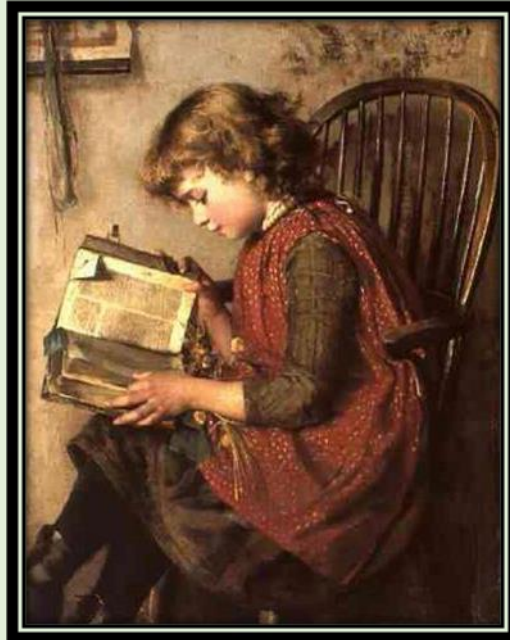


Lady May

Judith Nolan



“Attitude is a choice. Happiness is a choice. Optimism is a choice. Kindness is a choice. Giving is a choice. Respect is a choice. Whatever choice you make makes you. Choose wisely.”

Roy T. Bennett



In the BATB episodes we meet so few of the many helpers from Above. I first introduced the character of Lady May in *Dancing Light*, the 4th story in my arc of 8 zines. From there, she seemed to command her own backstory be told, so I decided to write it for her... I know she is pleased...



“I’m trying to decide exactly how angry I am with you.” Seated beside the marble fireplace of her huge drawing room, Lady May Heathcote-Smythe held her diminutive frame rigidly erect, her clasped hands resting on the ornate, gold head of the ebony cane, grounded between her feet.

The elderly widow of an aristocratic English industrialist who had settled in New York several decades before, May was still a formidable force in the city’s social scene. Her society parties were legendary, and she had an opinion on everything... which she never failed to express, at every opportunity.

She stared frostily at her unwelcome visitor. “To make you come all the way to the surface on the slight matter of a trifling chest pain. It is insupportable, Jacob. I thought you knew me better after all these years. When I wish to avail myself of your medical advice, I will ask for it.”

“Olivia and Mary are deeply worried about you.” Father stood in the middle of the room leaning heavily on his cane. He held his medical bag in one hand. The journey to the surface had been long and tiring, but he dared not sit until he received permission.

He gave May a surreptitious once over, but detected nothing obviously amiss, beyond a slight hitch in her speech when she moved. This told of some hidden cause of pain.

He’d already noted the fire burning cheerily in the grate. On a clear summer’s day it made the huge room overly stuffy and warm. He frowned at the glass of whisky on the small table at her elbow. It was barely one o’clock in the afternoon.

“Medicinal purposes,” May snapped, catching the direction of his worried frown. “I have contracted a slight chill. It’s nothing that need concern you.”

“It’s more than a slight cold. Any fool can see that. Mary was right,” Jacob asserted.

Despite his years, he felt like an errant schoolboy, being grilled by a stern headmistress and found wanting. “The last time they visited, you were unwell, too. Your young charges have said you haven’t been yourself lately. And they also told Olivia you haven’t seen a doctor in months. The last time you managed to come and see us Below was for Vincent’s birthday party. That was

nearly three years ago. I well remember a time when I had to force you to return Above to keep us all safe. You were young and wild then.”

“Well, they all should know better than to gossip about me now I’m old and crotchety,” Lady May snapped. “It was simply a small matter of my foolish doctor choosing to die before me. Since then, I’ve not found anyone suitable to my requirements. I may be old, but I’m not a fool nor am I senile. I will not be treated as such by some young shavetail just out of short pants with the ink still wet on his medical degree!” Her chin rose, daring Jacob to disagree.

Father’s lips twitched at the all too accurate description, but he managed to maintain his grave expression. “So you choose to ignore your ongoing symptoms rather than ask for help. You know how vital you are to us... to our world.”

“You simply cannot do without me to keep and train those among your young girls who wish to have a life Above. I am well aware of that.” Lady May sighed roughly. “Oh, sit down, for heaven’s sake! You’re giving me a stiff neck, making me look up at you standing there like some homeless penitent begging for alms.”

“Thank you.” Father grimaced as he subsided thankfully into a nearby chair. “You simply must learn to take better care of yourself, May. That’s all we ask. We care very deeply for you. I wish you could come Below more often. We miss your visits.”

