

No. 12

The Tale of Chesterfield

By Elle May Bradley

Frank Walkden was humble; meeting Death can do that. He was also very wet. Yesterday he had been very wealthy, today he was very broke. But he was still very much alive and for that he was grateful.

Chesterfield might have been a man or he might have been a bear. Whatever he was his mighty hands had pulled the old man from the black waters of the Thames before they'd washed him away. Unfortunately the waters were not enough to wash away the stench which surrounded him. Regardless of his aroma, Frank looked into Chesterfields' friendly eyes and was mighty thankful.

'I feel like a fool'

'Why did you do it?' Chesterfield helped him to his feet.

'Bad investments, the market crashed, and now I'm ruined.'

'Is money so important that you have nothing else to live for?'

'I have three daughters and I hope they never find out about tonight. What shall I do?'

'Go home to them.'

'Thank you my young friend for those words of wisdom to an old fool. How can I repay you?'

'Pray for my soul.'

'Where do you live?' asked Frank, shivering in his wet clothes.

Chesterfield pointed to a park bench across the road.

'Stay at my place for the night. I have not lost my house yet so we may as well have some comfort while we can. You can get cleaned up and I will give you some dry clothes.'

He smiled and nodded. 'I think you could do with some yourself.'

Feeling more light-hearted than he had done in weeks Frank led him to his house. No sooner had they arrived when a young woman burst through the door and threw her arms around him. Her eyes were red and puffy with crying but she was still very pretty.

'Dad I've been so worried. Why are you wet? Mr Garstang called and he told me everything. He said you were in strange mood when you left the office and then you didn't come home and I was so worried. What is that awful smell?'

'That would be me.'

The woman shrank back. After years of being repulsed he had grown immune to such a response but this time he felt a stab of remorse.

'It's alright Isabella. This is Chesterfield, a friend of mine.'

Isabella looked at the dirty man standing in his wet clothes. Wet like her fathers.

'Hello,' she said holding out her hand and smiling her thanks. 'Come inside. Dad go and change before you catch your death.'

The sweet smell of cooking filled the house making Chesterfield's mouth water as he followed Isabella into the kitchen.

'Would you like some supper,' she asked.

'It smells delicious but I can't eat cooked food.'

‘Then I’ll make you something that isn’t cooked,’ said Isabella and she started slicing fruit.

‘My daughter is a wonderful chef. Are you sure you won’t try a bit?’ asked Frank pushing a plateful towards him. ‘I’ve brought you some clean clothes, the bathroom’s just upstairs.’

‘No thanks. I don’t wash and I wear no other clothes but these. It sounds strange but I have my reasons.’

Before either of them could ask why the front door opened and slammed.

‘Isabella,’ screeched a voice. ‘What on earth is this message about? What do you mean we’re bankrupt! And where’s Dad.’ Isabella ran into the hallway whispering urgently to her sister. ‘What do you mean you think he jumped into the river? Stop talking rubbish and stop hushing me. Don’t you understand we have no money? What am I going to do?’

‘Victoria keep it down we have a guest,’ said Isabella following her sister into the kitchen.

Victoria was equally as beautiful as her younger sister but her dark eyes were hard and a scowl played upon her lips.

‘Dad, what were you thinking? Have we no money left at all. How am I supposed to...? What is that smell?’

‘That would be me.’

Victoria gazed in horror at the foul beast sat at the kitchen table.

‘Have you taken leave of your senses Father? Isn’t it bad enough that we will end up on the streets that you have to invite tramps into our home? Why aren’t you at the office trying to sort out this mess?’ she screeched and stormed out.

‘She’s upset, she didn’t mean what she said,’ said Frank following his daughter upstairs.

‘You’re welcome to stay the night,’ said Isabella putting down a plate. It was Waldorf salad.

‘Thank you, this is delicious. It’s the nicest thing I’ve eaten in a long time.’

She lit some scented candles to mask his smell, a small gesture which caused him more embarrassment than Victoria’s outburst.

‘It’s kind of you to offer but I don’t sleep indoors.’

‘Have you taken some sort of vow of poverty?’

‘Something like that.’ But he did not elaborate further. ‘You have another sister.’

‘Yes, Charlotte. She wants to be an actress. Victoria is half way through her degree in finance; she wants to work in the city.’

‘And what do you want?’

‘I have what I want, my father alive and well. Thank you for that.’

‘You’re welcome.’

‘Well if you can’t sleep indoors there’s a hammock in the garden. I can light the patio heater and fetch you some blankets.’

Chesterfield smiled and nodded.

The following morning Isabella was making breakfast when Charlotte came bursting through the back door in a pink slip and somebody's jacket with her high heels in one hand and half a bottle of champagne in the other.

'There's a bear in the garden call the police.'

'Good morning Charlotte. Did you enjoy the party?'

'Didn't you hear me? Call the police and have it removed. What is that awful smell?'

'That would be me.'

