

## Strange Meeting at Nicholas Road Road

One day that old sixties song 'Tell Laura I love her' came on the radio. The namesake of the beloved wondered fleetingly when someone would bring her such a message. Only later did she realise that this was how it had all started. That evening, as she sat reading a book, Laura heard the sound of a piano and then an accompanying female voice. It was only just discernable, and when she asked others in the house if they could hear it they looked at her blankly. The songs were old-fashioned music-hall numbers, each of which was followed by peals of happy laughter. For several nights after that the same thing happened. There was something haunting about the sound, and Laura found herself straining to hear more. One day, to her amazement, she heard her own name, and realised that this must be the singer. Apparently the accompanist was called Nick. But who could they be? She mentioned it to the neighbours, but they told her they had no piano. The music could not have come from the pub where it would have been drowned by the sound of revelry. It was vaguely disturbing, particularly since Laura continued to be the only person who could hear it.

Suddenly, it stopped, and she never heard the happy couple again. For some inexplicable reason, this was even more upsetting. Laura longed to hear their joyous laughter again, but a deafening silence came from the direction in which her ears strained. The feeling of loss was all the more poignant because it was springtime and nature was at its most beautiful. But on the evening 14th April great billowing dark clouds gathered in a sky which was from time to time blindingly illuminated by increasingly furious flashes of lightning. Then it came; a terrible flash followed almost instantaneously by a deafening bang, the sound of falling masonry, and the receding rumble of thunder. That was when the heavens descended. Never had Laura seen such rain; it lashed against the house as if intent of drowning it. Water leaked in through the windows and under the front-door sill. There was no question of inspecting the damage until after the storm had abated, but it was evident from the water pouring down the chimney that the stack had been hit. Then, as quickly as it had come, the sound and fury was gone and there was an eerie silence.

In the excitement of it all, Laura forgot about her ghostly musical friends. But the next night, as she prepared to go to bed, she heard a terrible and never-ending sobbing. It was a man's voice, and this time she was sure that other members of the household would be able to hear him. But Laura's mother told her she must just be a bit overwrought from the previous day's events. It was unbearable to Laura hearing Nick's suffering, for surely it was he, and just as surely something had happened to her namesake. There was no question that

what she was hearing was real, but why could no one else hear it, and where could it be coming from? Night after night the sobbing continued. Sometimes she would hear Nick calling out the name of his beloved, and she longed to go to him and comfort him. He seemed very near, but was nowhere to be seen.

Laura took to going out to the pub every night in the hope that Nick would be asleep by the time she got home and that she would not have to endure his cries of grief. Even if he was still sobbing when she got home, this was easier to bear in an alcoholic haze. And then it happened. One evening, after drinking far too much, Laura staggered home well after midnight. She fumbled with the door key, and wondered for a moment whether she was at the right house. The lock seemed to be in the wrong place, and the key was a different shape, but she knew she was inebriated and thought little of it. More alarming was the fact that, try as she might, she couldn't find the light switch. There was a distinct smell of gas, and then she noticed something she had never seen before; a small flame, like a very dim candle, on the wall. She groped towards it, and as she did so felt a little chain which she pulled. Almost instantly the room was illuminated, and Laura found herself in a hallway which resembled the one she knew, but was completely differently decorated. There were thickly-framed pictures of rural scenes on the walls, loose carpets and polished floor-boards, and a hat stand. In a panic, she stumbled into the front room which was equally unrecognisable in the dim glow of the hissing hallway light.

Laura sat down in a high-backed armchair and tried to pull herself together. She was drunk, that was all it was. But why was she wearing this long and unrecognisable dress? Then she heard Nick's voice again sobbing in a room upstairs. Every ounce of her being wanted to go to him, but she was afraid. Was she going mad, was this the devil calling her? Was she, like Ulysses seduced by the sirens, being trapped into some terrible captivity? But when he called her name she hesitated no longer. Rushing headlong up the unfamiliar staircase, she sought out Nick's voice in the front bedroom. The gas-light there was still on and so she was able to see a handsome man of around thirty sitting on the side of a double metal-framed bedstead, wearing only a white nightshirt. His head was bowed, tears flooded down his face and he was visibly racked by grief.

'Laura', he called out again. 'Laura, come back to me, my love, my only one, my treasure. I can't live without you.'

'It's alright, Nick. I'm back.' Laura said with involuntarily calmness.

Nick stared up at her with eyes fit to burst. Then he began to tremble violently.

‘No, no. Go away. You’ve only come to torment me. I can’t bear any more. This is some horrible trick, you can’t be real, you’re in a watery grave at the bottom of the Atlantic.

‘Do I look like a ghost?’ asked Laura, gently putting her arm round him and coaxing him out of his fear.

‘My mind is going. I no longer know what is real and what fantasy. But you’re so warm, oh so warm, you can’t be dead. Oh Laura, tell me its true. Tell me you’re not dead. And if you *are* a ghost, then let me spend this last night with you before we say goodbye for ever.’

Never had Laura felt so loved. Beginning at her toes, Nick kissed every part of her with a hunger which only grief could so have inflamed. She burnt with desire for him, she was transported to a world of delight far beyond the imagining of ordinary mortals; he devoured her, and she gave herself to him without any thought for the strangeness of what was happening. This was real and now, nothing else mattered.

At last the first flush of a beautiful spring day began to dawn, and Laura realised with a terrible pang that Nick had gone and that she was in her own bed in her own familiar room. But as she lay there thinking of what had happened, whatever ‘happened’ meant, it seemed all at once alright. Nick was released now, and she had released him. But she also had been relieved of a burden, she felt lighter than she had felt for many years. She stood at the window looking at the rising sun in all its glory, and thought: now I have started to live again.

And that might have been the end of one story and the beginning of another, but for a nagging question about what Nick had meant when he spoke of a ‘watery grave’ in the Atlantic. Some months later, as the house was being rewired, an electrician came across two old letters, still in their envelopes, hidden under the floorboards. Both bore stamps with the bust of George V on them, but one was British, the other Canadian. The first was postmarked Liverpool, 8th April 1912; it was addressed to Nicholas Scott, Esq., 1 Nicholas Road, Hove, and was signed ‘Laura’. The writing was difficult to decipher, but the gist was not hard to catch. Laura, Nick’s newly-wed wife, had reluctantly decided to visit her ailing mother in Canada a week or so after returning from their honeymoon. She arrived in Liverpool by train on 7th April, stayed the night at the Ocean View hotel, before embarking on the Titanic the next day. The letter was posted at the Ocean Terminal just before boarding the liner. It was full of endearments, and bitter regrets that they had to be parted from one another because they could

not afford the fare for both of them. She promised that she would soon be with him again.

The second letter was postmarked Toronto, 20th April, and was written in a very unsteady hand; it evidently came from Laura's mother. In the confusion of the sinking of the Titanic it was still not sure at this time that all of those who were missing were really dead, but it was evident that hopes for Laura were quickly fading. She seemed as much stricken with grief on Nick's behalf as she was for herself. Between every line could be read the message loud and clear, that Nick and Laura's marriage had been a 'meeting of true minds', an extraordinary love-match.