

“LIFE AND DEATH appeared to me ideal bounds, which I should first break through, and pour a torrent of light into our dark world.” – Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*

FEBRUARY 20, 1898

MRS. MARGARET ANNE SAUNDERS, nee Worthington, of Cumberland, has regrettably passed into God’s keeping after a lengthy illness. The deceased was born in Wiltshire in the year 1861 to father Captain Horatio Worthington and mother Gertrude Anne Worthington (nee Dawkins), and sailed to Canada in the year 1890 with her husband and two daughters. Her husband’s appointment as supporting physician with the Union Colliery Company brought the family to Cumberland, and since their arrival, Mrs. Saunders has been a vibrant and memorable citizen of this fine city. Her passing was not wholly unforeseen, for she had suffered many years with a number of long-standing ailments, and she will be missed by her beloved husband, physician Dr. John Saunders, originally of Wiltshire, and

her two daughters, Violet Anne Saunders and Amaryllis Elizabeth Saunders. Funeral to be held, weather permitting, on the morning of February 20. All friends welcome. - *The Weekly News, February 15, 1898*

THE MORNING of Mother's funeral boasted a light trace of frost upon the windows and a fresh skiff of snow across the yard. The previous night had been bitterly cold but, as the sun rose, the air became refreshing and bracing, almost pleasant, and the light danced merrily across the glittering fringe of icicles that adorned the eaves. Over the housetops, the pale smoke from the chimneys drifted straight as chalk lines into a dove-grey sky. The eastern horizon embraced the newborn sun in a cloudy cradle of vermilion and pink, like a bed of rose petals curving across the wide expanse of heaven, and before the last stars had fully vanished, I could feel the promise of a crisp, clear sunny day in the motionless air. It smelled clean, and invigorating, and--

“By all the stars in heaven, Amaryllis! Close the window!”

I let out my breath in a sigh and put my shoulder to the wooden frame. Half-pulling, half-pushing, I dropped the pane of glass between myself and the world.

“Letting out all the good coal heat!” Violet nattered, “Do you have no sense, Amaryllis? It's as cold as a penguin's toes in here!”

“Father has as much coal as he wishes, Vi,” I reminded her, “He's paid a portion of his wage in coal. But I need a breath of fresh air, and I didn't think he'd mind.”

“A lady shuns fresh air, Lizzie, for that's how disease is borne! God's teeth!” Violet huffed in frustration. “You'll come down with consumption and die and be buried alongside Mother, and I should be shamed to have a little sister so stupid!” Her throat hitched. She sniffled a little behind one hand, and reached for a handkerchief with the other.

My sister scoffed at education for women, but she'd studied the art of theatrics like a master. The ague that she'd suffered in Panama had never fully left her, and Violet had fashioned her illness into a

virtue, transforming it into a frailness that men found irresistible. Now, in deep mourning, Violet appeared more delicate than usual, as precious as the first snowdrop of spring. Her oval face, with a slight blush on her white cheeks and a rosy pink hue to her lips, appeared almost angelic. Grief had stripped her of her normally capricious, flirtatious nature, and transformed her into a regal beauty.

“Oh, for the love of... Please don’t cry again, Vi,” I said. “Look, I’ve closed the window, just like you asked!”

She hiccupped into her hanky. “You haven’t shed a single tear for Mother,” she accused, “I think you must be a little stupid, Lizzie, and don’t have a sense of what has happened.”

I winced. “I know exactly what’s happened,” I replied.

“Not stupid, then,” Violet sniffled, then added with thinly-veiled disapproval, “Only heartless!”

I leaned against the window frame as she dissolved into tears again. “I have cried, Vi,” I admitted, “I spent the night in tears. I will cry again, no doubt. But this public display of sorrow –“

“You must not hide yourself away to cry! There is no shame in grief!”

“Did you just accuse me of feeling shame?” I countered.

Violet laughed, but her mirth was as cold as the icicles outside the window. “Oh, how much you are like Mother! As calculating as a snake; as womanly as a stone. You’ve never felt a lick of shame in all your life; why would you start now?”

