

*Excerpt from the journal of Miss Noralei Gloom, dated Summer 1885 and discovered a fortnight ago beneath the floorboards of an abandoned cottage on the outskirts of Kingston Upon Hull, East Riding of Yorkshire:*

They say confession's good for the soul, but I don't have a soul so I wouldn't know. I just want to jot down my side of the story, and I might as well begin my tale on the night I met Sir Clement Wrenright Bibbershaw.

I was selling flowers around eleven o'clock when he came strolling by, all decked out in his fancy duds and carrying a silver-headed walking stick. He was a quality gentleman, to be sure, and I'd had my eye on him for awhile, but now it was time to take action.

Of course a gent like that wouldn't give a second glance to a withered old hag with saggy tits and veiny skin and a cocked eye and warty nose and a bird's nest of gray hair, so I packed away all my wrinkles and woes and changed into something he'd feel more comfortable in – a buxom lass with smooth flesh and straightforward eyes and soft auburn hair. Oh, I was a sight to behold, if I do say so myself.

I did the spell with six black crystals – which I carried in my garter inside a little leather bag made from my ex-husband (who gave up the material most unwillingly). The crystals packed a wallop and did the trick in two shakes of an imp's tail, their energy jolting through me every which way, up and down and over and under and around and through, till the ugly was on the inside and the pretty was on the outside. And after I'd fixed myself up proper, I spruced up my dress, too – nothing fancy, just a little décolletage and some lace around the edges.

The street was pretty much empty; the other flower girls usually hung around the theater a few blocks over, and they never worked past ten anyway, so I knew I'd have the gent all to myself.

As he got near I stepped into the lamplight so he could see me clear, and called out, "Flower, sir? Won't you help out a poor girl and buy a flower?"

"No thank you," Sir Clement muttered, and started to pass me by.

"Don't you think your lady deserves a nice fresh violet, sir? Think of the smile it'll bring to her face!"

He stopped and turned, his countenance surly. "My 'lady', as you put it, has gotten exactly what she deserves, and it isn't violets!"

He glanced at a rooming house in the next block, the house he'd just come out of. There was one light lit, on an upper floor, and a silhouette at the window – probably the lady in question, watching him. Then the light went out.

"Pardon me, sir," I said. "I didn't mean to be a bother to you. Please forgive me."

He nodded curtly and walked on by, but I let out a little snuffle and a wee sob and he paused, looking at me over his shoulder. “That’s overdoing it a bit, wouldn’t you say?”

Then he did a double-take, seeing the tears glistening on my downy cheeks – proof I wasn’t faking it. Or so he thought. He came back, annoyed.

“On come now,” he said. “I wasn’t that gruff with you.”

“I know that, sir. It’s just that it’s getting chilly and I gotta stay out here till I’ve sold all my flowers or I won’t have enough money to pay the rent what’s due tomorrow morning, and the landlord’s a mean old miser who’d never give a girl a break to save his soul.”

Sir Clement let out a tolerant sigh. “Oh very well. It seems this is my evening to be put upon by demanding females.”

He reached into his pants pocket, took out a penny and handed it to me.

“Thank you kindly, sir,” I said. I took a violet from my basket and started to hand it to him, and then I had a better idea. I set down the basket and came up real close and slipped the flower’s stem into the button hole in his lapel. My hand lingered on his chest. Our eyes locked. His nostrils flared.

“I can’t imagine you having lady problems,” I said in a husky voice, leaning a bit closer. “A fine and handsome gent such as yourself? I’d think you’d have the ladies eating out of the palm of your hand.”

He smiled grimly. “Unfortunately, after they eat out of it, they bite it. And then I give them the back of it.”

I dropped my hand to my side. “Aw, you must’ve gotten mixed up with one of them golddigging theater girls. Bunch of hard-hearted floozies, the lot of ‘em, putting on airs and thinking they’re better than everyone else. They give us decent girls a bad name.”

“Heh. I couldn’t agree with you more, miss ... what is your name, anyway?”

“Noralei, sir. Noralei Gloom.”

“My name is Clement.”

I already knew his name – first, middle and last, and a great deal more. But I didn’t let on about all that.

“A pleasure to meet you, sir,” I said.

“Likewise. Good luck in selling the rest of your flowers, Miss Gloom.”

“Thank you.”

He reached into the pocket of his waistcoat, taking out a fine-looking timepiece and flipping open the lid. “Bless my soul, it’s later than I thought. I highly doubt you’ll have many more customers at this time of night.”

“No sir.”

He put his watch away, then fished another coin from his trousers and gave it to me. “There you go. Now you can go home.”

