

Opening extract from
**The Crimson
Bed**

Written by
Loretta Proctor

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Belgrave Square, London 1839

Ellie pretended to be fast asleep. Sally, the nursemaid, shivering in her nightshift, waited a few minutes. She stared at her charge with suspicion but the child's eyes were shut, breath as light as thistledown stirring her small slender frame. Satisfied, Sally stretched her arms, and sighed.

Ellie could see perfectly well what was going on. She watched through lash-fringed slits as Sally struggled to put on her clothes in the chilly light of dawn, blowing on cold fingers to make them move around buttons and hooks. The young girl's breath hung in the air like a ghostly vapour and Ellie knew that when the curtains were drawn back she would see that Jack Frost had drawn his icy fingers over the windowpanes, leaving swirls and leafy patterns on them. Next, Sally would go and collect the big white jug the kitchen maid had left outside the nursery room door, water already cool after being brought up four flights of stairs. This was going to be for Ellie's wash. Dragged from a warm bed to be laved with tepid water: horrible, horrible! She shivered at the thought.

She had better ideas in mind. Rising while the water was lapping into the basin, the sound covering the soft rustle of the sheets, she slipped out of bed, through the half-open door and down the narrow stairs that led from the nursery. On the upstairs landing she paused as always to listen to the servants busy in the breakfast room below. The murmur of their voices was comforting and the aroma of cooking delicious. There was an odour of fishy kedgeriee and the peculiar smell of a dish Sally had told her were 'devil's kidneys.'

'What are "kid- nees", Sally?'

'They're things wot you get from inside animals, Miss Ellie.'

‘So why does the Devil want them? What does he do with them and why does Papa eat them for breakfast?’

‘Not Devil– devilled, miss. They call ’em that because they’re hot as hell.’

Ellie thought this dish sounded intriguing but knew that she could not partake of it, as it was unsuitable for a child. She would have salted porridge for breakfast in the nursery later on. She pouted, sulky at the idea of not being old enough to join Mama and Papa at their feast.

She did not linger long on the landing. Hearing an indignant Sally call her from above she ran for refuge to Mama’s room, the beautiful crimson room with the crimson bed. Her mother, whose name was Maria, was seated in this wonderful bed, a lacy white shawl thrown about her shoulders, the little nightcap atop her head tied beneath her chin. From beneath the cap dark hair spilled out over the pillows. On her lap was a small silver tray with a white doily and a long glass cup full of chocolate which she stirred with a silver spoon and then sipped slowly and pleasurably. There was always a single blossom laid on the tray, no matter what time of year.

Ellie ran up, clambered onto the huge four-poster, and snuggled under the sheets, leaning back on the soft feather pillows with a deep sigh of content, snuffing the distinctive scent of her mother.

‘Take care. You’ll spill my chocolate, you naughty wee thing! What *are* you doing, running down here again?’

‘Can I have some chocolate, Mama?’

Her mother, always indulgent, let her have a sip and it was the most delicious thing Ellie had ever tasted.

‘I want more!’

‘Oh, you always want more, little greedy-puss. There, another spoonful then – but that’s all now.’

Sally tapped on the door and put a head round, looking frightened at having lost her charge yet again. Mama laughed and said, ‘It’s all right, Sally, she can stay a few more moments before

you take her back to the nursery.’

‘She’s that clever, mum, she always gets away when my back’s turned,’ the young girl said and dipping a respectful curtsey, disappeared to wait in the corridor for her troublesome young charge.

Ellie was in no mind to leave too soon. First of all there was the vision of her beautiful mother in her lacy shawl; the sight of that glorious, shining hair never seen during the day when it was dressed upon her head with pins and combs. Then there was the room itself, its walls painted a soft crimson with black and gold edgings around the doors and windows and picture rails as if encasing everything in a frame. At the square-paned window hung heavy red velvet curtains that blocked out most of the light even in the daytime. Dark religious pictures with carved gold frames gave an air of antique gloom. A grand mirror hung over the table where Mama sat to have her hair dressed by Mulhall and there she would select her jewellery. Ellie was sometimes allowed to sit and watch this wonderful operation taking place, allowed to see the contents of the jewel box. Mama would point out the special garnet necklace and earrings Papa had given her when they were in Venice on their wedding tour.

In the centre of this dark room was the crimson bed.

It was a tall, wide four-poster which some said went all the way back to the days of Queen Elizabeth and had been made for one of the ancestral grandmothers as a wedding gift. Ever since then it had been passed down in the Templeton family to the first bride as her marriage bed. Made from solid oak, it had darkened with age so as to be almost black. It was carved all over with scrolls, animals and acanthus leaves. As Ellie sat in the bed and stared at the carvings it seemed to be alive and rustling with leaves, birds and creatures as if she wandered in some dark, dense forest.

At the headboard was a carving depicting a wedding. The bride in her voluminous clothes and little hat with a feather looked most demure: eyes downcast, face turned slightly away. The gallant groom, who bowed and held her hand in his, had elaborate frills

round his neck, wore puffed out trousers and hose that showed a sturdy leg; he was a dashing fellow. She liked the groom but thought the bride looked prim and foolish. Round the other three sides of the bed were hangings of rich red velvet and the counterpane was made of crimson-dyed wool on which were embroidered small cream flowers and dark green leaves.

Her mother often told her, 'Our great-great ancestor, Eleanor Mary, made and embroidered this.'

Ellie knew she had been named after this long-ago grandmother whose portrait was not only on the bed-head for all time but also looked down on her from the hallway as she went downstairs; a dark stern-looking lady with black, puritanical clothes and a stiff white ruff about her neck. That old lady, with eyes that followed one about accusingly, was frightening and yet she had made this wonderful rich bedspread and slept in the crimson bed when she was a young bride.

Ellie never wondered why Papa was seldom to be seen in this room. He had his own room and his own big bed. This was a room sacred to the Feminine. Men had no place in it at all. She had sensed too a part of her mother that was private, alone and, for some reason, immensely sad.