Charlotte screamed and ran from the room.

'Is your father about, I need to speak to him.'

'He'll be down in minute.' she said handing him a mug of fresh coffee. Soon Frank came down with his two other daughters following reluctantly.

'I have something for you Frank.' He reached into his pocket, took out a wallet and handed him a bankers draft for one million pounds. 'That should get you started again.'

Victoria snatched the cheque out of his hand and looked at it carefully. Then, possibly for the first time in her life, she smiled. 'This is a very generous loan Mr Chesterfield,' she said turning to him.

'It's a gift. And this is for you Victoria, to help you through University so that you won't have to rely on your father as much.' He pulled out three thousand pounds. 'I also have something for you Charlotte.' He pulled out a business card from the wallet. 'This is the

number for film director I know. Give him a call and tell him I sent you.'

She took the card gingerly between her perfectly manicured nails and read the name twice before shrieking with delight and running from the room, closely followed by Victoria with her money.

'This is very generous of you Chesterfield but I insist we consider this a loan,' said Frank.

'No. Please accept it as a gift in return for your kindness. The only thing I ask in return is that you pray for my soul.'

'I will,' he said and they shook hands.

'Thanks again for everything,' said Isabella as she walked him to the door. 'I'm afraid my sisters will squander your gifts. There's no helping some people because they are just no good.'

'I like to think there's some good in everyone. There has to be otherwise what hope is there for me,' he said a little sadly. 'Goodbye Isabella.'

'Wait a minute. You haven't given me anything.'

'I thought you had everything you wanted.'

'Not everything. I'd like to know why you are doing this for us. We're complete strangers. This sort of thing doesn't happen in real life. Just who are you Chesterfield?'

'I can't tell you,' said Chesterfield shaking his head. 'Not yet.'

Isabella turned away, annoyed with his secrets. He grabbed her arm leaving a dirty mark behind.

‘There’s a coffee shop just around the corner from here, do you know the one I mean.’ She nodded and picked up her coat. ‘I have to live like this for a little longer yet but one day I’ll find you in that coffee shop and then I’ll tell you everything. Just promise me one thing. Never drink coffee with anyone else in that coffee shop.’

‘Alright,’ she said taking off her coat. ‘I think you’re insane so I’ll humour you.’

Chesterfield spent another two years living like an animal, never sleeping indoors, never washing, never eating cooked food and never taking off the old coat he wore. He helped people wherever he went and in return all he asked of them was a prayer for his soul. It so happened that on one sunless day his wandering feet took him down a path through Hyde Park. A path he had not trodden for seven years. He stopped at a park bench and sat down next to the man who was waiting for him.

‘I’ve lived like an animal for seven years and survived.’

‘So I can smell,’ said the man putting down his paper. He was well dressed with dark hair, eyes of red fire and two curled horns protruding from his head. ‘My coat has seen better days and my wallet is a good deal lighter.’

‘I put it to good use.’

‘I know. A bargain’s a bargain. Here take this,’ said the Devil, handing him a briefcase. He did not look well pleased. ‘You’ll have all the money a man could want. Now return my coat and wallet.’

‘Not yet. You’ve not completed your side of the bargain. Clean me up so that I look like a man again as you promised.’

The Devil grumbled at this further humiliation. He took Chesterfield to the finest spa hotel in London and had him washed and cleaned and dressed in Armani. When he looked like a man again he handed the coat and wallet back to the Devil who left in a vile temper.

The next day Chesterfield sat outside a busy coffee shop and waited to see if a promise made long ago had been kept. He did not wait long before a pretty young woman whose face he had dreamed of so often sat down at a table with a coffee.

‘Do you mind if I share your table.’

Isabella looked up from her book at the smart man who was smiling at her. ‘I’m sorry I’m waiting for someone to come.’

‘That would be me.’

‘Chesterfield?’

He smiled and nodded and began his story. The Devil had found him in Hyde Park one day, alone and with nothing and a deal was made. Isabella listened to his wild story with sceptical patience but she didn’t mind if he was a little insane. She was in love with him. That sat and talked all morning until the Devil walked into the coffee shop and tapped Chesterfield on the shoulder. Isabella fainted from fright and Chesterfield turned deathly white.

‘No need to worry,’ said the Devil cheerfully, ‘You’re both far from my reach. I have brought you the morning paper. Shall I read it?’

‘Double Tragedy Strikes Walkden Family

The eldest daughter of Mr Frank Walkden, a leading philanthropist in the city, was this morning found dead. Victoria Walkden was believed to have killed herself after losing as a considerable amount of money on the stock market. In a second tragedy another daughter of Mr Frank Walkden collapsed last night at a private party from a fatal overdose of drugs. The actress Charlotte Walkden was infamous for her decadent lifestyle and off screen tantrums which made up most of her short career.”

The Devil folded away his paper. ‘So you see Chesterfield, I have gained two souls for your one.’

The End