

DOCTOR WHO

The Constellations of Ice

by Philip Boyes

My dearest Emmeline,

Sorry it is so long since I wrote to you last, though exactly how long, I must confess, is a question which leaves me quite perplexed. Should I reckon it a fortnight, thirty-four years or three hundred? A fortnight because that is how long ago, from my perspective, I last put pen to paper. Too long, I know, but the least severe of the reckonings, and one I pray you will find forgivable given the unpredictability of my current domestic arrangements and the many strange and exciting things that have been happening to me.

But perhaps it is indeed three centuries since I last committed my thoughts and adventures to paper, since, as you will recall, my last letter was written in my cabin on the *Mayflower* and rested in the care of some friends of my companion for those many, many years before the day came upon which they had instructions to deliver it to you. I trust they did as they were asked – the Doctor assures me they are entirely reliable, even down the generations – and that the letter reached you safely in 1889. 1889! How long ago that seems to me now, though it is a year I myself never lived through. I have aimed to keep time with you – two years of your time for the two of my own which I have spent in this whirlwind of travel and adventure – but in truth, dear Emmeline, even though it remains in some sense the future to me (the Doctor being very reluctant to allow me to learn anything of historic developments in the years soon after my departure, in case I should ever return), 1889 feels immeasurably distant in my past now. The late nineteenth century slips from me like a receding dream. I wonder, if you met me now, whether you would recognise your Victoria, the dear heart and confidante of your girlhood. I have changed, Emmeline, and as you will read in what is to follow, not all are certain it is for the better.

But I should press on. The third of the options for reckoning the time since my last letter was thirty-four years, for that – give or take a handful – is how many turns the world has made around the sun between that letter being delivered and the one you know hold being penned. Fancy, sweet Emmeline! Until now the Doctor has only brought me to the past – or to worlds so far from home that our calendars are immaterial. But now I write to you from the future! And a future so near at hand you might think you could touch it! Strange to think, as I sit here snuggled in my furs, that somewhere, half a world away, there is a version of you who will have grown into the prime of her years. I am sure by now you will have snagged that captain of the guards you always dreamed of and that you will have simply dozens of children (and now perhaps grandchildren?) by him. Even as I write these words, does that older you already remember reading them long ago, when this letter was delivered? Or am I forgotten, laid aside with the other enchanted things of childhood?

The year, Emmeline, is 1923. I write to you from a mountaineers' encampment on the shoulder of the mountain the Tibetans call Chomo-lung-ma – *Goddess-mother of the World*. Our little collection of tents huddles on the glacier tiny as wooden toys on the playroom floor. Above us tower great jags of ice – each far taller than a cathedral, seeming almost like peaks in their own

right. But they are dwarfed in turn by the true mountains beyond, and all of those by the looming summit stretching ever heavenward above us. The sun is setting now and if I open the flap of my tent I can watch the purpling rays of evening play over this beautiful fairyland of ice, sparkling off the icy comet-tails of mist that stream out from the peaks. It is, I think, the most beautiful and alien environment I have ever seen. Having read my previous letters, Emmeline, you will know that is not an idle claim. But I cannot sit and stare for long. The cold is brutal and whets the wind to a razor's edge. We have lost two men to frostbite since the Doctor and I arrived: a young blond lad from Birmingham – younger than me, I think, though he doubtless claimed to be a grown man – and one of the Sherpas: the small, hardy natives who guide our way and bear our luggage. This mountain is sacred to them and though they have always lacked the resources and inclination to attain its summit, they are born mountain-folk. For one of them to perish is a mark of how perilous matters stand, and it has deepened the gloom that hangs over the whole expedition.

You see, Emmeline, though we are higher than any other human beings have ventured before, we are not alone and the cold is not the only killer that has beset us.

We are being hunted.

The first death came four days ago, the day before we arrived. The expedition was a week out of Phari-Dzong, which they tell me is the highest town in the world. A part of me wishes I could have seen it, but I am told it is a ramshackle and mean place where the poor people live in a miserable squalor: entire families and their dogs and cattle all crammed together in their little stone dwellings. The smell of the place was horrendous, by all accounts – the natives never wash their whole lives, and everywhere is piled up with litter. The dead are hacked up like sides of beef on a butcher's block and left on the rocks for the birds.

