



THE DAISY CHAIN – By AI Campbell

SUDBURY – MARCH 1771

A trail of footsteps, indented into the glittering hoarfrost that sugar-coats the grass in the early spring sunlight, crosses the graveyard. A bunch of pale-blue Forget-Me-Nots in a stone urn mirrors the morning sky. A sombrely dressed girl, standing by a freshly dug mound of earth, hoists a canvas bag from her shoulder and sits on the plinth of an adjacent tomb. A lark salutes the dawn, warbling how good it is to be alive.

The legend on the headstone of the plot reads:

HERE LIE THE MORTAL REMAINS OF SIR JOHN SALTER BT.
JANUARY 1717 - MARCH 1771
TOGETHER WITH HIS LADY ANNA, IN HEAVEN AS ON EARTH

The girl takes out a sheet of heavy paper, along with brushes, watercolours and a porcelain mixing tablet. She pours water into a china bowl and starts painting, lost in concentration. Working outward from the middle of her subject an image of the humble delicate flowers slowly appears, perfect in every detail.

The church clock strikes 11.00. The girl looks up startled by the time. Repacking her things, carefully placing the painting between two sheets of tissue, she jumps down from the tomb, brushing a wayward strand of hair from her face with her fingers.

'Goodbye Papa,' she whispers. 'I do not know when I shall be able to visit you again.'

Turning she retraces her steps, the grass now slightly steaming as the spring sun tries to prove that summer is only a few heartbeats away, then turns right down the hill. She is tall for a girl, easily tall enough to see over the withers of a good-sized cob, and what country folk would describe as 'lanky'. There is nothing lank about her hair however, even in the low elevation sunlight the strawberry-blonde hues shine all copper and gold in the ponytail that swings alternately left and right behind her back as she walks, in brilliant contrast to her sombre mourning clothes.

She has a long stride, legs well shod in leather boots that kick away against a plain but well-cut woollen skirt. Her outfit is completed by a quilted riding jacket of green so dark it is almost black, such as that of a maple tree just before the autumn equinox when the leaves start to turn. Like many with her hair colour, her complexion is dappled with freckles that, even in this early season, bear tribute to a healthy life lived outdoors – as summer progresses, they will spread and form an arc across the bridge of a straight and purposeful nose above a full mouth that is predisposed to humour.



Her eyes are hazel and change with the light. She smiles quietly as she remembers what her father told her when she was little. 'With the gold of cut straw, mixed with the copper from the earth in your hair, eyes straight out of the forest and freckles that bloom best when the sun is at its highest you are truly a child of nature.'

Striding out she walks for ten minutes to the gates of a large house on the main road into Sudbury, just as a cart is leaving. Biddy, her one-time nurse and latterly her companion and aide through her father's illness, stands outside the open door.

'That's the carter off with the scientific instruments you didn't want your Uncle to get his hands on,' Biddy tells her. 'You'd better hurry Miss Daisy, the London coach departs at noon.'

'My bags are packed. I just want one last turn around my father's laboratory.'

Daisy walks to the back of the house, through the garden, and enters a long outbuilding with a large atrium roof. With the exception of the telescope, microscope and other scientific instruments she has sent ahead, it is as her father left it – a typical gentleman scientist's laboratory full of flasks, tubes and samples of extraordinary and wonderful things in glass cases.

Daisy turns full circle as if burning into her mind a final image of where she and her father had spent so much time working together. Satisfied, she walks back towards the door. As she passes her father's 'Cabinet of Curiosities' she stops, takes out a delicate silver instrument exclaiming 'I mustn't forget you!'

She stops beneath a small painting of a man with piercing eyes, an amused smile and short cropped iron-grey hair and holds up the device for him to see before slipping it into her pocket.

'Well Papa, with this at least I'll always know which way north lies – and what time it is, providing the sun shines!' She reaches up and takes the painting off the wall. 'And you must come too wherever the road now takes me.'

Biddy is outside the front door, her belongings in a wheelbarrow.

'Where do you go now Biddy?'

'As you do Miss, to stay with my sister. She is alone now, and we shall be good company. Sir John left me a small stipend.'

Daisy hugs her. 'No more than you deserve Biddy.' A tear pricks her eye. 'Take care now.'

'You too Miss,' Biddy replies, blowing her nose on a tiny pocket handkerchief. 'Miss, do you realise you have blue paint on your forehead?'



'Not to worry Biddy, I'll wash it off later.'

The two women hug one last time, turn, and walk off in opposite directions.

Ten minutes later, bags safely stowed atop the Post Chaise, the portrait of her father wrapped in paper on her lap, Daisy is wedged looking out of the window studiously trying to ignore the conversation of an overweight local landowner with halitosis. She knows it is the start of a very long journey – the coach ride being only the first part.

RICHMOND GREEN

In an elegant Georgian drawing room, in a significant house overlooking Richmond Green, a well-dressed man in his mid-forties, not quite handsome with a cruel looking mouth, paces up and down the carpet. Taking out his pocket watch, he opens it and scowls at a soberly dressed blonde woman, black ribbons in her hair. She looks almost half his age, dandling an infant on her knee.

'Whenever is that damned sister of yours going to arrive?' he says grumpily.

