

November 1871

by Gilly Beckett

'Bess, Bess!'

I can hear him calling me but I am out the back, sweeping the yard so I can pretend I don't hear him. Tim Purves is his name. He is such a gentleman, even towards me, a lowly wench from the workhouse. He's well educated is Tim, but he has a kindly manner - just like his Pa who gave me the job of getting their meals and cleaning their big house in the High Street. Oh, I am glad of it - I couldn't think of going back to workhouse days. They don't know I come from there, at least I don't think they know. Tim is shouting again.

'I'm out the back,' I call. I'm always a bit scared of him.

Here he is. Oh, he is such a handsome fellow.

'Bess, I've got us tea and currant buns. My ma used to bake 'em.' I see his face all sad from her memory. 'Now the baker's just started making 'em - Bess, you look puckered out.'

I mutter that I am all right, and that I could bake the buns for him. Then I'm half-scared that he might expect something more. He perches on the wood pile, sipping his tea, watching me. 'How long you been working for us?' he asks.

'Since May,' I say. Since my ma froze to death up on the Ramparts, but I can never tell him that. The tea has got sugar in it and my face is aglow from the sweetness. The mug burns my hands but I'm more alarmed by his question.

'Six months!' Tim muses, seemingly to himself. 'Your room is high up and the wind cuts across the water cruelly, and through the window too, I'll be bound.'

'I don't never notice it,' I say, worried by his strange talk. Perhaps they are going to chuck me out. Even though I am hungry, I can't eat the current bun.

Tim stands up, He towers above me. I've slopped tea all over me pinnie. I put the mug down on the cobbles. If he starts anything, I might have to let him have his way for the sake of the work and my room.

'Don't look so afeared, Bess,' he says. 'This is your place of work - but I have put that aside. There is no gal in this town that I like more than you, Bess. Pa knows that I want to care for you, Bess, p'raps to take you for my wife one day.'

'Your wife?' I gasp the words quietly, hoping he durstn't hear.

'Tonight, Bess, you shall eat at table with Pa and me. Sometimes, I hear you singing while you're working, it's the prettiest little sound. I want you to tell me about your life, when you were a child. "Suffer the little children" the bible says. Pa and me, we shall get to know all about you, both the good and the bad.'

He looks down at me. I swear that I can see love in his glowing brown eyes.

He leaves me alone with my currant bun and my terrible thoughts.

They want to know all about me, the good and the bad. I have nothing good to tell them, and they must never know the bad.

I saw the newspaper, back in February, reporting the death of my poor ma and there was a mention of Mr Purves's doorstep, but these are respectable folk, Mr Purves and his son. And even though Tim Purves loves me, they will never accept the daughter of a drunken woman.

I saw her suffer at the hands of my cruel father. And after that she took to the drink. And then she was moved on, and on. And then she froze to death up on the Ramparts.

I have to go, before I am moved on, just the same as my poor mother.

by the time, but nobody knew.

WOMAN FROZEN TO DEATH.—About a quarter to one on Sunday, while two boys, Robert Knox and Wm. Rielly, were going round the mound on the ramparts, called Cumberland Bastion, they discovered the body of a woman lying on the ground nearly covered with snow, and frozen to death. They immediately gave information to the Police and the stretcher was taken to the walls, and the body examined. It proved to be the body of Elizabeth White, alias Bess Knox. Up to now all that is known of the affair is that on Saturday night the deceased was seen in High Street, by Police Constables Davidson and Wright. She was then sitting on the door step of Mr Purves, High Street. Two men were with her. The Police proceeded down Western Lane, and on their returning found that the deceased had left the place. The men were not known to the Police. The above rather extraordinary but unfortunate woman has been no less than 115 times in the Police books during the last 25 years. An inquest will be held upon the body of the deceased.

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