

The Long-Timer Chronicles
A Tale of Two Sisters
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East End

1

London, Whitechapel district, half past one in the morning: It is mid-November of 1888 and despite the cold and the furor over the Ripper killings, Vickie Seely makes her way along the dirty street, hoping for a client who will pay enough for her to afford the rent on a tiny flat she shares with two other women. She is poor, illiterate, and her family gave up on her years ago leaving her to fend for herself, begging, stealing, walking the streets, taking pence or shillings from smelly men who want a “quick one” before heading home to their families. She cannot recall the last time she had a complete meal, just some scraps a friendly pub owner passed to her as she was scavenging in an alley.

Prostitutes are common in this section of London, but she doesn't look like the others. She seems younger, more vibrant, her face and features not marred by alcoholism or the hard living that plagues residents of the area. She is shorter than average with a small frame, making her look almost childlike. Her strawberry blond hair is pinned up and tucked beneath a weathered cap that's a size too big. She is a throwaway in a society overflowing with them, people who most won't notice at all unless they need something from them and in Vickie's case there's only one thing anyone needs from her. As she walks, she hums a popular tune, stopping occasionally to correct a note or recall a lyric.

Ahead, she sees just the sort of person who'll require her services, a well-dressed man. There is only one reason for someone like that to be in Whitechapel at this time of the evening. She falls into a slow saunter, staring in his direction. Seeing her, the man slows and as they meet, she says with a heavy Cockney accent, “Ev'nin' sir. Lookin' for some comp'ny tonight?”

A Tale of Two Sisters

The man smiles and produces a gold sovereign.

“You are lonely,” she says rubbing his arm. “Vickie’ll treat you right.”

She leads him into an alley, but as she turns to prepare herself, she suddenly feels her body shoved against the wall. Before she can react, even scream, a cord wraps around her neck and is jerked tightly, constricting her breathing. Desperate for air, she struggles to free herself, clawing at the rope to no avail.

“Not so fast, Vickie,” the man says into her ear, “I want to enjoy every minute.”

Soon, her body goes limp and she slumps against the wall. The man pulls her backwards and removes the cord then pulls a knife from his coat pocket and draws it across her throat, producing a steady trickle of blood. He shoves her onto the pavement and steps away from her. Just before he leaves, he looks down at her and says calmly, “Don’t worry, dear. You didn’t have much to look forward to anyway.” He flips the sovereign toward her, saying, “You earned it,” then heads back toward the street.

Manhattan, early-Fall, 2004: In an apartment overlooking the park on the upper West Side, a young, blond woman with a swimmer’s physique, her nude body partially covered by a bed sheet, lies on her stomach on a king-sized bed that’s messy from a night’s sleep and perhaps a little more. Her name is Dana. She occupies the left side of the bed and to the right there’s the impression of another head on a pillow though that side is now empty. She lifts her head and looks around then feels the opposite side of the bed.

“Vickie?” she calls out, “you here?”

Just outside the bedroom is a nicely furnished living room. There’s a baby grand piano in one corner and various other instruments arranged across the floor as well as numerous paintings on the walls covering nearly every artistic genre of the twen-

The Long-Timer Chronicles

tieth century. In front of the window looking out is a thin woman smaller than average, with long, curly, strawberry blond hair and wearing a flannel housecoat. She stares intently out of the window and idly, almost unconsciously, runs her fingers along an ugly scar across her throat. She is Victoria Wells.

Without moving her eyes from the window, she turns her head slightly in the direction of the bedroom and says in a voice that still bears the faint traces of a cockney accent, "It's okay, sweetie. I'll be in straight away."

From the pocket of her housecoat, she produces a coin, a gold sovereign bearing the likeness of Queen Victoria, and rolls it over the tops of her fingers, then steps away from the window, flips the coin into the air and catches it before it's halfway down. She heads into the bedroom.

Margaret Smythe never wanted to be a bad mother. When she married Thomas Seely in Bishopsgate in 1834 she anticipated many years together and a houseful of healthy, happy children. When she learned she was pregnant, she felt the future was wide open. Billy's birth made her the happiest she had ever been and Margaret foresaw many years with Thomas raising their family.

Thomas was killed in an accident at the docks when Billy was barely two-years-old and not long afterward, Margaret met Niles Gunnerson, a Norse seaman who answered an ad she placed for a lodger. Gunnerson paid on time and was quiet and kept his room tidy but Margaret always felt there was more between them than just a casual relationship. One evening, she looked in on him just before bedtime and they allowed things to go much further. Their affair began in late September 1837 and concluded a couple of months later, when he shipped out for points unknown. A month after that, Margaret discovered she was pregnant.