That is what Kilgare says, anyway. But I don't think he likes foreigners very much, if I am honest. Not everyone on the expedition feels the same. The Scots lad, Jamie, tells me he found the town rather wonderful, and certainly no more barbarous in its remoteness than Inverness. He describes exotic streets ringing with the sound of bells, strung across with multi-coloured pennants, as alive and ever-moving as the prayer-wheels that whirl endlessly on their spindles at the monastery.

The members of the expedition thus regarded their departure from the last settlement on Earth with diverse emotions, and reflected each according to his inclination as they struck out into the unpeopled mountain wastes beyond. There were hundreds of them then: the dozen or so expedition members from Britain, Sherpa guides and native bearers – as well as scores of donkeys and yaks and small mountain ponies. Imagine them stretched out in their long line, snaking across the snowy plains! But day by day their numbers diminished. Supply *depôts* and way-stations were set up, with Sherpas and other natives remaining behind to maintain them. As the amount of luggage to be carried grew smaller, they dispatched unnecessary animals back towards the town. Mountaineering is a ruthless endeavour: however fond they had grown of the beasts

they could not support any more mouths than necessary, and so the poor creatures were allowed to take their chances and find their own ways home.

By the seventh day out of Phari-Dzong the huge expedition had dwindled to a couple of dozen, of whom fewer than half were British. They were hardened mountaineers and adventurers all – the kinds of men (and women!, but more on that later) who appear in those delightful illustrated books that seek to instil little boys with a sense of wonder and excitement and the belief that all the world is theirs to tame, for the glory of Queen-Empress and country.

From the frozen shingle foothills they had passed on to glacier and snowfield. There are places on the mountain where the elements have carved ethereal labyrinths of ice – great scalloped defiles and rounded eruptions of ice, like the waves of a deep-churning ocean, frozen in an instant and then weathered into smoothness. We think of ice as jagged and a thing of straight lines, but it is not so in these parts of the mountain. All is curved, all smooth and sensuous as the curves of a body – when the men of the expedition describe it, you might think they talked about their sweethearts. The sunlight shines through these billowy ice-forms blue and aquamarine. Truly a beautiful place to die, if die one must.

The unfortunate man was called Morgan, a lieutenant in the Welsh Regiment with a wife and three little ones waiting for him back in Llandrindod Wells. He had lobbied his commander to be attached to the expedition: a chance of glory for himself and his regiment. Instead he earned himself a grave of ice and a stone cairn on the roof of the world. Because I am a woman, they will not tell me precisely how it happened. The Doctor heard but when I asked him he only put his arm around my shoulders in that avuncular way of his and said, low and sad: ‘Nastily, Victoria. Very nastily indeed.’

This much I did ascertain: something had attacked him. Something strong and utterly frightful, and nobody was quite sure what. He had been sent ahead with a Sherpa guide to scout out the glacier before the main expedition. They were worried about crevasses or some-such. They did not return, but the mountaineers soon stumbled across the Welshman’s body, or at least what remained of it. The Sherpa never returned and we must presume him dead too.

You can imagine, Emmeline, the effect this event had on morale. Mountain exploration is a perilous undertaking, never more so than on these highest peaks. Those who set out on such endeavours are prepared for injuries and even deaths due to the cruelty of the mountain, the harsh elements or even simple carelessness. But up here among the clouds, where no living thing normally ventures, they do not expect deliberate violence either from man or beast. For weeks and months they had journeyed and travelled with Lt. Morgan, shared his tent and looked with him at creased photographs of his family. I did not know him, but they did, and his killing hit them severely. You might imagine that in such circumstances at least one voice would speak up for turning round and abandoning the attempt to gain the summit. But these were not men and women of that sort. They were Britishers, and of the very highest quality. No-one thought of

throwing in the towel. It was not what Morgan himself would have had of them, they tell me. And so they pressed onward, but the joy had gone out of them. Their determination was grim now, dark and unyielding as the mountain nights. It was into this doleful mood that the Doctor and I made our arrival.

