



The Frost Fair

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CHAPTER ONE

Snow came like a thief in the night. Quickly and silently, it fell over the whole of London, searching every last corner and robbing the city of its distinctive appearance. When they awoke next day, Londoners found that they were in the grip of a raging blizzard. Not only did it smother the streets and coat the buildings in white, the snow was blown hither and thither by a mischievous wind that was determined to cause the greatest possible inconvenience. Heavy drifts leaned against doors, sealed up windows and blocked off lanes and alleyways. Wherever there was a gap in a threshold, a hole in a roof or even a tiny opening in some shutters, the snow blew in unbidden. Those who had slept in warm beds were fortunate. Beggars, urchins and stray animals that had spent the night in the open were destined to slumber forever. Unable to escape from the blizzard, they had curled up in doorways or hidden beneath benches, only to be frozen to the marrow by the chill wind

and covered by an ever-thickening shroud of snow.

Fires were lit in grates all over the capital but they only added to the general discomfort. They might bring relief to those who huddled around them but the smoke they produced could not disperse in the cold air. A sulphurous stench invaded the streets. Even when the snow finally abated, the smoke continued to belch from the chimneys, darkening the sky and swirling down to attack the throats and eyes of any citizens unwise enough to be abroad. London was brought to a standstill. Markets were cancelled, trades abandoned, shops left shut. Few visitors entered the city by means of its gates or its famous bridge and none tried to leave. For most people, it was a time to wrap up and stay indoors. Hardier souls took on the task of clearing the streets as best they could so that some movement could take place. It was slow and laborious work.

The snow had a deadly accomplice in its wake. Frost set in with a vengeance. Icy fingers took London by the throat and sought to throttle it. The old, the sick and the very young were its first victims, weakened, tormented, then finally killed off by the freezing temperatures. Even the most robust citizens found themselves prey to the infections that winter always brings. Thoroughfares that had been matted with snow were now glistening with ice, waiting to catch the unwary traveller and send him flying. Broken legs, arms, wrists and ankles were inflicted indiscriminately. But it was the Thames that underwent the most dramatic change. Ice formed first along the banks then, gradually and imperceptibly, extended its reach across the whole river. The water that was the life-blood of the city disappeared from sight. Above the bridge, and partially below it, the

Thames was one long sheet of cold, solid, continuous, unrelenting ice.

No ships could sail, no boats could ferry passengers from one bank to another. London was starved of everything that came in by water. The huge trade in coal from Newcastle came to a complete halt. Fuel prices soon soared. The city shivered on. Yet there was no sense of doom. Having endured virulent plague and a devastating fire in recent years, the capital met the latest crisis with a mixture of bravery and resignation. At a time of suffering, it also found a new source of pleasure. They held a frost fair.

‘It’s wonderful!’ exclaimed Susan Cheever, clapping her gloved hands together. ‘I’ve never been to a frost fair before.’

‘No more have I,’ said Christopher Redmayne, gazing around in amazement. ‘A hundred architects could not effect such a transformation. Mother Nature has redesigned the whole city. In place of a river, we have the widest street in Europe.’

‘Our pond freezes every year, and so does the stream at the bottom of our garden. But I never thought that a river as broad and eager as the Thames would turn to ice. Still less, that a fair could be set on its back.’

‘That is to blame,’ he explained, pointing to the huge bridge that spanned the river. ‘The piers that support it are set into starlings that restrict the flow of water. Above the bridge, as you see, it freezes more thoroughly.’ He smiled at her. ‘Shall we test it?’

Susan laughed. ‘Everyone else has done so.’

‘Then we must not be left out.’

They were standing on the northern bank of the river,

midway between London Bridge and the Tower. To keep out the sharp pinch of winter, Susan was wearing a long coat that all but brushed her ankles and a bonnet that protected her head and ears. A woollen scarf at the neck added both warmth and decoration. Enough of her face could be seen to remind her companion how beautiful she was. The sparkle in her eyes and the softness in her voice were a constant delight to him. He escorted her to the stone steps.

‘Take my arm,’ he offered. ‘The stairs are slippery.’

