Letty and the Mystery of the Golden Thread

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PUFFIN



CHAPTER THE NOUGHTH

The Beginning of the Year 1764

It started with the discovery of a child in a museum – a place she had no business to be.

The child in question – a golden-guinea-eyed thing – was so young she was speechless. She was found wandering among the shelves of priceless vases and coins, shimmering branches of coral, and very-dead crocodiles with malicious grins. She had no name that anyone could guess, nor parents to be found.

But the Assistant Keeper's assistant (who found her) sent word to the Assistant Keeper (who did not like children), who sent for the Keeper himself (who did). And the Keeper had sense enough to see that this child was special, and that

she deserved to be loved; therefore he (as was right) loved her instantly.

All this was uncommonly lucky.

And so the Keeper gave the wide-eyed, unspeaking girl a warm home – where he kept the truth of how she came to be his daughter for a later time, when she was old enough to want to know it.



CHAPTER THE FIRST

The Spring of the Year 1774

'Good morning, my dear Tomato,' said Sir Joshua, using his walking cane to drag an Ancient Greek vase across the table. He often called her Tomato; though sometimes it was:

'Cucumber, dear, could you help me to find my spectacles?'

or, on occasion,

'What do you think the inscription on this coin says, my little Cauliflower?'

Lettice would wander up to his desk on her way to her favourite window seat, pick up the coin and say something like, 'Well, the gold is worn so it's hard to say for sure, but I *think* that's Emperor Hadrian, in one of his scruffier phases,'

and Sir Joshua would nod, smile over his spectacles, and say, 'Clever Lettice. Thank you.'

And Letty would curtsy as a joke, and say, 'You're welcome, Pa,' even though strictly speaking Sir Joshua Breech wasn't her father (and there were some people who thought that she should call him 'my lord'). But there were many odd things about Number 6, Lamb Place, and this was by no means the oddest of them.

It had been ten years since Sir Joshua brought young Lettice (as he'd named her) home to Number 6, having retired from the museum in which he'd found her, and established a personal one of his own ('open to Scholars by Appointment only'). And what a lot she had learned since then. For instance:

- Example the first: she now knew that she was not, despite Sir Joshua's jokes, named after a salad vegetable, but that her name meant *joy*.
- Example the second: at four she could natter away not only in English, but also in Latin.
- Example the third: at six, under Sir Joshua's patient teaching, she could write Ancient Greek as well as she could draw a pigeon's skeleton, which is to say very well indeed.
- Example the fourth: by the age of eight she had learned a smattering of languages – Persian, Assyrian and Ancient Hebrew, too.

And now that she was nearly twelve, Letty was as knowledgeable as any Eton-schooled gentleman from the Royal Society. And her eyes still shone like golden guinea-coins.

Using his Collection of historical objects and curiosities – which were displayed throughout the tall house in which they lived – Sir Joshua had taught Letty to spot the difference between Ionic, Doric and Corinthian columns (Corinthian, of course, being by far the best), and to distinguish Devon marble from Yorkshire; he had shown her how to tell her aquatints from her mezzotints;* and he had not neglected, in addition to this thorough grounding in the arts and sciences, to teach her how to be kind. Despite Sir Joshua's vast intelligence and the importance of his Collection, he recognized kindness as the greatest lesson of all.

But only once in recent memory had he talked to Letty about something other than fascinating ancient artefacts.

'When I am gone,' he had begun, and Letty had covered her ears with her hands.

Sir Joshua gently pulled them away.

* A subject upon which I will not elaborate here, being too busily engaged in telling Letty's story; but you must be content with the fact that it has something to do with water . . . I think. Or is it the wood upon which the carving is made? Oh, dear me! I shall have to go and look it up in the library.

'When I am gone,' he continued quietly, 'all this is yours, dear Letty. *You* will be Keeper of this Collection, my girl. It is yours, and my only request is that you open the house as a public museum, so that all people may see.'

What could Letty do but agree?

So Letty grew plump and happy year on year, absorbing her lessons on constellations and artists and mathematics as easily as a lettuce draws water from the soil. And at the end of each day, the content of more books absorbed, and even more coins identified, Sir Joshua would unfurl his tired spine, rise from his desk, and climb slowly up the stairs (candlestick in hand), his white hair shining in the gloom.

And every night, after reading a bit more of her favourite story, the *Odyssey*, together (in its original Ancient Greek), he would say, 'Goodnight, Lettice, my little fact-hunter. How lucky I am to have you for a daughter. There is no such gem as you throughout the whole of the ancient world.'

Letty would look up from beneath her fringe and say, 'But Pa – I want to *see* these marvellous places! I want to walk among the ruins of the Forum at Rome! I wish to stand at the centre of a Roman theatre and contemplate the writings of Pliny and Horace! Can we go on Grand Tour soon?'

And Sir Joshua would chuckle, and say, 'One day. But en't our Collection here enough?'

'With the world as wide as it is?' Letty would reply. 'With all those wonderful *objects* waiting to be found? Never!'

And she would retire to her room with its yellow flocked wallpaper, and jump on to her high four-poster bed, and draw its thick green curtains; and she would move the candlelight over her atlas, which catalogued the countries from which all the wondrous curiosities in their home had journeyed. And then she would dream of distant lands, and of objects waiting to be found, and things she didn't yet know.*

*** A brief note upon aquatints and mezzotints.**

I have now returned from the library, where I learned a great deal about the difference between these two printing methods; but my margin here is too narrow for the purpose of explaining very perfectly, so I will say no more upon the matter.

Well, truth be told, I have got into something of a muddle myself. I think that perhaps mezzotints are more difficult to do. Yes, that is probably it. Now, think no more upon the subject and skip neatly along to the next chapter, like a good reader. Thank you kindly.

Off you go. I shall watch to see that you close the door snugly on your way out. That's right. Go on – stop letting the heat out, please.

Be off, now! Shoo! Stop bothering me here in this cramped and untidy space. There is nothing for you here! Away with you!