

## ***I Seem To Have Forgotten The Elephants* © Dorothy Freed, 1993**

### 31 THE LASS WITH THE DELICATE AIR (Ruth)

My old friend Ruth also played a significant part in my London years.

Ruth and I met in Wellington when we were both about 20, and we became close friends. She was a clever girl, quiet but with a wry wit and a hard-won degree in economics. She was then working as a secretary in the Prime Minister's Department. I, too, was working as a secretary, but in a humbler ambience for a firm of architects.

We made quite a sensation when we went to parties together in 1939, two good-looking girls with elegant legs wearing look-alike clothes — black flared skirts, red belts and high-heeled shoes, see-through long-sleeved blouses, mine white to show my dark skin through, Ruth's black to enhance her luminous white skin. Ruth's blonde and my dark hair cut in elegant page-boy bobs fashionable at the time. I don't know what they called me, but everyone called Ruth the Lass with the Delicate Air. But things were different when she introduced me, city slicker that I was then, to the joys of tramping in the Orongorongo mountains at weekends. During these sorties, which delighted but completely exhausted me, the elegant Ruth showed quite amazing toughness and energy. I found some of the risky things she did positively brave. She made me do them too.

After war was declared the Establishment in Wellington got nervous about anything suggesting dissidence. One Friday night we went shopping together, Friday being the one shopping night in the week preceding the usual absolutely dead New Zealand weekend, so the streets were always busy. Pigeon Park, a small open area in Courtenay Place, was then the city's centre in the Hyde Park sense of the word. People climbed on soap boxes and orated on Friday nights. On this one a clergyman called Burton, a well-known conscientious objector, had announced a rally there to protest the war and conscription. Ruth and I happened to be passing as he started, so we stood at the back of the crowd to watch the fun. To us this was just street entertainment. Within five minutes the cops had arrived, pulled Burton down from his perch and pushed him into the Black Maria. So we heard but little.

On the Monday morning Ruth went to work at Parliament as usual. She was greeted with the sight of her cleared desk and empty office, and told she was being transferred forthwith to the Department of Agriculture over the road.

According to Ruth, who was an intellectual snob, the Department of Agriculture was "the Sticks", and this comedown was mortifying. She would not even tell me what degrading work she had to do there, but I suppose really it was nothing worse than just plain dull. She had, of course, been "noticed" at the Friday night gathering and was now considered politically impure. She was so outraged at the bigotry and injustice of this that she decided to try to leave the country — no easy feat during the war when passenger ships overseas were almost non-existent and

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planes unheard of. But Ruth talked her way on to a rare cargo vessel travelling to London via Chile, round Cape Horn, and took off for good.

Ruth married an English publisher called Donald, and lived in London with him and their two young sons. We kept in touch with letters, but had no chance to see each other again until 23 years after my marriage when I threw everything over and took off myself for London to seek my fortune.

For the next three years Ruth was wonderful to me. I stayed in her Finchley house whenever I was temporarily homeless, using it as a base camp when I took off on long European treks and wanted to save on rent. Donald, too, was good to me.

However, it was obvious that Ruth was not happy in her marriage. I gathered that there had been episodes in the past when Donald had been weighed in the balance by an often demanding and puritanical Ruth, found wanting, and was not to be forgiven. But the boys were being expensively educated, and two earning parents were needed for that. Ruth worked as a high-powered reporter cum stenographer for international conferences when she could, and freelanced in various capacities otherwise. By this time she was a social as well as an intellectual snob, always referred to Margaret Thatcher as "Maggie" (which irritated me), and worked only for the English high-and--mighty. She still looked good and dressed beautifully. She was still the Lass with the Delicate Air.

My two grown-up daughters arrived to join me in London. Both stayed on in Britain for many years, but circumstances made it necessary for me to return to New Zealand to live. Ruth came to Victoria Station to see me off, thrusting a note in my pocket to be read on the train to Dover. When I opened it a five pound note fell out, with a message: "Don't cry too much about leaving your beautiful daughters, darling. Buy yourself a wonderful meal on that French train to cheer yourself up!"

Again we kept in touch with letters. The boys left school and University, and Donald left Ruth. I think the poor chap just gave up. Ruth, now living alone at Finchley, kept up her glamorous jobs with the high-born, one of which was to act as editor, ghost-writer and general amanuensis for a Lord (from thenceforth always referred to as the Belted Earl though I believe he had not quite reached those heights) who was writing a book about the House of Lords from his home in Kent, a venerable pile called Chilham Castle. Ruth drove her car down to Kent daily to do this work. She always drove like a maniac, and one day she smashed into something and came to in hospital in Canterbury, hovering between life and death. She had been very severely concussed, but they saved her life.