“I am well aware of the passage of time, Jacob.” Lady May’s lips tightened as she inclined her head. “I must tell you, Shannon brought her young man to visit with me last week. Elliot Burch is an interesting choice for our little songbird, but a good one. At least, from what they told me, he cares about her and is well able to protect her from the dangers of any unwanted attention. Not like that ghastly beast of a man she married, putting her on show like some exhibit. God rest his foolish soul. Of course, Burch once tried to buy my house, for some awful development or other he was planning. The *audacity* of the man!” She thumped the end of her cane on the floor.

Her eyes lit up with triumph. “I wasn’t so nice to him in that encounter. I sent him on his way with a very large flea in his ear, and I swore he would never darken my doorsill again. But, for Shannon’s sake, I consented to receive him. And this time he paid his respects with just the right amount of civility and

proper courtesy. Therefore, you will be pleased to know, the match has my blessing.”

“Thank you, May.” A relieved smile curved Father’s lips. Of course, it had been under his advice that Elliot and Shannon made a point of visiting May, to make peace and amends. The old lady hated to be left out of anything, despite her recent, self-imposed isolation.

He knew very well the obstinate rod of pure steel that ran through one of his oldest friends and most valued helpers to his world. He had also come to know Elliot Burch. The man could charm the birds from the trees, if he chose to do so, and one offended old lady would not be immune to his considerable address and deft handling.

“And you must tell Vincent to bring those lovely children of his to visit me, as soon as Catherine is well enough to travel,” May commanded. “You know how much I love the little ones. It has been too long since I’ve had babies here.”

“I know you do. And so does Vincent. He’s more pleased than anyone right now. As am I.”

She shook her head. “A grandfather three times over now, Jacob. It is a true miracle. I wish I could attend the naming ceremony, but it is a long way down to the home tunnels, and I’m not so young anymore. Now that Vincent is well settled and happy, all we need to do is find a suitable wife for Devin. Where in the world is my naughty boy, by the way?”

Father knew a delaying tactic when he heard one, but he decided against pushing the issue for the moment. “The most recent letter I received was from New Zealand. The last time he was there, I believe he tried his hand at adventure tourism, with some considerable success. This time, he writes of taking over an island vineyard and making a go of it. He does talk of coming home again, soon. I’ll believe that when it happens.”

“Excellent.” May nodded. “Then you must tell my boy I wish to place an order for ten cases of his first vintage. I know his taste will be exquisite. I will not be disappointed, and I will also make sure the good word gets around. He can count on me to ensure his success.” She spoke without conceit.

Jacob watched her hand clench on the head of her cane, as a sudden shaft of pain made her breath hitch. Despite the heat of the fire she was overly-dressed in layers of clothing.

“Thank you, May. I shall tell him. However, discussing my family will not allow you to escape the purpose of my visit. I will not leave until you change your mind and allow me to examine you.”

“And even if I asked you to respect my wishes, you will not consent to go away until I give in.” May lifted one shoulder dismissively. “You do like to try my patience to its limits, and it’s simply unwarranted. I am, after all, just a frail, old lady. You are taking unfair advantage.” Her firm chin might have trembled and her face become pensive, but her blue eyes glinted with a deeply rebellious look.

Father watched her with resignation. “It is only because I love you very much, May. You know that. And you are not as frail as you like to make out. Please save that line for those who do not know you so well.”

“Oh, very well. Give me your arm then, young man.” May stood, extending one hand imperiously. “Afterwards, when you have decided I will live for a few more years, you will take tea with me and tell me all about the latest happenings in your world down there. I wish I could be that young woman once more and open to such wonderful adventures as you and I once had.”

“Tea it is, then. *After* I have examined you. A fair trade.”

“You do try my patience.” May sighed. “But, that day I accidentally discovered the entrance to your world right down there in my own wine cellar was the happiest moment of my life. In those times I could be truly free in the tunnels. And Lord knows there were never many of those happy moments back then.”

She smiled sadly, wiping away a tear with an impatient hand. “But I do have my memories. And what times we did have together, when the whole underground world was ours and we thought we could never grow old.”

“You will always be young to me, May.” Father kissed her soft, wrinkled cheek as they left the room arm in arm. “And very beautiful...”

“You, *sirrah*, are an incorrigible flatterer.” May tapped his arm warningly, but her eyes twinkled with delight. “To sweeten your plans for me, we shall talk of old times and tell outrageous lies to each other, just as we once did...”



Thirty-five years ago...

“Face it, May Elizabeth Jane, you’re bored. Totally, utterly, discontent with your sorry lot,” Lady May Heathcote-Smythe addressed herself severely, as she sorted through the dusty bottles of wine in the dark recesses of her husband’s extensive wine cellar.

“Well, actually, it’s my wine cellar,” she corrected herself, on a sigh. “Arthur married me for my father’s fortune, not my company. That, he chooses to find elsewhere.” Her lips twisted in dissatisfaction.