She cried for a minute or two. While she sobbed out her anger, I waited. My sister could be caustic and mean, but Mother’s death had struck her a fierce blow, and I saw plainly enough that her insult was born of sorrow and not malice.

“I’m sorry, Liz,” she said with a hoarse throat. “One ought not speak cruelly of the deceased.” She sniffled and wiped her nose. “But Mother’s madness was a burden we all bore. You must admit, her death brings a sense of relief.” She took a deep breath, straightened her spine, and tipped up her chin. “Now, come help me with the lacing, would you?” Violet offered the lacing of her corset, a fine piece

of black bombazine with whalebone struts that were so crisp and new, they squeaked when she moved.

My own dress remained unbuttoned and my gloves lay rumpled on the end of the bed, but I breathed on my stiff fingers to warm them and took the corset's crossed laces in hand. With the heel of my right palm against the small curve of Violet's back, I jerked the cords tight.

"You... are....very....good..." Violet encouraged, grunting with each savage pull.

"Hold your breath, now, while I tie it fast."

I secured the corset. Violet took the black silk dress from the table and slipped it on, then pulled the long gloves over her hands and wrists. She swung a short wool jacket over her shoulders and finally finished the outfit with a fine angora shawl. Violet regarded herself in the mirror with a congratulatory smile.

A little pang of jealousy prickled at my heart. I had to admit, she looked lovely. The outfit gave her curled tendrils of blonde hair an unnatural luminescence.

But then, she rounded upon me like a rabid dog, and her smile melted into a scowl. "Oh, Amaryllis! You're hardly dressed at all! Here, let me help you prepare."

"It's no bother." I pulled at my stockings, "I'll only be a moment."

But Violet would not be dissuaded; she saw an opportunity to fuss and cluck over me, two years her junior and a world less experienced. "This is a bit more complex than your regular trousers and shirt, Lizzie! You can't simply throw on today's outfit with mere seconds to spare!"

"This is a bit more involved than I'm accustomed," I agreed.

I silently wished that trousers would have been acceptable. I could get away with such indiscretions while raking the yard and pruning the apple tree, but wearing pants to my own mother's interment asked too much of society.

No, in truth, it asked too much of Mrs. Gunn. Our housekeeper had been positively gleeful when charged with the duties of laying out the girls' clothes for the funeral because it gave her an open opportunity to muscle me into a dress. I hadn't worn a frock since,

well.... I cast her mind back. "Y'know, Vi," I mused, "I haven't worn a dress in over a year."

Violet aligned my body directly before her and, with feet braced, yanked the corset ties so fiercely that I almost felt a rib crack. Violet pulled and prodded, I grunted and cursed until, at last, the garment was tightly tied.

"Mercy!" I huffed, but Violet would hear no complaints.

"Come along, put this on," she insisted as she slipped the black blouse over my arms. She snipped the pearl buttons closed with practiced precision, and snuggled the gloves over my outstretched hands; the fine silk snagged on my calloused skin and dirty fingernails. At last, she snatched a brush from the dresser to tame my unruly tangles of ginger hair. There were times when I suspected that my hair, Gorgon-like, had a million serpentine minds of its own.

"Goodness! Unbelievable!" Violet muttered to herself. She twisted pins into the mess until my wild tresses were braided and smooth. "It is our duty," Violet said, examining the shape of my head with narrowed eyes, "Our DUTY, Lizzie, as young English ladies, to bring civilization to the wilderness, not succumb to it!"

I wobbled my head from side to side. So many pins nailed the braids to my scalp that my head actually felt heavier.

With a flick of both wrist and fabric, Violet flourished the silk jacket over my bony shoulders and wrestled and pushed and shoved until, her Herculean task complete, she stood back to regard her work, panting slightly.

And I, half afraid of what I'd see, glanced sideways into the mirror.