‘Thank you.’

‘Descend with care.’

‘I shall,’ she promised.

Arm in arm, they went slowly down the steps and Christopher enjoyed every moment of their proximity. They had known each other long enough to dispense with some of the formalities but too short a time for him to take any real liberties. An aspiring young architect, Christopher was helping to rebuild the city after the ravages of the Great Fire and one of the most appealing commissions that had come his way was a contract to design a town house for Sir Julius Cheever, elected to Parliament to represent the county of Northamptonshire. Sir Julius was a truculent man by nature and not always easy company, but his daughter knew exactly how to handle him. During the building of the house, her friendship with its architect had steadily developed and he was thrilled that she took every excuse to quit her home in the Midlands so that she could visit the capital. The affection between them was unspoken but no less real for that.

‘Well,’ he said, as they stepped on to the ice, ‘here we are.’

She tapped a foot. ‘It feels so solid.’

‘There’s talk of a thaw but I’ve not seen a sign of it.’ He

released her arm. 'When you return home, you'll be able to boast that you achieved a true miracle.'

'A miracle?'

'You walked on water.'

'Some people are doing much more than that.'

'Let's take a closer look at them.'

Wanting her to take his arm again, Christopher contented himself with the merest touch of her back as his palm eased her forward. Like her, he wore his winter attire, a long blue coat and a wide-brimmed hat keeping the wind at bay. He was tall, slim and well-favoured with an open face that glowed with intelligence. Peeping out from beneath his hat was curly brown hair with a reddish tinge. As they strolled towards the fair, they made a handsome couple, their reflections walking ahead of them in the ice. Christopher looked down to study her moving portrait but Susan only had eyes for the fair itself. 'Half of the city must be here,' she observed. 'Can you think of a better place to be?' She pointed a finger. 'What's that they are roasting?'

'An ox, I think,' he said, staring across at the spit, 'and I fancy we'll see a pig or two being turned over a brazier as well. Warm meat sells well on cold days.'

'Will the fire not melt the ice?'

'It appears not.'

'Another miracle.'

'You'll have much to tell them in Northamptonshire.'

'I plan to linger here for a while first,' she said, turning to him with a smile.

He met her gaze. 'Call on me for anything you should require.'

They walked on into the heart of the fair. Lines of

booths had been set up to form an avenue that was known as Temple Street since it ran from the bottom of Temple stairs. Every conceivable item of merchandise was on sale and there was loud haggling over each purchase. Large crowds and horse-drawn coaches went up and down the street with complete confidence. In some of the tents, freaks of nature were on display. Lurid banners advertised a cow with five legs, a sheep with two heads and a dog that could sing like a bird. Feats of strength were displayed by a giant of a blacksmith, bare-armed to show off his rippling muscles and seemingly impervious to the cold. Two dwarves in yellow costumes had a mock fight to entertain the children. Puppet plays and interludes were also drawing their audiences. Horse races were being held at regular intervals and sizeable bets were being made. Those who preferred more brutish pleasures flocked to the bull ring that had been erected below the Tower to cheer on the vicious hounds that baited the animals.

Watching it through startled eyes, Susan took it all in, anxious to miss nothing of the phenomenon. She paused beside a booth that housed a printing press.

‘Look at that,’ she said. ‘Someone is actually *printing* upon the ice.’

‘It’s a wise tradesman who knows how to create a demand.’

‘For what?’

‘Do you not see what he is about?’ asked Christopher, as the printer handed a piece of paper to a grinning customer. ‘He prints but one line to certify that the bearer attended the frost fair and he charges sixpence for the privilege. Here’s a shrewd businessman. I dare swear that he’ll make five

pounds a day at the enterprise.’ He put a hand to his pocket. ‘I’d be happy to buy a certificate for you.’

‘A kind offer,’ she said gratefully, ‘but one I decline.’

‘If anyone refuses to believe that you came here, turn to me for an affidavit.’

‘Thank you.’