The damp, musty cellar room had become her sanctuary. No one else came here unless by necessity. Here, in the darkest, cobweb-strewn corner, she found a measure of peace, and had begun cataloguing the vast collection that was included in the purchase price of the huge, gloomy mansion above her head.

She sighed, as she moodily rearranged the old bottles of wine, imagining her errant husband enjoying himself on another of his extended business trips, accompanied by the latest in a long line of leggy, blonde secretaries he liked to flaunt. May knew her childless, ten-year-old marriage was a gilded prison, but she was powerless to change anything for the better. Her genteel upbringing forbade such a thing. There had never been a divorce in her family. She wasn’t about to be the first.

“I bet those vapid women can’t even take dictation or type sixty-five words a minute!” She scowled at the vintage bottle of 1929 *Dom Perignon* in her hands. She wanted to hurl it, and the rest of the rack, to the stone floor in a fit of frustrated rage.

But she knew the household servants gossiped, and May was aware her husband was looking for any excuse to put her aside. Wanton destruction spoke of the possibility of a broken mind. He would delight in having her committed to a mental asylum, for her own safety.

“That, I cannot allow...” Her chin firmed.

May would not give him any reason to sue for divorce. Her stiff, English pride, which had carried her through many terrible moments in her young life, might be tattered and torn, but she would not be humbled in the critical eyes of the only world she knew.

She moved to replace the bottle of champagne in its wooden cradle. It was then that she saw the faintest flicker of light showing through a long, thin crack in the stone wall behind the wine rack. She frowned and blinked, passing a hand over her eyes. But when she looked again the light remained, softly flickering. It seemed to beckon to her.

“What on earth...?” She leaned closer for a better look. She moved several bottles aside to get a clearer view.

The crack resolved itself into a haphazard rectangular pattern, almost as if someone had tried to conceal some kind of opening in the damp stonework by bricking it up.

“Impossible...” May frowned.

She had heard stories of underground passageways and bricked up tunnels running beneath the city. People were said to live far beneath the skyscrapers. But New York was full of such old wives tales.

Still, she decided, *what do I have, but time...?* She reached for the wooden shelving, testing its movability. It gave slightly under her hands, grating on the dusty floor. The wine bottles it contained rattled alarmingly.

In the same moment, a telephone’s strident ring sounded in the mansion above her head. Footsteps hurried to answer it. May sighed. She knew she would soon be summoned back to the stark emptiness of her daily life. Mentally she marked the place where she’d seen the door, knowing she would return soon, when she would not be disturbed...



The next morning, May decided to give all of her servants the day off. None of them questioned her motives, and she was soon alone in the mansion. She

dressed in old clothes and armed with a bag of food, and a powerful torch, she retreated quickly to the cellar.

After much pushing and heaving, discovering muscles she didn't know she had, she finally uncovered the opening. It had once been mortared into the stone wall, but years of moisture had dislodged some of the concealment. The flickering light intensified as May worked to dislodge enough of the rough stones to effect an entrance into the mysterious place behind the wall. At last, she chipped away an opening just wide enough for her slight frame to squeeze through.

She had no idea what to expect, as she wriggled her way through the hole in the wall. At worst, it was simply yet another cellar room, long-ago bricked up and forgotten. *Please let it be something much more exciting...* Keen anticipation prickled along her senses.

May straightened into a long, narrow, rock-cut tunnel that ran away into darkness in both directions. At wide intervals, someone had hung old oil lamps that flickered in the damp air, but gave away little of what lay beyond their intermittent illumination. There was a hush, and a faint sense of unseen menace.

“Now what...?” May looked up and down the tunnel, seeking any inspiration about which way to go. The sweeping beam of her torch was next to useless in the near darkness.

The rational thing would be to retreat back through the wall and return the stones to their place. Forget the madness of roaming the fetid darkness, seeking who knows what...

“Be sensible, May! For God's sake!” May jumped as her husband's exasperated voice sounded in the back of her mind. *“You're my wife! Not some hooligan child who can do, or say, as she pleases! Don't make me beat some good sense into you, again...”*

May's lips tightened with displeasure. Her spine stiffened. The rebellious child within her would not be beaten into submission.

She glanced at her wristwatch and decided to forge ahead. She eased her way along the tunnel, moving from light to light, trying to pierce the gloom ahead of her. Her journey finally terminated in a jumbled barrier, a mass of tangled wire

and sheets of rusted iron that seemed to have been there, forever. There didn't appear to be any way around or over.

“Just when I thought I was getting somewhere...” She pushed against the barrier, but it appeared to be cemented in place.