The black clothes accentuated the tawny sun-brazed color of my face. They made my hazel eyes appear dark and sharp and cunning, like those of a woodland mouse. Violet might look more celestial in her flowing black garment, but the same outfit made me look decidedly more terrestrial.

"There's not much I can do to help you, Liz," Violet said as she studied the flat, stark and unfeminine lines of my form. She was

unable to mask the pity in her voice. “We’ve managed to stick you in a dress, but doesn’t quite work.”

“It was worth a try,” came my despairing reply.

“I blame Mother, you know,” she said, “You’re like one of those strange Japanese fish that grows to accommodate the size of its container. Mother allowed you to wear trousers, and you’ve had no opportunity to grow except to look awful in a skirt.”

I regarded myself in the mirror with utter dismay. My hair had adopted a fiery red tone in the warm glow of morning, which only accentuated the smattering of freckles across my small nose and the flecks of green in my eyes. I was plain and lean, ropy and muscular and angular. With my dirty nails and nut-brown complexion, acquired after long hours out-of-doors, I decided that I looked more like a faun from classical mythology than a prim and proper lady.

I couldn’t suppress a sigh. “Lordy, I make an ugly girl,” I decided.

Violet grabbed her clutch purse from the table and a folded black scarf from the shelf by the door. “Rest assured, Lizzie dear,” she said, “You make an uglier boy.”

We descended the straight, narrow stairs to the ground floor. Violet moved with grace and poise, one gloved hand outstretched to the balustrade to guide her descent. I tromped heavily, mindfully, with every ounce of concentration dedicated to avoiding a trip and fall over the unfamiliar, ankle-length hem.

“No one will fault you for your attempt, Liz,” Violet consoled over her shoulder, “But years of heavy chores have taken their toll on you – why Father never hired help for the yard, I’ll never know. It was unkind of him, Lizzie, to condemn you to a boy’s chores. Simply unkind.”

“I’ve never thought of it as unkind,” I replied, “Only necessary.” Hauling water was so much easier while wearing boots and pants. I couldn’t imagine attempting my chores in this bloody awful corset.

“I remain committed to the fact that our parents’ indulgence with your eccentricities is cruel.” Violet waited at the bottom of the stairs for me to reach the last step. “They ought never to have perpetuated your ridiculous, ridiculous wardrobe.”

When we reached the main floor, I heard Mrs. Gunn in the kitchen, humming a gusty tune to herself. The copper pots clattered as she prepared the luncheon to follow the service, but upon hearing our leather boot soles on the wooden floor, she poked her round, ruddy face through the kitchen door.

“Och, me wee lovelies!” she exclaimed, pressing her clasped hands to her bosom, the volume of which strained the durable fabric of her apron. Agnes Gunn was a busty rhinoceros of a Scotswoman, formidable in size and presence, with not a single dainty attribute to claim as her own. I mused that, without Agnes’ perpetual white apron tying her all together, that broad and bountiful porridge-filled frame would lose all definition and any semblance of human shape.

Agnes Gunn had been the Saunders’ maid since our arrival in Cumberland, and at times she seemed to be a fixture of the house, rather than an employee of the family. With an ease borne of familiarity and buoyed by her imposing size, she bustled through the rooms, perpetually dusting or tidying, preparing every meal in the immaculate kitchen. She kept a jealous account of the contents of the parlor and outbuildings; one could be forgiven for thinking that the money spent on supplies was her own. Dr. Saunders was often busy with his career and Molly had been in no fit state to care for children, but Agnes fawned and fussed over Violet and me with the same smothering affection she ladled on her own seven sons.