My eyes got big. “A shilling! Oh, you’re a godsend!”

I flung my arms around his neck and pushed my tits against his chest and kissed him smack-dab on the lips. He sucked in his breath – and my tongue along with it.

I knew I had him then, like a fish on a line – only my hook was wet and pliant and playful. When the kiss finally ended I pulled away, reluctantly, then picked up my basket and held it out. “I believe these are yours, sir.”

“Frankly, I don’t care much for flowers. You keep them.”

“Truly? Oh, that’s very kind of you.”

“Think nothing of it.”

I smiled. “Well I guess I’d best be going now.”

“Can I give you a lift?” he said, gesturing toward the next corner up, where he usually caught a hansom cab after he was done visiting his “lady” friend.

“Oh, I can manage. It ain’t very far if I take the shortcut.” I pointed at the alley behind us, which was full of shadows and islands of light made by three little glowstone bulbs set into the sooty wall in rusty old sconces. “Sometimes there’s an unsavory bloke or two lurking about, looking for easy pickings, but you don’t have to worry none about me. If they try to latch onto me I’ll just reach for my hat pin.” I put a hand up to my hair and pulled the pin out an inch or so, then pushed it back. “I don’t have a hat no more. Somebody stole it. But I still got the pin.”

“Do you often encounter blokes on your walk home?”

“Once in awhile. But they don’t scare me ... much.”

“Would you like me to escort you to your door?”

“Oh, I couldn’t impose on you sir.”

“No trouble at all, Miss Gloom.”

“You’re awfully sweet. A true gentleman.” I nodded toward the alley. “Shall we go?”

And off we went. After a few twists and turns we arrived at a dreary rooming house with a door that used to be Kelly green, and I said, “Thanks for coming with me, sir.”

He touched the brim of his silk top hat. “No problem at all, Miss Gloom.”

I bent down and started unlacing my boots.

“What are you doing?” he said.

“I have to step softly once I get inside,” I whispered. “Lest I wake Mr. Kekendorf.”

“Who’s he?”

I grimaced. “My landlord. A hunchbacked old coot who smells like vinegar. He’s usually passed out drunk by this time of night, but if I wake him up he ... well, he tries to take liberties, and I have to stick him with my pin. If I can just make it up to my room I’ll be alright. It’s got a good, sturdy door with a strong bolt. And in the morning he’ll be so hung-over he won’t be in any shape to bother me.”

“Disgraceful,” Sir Clement said. “Absolutely disgraceful. The man is a cad.”

“That he is, sir.”

“Would you like me to escort you up to your room? Under normal circumstances I wouldn’t make such a suggestion, of course, but I assure you my intentions are strictly honorable. I’m only concerned with your safety.”

“I’d never impugn the motives of a fine gent such as yourself, sir. And I’d very much appreciate an escort. A girl can’t be too careful these days.”

I started to unlace my boots again, but Sir Clement stopped me.

“No need for stealth,” he said. “In fact, I hope your landlord *does* awaken. If he tries to take liberties with you tonight, I’ll thrash him within an inch of his life.”

I chuckled. “Now that I’d like to see.”

We entered the house and went up the stairs and I unlocked the first door on the right and led him in. I rubbed the glowstone lamp on the corner of the dresser and a pallid light filled the room, and Sir Clement’s eyes took it all in – the stained ceiling, the holes in the plaster, the dirty curtains fluttering in the fitful breeze, the crack in the top window pane, the saggy bed.

“It ain’t the Taj Mahal,” I said, smiling self-consciously, “but I call it home.”

“Actually, the Taj Mahal is a tomb, not a palace. I don’t fancy anyone would enjoy living in a tomb.”

“A tomb, eh? I didn’t know that, sir. Makes me feel a tad better about my lowly digs. At least there ain’t any stiffes here.”

If truth be told, I knew a lot about tombs. And graveyards. A lot more than a body ought to know. And as for there being no stiffes in my rooming house, well ... we’ll be getting to that.

“A pretty girl like you shouldn’t have to live in such squalor,” Sir Clement said. “Don’t you have a beau?”

“No sir. This neighborhood’s full of nothing but rascals, and the fine young gents never give a flower girl a second glance.”

“Nonsense. If you sold your flowers in a finer part of the city – which would be just about anywhere – I’m sure there’s any number of fine young gents who’d take a shine to you ... and set you up in fine style if given half a chance.”

I batted my eyes. “Like you, for instance?”

“Heh. I’m hardly a *young* gent.”

