

West Lights

CHAPTER

1

Journey Home

F eet, clattering like horses' hooves, echoed along the grey marble corridor, as a group of nurses, who had just finished night duty, hurried home. Their long crisp dresses, adorned with white starched collars and cuffs, rustled as they moved. Slung casually over shoulders, their cloaks revealed a blaze of bright red flannel lining. Dangling, cowl-like at the nape of each girl's neck, sat a bonnet, tied loosely underneath the chin; a black bag was clenched firmly in hand.

Chattering eagerly they made their way to the duty office to sign out. Long hours and lack of sleep had taken their toll. They were all pale-faced and drawn. As they approached the kitchen, there was the unmistakable slamming of oven doors, the clatter of hot pans and, a moment later, a waft of freshly baked bread. How wonderful it smelled. How hungry the nurses were.

When Gus, the porter, entered the duty office that morning, the clock on the wall above the desk began to strike the hour. "Phew!" He hung his coat on a hook behind the door. "Thank God I made it on time. Nasty weather this morning, Peter," he commented to the night porter and wiped his wet face with a handkerchief.

“So I believe,” answered Peter, puffing away on his pipe. “See you tomorrow, Gus,” he said pulling the flaps of his bonnet over his ears as he left. He had to smile at Gus’ comment about making it on time, Gus always just made it on time.

Gus slipped on his overall and sat in the swivel chair at the desk. He used the time waiting for the nurses to arrive by catching up with his paperwork. A register lay open on the desk. The heading on the open page was “Friday, January 28, 1879, A. M.”

A happy-go-lucky fellow, Gus laughs readily and honestly with a kind word for everyone. His ruddy complexion and dazzling hazel eyes reflect his jovial personality. Horn-rimmed spectacles straddle the lower part of his nose, allowing him to look out without raising his head.

“Good morning, nurse,” spluttered a scraggy voice as I approached the office window. With a radiant smile, Gus put the register down on the window ledge and handed me a quill.

I took the quill from him and signed the register, ‘Roselyn Carey’. I glanced at the clock on the wall across from him and noted the time beside my name.

“I suppose you’ve already heard all about the terrible assault, Gus!” I returned the quill to him.

“Assault! What assault? Where? When?”

“In the Cowgate. Last night.”

“In the Cowgate? What in the world happened?”

“Well, I don’t know the gory details. I overheard two nurses talking about it in the dining hall. Apparently a woman was rushed into casualty on the stroke of midnight, bleeding from multiple stab wounds. Evidently the constabulary are treating the incident as attempted murder!”

“Murder! In Dundee?” he choked, “you’re no saying that?”

“I didn’t say ‘murder’, Gus. I said, ‘attempted murder!’”

“Well ...” he shrugged. He leant forward, propped his elbows on the window ledge and cupped his face in his hands “Right. So who was the woman?”

“I’ve no idea.”

“God help the poor soul, whoever she is,” He rolled his eyes and looked me straight in the eye. “It’s a wicked, wicked world, nurse.”

“It most certainly is, there’s no doubt about that!”

I tied the ribbons of my bonnet securely and walked to the exit. I turned to Gus and asked what the weather was like.

“Ooh,” he puckered up his lips and pulled a dour face at the same time. “It’s dreich. Better make sure you’re well wrapped up. That wind would go right through you. And be careful on the brae! It’s no half slipper. I’d hate to see you fall.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll be careful,” I smiled and waved my gloved hand.

“Cheerio nurse! God bless!” I caught the tail end of the sentence, as the immense oak door slammed shut behind me.

I hugged my cloak around the slender frame that housed my spirit and stepped out to a bitter morning. The wind threw icy drizzle on my face, reminding me of the season. I crossed the dark courtyard. The tall iron gates at the entrance rattled incessantly. A pale blue flame flickering in one of the street lamps cast intermittent shadows on the wet cobbles. The foul smell of gas, escaping from another lamp, compelled me to put my handkerchief to my nose.

A wave of grief for a young patient flowed over me. Connie, a Yorkshire woman, had slipped peacefully away in her sleep just after midnight. I had grown so very fond of her all the time I'd been nursing her. Profound optimism was one of her many fine qualities. She had convinced herself that a miracle would take place and restore her good health. But of course, that hadn't happened. I had not been able to take my eyes off her empty bed and now ...

Two burly constables came marching into the courtyard breaking into my thoughts, their thick rubber capes making a loud swishing sound with their movements. The clanging on the pavement, caused by their heavy tackety boots, was exaggerated by the stillness of the early hour.

"Good morning, Nurse," their gruff voices said and I replied with the same words.

Rainwater dripped off the rims of their helmets. They crossed the courtyard and disappeared through the casualty entrance.

