

SPIRITS OF THE SNOW

by Sian Edwards

Sarah woke with a start. A feeling of weird unease was deep inside her. The room of the ancient cottage was silent and still as usual, but she was certain there was something.

“Stop it “ she said out loud to reassure herself, “It was a dream “ She lay there listening. The noise came again. The rumble of wheels on loose stones following the steady thump and clatter of horse’s hooves. The dull glimmer of lantern light passed the window slowly, very slowly. It cut into the darkness like a car, but it was no brighter than a torch.

It was the light that catapulted Sarah out of bed and across to the window. She threw the curtains back and stared. She hadn’t dreamt it at all. It remained there, level with the window, a dark image of the night, a huge carriage drawn by two fine built horses.

Snow fell rapidly down on the carriage roof. It was solidly built of iron and wood, with curtains at the windows. The lanterns swung lightly from each side of the horses. The carriage looked like new, yet the style of it was old, like something out of the eighteen century.

Slowly it disappeared up the track. For a while Sarah looked on in amazement. Finally she drew the curtains and turned away. She glanced briefly at the clock as she crawled back into bed. Nobody used the track as a road anymore. Certainly not at quarter to one in the morning! As far as Sarah



knew, the road had ceased to be The Great North Road over a hundred years ago.

Questions ran round her head but she pushed them away too tired to think. Turning her back to the window, she slept uneasily.

Despite the apparent heavy snow fall, the ground was dry and the track had returned to tarmac. The day passed in a confused blur. She researched into music and film reviews in a half concentrating state. It wasn’t just the mysterious sighting that kept her mind focussed on the events of last night. When she had slept, as well as the carriage entering her dream there had been a voice.

Again and again she let the words repeat inside her head. The voice was of a young girl. As the carriage headed out of the gates of a mansion, the quiet gentle voice seemed to be pleading with her to help. The voice was coming from somewhere in the courtyard. She sensed it was watching the carriage go.

The thought stayed with her throughout the day. That night the track became loose stones and events repeated themselves. Snow fell to no avail.

Morning brought the certainty of reason, but also confusion. Sarah had heard the name "Lucy" spoken in the dream this time. She was sure Lucy was the girl pleading with her.

There was one other thing to be certain of, that she was meant to do something.

Oblivious to the unusual pattern of her nights, the days continued to flow. This morning Sarah bought a newspaper and a copy of "*The Goss*" Magazine. She had taken a great pride in the last review she had written about the latest Brad Pitt film and she wanted to see the result.

The headline hit her at her first read of the local newspaper. Someone had written about a road being closed. Sarah's eyes scanned the page for clues. Suddenly her heart leapt. It was not a report of a road blocked off last week, as often happened. It was a reminder of the two hundredth anniversary of a closure. The report contained very little detail. Only the words Great North Road seemed to bulge.

She had no time to finish reading it now, as she had reached her destination. She quickly put the paper away as she made her way down the bus.

Sarah hardly had time for a break that day. She already felt exhausted by the fullness and rush

of the events. There was no chance to finish the reading the newspaper report.

Back home, her mind drifted, redirecting to the newspaper report. She resolved to finish her reading, only to find it misplaced in the day's rush. "I must find out what happened" she vowed, in her disgust. The certainty that the report had meant to inform her of some vital task was strongly evident.

She knew the date, 7 February 1799. The report said the road had been closed after six days of consideration.

Sarah took the next day off. The lack of sleep was really beginning to tell. She had to get to the bottom of this. It had a total grip on her, it felt totally out of control.

In the early afternoon Sarah made her way to the local museum. She scanned through disk after disk of ancient newspapers with little success.

Then there it was, dated the 2 February 1799. Again the words "Great North Road" bulged out. This time the report was detailed. Sarah read over it and over it absorbing every detail. It said:

"Heavy snow falls forced the closure of many roads last night. On the Great North Road an incident was rumoured after fleeing coach horses had been found. Anyone travelling between Burntisland and Dundee are advised to use an alternative route."

There was no mention of permanent closure. According to the report she had read yesterday, the road had been closed six days later after it had become dangerous.