“I’m not much interested in the young ones, sir. I prefer the more mature type. The ones who’ve got experience and know how to satisfy a lady’s ... private needs.” I came closer. “If you ... catch my meaning.”

His face turned red. “Well ... I ... that is ...”

I gave him another kiss and our tongues got reacquainted, as his hands introduced themselves to my bottom and my top, and then he found the buttons on my dress. He’d had a lot of practice undoing ladies, in more ways than one, and he had me undone in no time. I helped him doff his own duds, and there he was, buck naked, and not looking half-bad neither. A little baggy in the middle, but I’ve seen worse. He had an old scar on his leg, probably a war wound he’d get around to telling me about someday ... except he was running out of somedays.

He got me down on the bed, and that worn-out mattress nearly touched the floor from the weight of us – on account of the springs were long gone – and he sucked on my teats like a hungry babe and then he grabbed his sausage – a long, grand one, just like his name, befitting a gentleman of such stature – and he aimed it at my box, and I heard a little scritch inside the closet and knew old Egmont was peeping in on us, and that got me even wetter, and Sir Clement commenced to rubbing his sausage in my bun and puffing like a steam engine and I was puffing near as hard.

Presently, I reached down to my boots – which I'd left beside the bed – and I pulled out my knife, the kind with a spring-loaded blade that flips out of the handle when you push a button.

*Snick.*

Sir Clement didn't hear the sound of the knife popping open; didn't see it neither, 'cause his eyes were closed. I slid the blade across his throat, easy as you please, and his heavy breaths turned into gurgles and he clasped a hand to his neck but he couldn't stop the blood from gushing out and raining down on me. I opened my mouth and caught as much as I could – hot and heady it was, like mulled wine, and I moaned in pleasure, savoring the coppery tang of it, and then Sir Clement collapsed on top of me and I clamped my mouth to his throat and drank deep till I'd had my fill, and all the while I was coming like crazy.

Those with a penchant for writing romances talk about how grand it is to feel your lover's heart beating in time with your own. But to me there's no greater thrill than feeling a heart falter and stop, and the dead weight of a man laying on top of me, getting stiff all over like one big hard-on.

So I lay there for a good minute or two, basking in the afterglow, with Sir Clement's corpse on top of me, his blood soaking my mattress, his dead dong in my duff, my pussy spasming like crazy. And after I settled down I wiped my knife on the side of the mattress and slipped it back into my boot.

That's when the closet door creaked open and Egmont Kekendorf came scuttling out. He was a wizened old bird with a glass eye and wooden teeth and a hunched back. He grabbed Sir Clement by the shoulders and hauled him off of me as the gent's dong slid out of my box with a big "slurp," then Egmont dragged him into the corner, trailing blood across the boards.

There was a chair in the corner, just like the one near the bed where Sir Clement had dumped his clothes, but the one in the corner had a trick to it, and when Egmont tilted it over onto its side, a trap door in the floor rose up, for it was attached to the feet of the chair, and beneath the trap door was a sloping shaft made of tin, like a coal chute, leading down to a secret chamber in the cellar.

Egmont crouched between Sir Clement's legs, running a hand over the gentleman's bum – a little too fondly for my liking – then gave the corpse a shove, sending it head-first into the hole. The body slid down the shaft, slick as you please, and landed on the dirt floor below with a muffled thump.

Egmont turned back to the bed and watched me keenly as my spell faded away and my pretty facade reverted to its true form – my skin crinkling like parchment, my titties sagging like deflating balloons, the veins spreading over my legs like cracks in thin ice, my hair turning gray and coarse and tangled. And Egmont's eyes were bright as shillings as he took it all in; he's never been beautiful himself, even as a baby, and resents those that have a pleasing aspect.

When my change was done I sat up but didn't stand, since I was feeling a bit wobbly, and I watched Egmont as he walked over to the chair near the bed and went through Sir Clement's belongings.

First thing he did was snatch up the top hat and plunk it onto his own head, tilting it at a jaunty angle.

"Now don't I look the proper toff?" he said.

I shook my head.

He reached underneath the chair and picked up Sir Clement's boots and gave them a good sniff. "Italian leather," he said. "Custom made. Too big for me, more's the pity. Why do all these toffs always got to have such big feet?"

He snatched the wool socks out of the shoes and stuffed them down his shirt, then started riffling through the gent's clothes, gleaning ten pence and twenty shillings from the pockets of the trousers, and a nice hand-tooled calf-skin wallet from the breast pocket of the coat. The wallet yielded a hundred pounds and some elegant calling cards and a note written in a woman's hand on fine stationery.