The woman passes the baby to a nurse, pours tea, gives him a cup and looks up.

'She'll be well on her way, husband. She was stopping in Epping last night and coming first thing via the turnpike road as far as the Barbican, where she has to change coaches.'

The man grunts.

'Why is she imposing herself on us? Especially so close to our May Ball?'

'Hugo, we have been through this before,' the woman replies almost despairingly. 'We have lost our father, our Uncle has inherited, he will doubtless sell the estate to pay his gambling debts and she has nowhere else to go.'

'She should be married so some other man could pay for her,' Hugo retorts.

'Daisy isn't the sort men naturally fall for – she's rather studious,' Fanny replies, frowning. 'Anyway, somebody had to keep house for Papa after Mama died – you wouldn't have him here!'

Hugo nearly chokes on his tea. 'Certainly not,' he splutters.

THE BARBICAN

Meanwhile across London, at a coaching inn at the Barbican Market, Daisy is stranded with her bags, surrounded by the noise of animals and the smell of excrement, endeavouring to keep her boots



clean. As she is looking around lost and vacant, a youth barges into her, knocks her to the floor, seizes one of her bags and runs off. Daisy indignantly jumps to her feet and starts to give chase.

Much to their surprise a strikingly tall and handsome man, who has seen the theft, sticks out a long leg and trips the thief up. The man retrieves the bag and, as the youth runs away, kicks him up the backside. He walks over to Daisy.

‘Are you alright Miss?’ he asks with a slight guttural accent, holding out her bag.

Daisy regards him. He has blue eyes and long fair hair tied in a pony tail. Despite the fact his clothes are travel stained she sees he is elegantly dressed. She finds her tongue.

‘Actually, Sir, I am quite alright – and I would most certainly have caught him. You didn’t need to become involved!’

The man looks at her quizzically and raises an eyebrow. Daisy takes the bag from him and remembers her manners.

‘But I thank you Sir. My things are of no great value but of much sentiment.’

The man bows. ‘Johannes Van der Humm, pleased to be of service.’

Daisy curtseys. ‘Miss Daisy Salter – obliged to receive the same.’

‘I assume Miss Salter that this is your first time at the Barbican? It is not the best place for a young woman travelling alone.’

‘I have only been through London before with my father Sir. And then only twice.’

Van der Humm looks at her closely and realises she is wearing mourning clothes.

‘And I am sorry to suppose that your father can accompany you no more.’

‘Sadly Sir, he cannot.’

‘Well Miss Salter, I am for the Inn and some lunch. My Dutch countrymen tell me that this Inn, being so close to Smithfield Market, does an excellent Mutton Pie. Perhaps you would join me and together we can oversee your bags?’

‘In that case you are a very kind Dutchman Sir, but first I must find which coach will take me to Richmond.’



Van der Humm smiles. 'This is a happy co-incidence. I am bound for Bristol on a coach that departs at three o'clock, stopping in Richmond to change horses. Do you have a ticket yet?'

Daisy shakes her head. 'Not as yet Sir, I have to buy one.'

The Dutchman makes an expansive gesture with his hands. 'Happenstance I have a ticket to spare, my intended travelling companion is unwell.' He smiles. 'Please, be my guest – firstly for mutton pie and then the coach trip.'

'That is very generous Sir, but I can pay – for both.'

Van der Humm puts his head on one side and looks down his long and elegant nose. 'I'm sure you can Miss Salter. But, *on both counts*, perhaps you will let a foreign gentleman be, well, gentlemanly.'

Daisy smiles and nods. Van der Humm picks up her bags and ushers her into the Inn.

They eat in companionable silence. As the serving girl clears away her empty plate, Daisy finishes her glass of wine.

'I have to admit that I was hungry and thirsty. It was a fine mutton pie. Thank you'.

Van der Humm makes a deprecating wave of his hand. 'Do you know that you have something blue on your face?'

'Nothing but a smudge of cerulean.'

Van der Humm looks mystified. Daisy says nothing more so he continues. 'May I ask what takes you to Richmond?'

'My father having died, I am to live with my sister.' Daisy's eyes drop and she looks glum.

'From your demeanour you are not entirely happy with the prospect Miss Salter?'

Daisy regards him for a long second. 'As we are strangers Sir, I feel I can speak openly to you. I love my sister very much, but I cannot say the same about her husband, who is a pompous brute. In some ways I go to my salvation – in others I feel I am sent to purgatory.'

Outside a voice cries that the Bristol Coach departs in 10 minutes. Van der Humm stands and gestures Daisy to do the same.

'You have my sympathies Miss Salter. I hope it is your salvation rather than a preparation for the descent into Hell.'



RICHMOND

Two hours later, as the clock above the Mews strikes five, the coach and four pulls up at a pair of substantial gates with the name 'Godolphin House' wrought into the ironwork. The door opens, Van der Humm gets out, hands Daisy down, and helps the postern with her bags.

'It has been a pleasure to make your acquaintance Miss Salter. Who knows, perhaps we will meet again one day. In the meantime, welcome to your new home.'

Van der Humm climbs back up. With a cheery wave the driver cracks his whip, and the horses trot off.

Daisy surveys the gates. 'Home?' she wonders. 'Or prison?'

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