

'The Fair Lady'

The taxi driver nodded his head towards the back seat.

'Yeah, get in love. Castle Rising tea rooms is it? No problem.'

I was driven through the less attractive part of town, past the docks and seafood processing plants then out along the road that heads north.

'Friend of mine, Marik, did this run not long ago,' the taxi driver commented. 'He's not about now though, he's gone back to Poland. A lot of them do, this time of year.'

I was quite pleased that he wanted to talk. It had been a long journey to Lynn, without much conversation with other travellers on the train.

'I'm meeting friends at the tea-room,' I offered to keep the dialogue going.

'Hmm,' he said, 'the tea rooms are nice. Mind you, when my mate Marik was up there he came across a right one in that village.'

He continued, 'So he sees this woman and he thought she were a nun. Usually they wear black and this one was in blue but he said she had that same band across her forehead an' he didn't know if whether in this country the nuns wore blue rather than black.

'Anyway, she came up to his passenger window, tapping on it and saying she needed to get to London. Tower of London to be precise. Well Marik weren't able to take a fare right then,' the driver paused. 'He thought, well I can't take her as a paying passenger but maybe I could just let her ride along with me. You see,' he said looking at me through the rear-view mirror, 'they're Catholics are them Polish and Marik found it hard to just leave a nun on her own.'

'So, anyway, he let her travel alongside on him, on the passenger seat; felt it wasn't so much like she were a customer that way. He had to do her seat belt up mind, 'cause she didn't seem to have much clue about that.'

'As soon as they got to the station at Lynn she was up out of that cab and away to the platform. Marik thought well that's blooming good, she didn't offer to pay for the fare so just as well he never had the meter running. And he did wonder what she'd do about paying for a ticket to London 'cause she weren't carrying any bags or purse that he could see.

'Well, Marik was back at the station a couple of days later, dropping off a passenger, and one of the other lads said to him 'you'd better not hang about here very long Marik as the Queen's about to arrive and once she's off that train there'll be no end of delays'. So Marik didn't hang about, he thought, I'll get going while I can.

'He was about to drive off and then the same woman from the other day comes along and taps on his window again. 'Could he take her to the castle?' she asks. And then she says 'The army wasn't at London; it must be at the castle'. Marik thinks, poor thing she's got dementia or something and he decides the best thing is to get her back to where he found her and maybe there'd be someone there who'd be able to help.'

By this time, we had left the town, climbing to the top of a hill where we could see the Norfolk countryside stepping away into the distance. Snow was settled on the fields and the grey sky above threatened more.

We drove along in silence for a while. The driver had to negotiate a roundabout and then we were soon dropping downhill again. The traffic was running quickly and smoothly but a lorry in front was spraying us with slush and road grit.

'Creating a mess i'nt he?' said the driver, switching on the windscreen wipers. 'Mind you good piece of road this, has to be as the Queen travels on it. It weren't so long ago that they had three lanes here, so as the Queen could get to her house in Sandringham quicker.' His Norfolk accent lengthened out the vowels 'traavels' and 'soo'. The turning for Castle Rising soon came up on the left. Once we had started climbing the incline of the next hill my driver continued with his story.

'Well Marik brought the lady along here, and when he gets to the village he takes her to the tea house but she says she must go to the castle to find the army. So Marik parks up and they start to walk to the castle. As I said, Marik wanted to find

someone who could look after her so he thought maybe there would be someone there who would know her.

‘When they get to the entrance gate there was a cashier so Marik thinks, I can’t get out of this, I’ll have to buy us tickets. He was beginning to think this was all costing him a bit of cash and time, but you know Marik’s a kind hearted guy, so he pays the entrance fee. Only, when he buys two tickets the cashier asks him, had the other person gone ahead? Well Marik didn’t understand this you see, ‘cause the lady was standing just by the gate. He told the cashier but she just looked at him as though his English weren’t very good. So Marik turns to follow the lady, but she’d disappeared, just vanished. Marik goes up the stairs to look for her, then asks around. And of course the cashier says she’d never seen the lady, so all Marik could do was come away. He was very upset you know, not knowing where she’d gone.’

The driver stopped speaking. We drove along with him deep in his own thoughts. It had started to snow, just little flakes that were falling lightly along the side of the passenger window but hitting the driver’s screen heavily. Every so often the wipers moved across the glass, clearing the melting snow as more flakes landed.