"Well, well," Egmont said, peering at one of the cards. "Sir Clement Wrenright Bibbershaw, eh? That's a mouthful. And what did the honorable Sir Clement Wrenright Bibbershaw do to deserve your special kind of service, eh, Noralei?"

"Oh dammit! I forgot to mention her name!"

"Whose name?"

"Vorena Haverty – a poor wretch of a girl who drowned herself on account of him. She was young and pretty once, and he was kind to her, like he was kind to me. But he tired of her and moved on. And she had nowhere else to go. I was gonna tell him Vorena sent her love, just before I did him in, but I forgot."

"Too bad. A gent should know when he's getting his comeuppance so he don't mistake it for ill fortune."

He set down the card and unfolded the note; read it and smirked.

"My, my, it seems a certain lady wasn't too pleased with Sir Clement. But it ain't signed Vorena, it's Chulia."

"Chulia Filp. One of them theater tarts. His latest ... acquisition."

"Ah."

He crumpled up the card and the note and tossed them onto the bed, then grabbed Sir Clement's tailored silk shirt, purloining the cufflinks in the blink of an eye. He held them up to the light.

"Eh, nothing but common bluestones," he said.

"Bullshit," I said. "They're sapphires and you damn well know it."

He flashed his crooked, yellowed teeth at me. "So they are. My eyes must be getting bad."

"Or your lying tongue is getting too thick. Maybe I should shave it down for you."

"Thank you kindly, but you've done enough cutting for one day. I wouldn't want you to dull your blade."

He picked up Sir Clement's vest, liberating the pocket watch and raising it high. It twisted slowly in the breeze coming through the window, as the lamplight glistened off its silvery surface.

"This'll fetch a pretty penny," Egmont said.

"Hey, I get the watches, remember?"

He paused with the watch halfway into his pants pocket. "Sorry, Noralei, I plum forgot."

He set the watch on the seat of the chair, along with half the paper money, a few shillings and one cufflink – my share of the ill-gotten gains – then he grabbed Sir Clement's walking stick, which was leaning against the side of the chair. He twisted and tugged on the handle, hoping it had a sword inside, but no such luck. Still, it was a fine stick and would fetch a good price. He tucked it under one arm, then bundled up Sir Clement's clothes and shoes and carried them to the corner, dropping everything through the trap door. He turned to me, bowing low and doffing his hat, then grabbed the brim and flung the hat sideways with great panache. It hit the wall, caromed off and disappeared down the hole.

"Well that's that," he said. He lifted up the chair, shutting the trap door.

I rose from the bed and tugged the blood-soaked sheets off the mattress, claspings them to my chest as I followed Egmont out of the room. We made our way down to the cellar and he opened the door of the furnace and I tossed the bloody sheets into the fire, then we stood there a spell, watching in silence as the flames feasted. After awhile Egmont turned to me and said, "I'd best be getting to work."

We crossed to the far side of the cellar and Egmont unlocked the black steel door to his private chamber and swung it open as flickering blue-white light poured out, along with the sounds of bubbling cauldrons and grumbling steam engines and the smell of alchemicals and other things. Egmont went in, but came back out a few seconds later, holding a bucket of warm water, which he handed to me.

“Happy ablutions,” he said, and returned to the room, clanging the door shut behind him.

I carried the bucket to the back of the cellar and poured most of its contents into a copper tub, then I climbed in and sat down, heaving a contented sigh as the warm water rose around my body. I picked up the sponge, scrubbing myself good and humming a sprightly tune, and when I was done I grabbed the bucket and turned it upside down over my head, letting the last of the water pour over my hair and face. I opened my mouth to catch the dregs, then spat it out and climbed from the tub. I dragged the tub over to the shit hole and lifted the wooden lid as a god-awful stink hit my nose full force, but over the years I’ve built up a tolerance for malodorous vapors, so it wasn’t so bad. I tipped up the tub and watched the bloody water pour into the hole, then I dropped the tub, shut the lid and headed for the stairs.

I could hear the sound of Egmont’s machines through the black metal door, and the scent of his alchemicals lingered in the air, along with hints of fouler stench. I hurried up the stairs, trying not to think about what was going on inside the chamber, and when I got up to the first floor I paused by the window to smell the *jasmotus* plant, which I kept in a little red pot. The plant came all the way from Egypt and it was over three thousand years old, but still alive and thriving, doing the same job it did back in the time of the pharaohs, when the embalmers used it in their workshops to devour the ghastly odors arising from the dead. It would cleanse the air in Egmont’s house in no time, leaving no telltale whiff for snoop noses to detect.