Her slab of a face, as delicate as the back of a shovel, was topped by a closely-cropped crown of silvery curls. When she smiled, the expression was quick; this morning, of all mornings, must not be wasted in frivolity. She was, in her own acidic way, a thoughtful and loving woman, although she possessed a propensity to speak her mind with a lusty, God-fearing and self-righteous vigor. She had never kept secret her disdain for Mrs. Saunders’ madness, and she felt that Dr. Saunders tolerated far too much when it came to his wife’s queer notions and his youngest daughter’s free and easy will. Now, with the death (albeit tragic and sad, God rest Margaret Anne’s tortured soul, sign of the cross hastily made over the hurdles of a body’s bumps and valleys), the family

was free to return to normalcy. I could dress as a girl befitting my station. Mrs. Gunn, with only a masculine brood to clothe, had collected a number of dress patterns from her neighbors and appraised the fine woolen weaves in Simon Leiser's Big Store. A bolt of cotton, olive green to match my hazel eyes, was already on order.

"Twa bonnie beauties!" she cooed, slapping the flour from her broad palms before she took my hands in her own. "A fair maiden hides in there yet, I do believe it!" she said. She turned to Violet. "And, you! Looking as noble as Her Majesty the Queen! All the boys heads will be a-turning!"

"Thank you, Agnes," Violet said, blushing slightly.

I fussed with the hip of my corset, which bit into my thigh. I hadn't thought of Queen Victoria as the kind of woman to turn a boy's head. "I don't need to wear this awful thing, do I?"

"For shame!" Agnes admonished, "Your mother not even in the grave, and already you're grouching!" She slung her arm over my shoulders and guided me down the hall, toward the parlor. "Let's try, just for today, tae exercise the feminine beauties that God hath bestowed upon ye!"

"But she's lacking in God's beauty," said Violet, "You can't blame her for being discouraged."

I wasn't completely sure if I ought to thank Violet for the support, or deck her in the jaw with a closed fist. Instead, I decided to bite my tongue and suffer through the morning, pesky corset and all, in tortuous silence.

Cedar boughs adorned the hearth in the parlor. They lent a Yuletide flavor and a pleasing, sweet perfume to an otherwise austere room. Strips of black crape tied the curtains back, letting in a few rays of watery sunlight, and ivory-colored candles on the tables provided a gentle illumination, much softer and more quiet than the hissing coal-oil lamps. Between the parlor and the kitchen sat the dining room, where all of the furniture had been rearranged: the long table had been moved against the wall and Molly's closed casket, surrounded by more candles, sat silently upon it. Three wooden chairs faced the

casket, where mourners could sit comfortably and contemplate their own mortality.

I had spent most of last night in one of these chairs, reading a book and listening to the ominous ticking of the mantle clock. In the bone-chilling dark, the waves of heat radiating from the small inferno of candles had made the dining room a very pleasant place to wile away the hours. Pleasant, of course, except for the silent company of my mother's mortal remains, lying on the table.

Mrs. Gunn's first task, every day, was to light a fire in the hearths. Already, the parlor was quite comfortable.

Violet sat on the couch by the fireplace, smoothing out the folds of her skirts with her palms. "Is Father ready?"

Agnes shook her head. "He's oot in the yard, in his surgery."

This came as no surprise. My father was prone to contemplation, and the surgery was his refuge. The little building of dun bricks sat in the southwest corner of our yard and had originally been a tool shed, but John Saunders had converted it into a private office for after-hour appointments and emergencies. It was small, neat, well-organized and secure, with a tiny four-panel window to the right of its wooden door. Outside, it appeared small and modest, but inside, my father had created a cozy and welcoming office, pharmacy, and personal study.

The surgery held only three pieces of furniture: a solid wooden table, a wicker chair by the door, and a locked cabinet of medications and ointments. The monstrous table was hewn from a single massive slab of oak, and it was strong enough to support the full weight of a man; here is where Dr. Saunders urged patients to lie down while he sewed up lacerations or assessed bruised muscles. The surface was carved and hacked by years of use, and Father had told me that he'd bought it from a public house for a very reasonable price. Patrons had whittled their blades on the edges, and someone had carved a name, "Robbie", in runic lines at one corner.