We were, I am not ashamed to say, playing like children in the snow. The Doctor was delighted to find the thick white covering outside the TARDIS doors and his enthusiasm was infectious. We made snow-angels and chased each other with snowballs. One of mine clipped the Doctor right on the neck and made him hop around squeaking as the icy clumps went down the neck of his fur-coat. After that we decided to build a snowman – or rather a snow-lady, for I alighted on the notion of making her in the fashion of the Queen. She was almost finished when Hawkins and his Sherpa pal came by. The boy gaped in astonishment, and who can blame him? Just imagine – trudging for days and weeks through the snow and up the ice-cliffs. Sent ahead to scout, his mind cannot but have been dwelling on Morgan's fate the day before. His thoughts must have been black and fearful, and then to find himself confronted with a strange fellow and a young girl merrily building a snowman! It is a wonder he did not faint dead away!

The Doctor hallooed him and quickly told him something that seemed to settle his initial confusion. Hawkins is a good lad who takes things as he finds them, and he greeted us in a pleasant if rather bewildered manner, insisting that we accompany him back to the relative safety of the main party. But I do wonder if at least part of him was a little suspicious of us. We are neither of us especially prepossessing, but in his grief and fear can he have helped wondering whether we might have had something to do with Morgan's fate? If so, he kept it stolidly to himself. Nor did he ask a great many of questions of us, though he would have been quite entitled to do so. Instead he told us about the background and aims of expedition so that we would have some idea what to expect when we were introduced to the others.

Their goal is twofold: firstly, to gain the summit in the name of the Empire and the King (it will not surprise you to learn that the old Queen passed long ago). Their second objective is more personal. There had been, he told us, a previous expedition the year before, led by a man called Carruthers – a great hero of Empire, we're told. Doubtless you will hear of him in the years to come. That expedition had failed and Carruthers himself had never returned. His body had never been recovered. So Hawkins and his fellows had instructions to find, if they could, what had befallen this earlier titan – and if at all possible to bring his remains back home for a hero's burial. If that proved impossible, they were at least to see that he was laid decently to rest on the mountain. I asked Hawkins what he thought had happened: was the weather unusually bad? Was there some freak accident? If Carruthers was as great and experienced as he said, then how had the mountain claimed him?

'The mountain can claim any one of us, any time, miss,' he said to me gravely. 'She's greater than any of us, even Carruthers; we're here on her sufferance. Remember that, or you'll

wish you had.' He said nothing then, for a long while, but finally added, 'If it *was* the mountain. Who knows. Perhaps whatever got old Morgan took him too.'

He would say no more on the matter; he just left it hanging. It was our first intimation that all was not well and it left us both distinctly unsettled.

After a half-hour or so hiking downhill we spied the main party. We were met first by Kilgare – one of those typically burly and dour Scotsmen of the kind who could have set Her Majesty's grieving heart a-flutter. 'Tom's still away,' he said gruffly, 'so I'm in charge here for now. Hawkins, lad, mind telling me how you've managed to come back with more bodies than set out?' Then he turned his attention to the Doctor and myself. 'Who are you, anyway? How did you get here? This mountain's a pretty place to be sightseeing.'

The usual questions, then, and repeated by the other mountaineers who gathered round as we talked. The Doctor fended them off as deftly as ever, dancing and charming his way through the conversation so that all those present left with the distinct impression that of course there was a perfectly sensible explanation, which they would have in full once everybody was present and had been properly introduced – naturally, he didn't want to have to repeat himself half a dozen times. In truth, he told them almost nothing about us, while finding out much about them. The absence of their leader – this Tom – had piqued his interest, I saw, and he kept subtly bringing the topic back round to it. The man had gone off alone in pursuit of some task, without so much as a Sherpa to help him. I confess this did not sound like terribly wise behaviour on a high mountain but everyone spoke as if it were perfectly natural and a straightforwardly brave and noble thing to do. He was expected back shortly anyway – some time ago, in fact. I wondered that they were not more concerned by his lateness, but then I suppose keeping time is hard on a mountain and few undertakings can run as smoothly and quickly as one estimates beforehand.

