

After the Fire

I moved to the city after the Great Fire and left before the Great Flood. Between these two cataclysms, as the fire had consumed our cinemas and prison, life was fairly dull. I was a member of the leisure class, having married into wealth, but I was stricken with widowhood before having children, and as a result, had to bear the burden of spending my time caring only for myself. Most of the city's citizens were occupied with rebuilding, so we of the leisure class were left to entertain ourselves with private concerts and theatrical performances in our homes, and with killing waterfowl in the city park that runs along the Ooblong River.

I must admit that my skills as a musician left much to be desired. I attempted to play the harp, the lute, and the flugelhorn all with varying degrees of failure. However, my skills as a tragedienne were renowned among my peers. I played the leading roles in *Hyacinth of Phrygia*, *The Abbess at Midnight*, and *House of the Wilting Roses*, to everyone's acclaim, though Mrs. Allsrocket did at one point wound me deeply by declaring that I could act professionally, an insult for which I've never forgiven her.

In winter months, when travel was difficult and birds were scarce, we engaged in cooking contests, and while my culinary skills were little better than my musical skills, I have a very refined palate and was asked to act as judge on many occasions. As such, I ate many a fine meal without really having to lift a finger, unless you would count those holding forks and knives. Being a widow, I was not expected to host such events, but I did several times, though on each of these occasions, the humiliation of the indigents, and not the meal, was the highlight of the evening.

Unfortunately for me, it was ultimately discovered that the birds I had killed I had not shot with a crossbow, but had actually poisoned, and while this was not strictly illegal, it was considered a grievous breach of etiquette. As a result, I was stripped of my fortune and forced to seek employment. With the help of one of my theatrical colleagues, I found work as an assistant fire inspector. In the days following the Great Fire, inspectors had a great deal of authority, and the inspector I worked for, Judith Tippetree, was a particularly formidable figure. We had unfettered access not only to the city's offices and shops, but to its private residences as well. Of course there were rumors that I abused this authority on one occasion, but that is nonsense.

Firstly, I was only an assistant and had no real power, secondly, the Allsprockets' house was demonstrably not in compliance, and thirdly, living in a hotel for a year could hardly be considered a hardship, even if that would disqualify a family from hosting concerts and theatricals.

Shortly after taking up my position as assistant fire inspector, Ms. Tippetree and I were called upon to assess the offices of Parsival and Unck Engineering, and in the course of our work, we were made privy to a new plan for fire suppression. The firm was working, under secret contract with city officials, on a plan to divert the course of the Ooblong River into a series of tunnels underneath the city surface. I am no engineer, but Ms. Tippetree is quite knowledgeable on the subject, and she recognized immediately that this would be a bold and exciting step forward in the field of public safety. But the plans hit a snarl during the time Parsival and Unck was inactive due to its non-compliance with fire codes. A series of loans came due, and the firm was forced to shutter its doors permanently. It gives me no pleasure to relate that members of the leisure class whom I once counted as my friends held the notes on many of those loans.

Yet the city was home to more than one engineering firm. After making a large donation to the Bureau of Fire Safety and Prevention, Aldous, Hough, and Blackbird purchased the records, plans, and contracts of Parsival and Unck and were able to begin work on the underground tunnel system.

However, things did not go as well as might have been hoped for. Whether the plans were more flawed than we believed, or whether a piece of them had gotten lost in the transfer between the two engineering firms, or whether there were shortcuts made in construction by Aldous, Hough and Blackbird we do not know. The only thing we do know is that when the pumps were first run and the river's course diverted, the valves that were to act as conduits for the water in case of fire gave way, and the river inundated the city.

Fortunately for me, as I mentioned at the start of this tale, I had left a few days before.