The Belted Earl turned up trumps. He knew Ruth was short of money, and it was going to be necessary for the Finchley house to be sold, so he offered her a kind of general factotum job on the estate at Chilham Castle, with a private flat in a wing of the building. She could bring her own furniture if she liked. She realised she

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had changed and could no longer keep up the frenetic pace of the international conference work she so enjoyed doing, so she accepted this kindly offer. And the idea of actually living in a real castle absolutely enchanted her.

Five years after my return to New Zealand from Britain I was able to return for a three months trip, to see my daughters. Ruth had not yet left Finchley for Chilham Castle, and was living there alone. Anna, living on a commune in rural Wales, was due to have a baby around the time of my arrival, and I was to stay with Jane, then living in my old Hampstead flat. She could not be there till 4 days after my arrival, so she told me where the key was and I could go there. However, Ruth was insistent on my staying with her in Finchley till Jane's arrival back in London, and promised to meet the plane.

Never shall I forget that traumatic Thursday morning at Heathrow. Anna's baby had arrived early, and she decided to come to London to meet me. Somehow Ruth discovered this, and offered to take her and the baby to the Airport with her. This was all most exciting for me until Ruth disappeared for a few minutes to attend to the car and Anna burst into tears. Ruth had not only given her a fearful lecture all the way out to Heathrow on the irresponsibility, immaturity, selfishness, lack of consideration and downright greed of having a baby in an unwed state, but she had driven her car so wildly that Anna was frankly terrified and almost too scared to go back with her. I was furious with Ruth, but could say nothing.

We all spent a quite dreadful day in each other's company, me trying to cope with Anna's distress and Ruth's irrational conversation and neurotic behaviour. I was shocked to find her so poorly recovered from her accident. I went to bed in her Finchley house that night half-starved because she had been far too excited to even think about food, and then found I was not to be allowed to sleep, exhausted as I was after the long flight. Ruth refused to leave me alone. She just talked and talked. By about 4 a.m. she was telling me about a recent visit from a mutual New Zealand friend. I discovered later from that friend that she had had the same experience, and had actually climbed out of the bedroom window when Ruth had to go to the bathroom for a moment, and run away. I certainly felt like doing the same thing myself that night. Finchley is not so very far from Hampstead, and I knew where the key was.

I managed to avoid Ruth for the rest of my stay. It was so sad to find my old friend, still the Lass with the Delicate Air, now such a wild, irrational creature. She was certainly mentally sick.

Five years later I visited Britain again. Ruth was now living at Chilham Castle and seemed much more relaxed and happy in her letters. She made me promise to stay with her for a few days, and arranged to meet me after my European sortie, at the Folkestone ferry.

I gave her the wrong time for the ferry's arrival, which made her so wild she

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could talk of nothing else during that fearsome drive to Chilham Castle. Before we even reached it I was feeling sorry I had agreed to stay with Ruth yet again. She was still wild and dotty.

The castle was empty of people, except for some kitchen staff to whom Ruth introduced me, and gardeners and other outside workers. The Belted Earl and his lady had gone up to Scotland, and Ruth said she was in charge of the estate in their absence. Her flat was comfortable and attractive, and in the morning I was shown round the castle and its grounds and I was indeed enchanted. She told me the grounds were open to the public on Saturdays when Guy the falconer flew the eagle. There was a Capability Brown terrace with shaped yews cut into peacocks around it, a beautiful man-made lake with an island in it and acres of lovely gardens and woods. Ruth herself had a little garden where she cultivated various pretty things. The castle was practically bereft of the grand furniture it had once contained because of "death duties". But the building itself was fabulous.

Ruth calmed down after we arrived. But I viewed with alarm her attitude to the castle. She kept using words like "we" and "our". One look out of the window at the ancient keep, the turrets and arches, the statuary, the "tree" peacocks and the real ones strutting around, the dreamy lake, and it was obvious that it was not, and never could be Ruth's, in any sense of the word. She now had no real home of her own, so she was identifying with a magnificent half-ruined mediaeval castle. I felt she needed something of her very own, no matter how humble. This grandiose place was doing her no good.

Saturday morning came, and Ruth warned me the tour buses would be coming at midday to bring the visitors in droves. We went down to the tiny village of Chilham in her car (at the usual risk to life and limb), and had a drink at the charming old local pub. I noticed that Ruth seemed to know nobody there, not even the bartender. Did she not know them because she never went, was too "grand" to mix, or because they did not want to know her? I felt uneasy. Ruth had lived there long enough to know everyone.

When we returned the first bus had arrived, and a pleasant local lady was in the little gatehouse taking the money. Guy the falconer, a chap who looked like a successful farmer, was helping to disperse the busload of people. I sat in the car while Ruth did some casual supervising she seemed to find necessary involving the checking of receipts. She discovered that the number of tourists in the bus did not tally with the amount of money the gatehouse lady had. Guy, in a very small-time-crook sort of way, was cooking the books, and Ruth had just found out.