Much of this we learned from a rough-looking chap named Travers. With his stubbly beard and brawny arms he struck one as quite the rogue, but first impressions can be deceptive. Travers is a naturalist sent to join the expedition by the Zoological Society of London, and I soon learned that behind that dangerous-looking façade was a talkative and rather nervous man. He was accompanied – to my surprise and delight – by a young woman: his sister, Anne – a scientist in her own right and, I soon learned, veteran of even more adventures than myself. She impressed me very greatly. Do you remember how I used to sneak into Mister Maxtible's laboratory when we were young? How I used to pilfer his textbooks and read them by candlelight all night long so I might impress him with my scientific knowledge? I longed for him to notice me, to recognise my potential and take me on as an apprentice or assistant. From such a basis I might prevail on Father to send me to Girton or Newnham. I cannot say how sorry I am that I overestimated Maxtible's good character and that in my desperation to make myself useful to him I gave him opportunity to manipulate both myself and poor Father for his wicked schemes. But I do not regret my ambitions. On the contrary: from that moment I met Anne Travers and felt her cool, appraising eye on me; and more with every day I know her, I feel that this capable,

quick-witted young woman is everything I have always aspired to be, an icon of the possible and of what I might have been.

After Anne we were introduced to a bevy of mountaineers, but my attention was elsewhere. I confess even now I am not sure who everyone is. The exception was Jamie, a young Scots lad fresh out of school. Heaven knows how he got himself attached to this venture – he knows nothing of mountaineering, for a certainty. To be perfectly honest, Emmeline, he does not seem to know very much of anything at all, but he wears his ignorance with good humour and is keen to learn. More than that, he is brave and stout-hearted and of all those on the expedition, he is the fellow I would most want at my side in a tight spot.

It was with Jamie and Anne that I spent most of that first afternoon. While the Doctor concerned himself with Kilgare and the other principals of the expedition, we trudged along in the middle of the train with the Sherpas and the mountain-ponies. We were traversing a broad expanse of glacier, heaped with deep snow – hard going, but not especially difficult or dangerous. The real challenges still lay ahead of us. I was enjoying myself: Anne in particular is first-rate company and refused to allow herself to be made downcast by the misfortune that had befallen Morgan. She entertained us for hours with a tales of high adventure that ranged from swashbuckling and inspirational to outrageous and bawdy. Jamie hung on her every word. He scampered along in her footsteps like a besotted puppy, and while I do not think I flatter myself overmuch when I say that my own charms – such as they are – are not lost on him, it is to her that he will, I think, forever be devoted.

Although I thus took pleasure in this company and conversation, and the majestic scenery that surrounded us, I could not fail to notice a change in the mood of the expedition as the day waned. The brief good temper and high spirits precipitated by our arrival gradually darkened and soured as Tom, the expedition leader, still did not return. Whispers began to circulate; people's thoughts turned back to Morgan and whether their leader might have suffered a similar fate.

The time was approaching when we should have to settle down and encamp for the night. As the sun dipped below the highest peaks, the Doctor came back through the train to find me. Kilgare was with him.

'We're going to look for him,' the Doctor told me quietly. His tone of voice suggested this was a precursor to a suggestion that I should stay here and not worry about him, but he left a pause afterwards – deliberately, I think – into which I interposed and insisted upon accompanying them.

'Quite out of the question!' Kilgare said, all of a-bluster. He followed with all the usual things men say about danger and a woman's place and suchlike. It was a mistake in front of Anne. All he achieved was that when it set out the search party included not just Kilgare, the Doctor and a pair of Sherpas, but also myself, Anne, and naturally Jamie too. This cast Kilgare into a foul mood, but the Doctor seemed much the happier for it. He had not yet had

opportunity to talk with Anne, and clearly took to her as much as I had, spending near as much time walking with her and exchanging stories of adventures on the Limpopo or in the ruined cities of the Amazon as he did chattering away in Sherpa with the two natives – with whom he already seemed to be fast friends.