She gave him another warm smile and they moved on. They passed a woman selling pies and another with a basket of trinkets and dolls under her arm. Strong drink was in good supply and sounds of revelry came from a large tent. Even in the wintry conditions, prostitutes found ways to ply their trade. Hearing the rustle of taffeta to his left, Christopher took care to block Susan’s line of vision so that she did not see the woman was smiling provocatively through a gap in a booth at the men who passed by. An old man selling brooms competed aloud with other peddlars who were trumpeting the merits of their wares. A scarecrow of a ballad singer then claimed their attention, singing of the frost fair and thrusting his copies of his ballad at anyone who came within reach. The man’s daughter, a tiny creature swathed in rags, followed him with a wooden bowl in which she kept the day’s takings.

Christopher guided his friend between two booths and out into a wide expanse of ice. Sleds were darting to and fro. Skaters were everywhere, some with more sense of balance than others. Deprived of their livelihood, the notoriously foul-mouthed watermen who usually rowed people from one bank to the other, had just cause to turn the air blue with their oaths. Some of them, out of desperation, had harnessed their craft to horses so that the Thames could still yield some income for them. Christopher was glad that Susan never got close enough to any of them to hear their bad language. They

came to a halt to survey the scene. It was, in the main, one of joy and merriment. London was defying the elements with a show of celebration. Christopher noticed something else.

‘*Civitas in civitate,*’ he remarked. ‘Here is truly a city within a city, and one without the constraints we find on shore. Do you not *feel* the difference?’ he went on. ‘We are all one on the ice. Degree vanishes and an earl has no more status than an eel-catcher. The King himself was here yesterday to rub shoulders with his subjects and to carve his name in the ice as readily as any child. The frost fair abolishes rank and makes us all the same age. That is the *real* miracle.’

‘I believe it is,’ she agreed.

‘Thank you for letting me bring you here.’

‘I would not have missed it for the world.’

‘It pleases me so much to have you here in London.’

‘The pleasure is mutual, I assure you.’

Their eyes locked for a moment and Christopher suddenly realised just how fond he had become of Susan Cheever. While they had met as a result of the commission to design a house, it was the murder of her brother, Gabriel, which really drew them together. A bond had developed between them and Christopher was now aware just how strong that bond was. He felt an upsurge of affection for her. He was on the point of putting it into words when, out of the corner of his eye, he saw someone approaching them. Christopher turned to see two familiar faces. They belonged to Jonathan Bale and his wife, Sarah, who were strolling arm in arm across the ice. Delighted to meet his friends again, Christopher nevertheless wished that they had delayed their arrival by a few minutes. They had interrupted a special moment.

After a flurry of greetings, Jonathan smiled politely at Susan. 'I'll wager you've seen nothing like this in Northamptonshire,' he said.

'No, Mr Bale,' she replied. 'It's a source of great wonder to me.'

'And to us,' admitted Sarah. 'We've had bad frosts before and blocks of ice in the river but I can't remember it freezing over completely like this. It's such an adventure for the boys. We simply had to bring them.'

'Where are they?' asked Christopher.

'Skating over there,' she said, waving an arm in the direction of the bridge.

'*Trying* to skate,' corrected Jonathan with paternal fondness. 'Richard has taken well to the sport but Oliver is too clumsy on his feet as yet. There they are,' he added, jabbing a finger. 'Close by that boy on the sled. Do you see them?'

Christopher picked them out at once. Oliver Bale was moving gingerly across the ice while his younger brother, Richard, was skating with a degree of skill on the skates that their father had fashioned out of wooden blocks and straps of leather. Like so many other children on the river, they were enjoying themselves hugely. The parents watched their sons with indulgent smiles. Christopher liked the whole family but he had a particular fondness for Jonathan Bale.

In character and in background, the two men had little in common. Jonathan was a big, sturdy, diligent constable whose Puritan sympathies made him a stern critic of what he saw as the excesses of the restored monarchy. Dour by inclination, he had the kind of misshapen face, disfigured by two large warts and a livid scar, that even his doting wife

could never describe as handsome. For her part, Sarah was a stout, bustling, warm-hearted, gregarious woman who had kept her good looks, if not her figure, well into her thirties. Since Jonathan had played a crucial part in pursuit of the men who had killed her brother, Susan, too, had a great respect for the constable.