What a performance ensued! Ruth shouted to Guy to come over. And right there in front of my eyes she yelled at him, waving her arms around, totally abusing him for his dishonesty and threatening him with the sack the moment the Belted Earl returned. All this went on in front of the poor innocent tourists who were looking aghast.

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I was horrified. What manners, no matter what Guy had done! Even the gatehouse lady threw me a look of distress. Guy, after some initial attempt at explanation, went purple with rage. Ruth just went on shouting. I decided she was going to get it from me when we got away.

And so she did. I told her I had never seen such an ill-bred harangue, and in public too, and her family would be ashamed of her. I told her I, too, was ashamed — to be seen there as a fellow New Zealander. She yelled absolute nonsense at me. I didn't understand the English as she did, I couldn't possibly have any idea about people here, the man was a crook, she was going to see he was sacked, just wait and see! I told her she was talking a load of codswallop, the Belted Earl would not sack Guy at all. But Ruth raved on, and I was sure even the kitchen staff could hear her. So I said, "Right, Ruth, I've had enough. I'm off!"

It was a ridiculous thing to say because I knew there was no way I could be off. Quite apart from the business of getting myself to the tiny local station and waiting around for one of the rare London trains to appear, I could not even get out of the castle itself without Ruth's help. She was fussy about keys, and had a bunch attached to her wrist like a chatelaine when she went outside. The place was full of locked doors, even the door leading to the kitchen was kept locked, and Ruth had all the keys. Even with the keys I doubted if I could navigate myself around the many empty rooms to one of the doors leading outside. So to say that I would depart immediately was a feeble threat indeed!

But Ruth took it seriously. She burst into tears, suddenly all contrite and pleading,. "Please don't go, darling — please, PLEASE! I couldn't bear it!"

So I was able to pretend to calm down slowly and forgive her! But that was surely a stroke of luck. If she had taken me at my word, I can't think what I would have done. Climbed down the ivy, I suppose, and probably fallen and made a complete fool of myself.

After we both recovered from this searing episode all was love and harmony once more. But Ruth rang up the Belted Earl in Scotland that night and I overheard her end of the conversation. She told him about Guy's misdemeanours and he was obviously trying to calm her down, saying it did not matter. Ruth's puritanical attitude to dishonesty could not take this, and the Belted Earl had a job on his hands.

I felt like telling Ruth that belted earls had been turning the blind eye to perk-seeking family retainers for a thousand years, and this one certainly took things like that in his stride.

I was happy when Monday morning came. I expected Ruth to drive me to the train for London where I was to stay with an old photographer friend with a live-in studio near Paddington station, for my last three or four days in London. But I found

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Ruth not only preparing to drive me all the way up to London, but determined to persuade our mutual friend to have her, too, to stay. This I knew our friend would not want. But there was to be no escape. Ruth slept on a mattress on the floor in the studio.

I planned to visit the Colosseum one morning to buy a day sales ticket for that night's opera. Ruth was not in the least interested in music, but she insisted on coming too. I bought two tickets.

"We must leave at 7 o'clock, Ruth," I said during the afternoon. "The show begins at 7.30."

"I'll be ready, darling!" Ruth assured me.

At 6.30 Ruth decided to have a bath. Knowing she would talk through the door, not to mention the time it would take for her to assume the famous Lass with the Delicate Air look after her bath, I remonstrated.

"Don't worry, darling!" cried Ruth. "I'll be ready by 7!"

"If you're not, Ruth, I'm going by myself!" I replied.

At five to seven Ruth was still lying in her bath. At 7 o'clock I called out, "I'm off, Ruth! Your ticket is on the table!"

I took the tube from Paddington and arrived at the Coliseum off Trafalgar Square at 7.25. There was no way Ruth could get there in time, and nobody was to be allowed in after the curtain rose. I took my seat.

Seven-thirty came and went. The orchestra was seated, instruments poised for action. Nothing happened. The curtain did not move.

Ten minutes later there was a commotion along my row, and Ruth appeared, all waving arms, smiles and apologies to people whose knees she was pushing. She flopped into her seat just as the curtain rose.

"I made it, darling!" she chuckled.

I gazed at her in awed silence.

"Well done, Ruth!" I said.

She had caught a bus and put on such an act with the driver that he had actually driven her right up the side road to the very door of the Coliseum! My God, that Ruth! What cheek! But the style — the aplomb!

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My persuasive words to Ruth at Chilham Castle about finding a place for herself, no matter how small, bore fruit. Her family rallied round, and a tiny but charming cottage was found for her in Wiltshire, where she has lived ever since, tending her lovely little garden which she made herself. I have stayed with her there several times now, and the rural surroundings seem to have settled her down. The car, mercifully, was sold.

Ruth must be over 75 now. Put she is still pretty and beautifully turned out, even when she is weeding her garden. Ruth is still the Lass with the Delicate Air.