Kilgare pushed us hard and we travelled what seemed like a great distance away from the main party, but we did not find Tom before nightfall. We had no choice but to pitch camp. I had been expecting to overnight in the way-station prepared for us by the advance scouts, which should have been hard enough (and writing in one now, I can confirm that is no vicar's tea-party) but would at least have offered the security of planning and careful preparation. Instead we entrusted ourselves to hastily-pitched tents on a patch of mountainside in the shelter of a high granite spur.

Naturally, I was assigned to share with Anne. As the freezing night bit deep around us, I found myself reflecting on our errand and Tom's absence. Even then the whole affair struck me as rather rum.

'Why would he go off on his own? Surely it would be foolish even without some ferocious creature out for blood? I mean to say, that fellow Carruthers – the one in charge of the last expedition – Hawkins said he never came back. And that wasn't a monster, was it? That was just the mountain.'

Normally so voluble, Anne chewed too long over her response.

'My word!' I exclaimed. 'You *do* think it was the monster! Heavens, is *that* why you're here? You and Travers? I mean, I did wonder. Whatever is a *naturalist* doing on a mountain-climbing expedition?'

She scowled a little. I do not think she had expected me to piece it together so quickly. That piqued my irritation a touch: I am used to being underestimated by men, but I had expected better of Anne.

Finally she spoke; a little grudgingly at first but soon recovering her equanimity. 'There have long been rumours that there's something living on this mountain, some fabulous specimen hitherto unknown to science. No-one took them seriously, but then Carruthers was lost... They say that man was born on the mountain, Victoria. He was of it down to his marrow. He grew up in a monastery of lamas and could scale lesser peaks by the age of five. All the silly kinds of mystique men spin about each other when they fall a little in love. And the scholars of the Society loved him as much as anyone. From their leather armchairs in front of the fireplaces of Mayfair they could not conceive that such a man might have miscalculated or overreached himself, or just suffered d--- bad luck. The Sherpas told their stories, as they always do, and for the first time there were people back in England who were prepared to listen.'

I understood. 'They didn't send you to find Carruthers at all. They sent you to find what killed him.'

‘That’s why they sent Edward, yes. Nobody sent me. Truth is, it was the mountain that did for poor Carruthers, like as not. But if there is just a chance the rumours have some truth to them, I’ll be dashed if I’m prepared to let Edward and those old buffers hog all the glory.’

Outside, far away, something howled, high and unearthly. It was almost certainly the wind. Almost.

‘And just as well I did come,’ Anne added in a low voice. ‘Because it certainly wasn’t the mountain that saw off poor Lt. Morgan.’

I slept poorly that night. I expect that scarcely needs saying. It was cold and I was frightened. I seemed to spend hours lying awake in the dark, pressed as close as was seemly to the warmth of Anne’s back and listening to the ethereal noises of the mountain. The lonely darkness transforms every whisper of the night to a grim harbinger of some approaching beast. Darkness can do that even in Sussex, so imagine how much stranger and more fearful the night can be up here on the roof of the world.

But nothing came to claim us. Morning came and the sun spread its light across the cliffs and icefields. Although tired, I was eager to be up and moving: anything to encourage some warmth back into my fingers and toes. We did not wait even for breakfast, but ate as we walked, fumbling pemmican into our mouths with clumsy, thick-gloved fingers. Our way grew harder and steeper that morning; at times we had to rope ourselves together to ascend precipitous walls of ice and rock. This the Doctor in particular accomplished with no little amount of nervous ‘Oooh’- and ‘Oh-my-word!’-ing. Do not think less of him – I do not. I rather suspect the whole rigmarole was something of an act to put my mind at rest (he always has worried for me so!) and wrong-foot Kilgare. That it also entertained the Sherpas mightily he would only have considered a wholly desirable side-effect.