‘This weather must make your job somewhat easier,’ she remarked.

‘Easier?’ he echoed.

‘Yes, Mr Bale. Burglars will have too much sense to prowl the streets on chilly nights. We may put up with more disruption but we have less crime.’

Jonathan became solemn. ‘If only it were so. Evil men pay no heed to the cold and they work by day as well as night. The frost fair is a boon to them for they know that so many houses will be empty. And here on the Thames, the pickpockets are still with us, alas. Wherever there’s a crowd of people, there are criminals mingling with them.’ A great roar was heard from the bull ring. Jonathan’s face hardened. ‘Baiting a poor animal is a sinful pleasure,’ he said. ‘Left to me, there’d be none of it.’

‘Left to you,’ teased his wife, ‘there’d be no frost fair.’

‘That’s not true, Sarah.’

‘You hate to see too much merriment.’

‘Not if it’s kept within the bounds of decency,’ he said. ‘We are entitled to get some enjoyment out of this terrible frost. What I hate to see are the thieves, rogues, liars, gamblers, charlatans, drunkards and lewd women that a fair will always attract.’

‘That’s no reason to shun such an event as this,’ argued Christopher.

‘Nor have we done so, Mr Redmayne. I was only too ready to call on my skills as a carpenter to make some skates for my sons.’

‘Yes,’ said his wife proudly. ‘Jonathan has kept all the tools he used during his days as a shipwright and he can still use them like a master.’

‘I wanted Oliver and Richard to have their fun while they could. This weather will not last and they may never see such a frost fair again.’

‘I’ll certainly not forget this one,’ said Susan.

‘Nor shall I,’ added Christopher with an affectionate glance at her.

‘I’m sorry that Father could not be persuaded to join us on the river.’

‘How is Sir Julius?’ asked Jonathan.

‘Fretful.’

‘Because of the weather?’

‘It has made the roads impassable,’ said Susan, ‘and that irritates him. We can neither return home to Northamptonshire nor even visit my sister and her husband in Richmond. Snow and frost have kept us in London, though I make no complaint. I’m the happiest of prisoners. I could spend every afternoon here on the ice.’

Christopher grinned. ‘We’ll have to get Jonathan to make you a pair of skates.’

‘Shame on you, Mr Redmayne!’ scolded Sarah playfully. ‘It’s a pastime for small boys, not for refined young ladies.’

‘And yet,’ confessed Susan, ‘I do envy your sons.’ They all turned to watch the progress of the two skaters. Oliver and Richard Bale had now moved much further away to find a patch of ice they could have entirely to themselves. They

were engaged in a race that could only have one conclusion. Though they set off together, Oliver was too preoccupied with staying on his feet to move at any speed. Richard was soon several yards in front of him. Putting more effort into his skating, he lengthened each stride and pulled right away. The younger boy was thrilled. Accustomed to being in Oliver's shadow, he had finally found something he could do better than his brother. It bred a fatal arrogance. When he was thirty yards clear of Oliver, and still skating with verve, he could not resist looking over his shoulder and emitting a mocking laugh. Richard soon discovered that he still had much to learn. Losing his balance, he fell forward and skidded crazily over the ice on his chest. He let out such a cry of horror that both Jonathan and Christopher hurried off simultaneously to his aid.

'Dear God!' exclaimed Sarah. 'The poor lad must have broken something.'

'I hope not,' said Susan.

And the two women walked swiftly in the direction of the fallen boy.

Jonathan was also afraid that an arm or a leg had been fractured in the accident and he cursed himself for letting the boys get too far away from him. As they ran past Oliver, he was still having difficulties staying upright. Richard, meanwhile, was backing away on all fours from the spot where he had finished up. Christopher and Jonathan soon realised why. When his father grabbed him, the boy was gibbering with fear and pointing in front of him. A jagged line, first sign of a thaw, was etched in the ice but that was not what had frightened the boy. Through the crack, the two men could see the hazy outline of a body. Two large, dark, sightless eyes stared up at them out of a deathly white face.