From beyond where she stood, she could hear a faint tapping, almost as if someone was drumming a tune on the metal pipes that ran along the damp stone wall on her side of the barrier, before disappearing beyond. *Impossible! Nothing makes any sense...*

May turned to look back the way she'd come, reluctant to retrace her steps and admit defeat. Not when she had come so far. She turned her attention back to the barrier. *Perhaps there is some way to climb the thing, or go around it. I've just got to find it...*

She spent some time assessing her options. She didn't intend to go home until she had solved the mystery. She approached the barrier again with renewed determination.

All the time May stood there, trying to decide what to do next, she was completely unaware that she was being observed through a narrow slit in the brickwork beside her. One of the outer sentries from the world Below watched her for some time, before hurrying away to tap out a message of alarm to the home tunnels.



Alert! Intruder seen at barrier in section six...outer tunnel...northeast quadrant...



Vincent looked up when Father limped into his chamber. “You have been away a very long time and you look very tired. How is Lady May, or should I not ask?”

“Oh, May is as stubborn as ever.” Jacob shook his head wearily. “And just as hardy. A little indigestion from eating too much rich food coupled with a decided unwillingness to slow down or compromise her lifestyle. I cannot believe she’s nearly seventy. I remember a young woman who could run the legs off any of us, once upon a time. She virtually lived in the tunnels whenever her husband was away overseas on business.”

He sighed. “Many a time I had to force her to go back Above, and put in an appearance in her own life. She only went because she knew her presence here compromised our safety. I know she would rather have stayed. She said we made her feel alive, and loved. We are viewed as the family she never had.”

“I am relieved to know she is well. I don’t think I remember a time when she wasn’t offering to help us. She is a force of nature.”

“She is, indeed.” The old man shook his head at memories he’d just revisited. “May came into her own only after her husband was killed in a car crash in Monte Carlo back in `62. It was then she decided she would house any of our girls who wished to return Above. She never looked back, and she refuses to mention her husband again. I know theirs was not a happy marriage.” He set his bag down on the table with a grateful sigh.

He moved closer to his son, placing a hand on Vincent’s shoulder. “She loved all the tunnel children like they were her own. You, in particular — she couldn’t get enough of you when you were a baby. She and Mary often disagreed over your care...” He shook his head. “May won more times than not. She often aided and abetted Devin in some of his more outrageous schemes, too. It is a shame she never had any children of her own. She was a natural mother. Now she looks after those of our girls who choose the life up there.”

He crossed the chamber to look down at Vincent’s three-week-old twin daughters, sleeping in their adjacent cribs. “She insisted I stay to take tea with her and regale her with the tales of all our doings. But at least, before I left, I

managed to secure her agreement allowing Peter to take over as her physician. She is not happy with me for telling her a few home truths about her condition.”

“I can well imagine. And I wonder if Peter will still be speaking to you at next month’s Summerfest.” Vincent chuckled as he came to stand beside his parent, placing a comforting arm around his slumped shoulders. “You have succeeded in a very difficult task. May is not the easiest of people to deal with.”

“She requested... no, make that, commanded... that you and Catherine must visit as soon as you are all well enough to travel. May said your children are a true miracle.” Jacob stroked one of the sleeping babies softly, on the cheek. “And I agree with her. Have you and Catherine decided on names yet?”

“We have.” Vincent nodded. “We were waiting to talk to you about the naming ceremony.”

Jacob took a firmer grip on his cane, to ease the pain of his hip. “Of course, when you are ready. Everyone is looking forward to it. It was such a shame Jacob’s ceremony had to be so private, and held under such impossible circumstances, with us all in hiding and afraid of our own shadows. I cannot tell you how glad I am for all that to be behind us now. We are finally free of the past, so we are going to celebrate in style. And, despite my misgivings over her state of health, I think we should do our best to see if May can attend this one. She expressed a wish to revisit her youth, and I’ve a mind to help her realize the dream.” Father looked around the chamber. “Where is Catherine? I hope she is resting, as I ordered?”

“Yes, Father.” Vincent laughed and nodded. “Shannon has gone Above to spend the weekend with Elliot. She insisted Catherine must use her chamber whenever she needs to do so. Last time I checked on her, she was asleep. Mary is reading a bedtime story to Jacob in her chamber.”

“Good. I’m pleased. At least one of my patients has listened to my advice.” Father picked up his medical bag. “So now I must go and write a referral to Peter on May’s behalf, before she has time to reflect, and change her mind. She will not escape this time. I’ll send Geoffrey Above with it, first thing in the morning. Good night, Vincent. I can only hope you will sleep better than I will, tonight.”

“Good luck, Father.” Vincent kissed his forehead before the older man left the chamber, shaking his head and talking to himself about long-ago things, and how it was once the best of times...



“Live your truth. Express your love. Share your enthusiasm. Take action towards your dreams. Walk your talk. Dance and sing to your music. Embrace your blessings. Make today worth remembering.”

Steve Maraboli