There was a short respite after that, where the going was steep but not especially difficult, but soon enough we were forced to tackle crevasses and terrifying ravines again.

‘How do we know this is the way he came?’ Jamie asked Kilgare. The older Scot shot him a fearsome look. I do not think he is used to being questioned.

‘It’s a reasonable enough question,’ I said.

‘This is the way he came,’ Kilgare said, and trudged on through the snow.

Anne laid a hand on my shoulder. ‘This was Carruthers’ route,’ she said. ‘The South Col.’

As it turned out, we did not have to wait for long. We were working to cross a deep gash in the mountain when the Doctor held up a hand.

‘Shh!’ he said. ‘Everybody be perfectly silent. There – do you hear that?’

‘It’s very faint,’ I said. ‘A sort of... moaning. Ugh – it sends shivers down my spine.’

‘Most likely the wind,’ said Kilgare, ‘on both counts. It whistles across the striations of the ice in the crevasses. I’ve heard it sing like Daisy Dormer.’

‘No, she’s right,’ said Jamie. ‘Haud yer wheesht and open yer ears. That’s nae the wind – it’s a man whimpering.’

Anne pulled some field-glasses from her pack and began scanning the crevasse below. A moment later she spotted him – a small human figure lodged on an ice-shelf maybe twenty feet below us and some distance off to the left. He looked a rather pitiful sight crumpled up down there – and was evidently in some discomfort.

‘Tom?’ she called out. ‘Tom, is that you? Whatever are you doing down there?’

He seemed either unable or disinclined to answer, so we turned our attention to the pressing difficulty of how we might recover him. There was no obvious safe route down and we could not even get to a point above him from which we might lower a rope. Kilgare grew more and more frustrated, cursing and blustering as if every moment’s delay was a personal deprecation against his manhood.

It was Jamie who eventually pointed out a horribly narrow ledge of ice running a little way along the length of the crevasse, just below where Tom was hunched. It was little more than a toe-hold in truth, and in places cut away considerably underneath. It did not look at all as if it would support very much weight. Of course, hot-headed lad that he was, that did nothing to discourage the young Scot from offering to climb down there tight away and pick his way along the ledge to where he could attach a line to Tom. He was most of the way through harnessing himself up before the combined efforts of Kilgare, Anne, the Doctor and both Sherpas finally convinced him that such a course of action would accomplish nothing more than his own ruination.

‘So what now?’ the poor boy asked dejectedly. ‘There’s nae other way down.’

‘I could go,’ I said.

There was, of course, general outcry. Everyone was utterly aghast.

Everyone with the exception of Anne. She nodded slowly. ‘She’s the lightest,’ she agreed. ‘It’s our best chance.’

‘She’s just a girl,’ Kilgare protested, ‘and not even a mountaineer!’

‘You lower me down, I edge across, attach a rope to Tom and then you haul us both back up,’ I said. ‘What mountaineering do I need to know? I’ve climbed trees and the rocks at seaside.’ And the frozen steel of the Cybermen’s ice-tombs, though I kept that to myself. ‘I assure you I’m nimble and steady on my feet. Tell them, Doctor! I can do this.’

‘I do rather think it might be our only chance,’ the Doctor said softly. ‘If you’re sure, Victoria?’

Nobody objected after that, though Kilgare seemed more affronted than ever. They quickly fastened the harness about me and, almost before I’d had time to realise what I had volunteered for, I was being lowered over the edge and down in the crevasse.