"What the devil are they doing here? Why, of course. How stupid of me. It'll have something to do with the assault in the Cowgate." I shuddered at the thought. Drawing my cloak even more tightly around me, I proceeded down the brae. The rain turned to snow and I could barely make out the lights that usually twinkled and sparkled so vividly on the opposite side of the river. I chose each step carefully and convinced myself that the wind was trying desperately to rip the cloak off my back.

The disadvantages of living in Tayport and working in Dundee are twofold. Firstly there's the inconvenience of having to travel back and forth by train or ferry. Oh, that train trip is something I have got used to, but

every time my spine tingles at the thought of crossing such a mass of water on a slender structure. Secondly there's the effect on my emotions of the all too-visible poverty and disease, existing in the town. Tall chimneys of the mills reach up to the sky, continuously filling the air with thick smoke. The foul smell of raw jute about the town is vile. Drab four-storey tenements have filthy middens in their back courts. There, the tenants dump their domestic and human waste, providing a breeding ground for rats and disease.

My heart bleeds for the barefoot, scantily dressed children. Their undernourished bodies are so vulnerable to every disease known to man. Many of the children reek of carbolic soap and the thick, gooey ointment spread thickly on their skin after they've been scrubbed until they bleed. The latter is the agonising treatment they receive to combat the scabies mites. Shaved heads are commonplace, exposing large, weeping sores.

The route to the railway station passes by the west wall of the Howff. The Howff, a meeting place and one of the oldest graveyards in the district, dates back to 1564. Mary Queen of Scots gifted the land to the people of Dundee to be used as a new cemetery. During her visit to the town in 1564, she had been told of the inadequacy of the existing burial land in Dundee. It's one of Dundee's most visible links with the past and contains the bones of medieval citizens, both great and common.

My heart was racing as I approached the Howff. My imagination began to run wild. Large oak and willows fringe the gloomy graveyard. Their wispy branches slouch relentlessly over the tall tombstones. Howling through the trees, the wind moves the branches, making them resemble long spindly arms. I swear to God, they're reaching out to grab me. Quickening my step, I

turned and took a quick look in the direction whence I'd heard a loud screeching noise. A cat, bolting out of the shadows, ran blindly across the road, cleverly scaling the cemetery wall and disappearing into the darkness. Convinced that I was being followed, I glanced back over my shoulder several times expecting to see someone there. The snap of a twig, the wail of the wind and the echo of my lonely footsteps all added to my apprehension.

Gathering my cloak around me, I lifted my skirt above my ankles and took to my heels, running as fast as I could, not stopping until I had reached the busy High Street. I used to laugh at my brother Tom when he spoke of 'ghosts in the grave yard'. Perhaps he was right.

The lively hustle and bustle as I emerged from the eerie darkness of Barrack Street was comforting. At the corner of the Nethergate and Union Street, a one-legged man was sitting on the pavement selling the morning newspaper. His only protection from the cruel weather was the overhang of the building and a worn-out cape draped over his scrawny shoulders. Straggly hair clung to his egg-shaped head, emphasising a large hooked nose protruding from a gaunt, expressionless face. A grubby checked cap lay on the ground in front of him and, to his left side, propped up against the wall, a homemade crutch. Compassion fills my heart whenever I lay eyes upon him. He is the most pathetic sight I've ever seen.

"Dundee woman stabbed!" he shouted out at the top of his voice, repeating himself continuously. A crowd of people swarmed about him anxious to buy a newspaper. Stooping down I tossed a penny into his cap. He pulled a paper from underneath his cape and, with a clever flick of his fingers, he folded the paper, handing it to me without stopping his shouting.

I tried to read the report but a gust of wind blew my bonnet to the back of my head, whipping my hair across my eyes and almost wrenching the paper out of my hands. Holding my hair back with my gloved hand, I swiftly crossed the road, the wet snow stinging my face, my cloak ballooning in the wind. In the doorway of the Royal Hotel at the top of Union Street, I took refuge to read the report. It read: Mistress Mary Ann McKinley of 25 Cowgate was brutally attacked in her home last evening. She suffered multiple stab wounds as well as bruising to her face, neck and arms. She is currently fighting for her life in the Dundee Royal Infirmary.

“Good Lord!” I gulped with an uncontrollable surge of emotion, covering my mouth with my fingertips, “I can’t believe it. I just cannot believe it.” Mary Ann’s Gus’ sister. My mind in a whirl, I folded the paper nervously slipping it into my bag. Straightening my bonnet, I tied the ribbons more securely and hurried to the station. Pausing momentarily at the top of the stairs leading to the platforms, I took a quick glance at the West Station clock. It was ten minutes to eight. “Ah! There’s still plenty of time to catch the train.”

The scene at Tay Bridge Station was typical of the hour. People were huddled in small groups awaiting the arrival of the seven fifty-five express from London to Aberdeen. Two elderly gentlemen, thick woollen scarves wrapped around their throats and deerstalker hats pulled down over their ears, stomped feet vigorously as they swung their arms to and fro across their chests. Their red noses were dripping. Water from their eyes trickled down the crevices of their wizened faces.

