tree in London,” he said. “A witness to history that has survived countless calamities, not least fire. And this stench.”

“Are you sure it's safe to be out?” I asked.

“Cross my heart,” he said. “Now, come with me, I want to show you something.”

We took a hansom to St Giles-in-the-Fields. Oscar wanted to give me a tour of the Rookery, location of William Hogarth's Gin Lane, drawn a century before. The alleyways were caked in mud and muck – or was it excrement? – teeming with emaciated men and women, squabbling and swearing, drinking and leering. I screamed as a bucket of stinking slop was emptied onto the street, splashing my bloomers.

Oscar told me the slum was also known as “Little Ireland”, owing to the large population of Irish immigrants who had fled famine. “When it rains, raw sewage from the city's cesspools rises up through the floorboards. Every day is the Great Stink here.

“The thing is, this miasma fallacy gets politicians off the hook. If everyone believes cholera is in the air, nobody will bother to fix the sewage system and the water supply. And countless more people in slums like this will die.”

I'd seen enough. My blood was boiling – not only because of the heat.

Late afternoon

We retired to a pub near Covent Garden, the most famous market in England. Tucked into an alleyway, The Lamb and Flag is regularly frequented by Charles Dickens. As we slurped

warm ale, Oscar told me Dickens had recently got into a fight with William Makepeace Thackeray at a gentlemen's club called The Garrick.

"Do you know him?" I asked, eyes wide.

"I've shared a table with him at The Garrick," said Oscar. "He's unbearable at the moment. Impulsive and hot-tempered."

"Maybe it's the stink."

"Yes, it's getting to us all."

We spoke a little about our lives. He told me of his longing to return to Ireland. I told him of my longing for financial independence.

Evening

Back at Sackville Street, the air was filled with tar smoke. A cart was parked outside the front door of the townhouse. I bumped into a man carrying a bucket. "Oi, watch out, Miss!" he shouted.

A familiar smell wafted up, stinging my nostrils. The man disappeared back into the house, descending the steps into the cellar. Slowly it dawned on me that Uncle Percy's new-fangled toilet was flushing waste straight into the cellar. These workers, known as nightmen, were collecting the raw sewage to sell as manure.

"Thousands of houses in London have cesspools in the cellars," said Oscar. "There's never been more demand for nightmen. But they can't keep up. London is literally up to its neck in excrement."

And, with that, he turned to leave.

I entered the house, grimly amused. This was a date that could never have ended with a kiss.

Thursday 17 June, 1858

Morning

The temperature has cooled significantly today – in more ways than one. At breakfast, Aunt Beryl could scarcely bring herself to look at me. Uncle Percy hid behind his copy of *The Times*.

In any case, things took an unexpected turn. I was readying myself for my return to Rochester, when there was a frenzied ringing of the doorbell. I listened on the stairs as my aunt opened the door. After a hushed exchange, I heard her shriek for my uncle.

"It's Doctor Snow," she exclaimed. "He passed away yesterday!"

The doctor had suffered a stroke. Oscar turned up to report on the tragedy. He told my aunt that *The Times* was short-staffed. Could she possibly lend her niece to gather reactions around Broad Street, where the doctor had saved so many lives?

How could she refuse?

So, it looks like I might be sticking around for a while. Me, plain Jane Crawley, reporting from the world's biggest, and undoubtedly smelliest, city. It's a dirty job, dear reader. But someone has got to do it.

Ends

** Broad Street is now called Broadwick Street.*

Belated recognition

A lone voice linking cholera to drinking water, Doctor John Snow died of a stroke on 16 June 1858, incidentally the hottest day of the Great Stink. His theories were not accepted until the 1860s.

A Victorian hero

In July 1858, Parliament stumped up the cash for a proper sewage network. Engineer Joseph Bazalgette designed the system of 1,100 miles of drains, feeding into 82 miles of sewers. Built to last, the system is still in operation today.