Margaret found herself unmarried and pregnant by a man who was no longer in the picture, a bad combination for early

A Tale of Two Sisters

Victorian England. Her daughter with Gunnerson was born on Coronation day, June 28, 1838. Being a believer in signs, Margaret named the girl Victoria. Since Margaret had never married Gunnerson, Victoria could not have his name, so she became Victoria Seely. The local parish refused to baptize Victoria, but kindly old Reverend Drake performed the ceremony in the church rectory after evening services had concluded. Margaret soon discovered the severe stigma attached to women who had children out of wedlock. English law at that time laid all the blame on the mother and no longer required the fathers to support the children, a moot point in Margaret's case since she didn't know how to find Gunnerson. She found it hard to get work, even doing laundry and the neighbors who had been so kind to her when she was a young widow now shunned her and her bastard daughter. Margaret held up for as long as she could, but at last took to the bottle to relieve her misery. As resources became scarce, she resorted to the final indignity, taking men into her bed for money. Two years after Victoria was born, Margaret found she was pregnant again. This child, born late in 1840, she named Amanda, after her sister.

As Margaret continued her spiral into booze and prostitution, the children were neglected and it frequently fell to kind-hearted neighbors to look after them. Education was out of the question, except for Billy who attended a local poor school sponsored by the church, where he was taught the basics of reading and writing and how to add and subtract and little more. The girls grew up ignorant and unloved, shunned by a society which vilified them. Billy did the best he could to look after his sisters, but there's only so much a young boy could do. As she got older, Victoria displayed a talent for music and was always humming or singing snippets of songs she'd heard around town.

When Victoria was eight, Niles Gunnerson returned, explaining to Margaret that he'd been traveling around the world and

The Long-Timer Chronicles

that this was his first opportunity to get back to her. She curtailed her drinking and they resumed their physical relationship and made plans to marry. Gunnerson was happy to learn of Victoria and to Margaret's delight, was willing to take responsibility for Amanda as well. On one of his visits, he gave Victoria a wooden flute which she learned to play quickly. Some neighborhood boys took it from her, prompting Billy to chase them down and beat them until they returned it with apologies. It was the happiest Margaret had been since the time she had been with her husband, and for the first time, she made an attempt at being a mother to her daughters as well as her son. Then in March of 1848, a few weeks after Margaret learned she had another child on the way, Niles collapsed in the living room of Margaret's house and was pronounced dead by the doctor who arrived to tend to him.

Margaret's remaining months were spent preparing for the new baby by drinking a lot and lying in a near-catatonic state on the sofa in the living room. The events of the past few years kept swirling around in her head and the conclusion she finally came to was that her life had started to go wrong when Victoria was born. She made sure she shared this insight with Victoria whenever her daughter was within earshot. By the time the new baby was due, Margaret had formulated a plan to rid herself of the causes of all her problems. Then she and Billy could start anew somewhere else.

Victoria welcomed the arrival of her little sister, named Sarah, a few months after her tenth birthday, but the joy was short-lived as Margaret announced about a month or so after Sarah came along that she'd given the baby to an "agency" which would take good care of her. In fact, she had paid Jackson and Hendricks, two malcontents she knew from the pub to help her dispose of the child. The following day, she marched Victoria and Amanda down to the local orphanage and left them on the steps with a

A Tale of Two Sisters

note that read, “Do what you want with them. I don’t care.” Margaret headed back to the house and went on a drinking binge to celebrate the start of her new life. Two days later, Billy found her dead on the floor of the kitchen. Because he was old enough and already a very strong boy, Billy was sent to a workhouse. It would be several years before he would see his sisters again.

Cedric Stepney and his wife Anne have always led exemplary lives. Cedric is a clothier, one of the “sons” of Stepney & Sons, a shop started by his father Everett some forty years ago. Cedric has retained the name even though his brother, the other “son” left to start his own haberdashery shop in Surry ten years past and Cedric has no children, let alone sons, to carry on the family business. He’s a deacon at the local parish where Anne sings in the choir, and the Stepneys are known throughout their parish as the most generous and friendly people one could know, never too busy to lend a hand with a cause or to collect money for the poor. A large, rotund, and jovial man with a booming bass voice, Cedric always plays Father Christmas in the local holiday pageant and Anne collects clothing or other donations, and often bakes up a batch of cookies to give out to the children of the parish or to some wayward youth who happens across her doorstep. A woman of average height, but full-figured and shapely, Anne is the perfect complement to Cedric with a slightly nervous demeanor that she covers with excessive cheerfulness. Subject to occasional flights of fancy, Anne dreams of the day she and Cedric will begin their family. Despite this, they have never been blessed with children of their own, and as each year slips by, they move closer and closer to the time when it will be impossible to have any at all.

This afternoon the Stepneys are making their way through the streets of Aldgate on their way home from the shop. For most of the twenty years they’ve been married, Anne has made it a habit

The Long-Timer Chronicles

to visit Cedric at his store then walk home with him. On this day, they take a slight detour as Anne spots a parcel of fabric she thinks would make good quilting material.

