

Night at the Museum.

Terror seemed to stretch across the canvas. I could almost hear the screams as fire raged through streets. Buildings became spires of fire. Boats crammed with fleeing people were silhouetted by flames, so high above the church that they must be carrying the souls of Londoners to heaven. Shock was etched into the faces. My eyes started to blur and in my imagination I could feel the heat as if I was there.

"It was terrible."

Thinking I had been alone, I spun round. An old man I had not noticed before was sitting in the corner of the gallery.

"Terrible."

I turned towards him.

"Over thirteen thousand houses burnt; four fifths of London."

"But only six died." I said, showing how clever I was.

"So they said missus. But who counted? Who counted the old? Who counted the sick? What about the prisoners locked in the vaults below? Who counted the homeless children?"

"I hadn't thought of them," I said softly.

"What's your name?"

"Alice."

"You shouldn't have said that." He murmured.

I felt a heavy and sad silence fill the room and felt afraid.

"I can still hear her voice. It has haunted me all these many years..."

I sensed I should not interrupt.

"I was just a boy at the time. A coward, a weakling..."

He blinked back tears.

"I'll never forget her."

"What happened?" I whispered.

"I shared a room with my sister...Alice was her name, same as yours missus. The heat woke me it did and I could hardly breathe. Smoke stung my eyes. I remember stumbling towards my parents.

'Mother! Sir!'

I coughed and retched. Thick smoke poured out from under their door. I just had to get out. I shouted to Alice to follow me and smashing open the shutters, leapt out onto the road below.

Like I had jumped into hell, it was. All around me houses were on fire. People were screaming. The heat was unbearable and I feared for my life.

'Brother! Brother! Don't leave me!'

'Jump!' I screamed. 'Jump!'

The poor mite was terrified. She was only ten. She had frozen with fear at the window ledge; flames already reaching for her nightdress. But I was scared myself. I turned and ran.

To my everlasting shame, I ran away...
The fire raged for five days. I never saw her or my parents again.”

“She was ‘bout your age...and just as beautiful.”

I was tearful at his pain. He put his arm around me and I rested my head on his shoulder.
I must have fallen asleep.

“What’s your name?” I asked when I woke.

“Can ye tell if the lights are on first?”

I had lost track of the time. I ran to the door. A security man was coming down the corridor.

“Hey, what you doing ‘ere? ‘You bin ‘ere all night?”

I turned back to the old man, but there was no one there.

Just an oil painting and an empty bench where I had fallen asleep.

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