‘I suppose I should have gone up there myself, but I haven’t had time. With Marik leaving it’s left us a driver down, and with all the shoppers this time of year we’ve been busy in town.’

I realised he wasn’t expecting a reply.

The driver left me outside the tea room. There were some shops nearby, prettily lit with beautiful items on show in the windows, their windowsills and gables furred with snow. The tea rooms looked cosy with shaded lights and net curtains. Inside there would probably be a log fire burning. I’d received a text from my friends telling me they were running an hour late and although everything looked so enticing; I felt curious. I wanted to see the castle for myself.

I had very little to carry and I was wearing reasonable boots and coat, so I set off and followed the signs for the castle.

It didn’t take me long to realise it was a bit of a mistake. I’d forgotten how quickly falling snow turns to water on your clothes, hair and face. I pulled up my

hood and braced myself to make the best of it. After all I was more than halfway to the castle. I began to wonder if the rooms at the castle would be decorated with holly, ivy and other traditional ways that would counter the plastic and tinsel on show in town. I even had a name for it in my mind, 'Christmas at Castle Rising'. I'd positively had it trademarked by the time I tramped round the bend in the lane and the castle came into sight.

Granted it's a large castle, standing high on its hill top, but it was an immediate disappointment. With one look I knew that there was no-one there, no cashier to open the gates and certainly no sophisticated decorations, mince pies and warming cups of mulled wine. The castle was deserted.

All the same, I thought, if the scenery on the way was anything to go by this certainly deserved a look. I was at the highest point around here and I would be able to see the snow covered countryside stretching from castle to sea.

The gate into the entrance lobby was unexpectedly open so I went inside to take a rest from the falling snow. It was silent inside the foyer. The weight of years hanging heavy, centuries of Christmas celebrations yearning to be recalled.

Although closed for the season there were displays telling the history of the castle. I viewed the images of a beautiful woman dressed in blue, referred to as Isabella the Fair. This was Queen Isabella who had ruled England, but then her son, and his wife Philippa, became rulers instead and Isabella retired here to live in sumptuous luxury. The display showed the decorated rooms of the castle as they would have been seven hundred years ago.

As I turned to look for further displays I noticed that the turnstile was open. I'd wanted to see the winter scenery from here and if I could go higher the view would be even better. I walked through the turnstile and started to climb the steep stairs.

'Has the army arrived yet?'

It was the lady in blue, Queen Isabella. I had found her in the medieval waiting room. She had been looking out through the large glazed windows.

'There is no army, madam,' I replied.

She spun to look at me. 'No army?'

'It's not needed madam,' I said. 'The Queen has a new castle, she is protected there.'

'Is Queen Philippa well?' asked my lady.

'Not Philippa, Elizabeth. Elizabeth is safe.' I said softly. My lady stepped back, looking confused. 'These are not your times madam.' I kept my voice low, wishing to soothe her. 'You should sleep my lady.' I walked towards her, my hands open, encouraging her. 'Let me take you to your rooms.'

She hesitated and, oblivious, walked through to her room with its cold stone arches and the wind singing its haunting, timeless melody through a gap in the ancient windows. In a corner there was a low bench covered in a sheet left by workmen. I followed her as she walked towards the seat.

There was a sudden flashing of light, and the room was transformed with colour. Tapestries hung around the room, their needlework a depth of red and blue wool. The bench was a glorious four-poster bed draped in curtains woven with gold and covered with blankets and furs. I assisted my lady to climb into the bed and then I drew the soft blankets close around her.

'She is well you say? Queen Elizabeth is well?'

'Yes,' I reassured my lady. 'She is well, she has her own protectors. You no longer need to worry.'

My lady rested her head against the pillows.

'That is good,' I heard her say.

The flashing returned and we were back in the monochrome room, with its bare stone walls and draughty windows. The bed was again a bench.

The winter wind blew around me, causing the leaves that had gathered in the corner of the room to swirl and dance. I watched my lady as the centuries came to reclaim her. To return her to her time. Her chin sagged; her cheekbones appeared heightened as the skin beneath began to recede. Her eyes closed and the eye

sockets sank. Her fair flesh turned to grey and then was slowly erased, falling from her as dust and joining the leaves blowing around the room, until every last mortal remain was lost and my lady returned to her own time. There was no need for her to find the protecting army. She could rest knowing her realm was safe.