“Quite a bit of it, too,” she says, as they approach the rolled up fabric sitting on top of a stack of discarded boxes. Touching it, Anne looks at Cedric and says, “There’s something in it.”

She carefully removes the fabric but stops when she sees the top of a child’s head. Cedric exclaims, “Oh God,” as Anne removes the section covering its face. The child’s eyes are closed, its skin is pallid and its lips are blue and it’s not breathing. Anne cradles the baby in her arms as Cedric pulls back the remainder of the fabric.

“It’s a little girl,” Cedric says sadly.

“Oh, Cedric,” Anne sobs. “Who could do something this horrible to someone so innocent?”

Anne presses her head to the baby’s and says, “You poor little thing. You didn’t have a chance.”

“What should we do?” Cedric says.

“We can’t leave her here,” Anne says. “She deserves a proper burial.”

Anne’s cheeks are soaked with tears, and she looks again at the tiny lifeless face then looks skyward and says, “Oh, God, why couldn’t you have brought her to us? We’d have done right by her.” She holds the baby tightly to her.

Suddenly, the baby’s body starts trembling, frightening Anne who looks up at Cedric then back to the baby whose body convulses as she takes in a gasp of air. Cedric and Anne watch in amazement as the color returns to her face. Finally, she opens her eyes and begins moving in Anne’s arms, seemingly no worse for the ordeal.

Wide-eyed, Anne stares, first at the baby then at Cedric, saying, “What’s just happened, Cedric?”

“It’s a miracle!” Cedric says touching the baby and looking at

A Tale of Two Sisters

Anne, “a sign from the Lord. He wants us to take this baby and raise her.”

“Are you sure?” Anne says.

“How else can you explain what we’ve just seen?” he says. “Only the Lord can perform a miracle like that.”

“I think you’re right,” she says. “But can we keep her? She must belong to somebody.”

“Way I see it, anybody who’d dump her on a trash heap don’t deserve her,” Cedric says.

“You’re right,” she says, angrily. “We should take her and raise her in a proper manner. This is a sign from the Lord.”

Cedric taps his forehead with his right index finger then points. “Here, now, one of my clients is a judge with the Old Bailey. He’s due for a fitting in a couple o’ days. I’ll sound him out on the best way to go about this. Make it all nice and legal. If he can’t help us I grant you he’ll know who can.”

“That would be wonderful,” Anne says. She looks back to the baby and says, “You rest easy little darling. We’ll take good care of you.”

As they walk toward their home, Cedric says, “What shall we name her?”

“What about Allison, after my mother?”

Cedric has another thought, “How about Allison Anne Steppney?”

Anne smiles and says, “I like that.”

Vickie’s body lies in a heap in the alley, eyes open and staring into the darkness, blood from her neck wound forming a pool beneath her, and her face wearing the horrified look it bore during the attack. She had not heard her attacker’s taunt after he’d finished, nor had she noticed him standing a few feet away from her contemplating something intently.

“Where to go, where to go,” he said. “She’ll probably be found

The Long-Timer Chronicles

around sunrise—”

He scanned the street across from him until he saw a dark alcove set back from the street. “Perfect!” he said then crossed the street and took refuge in the alcove.

What he had not noticed were the changes occurring with Vickie. The cut across her throat began to heal itself almost as soon as he dropped her onto the pavement. The hemorrhages in her eyes from the strangulation had cleared as had the rope burns on her neck. Finally, not quite ten minutes after the attack, her body starts to tremble then jerks violently and she gasps, pulling in a large amount of air then she rolls onto her back, breathing heavily, still trembling.

“What’s happened?” she says. “Where am I?”

She sits up, looking around, shaking, now with tears running down her cheeks. Her throat is sore and her neck feels stiff. On the pavement near her, she sees a shiny object and picks it up finding that it’s the sovereign she was offered earlier. She stares at it, first with curiosity then terror as the memory of her last customer comes back to her. She slips the sovereign into one of her shoes then struggles to her feet, and leans against the wall for a few minutes, until she feels steady enough to stand on her own. Looking around, she focuses on the pool of blood near where she was lying and emits a fearful whimper. Then she notices the front of her dress and becomes more panicked. Scanning the area to be sure she’s alone, she creeps toward the entrance to the alley and, seeing no one, she moves quickly along the sidewalk toward her flat.

Across the street, her attacker is concealed in the shadows. He leans against the wall absent-mindedly whistling an indistinct tune and cleaning his fingernails with a pocket knife. When Vickie emerges from the alley, he springs to attention, staring in a combination of amazement and confusion then moves almost to the street as she heads away from him. He tracks her with his

A Tale of Two Sisters

eyes until she is nearly a block away then steps from the shadows looking after her, a stunned expression on his face.

“It can’t be,” he says to himself. He is seized by a sudden fit of laughter then finishes, speaking slowly and deliberately, “After all these years, I’ve found you!”