

1 BELLE'S TALE

"The course of true love never did run smooth"

– W.S., A Midsummer Night's Dream

Scene the First: Belle encounters an auld acquaintance, unforgot.

She only rarely thought of him anymore. It was now more than fifteen years since she had broken it off — on Christmas day, as it happened — and had released him from his obligation. She had soon met another fellow, John Martinette, a wonderful, effusive, church-going man, and they were married within the year. Avoiding spinsterhood had been in the back of her mind, even towards the end of her time with Ebbie. Although fate had taken John from her too soon, nevertheless it had been a wonderful marriage.

And here we are, in church on New Year's Day. And who should she first hear, then espy, singing along with the congregation — badly and out of key, as ever — but her old beau, Ebenezer himself! Even under the more liberal mores of 1843, a lady would not be, under normal circumstances, permitted to simply walk up and address a man not of one's family; but widowhood had brought Belle a sense of liberation. She often found herself not caring what society would say. "Gossips be damned, it says so in the Bible" she would think — but not say. It wouldn't be proper to say. At the end of services, she walked up behind and spoke to him.

"Mr. Scrooge, Mr. Ebenezer Scrooge?"

He turned to her voice, and she was pleased to see that, as he turned his face, it was smiling. He had been otherwise when last they met. "B-Belle? Belle Fezziwig? Can it possibly be? My dear lady!"

He took her hand, shook it, and impulsively went as if to kiss it, but stopped short.

"It's the Widow Martinette now," she said.

"I am so sorry, Belle." He paused. "Incredibly sorry."

She looked at him. A long moment passed.

"And who is this radiant beauty?" a cheery young man's voice popped in, breaking the awkwardness.

"Ah, Fred," Ebenezer recovered his voice. "I have forgotten my manners. This is my former fiancée, the alienation of whom was my greatest error and my chiefest regret — even more than my neglecting of you, my boy, I'm afraid. Mrs. Martinette, I am pleased to introduce my nephew, Fred Colchester. He is everything I should have been, and nothing that I made myself into."

She shook the younger man's hand. Looking at his face, she thought, perhaps, she glimpsed again some of the laugh lines from her old beau's face. And it was a pleasant thought.

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Colchester. I so admired your dear late mother; she was a treasure."

"Why, thank you. So Uncle has been telling me. Of late." Fred laughed, clapped his uncle on the back.

Ebenezer laughed; and Belle also laughed, although she didn't actually see humor in the remark.

"Well," Fred said, recovering himself, "You must have plans later this afternoon, or else I would insist you come around to our place. My fiancée, Alice, and I are planning a tiny soirée for a few friends, and one relation, and of course we would be thrilled to include you."

"Well, as it turns out, I am quite free. I have plans here at the Hospital Mission nearby for a few hours, and my daughter is at her school for lessons a few days yet. So it turns out, I was planning nothing more exciting than to go home and enjoy some tea and a cozy little fire. I should be delighted to meet your Alice. At what hour shall I come? And may I bring a pudding or a custard?"

"Splendid! Four o'clock. And yes, we love custards!"

Ebenezer came out of his reverie, or his paralysis, or whatever it was. "In truth, you

will? How wonderful! How splendid. I see the spirits of Christmas are still at work."

"What a curious expression," Belle thought.

"Very well then," said Fred. "Until then, adieu, good lady."

"Adieu, Young Master Colchester. And, adieu, Mr. Scrooge."

She held out her hand. And this time, he did kiss it. And he looked for a moment in her eyes. He was tearing up. And then, he scurried off, in an arthritic old man's walk, arm in arm with Fred.

"This could prove to be a most interesting gathering," she mused.



Scene the Second: In which Belle divulges some information.

"Did you know my mother?" Fred was serving the dessert wine and his fiancée was across the room, speaking with Uncle Ebenezer. He had leaned in close to whisper his question to Belle.

"Yes, certainly I did. Has he told you so little?"

"Mrs. Martinette -"

She stood and walked to the window, so that they could speak in more natural tones. "My name is Belle," she offered, her eyes still watching the snow as it drifted past the window. "If it's all the same, I've become quite accustomed to it."

"Very well, Belle it shall be. For years and years, you have to understand, Uncle barely spoke to me. When Father passed, I visited him but once until I was trundled off to University. Yet, if my studies dipped the slightest bit during term, I would receive the briefest of sharply word notes, but nothing else. I believe my first posting as a Solicitor was arranged through one of his business associates, but nothing was ever said about it to me."

"So cold." She looked about for her shawl. An ancient chill had gone over her, like the shade of a cold and distant memory.

"I'm sorry, the window," Fred said. "Well, let's stand near the fire then. But what of my question to you?"

"Well, where to start? Ebbie was apprenticed to my father, Old Fezziwig as everyone

called him.”

“Was he indeed old?”

“No, not so old but old-fashioned. He wore his wig in the Georgian style after everyone else had given it up, and after Mad King George himself had passed to his reward. But you asked first about your mother.”

Belle paused, thinking. She began, as if introducing a composition: “Fan Scrooge was born eight years after her brother; in my family, we knew that their mother had not long survived her birth, as is still all too common and tragic a consequence of childbearing. This circumstance by itself may explain much. Perhaps it was fourteen or fifteen years later, I am not sure of her exact age, Fan came to Father’s shop with the news that their father had passed on. This was when I saw her first. She was a lovely, delicate creature—she beamed as with a light, but a strong wind would have extinguished her. And your Uncle did certainly bear her great affection. That day was the only time I ever saw him on the verge of tears, which he held back as he embraced her and told her it would be all right.”

“My Uncle? Indeed! Well, I suppose I can picture it, now.”

“He introduced me to Fan just then. And we were good chums for a little while after that. I stood next to her at her wedding.”

“What? My heavens, you are full of secrets.”

“Yes. She had no one else, although the sexton agreed to stand as official witness. Ebenezer refused. He said she was marrying too soon and for all the wrong reasons. But he couldn’t stop her. He was furious, for a time, and remained furious at your father. I don’t think they ever exchanged words from that moment.”

She paused, warming her hands at the fire. “Even lovely apartments such as this were so full of drafts. But Fan’s health was, as I intimated, fraught with — if I may be so indelicate — with women’s problems. When you started to come along, she had to take to her bed. And it was there that she died, as you know, not many days after you were born. Oh Fred, has he never told you how much she loved you in the womb and dreamt of the days to come?”

“Thank you.” Fred choked out his words.

Belle stopped speaking, and kissed him lightly on the cheek.

Elsewhere in the apartment, someone at a pianoforte started playing a quadrille to dance to.