Sarah ran over the clues once more in her head. Every time the carriage appeared it snowed heavily. Lucy always pleaded for help just as the carriage disappeared from view.

For some unknown reason, she found herself staring hard at the date on the newspaper as if it had been the carriage itself. The shiver of shocked realisation ran through her. The date given for the incident was the same date that the carriage had first passed the window! Sarah realised that Lucy had lost her parents in a carriage accident *exactly* two hundred years ago and now looked to Sarah to help her find them.

She zoomed back to reality. She had been looking through the museum's CD-ROM for ages. It was time she went. Sarah checked her watch. The bus had left two minutes ago. For a moment the idea of waiting for the next one occurred to her but she dismissed it. A walk under this clear sky would be beautiful and somehow the thought of a bus journey didn't seem right.

Sarah gathered up her possessions and made her way out into the clear afternoon. Despite the chill, the sky was blue and there was no wind. She made her way south towards home. It was a long way - four miles to be exact -

but she didn't mind, she felt compelled to walk the distance.

Sarah was half way home before she realised the way she was going. She was making her way home along the Great North Road! This couldn't all be coincidence. The journey, like the dreams was leading her towards the truth. It seemed that she must see the place where the accident happened.

Sarah was almost home before it happened. There seemed no reason for it but suddenly snow began to fall in earnest. The sky was cloudless although the flakes continued to flow down.

Sarah continued to walk, listening for the now familiar sound. She knew what was coming. Turning the first part of the bend she caught a glimpse of something lying in the thin layer of white ahead.

The object lay as an obstruction across the narrow road. The corners of the bend were blind. Fields engulfed the way with a hundred-metre drop on one side. Anything that fell down that bank could be lost forever.

By now the snow was a blinding blizzard. All too late the puzzle came together in her mind. Sarah ran towards the log in the road as the faint rumble of the carriage came into the distance.

She pushed relentlessly against it with her weight trying to roll it towards the side of the road without success.

The carriage was getting nearer. Sarah continued her efforts regardless, determined that the log would move. Far too soon the carriage was upon her. She seemed to be thrown in a flurry of speed as she jumped clear of it.

Through a sheet of snow Sarah saw the carriage hit the log with force. Any grip that either the horse's hooves or wheels had was lost on the icy surface of the road.

The vehicle was spun out of control by the collision. The last image Sarah remembered was seeing the carriage hanging by the weak harness then disappearing over the edge of the bank, into total blackness. The horses vanished into nowhere in a flurry of terrified speed, trailing their useless burden of leather

When at last she came to her senses there was no sign of the log or carriage. The blizzard had stopped without leaving its mark. This time she knew exactly what to do. Getting up, she headed for home at a flat out run.

Reaching home she crashed through the house flinging every door open in her haste.

At the entrance to her bedroom she stopped. A girl was sitting on the end of her bed. It was Lucy. Sarah knew that dark hair and brown eyes. The lips were smiling as if they had been long lost friends.

There was no fear in Sarah's voice when she spoke. She felt quite comfortable around this girl now. "I've found your parents Lucy" she said calmly, "I'm afraid they ran off

the road between here and the inn. The carriage collided with a log that lay across their path."

"Will you take me to be with them?" Lucy whispered in her gentle voice.

"Yes ". Sarah smiled, "You have been waiting long enough"
"I have been wondering since I was ten." Lucy informed her, " That's when my uncle told me. He raised me as his own from a baby."

Sarah's heart went out to her. She couldn't imagine anything like that happening to her. It seemed to make her job even more important. "Come on then," she said, "At last it's time"

She let Lucy's spirit slip inside her. She walked back towards the sight of the accident in a trance. At the edge of the ditch she let Lucy ease herself free.

They faced each other for a long moment. Sarah heard that sweet voice for the last time. This time there was no fear, no worry. The tone was grateful. "Thank you Sarah " Lucy whispered.

"Your welcome". Sarah heard her own voice as if watching the whole even on television. She stood back and watched Lucy shrink into the ground. The waiting for was over for her.

Sarah felt totally at peace as she wandered slowly home. In an odd way she felt that something had changed. Over the last week she had lost sleep but gained a friend. Tonight the sleep would return but she would miss Lucy.