In direct contrast to the table, the wicker chair looked too fragile to bear anyone's weight, even a scrawny bone-rack like me. When Father set his medical case – a heavy split-handled bag fashioned

from walrus hide -- on the chair, the delicate legs creaked and groaned under the burden. I thought the chair to be rather useless as a bit of furniture, but its seat had been upholstered with blue chintz to match the blue Persian rug that covered the floor, and Mother had claimed that the complimentary pieces made the surgery seem more professional, and less like an old tool shed.

I could not blame my father for seeking solitude in the surgery. He often sought refuge there from a house full of shrieking, nattering women. Today, it offered him a private sanctuary to collect himself before burying his wife.

"I knocked upon the door," Agnes continued, "And told him tae come, but ye ken how your father can be. He'll join us in his own guld time."

"But he must be here when the hearse arrives," Violet said. Her voice wobbled like a marble on an uneven floor. "It's only proper!"

"Aye, but you must agree, your father's heart has fair been crushed to have lost the missus," Agnes reminded, "Your guld mother was his everything." She tipped her chin in the direction of the back yard. "Your father has the guld sense to take a few minutes of solitude to hide his weeping. Ye can nae fault him for wanting privacy at a time like this. He's too much of a gentleman to show his emotions."

The hollow clapping of hooves against the frozen mud of First Street rang in the icy air. I hurried to the parlor window.

A matched pair of shaggy black horses rounded the corner. Stars of sunlight flashed off their polished harness. Clusters of purple feathers adorned their brows. They pulled a carriage which gleamed like polished jet, and they breathed white plumes into the frosty air as they tossed their noble heads. The driver reined them to a halt before the house as a small crowd of neighbors congregated in the front yard.

"The hearse is here," I said from the window, "And a number of mourners, too. Thirty, at least, and more coming up the street."

"And Father, no where to be seen!" Violet fretted, "God's teeth! We shall not live this down!"

"The crowd can wait," I replied as I stepped away from the

window. "Another minute more won't matter; Mother isn't going anywhere."

Violet gave a little squeal. "There is an order to these things, Liz! Every social occasion is like the theatre, and all people have their part to play, and all moments have their cue! And if we fail in our duty to bury our Mother properly? What then?"

"What then, indeed?" I replied, "The world won't fall to pieces."

The pallbearers crowded onto the porch, waiting for admittance. Agnes looked quickly to the door, her mouth set in a hard line. "Girls, girls," she said, "There'll be nae fighting between ye today! Please!" She touched her fingers lightly to Violet's cheek. "Never mind, ye bairn, I'll fetch him now, and you invite the pallbearers in. With your mother gone, tis your duty now to host them."

Violet visibly trembled as she stepped into the entrance hall. The doorknob squeaked as it turned under her hand, and the door opened to reveal six men on the front porch, waiting silently, their hats removed and their hands folded before them. She stepped aside as they entered, each bowing his head with silent respect.

I recognized them all: patients of my father's and upstanding members of the community. Alistair and Henry Gunn, Agnes' oldest boys, came first, followed by Hugh Donaldson, the son of the blacksmith. Then came Daniel Creekmore and Steven Hughes, company men, who gave their condolences with a tip of their felt top hats. Both men looked over my dress and smirked at each other, as if my costume were a grand joke, but who was I to argue? It seemed ridiculous to me, too.

Last to enter was Rufus McGregor, the deputy constable, a stout ox of a man with a thick mop of black hair and a lop-sided face, and a neck as thick as my thigh.

It was said that McGregor had once been a fighter on the circuit before a ham-fisted chop fractured his skull, broke his jaw, and rattled his brains, but as far as I could tell, McGregor's brains had unscrambled themselves just fine. His skull had healed but his face remained forever lumpy and scarred, gargoyle-like, and no matter how pleasant his personality, McGregor knew he was nothing pretty

to look upon. When he smiled to me, the expression was awkward, twisted and toothy, painful to watch and poignant for its brutality.

But great kindness lived behind it. I smiled in return.

“I am very sorry for your loss, miss,” he said, his hat in hand. “We all knew there was a sweetness in your mum rarely seen outside these walls.”

“Thank you, Mr. McGregor,” I replied. “She had her moments of lucidity.”