What can I say about those minutes, Emmeline? How can I ever convey to you what thoughts and sentiments coursed through me as I depended from that line with nothing beneath me for hundreds of feet? As I descended, even the few dozen feet to Jamie’s ledge, it grew darker,

my world taking on a chiaroscuro quality: pellucid mountain light and intense, space-cold shadow. The sky was a jagged gash of brightness above my head. Crystals of ice and snow sparkled lazily in the air, dislodged by the rope on the edge of the chasm and caught in the light as they twirled through an unhurried spiral ever downwards. You might think I would have been frightened, and yes, I was. What sane person would not be? And yet, I am not that same girl you knew, two years ago for me and perhaps a lifetime for you; that same girl who shied away from climbing trees and preferred a cosy bower and a pretty book to any kind of risk or adventure. As I hung there, my heart thrilled and swelled with excitement. The others were all looking down at me from above: the Doctor and Anne with anxious concern, Jamie with a kind of stupefied admiration, Kilgare as if braced for the moment of my failure. Once, it might have discomfited me to have so many eyes upon me, so much responsibility on my shoulders – for at no instance could I forget that Tom’s fate rested entirely with me – but I have done so much since I left England, and this was not the most perilous clinch I had found myself in. I have changed and learned to thrive on such dangers. The truth is, I felt a kind of giddy elation at it all. Just a girl? Let them see what Edward Waterfield’s little girl can do!

‘Victoria!’ the Doctor called. ‘Victoria, you should be at the right level now. Can you find the ledge?’

I searched for it with my feet, scrabbling a bit at first, but then finding it and pulling myself secure against the ice-face. It was even more precarious than it had looked from up top. Barely more than the toe of my boots could fit on it. It would help me manoeuvre along the length of the crevasse, but it scarcely supported me at all. They had to pull the rope taut to take some of my weight, and that force threatened constantly to pull me back, so to counteract it I must at all times press my weight forward against the ice. It scoured and bit at my cheek as I edged left towards Tom. There were times when I was sure I was about to slip. If I did I would plunge out into the crevasse, and even if the rope held I would undoubtedly swing back to my starting-point, where I should have to begin all over again.

I did not lose my footing.

It took what felt like an age, but I reached Tom’s ledge.

‘Oh, well done!’ the Doctor shouted overhead. I heard him clapping his mittened hands.

‘Excellent show!’ Anne called. Jamie said something too, but I confess I did not catch it.

I was distracted, you see, for I had just got my first good look at Tom. He was a fine man, well-built and handsome, or he might have been had he not been so abject. His face was hidden behind a scarf and hat, but his eyes were wild with fear and pain. The poor man was half-delirious. Pain, I assumed at the time, and who could blame him? His left leg was twisted awkwardly. That worried me. If it was broken we might never get him home.

‘Tom,’ I said, not sure if he had even registered my presence. ‘Tom, I’m a friend. I’ve come to help you.’

He turned his head a fraction and his eyes widened.

‘No,’ he said, slurring the word a little. ‘No, it’s not you. You’re dead. You’re a ghost it’s sent to tempt me.’

As he spoke he glanced at something in his hands that I had not noticed at first: a globe of bright, shining crystal. I managed only the briefest glimpse. When he saw me looking he hid it away in the folds of his clothes.

I had no time to dwell further. The priority was to effect his rescue. This we managed, though it took rather longer than we had hoped because of his injury. I attached a second line to his harness and since it was quite apparent that my narrow ledge could not support us both, I had to coax him to step out into the crevasse so he would swing directly below the others and they could haul him up. This was made considerably more difficult by the fact that he seemed convinced that I did not really exist, but was some figment of his delirious mind working to enact a perverse death-wish. Men can be like that when they are in pain.

Anyway, accomplish it we eventually did, and at length both Tom and I were safely back on firm ground. Kilgare had eyes only for his friend, but I was fêted by the others. The Doctor embraced me in delight the instant I came back over edge. Anne shook my hand and clapped me on the shoulder and told me it was as fine a bit of rescue-work as ever she’d seen. Jamie was, I think, a little in awe – and if perhaps I sensed that he regretted that he had not been afforded the chance to be the hero, he was never less than perfectly gracious and utterly gallant.

We remained there a little while as I was quite exhausted from my exertions and the Doctor and Kilgare needed to check over Tom.

‘Is he all right?’ I asked, joining them when I had recovered sufficiently.

‘He will be, I think,’ the Doctor said. ‘He’s lucky we came along when we did.’

Tom looked at me and murmured something, stretching out a hand. I thought he wanted me to take it, but when I tried to do so he seemed to grow frightened and snatched it away again.