Six brightly painted coaches waited on the south-bound line while the engine was having its boiler filled. Many passengers had already boarded the train. Ladies,

dressed to the hilt, were peering aimlessly out the windows. Some wore sober poky bonnets. Others wore pretty, wide-brimmed hats tied in huge chiffon bows underneath the chin. Gentlemen were all occupied either reading their newspapers or puffing away on their pipes. A small boy's face, round, with bright rosy cheeks, his nose pressed hard against the window, caught my eye. He smiled shyly at me, his large blue eyes filled with wonder. I waved my handkerchief to him and he responded enthusiastically, waving a tiny gloved hand.

I noticed the Tayport train was ready to leave from platform three. Holding my bonnet in place with my free hand, I ran. The cold dampness penetrated my bones. My eyes were watering with the wind. When I reached the train, I lifted my skirt above my ankles and clambered, harassed and out of breath, into the compartment immediately ahead of the brake van. When the guard was satisfied that all the doors were shut he gave a blast on his whistle, waved a bright green flag and climbed into the guard's van. Moving away from the platform slowly at first, the train gathered momentum as it passed the marshalling yard, hurtling out of the station and leaving the dismal greyness of Dundee behind.

I sank into the seat by the window, removed my bonnet, shook my head and ran my fingers through my hair. It felt wet and grimy. Tired and weary, I rested my head against the soft upholstery and allowed my eyes to close. The huffing and puffing of the engine, rumbling slowly across the bridge, lulled me to sleep.

"Waken up, lassie! Waken up!" A lively porter, arousing me with a shake, startled me. "Been working you too hard have they?" bellowed his piercing voice.

"My goodness," I gasped, hand on heart, yawning simultaneously, "what a fleg you gave me. I feel as if I

just closed my eyes and here we've arrived."

"We have that, lass, we have that." He held the carriage door open, for me to disembark. Staggering to my feet, I retrieved my bag from the luggage rack, placed my bonnet on the top of my head and buttoned up my cloak. As I went to alight, I stumbled.

The porter surged forward, grabbing my arm to steady me. "Oh take it easy, lass, take it easy." With a quick word of gratitude to him, I braced myself and followed a handful of people through the exit gate.

It had stopped snowing but the aftermath of dampness was everywhere. Slush filled the gutters, melted and gurgled into the drains.

Dawn had replaced darkness and the razzle-dazzle in the street was evident. A dapple grey horse harnessed to Pragit's Dairy wagon waited in front of the Ship Inn, while the master delivered his daily orders. The horse continually pawed the road with its metal-shod hoof. Sparks were flying. Timorous of such a mighty animal, I gave it a wide berth.

Graeme Henderson, the baker's boy, bonnet tilted to the side of his head, whistled 'Bonny Lassie' as he followed close on the milkman's heels. The aroma of freshly baked rolls escaping from his basket caused my tummy to rumble. I reached into the pocket within the lining of my cape to retrieve an apple, which Jessie Hampton, a nursing friend, had given me. The juice trickled down my chin when I bit into the fresh crisp fruit. I was starving.

Jock Morris, a local worthy, who walks his dog at the same time every morning, came marching across the road the moment he spied me. "Nurse Carey! Nurse Carey!" he shouted at the top of his voice. "Ad say the weather's gonna settle doon. Look! Look! Up there!" He

was pointing his cane to where the clouds parted and a glimmer of pale wintry sun peeped through.

“Well! How about that? It’s not before time we had a change of weather.” His wind-burned face beamed at my positive reaction. Promptly he folded his hands over the handle of his cane, as if he’d settled down to a morning of yapping. Meantime, Megan, his collie was licking my gloved hand.

“Megan doesn’t mind this nasty weather, Mister Morris,”

“Heavens no, she’s happy as the day’s lang when oot for a wak. Rain, hail, or shine maks nae difference tae her.”

An untimely gust of wind blew his moth-eaten kilt up over his face compelling him to drop the cane. Well, I couldn’t help but laugh. Quick as a flash, I retrieved the cane and handed it to him. Out of sheer embarrassment, I focused on Megan. “Ah, Megan,” I fussed, running my fingers through her silky coat. “You’re a bonny wee doggie, so you are. I’ve noticed how friendly she is with children, Mister Morris.”

“Aye, she is that! Why, she’d befriend Auld Nick himself!” With his grey, wiry hair poking down from underneath a Harris-tweed-hat and his crooked nose cocked in the air, he reminded me of a leprechaun.

“I’ve had a terrible pain in this leg of mine a’ winter,” he whined, rubbing the leg in question with the palm of his hand. “Is there anything you could recommend that would ease it, you being a nurse?”

“Heavens no, I wouldn’t jeopardise my job. Your doctor will prescribe something to help.” He hummed and hawed and would’ve prattled on forever, so I tactfully bid him good day.