Agnes drew close and took my hand in her own. “I stepped oot tae the surgery, knocked upon the door, and heard nae a peep inside.” She sighed. “I’ve done all I can tae fetch your father, me love.”

“He’ll come,” I replied quietly. “We wouldn’t leave without him.”

Violet gave a slight cough behind one gloved hand.

“Gentlemen,” she began in a quivering voice, “I wish to thank you for all your help. You’ll find my mother resting here.”

She led the six pallbearers into the dining room, and they drew alongside the table, moving candles out of the way to grip on the coffin’s brass handles. On the count of three, they hefted the casket onto their shoulders for Molly’s final exit from the home.

Violet stepped to my side and her sharp elbow nudged my ribs.

“Bow your head, Liz: the coffin’s going by,” she hissed, “It’s only proper.”

Mrs. Gunn shed noisy tears and covered her mouth with her hands, and Violet began to weep, pulling a black linen handkerchief from the sleeve of her glove to dab the corners of her eyes. I watched, silent and solemn, as the men bore the casket out the front door. I tried, but found herself unable, to imagine my mother lying inside. Molly Saunders, who in life had been so exacting and persnickety, who had measured and managed her household with a fiery obsession, who had insisted on all things in their place – Molly surely could never lie still as a cold corpse. My mother had flown across the surface of the world, mad with precision, sorting and cataloguing everything in her path, bringing order to the chaos of nature. How could Molly lie still and silent in a box? She had barely laid still during the thirty-seven years of her life! She’d slept sparingly, at odd

hours of the day and night, keeping to no schedule. Even when she grew tired, Molly propped herself in the horsehide chair in the corner of the parlor, where one could look right and see the front door, or look left through the dining room to see the kitchen and back door. Her hysteria caused her to live in a state of perpetual readiness, and her obsessive nature demanded that nothing be out of place. I could scarcely comprehend a force that could keep a woman like Molly still, but death had succeeded where all other treatments had failed.

The pallbearers shuffled down the steps, treading carefully on the icy path as they bore her towards the waiting carriage. As I watched them go, I felt, more than saw, my father step next to me.

Neither tall nor short, neither large nor small, John Saunders was a specimen of average physical attributes, but he carried himself with the assured bearing of a man comfortable with his station: gentlemanly, knowledgeable, confident. His folded hands were muscular, deft and graceful, with well-shaped nails and scrubbed knuckles. With his patrician features, dark brown hair and a neatly-clipped beard halfway between brown and grey, I thought he made a modestly handsome man, but his calculated manners gave no outward indication of vanity. His meticulous keeping was more a result of good hygiene and breeding than any attempt to attract the attentions of the opposite sex. But gossip is merciless in its swiftness: Molly had been dead for less than a week and already the idle chatter of Cumberland's housewives portrayed him as a poor widower in need of a wife.

Of course, I thought, this was the fabrication of bored mothers with eligible daughters – John gave no indication of replacing his wife of twenty years and, if he heard the gossip at all, turned a deaf ear to it. He already lived in a house filled to the rafters with women, he claimed: between Violet's dotting, my conversation, and Agnes' housekeeping, he had no need of another female creature under his roof.

John followed the men into the street and waited at the door to the carriage as they finished securing the casket. His solemn face was

pale with grief. When the pallbearers filed before him with heads politely bowed, he clasped their hands warmly between both of his palms to give them a firm handshake, and assured each with his gentle, sad smile that he greatly appreciated their assistance. Only after he clapped McGregor on the shoulder did he turn his attention to the women. He kissed Violet on the cheek and embraced Agnes, but he startled slightly to see me.

“You look remarkable, Liz,” he said to me, “You’ve become the very image of your mother.”

“Thank you,” I replied, tugging at the edge of my corset, “But I confess, sir, it isn’t very comfortable.”

“To be perfectly honest, Liz, I don’t think your mother was comfortable in her own skin, either.” He held out his hands to us. “Come, girls, let’s get the day done with, shall we?”