‘Stand back, lass,’ Kilgare said gruffly. ‘Tommy, are you thirsty? Here, drink something.’

He pulled out his canteen and pulled down Tom’s scarf so he could drink.

His face, Emmeline! *His face!*

It was the face of a man in his early forties, strong but kind, with ice-bright eyes and a stubble-beard rimed with frost. It was not disfigured or injured or ugly in any way. And yet I gasped at the sight of it. Because it was a face I knew. Even changed by all these years, there was something indelibly familiar in the line of his nose, the angle of his brows. There was a little of my father in that face, a little of myself.

He recognised me too. ‘Victoria,’ he murmured. ‘But you died... *You died...*’

And I knew him then. Thomas. Little Tommy. The little boy whom we bounced on our laps as girls and played chased around the garden for kisses.

‘You didn’t tell me you knew each other,’ Anne said.

‘Victoria?’ asked the Doctor.

‘He’s... Thomas Waterfield.’ I could hardly believe I was saying the words; that the grown man before me was from my own past. My own family. ‘He’s my cousin.’

When Father died my world both shrank and broadened immeasurably. I gained the universe, and yet I lost my family and the circle of all that was familiar to me. When we were girls, you and I, we were raised in Society. Maybe not quite the echelons of *débutantes’* balls and all that, but we were comfortable in our standing and never short of dinner-guests and dance-partners. We were never lonely and never at a loss. The greatest blessing of all: we were surrounded by people who loved us. All our lives we took that for granted, as if it were only natural; but I have seen more of the world now, Emmeline, and it is not so common as all that. I cannot tell you how grateful I am to have experienced such love and comfort as was generously afforded to me. But I hope you will not think me self-regarding when I tell you that when it was all snatched away from me – well, I have written before of how I felt. It broke my heart utterly, and Father’s passing worst of all.

The Doctor has been good to me, of course. He cares for me deeply, and I feel more gratitude and affection towards him than I can ever hope to express. In those first months after he took me in I felt certain that I should never have managed if he had not taken pity on me. All I saw and felt was what I had lost. The Doctor was my saviour, my funny little knight in mismatched armour. But as we journeyed from place to place and I became a companion and equal partner in his adventures, the pain of loss faded. I grew and blossomed. It is not that I became strong. I thought it was, at first, but now I see that I have always been strong. I have always had that steel and fire within me. If the Doctor had not plucked me away from everything, I might have faltered but I would not have foundered. Somehow I would have muddled through, set myself aright and dusted myself off. Somehow I would have thriven.

That was my darkest time. I fear some part of me began to resent the easy escape the Doctor had offered me. I felt in some measure cheated of slower path – unquestionably harder but at the same time more honest – which might have retained for me my friends and relations and the dreams I had made for myself. Had I not run away in his silly blue box, I wondered, would I now be at Girton, on my way to becoming a scientist in my own right?

That time passed, of course, as it must even with the Doctor. In time my grief faded and with it my homesickness and resentment. Little by little I stopped wondering about family or the future that might have been mine. The TARDIS seldom goes where the Doctor wants and I came to believe that I should never see anyone or anything familiar to me again. And nor did I want to, for I had glimpsed the Universe and danced in Eternity.

And now I stand closer to my time than I have ever been in two years. In the tent across the way is that same little cousin I had dandled on my knee, now grown and matured into a stalwart man and an adventurer in his own right. He might take me back with him if I asked him, set me up and introduce me to his friends and our relations. I could come back to you, Emmeline, and tell you my tales in person! When Kilgare pulled down his scarf and I recognised

that face, I realised at once that all that I had believed denied to me forever was being offered anew; I need only reach out and take it.

I could slip back into the world. But to become a Waterfield again I should have to lay aside all that I have gained, all that I have become. No more an Adventuress of the Universe: merely myself: Victoria Waterfield. And away the Doctor would fly, he and the Cosmos lost to me for ever.

Oh, Emmeline! Whatever am I to do?

Your devoted friend, for ever,

Victoria