

PART IV
HOME



Chapter 73

HEADLINES ACROSS THE WORLD

If the long sail back to London was sombre, the journey up the Thames was anything but. All of London turned out to watch HMS *Victory*, which had seen off the entire British naval fleet, make its way along the river. The news of the mammoth's adventures had made headlines all across the world.



Folk lined the banks to wave and cheer, and this lifted Elsie's mood a little. During the long voyage, the girl missed her friend terribly. She had grown accustomed to the mammoth's smell and sound and touch. She yearned for her trunk to be wrapped round her again. It was like a part of her was missing.

A month or more had gone by since they'd left London. The ice over the Thames had melted away, and HMS *Victory* made fast progress towards the centre of London.

Despite seeing the obvious delight of the crowds, all on board were nervous as the ship came into dock. A pack of policemen, led by Commissioner Barker, of course, were waiting on the riverbank for them.

"Don't you worry, officers. We only, ahem, borrowed the *Victory*. Took her for a quick spin," the admiral called over.

Barker's face soured. His lip quivered in barely disguised rage, causing his tiny moustache to twitch.

"Our orders are to take you straight to Buckingham Palace," he announced. "Her Majesty the Queen wants a word with you!"

The pensioners all gulped. By the sound of it, they were all in

deep,
deep
trouble.



Chapter 74

A FLEET OF
CARRIAGES

A fleet of horse-drawn carriages raced across London to Buckingham Palace. Elsie sat between Dotty and Titch in the first one. Both grown-ups looked sick with nerves.

Dotty pulled out a handkerchief and spat on it. "Elsie, I just need to give you a quick wash." She then proceeded to furiously polish the girl's face.

"GET OFF ME!" yelled Elsie.

"You're meeting the Queen! When was the last time you had a bath?"

"A what?"

"That's what I thought!"

The fleet of carriages passed through the tall iron gates into the grounds of Buckingham Palace. Elsie, Dotty and Titch all pressed their faces up against the

A Fleet of Carriages

window to get a better look.

"WOW!" exclaimed the girl.

"It's magnificent," added Titch.

"It could be fit for royalty," remarked Dotty.

"It is fit for royalty!" said Titch. "The royals live here."

"They must have come from a very rich family," observed the lady.

The carriage stopped outside the entrance to the palace itself. A footman opened the carriage door, and the three stepped out on to the red carpet. All the old soldiers put on their tricorne hats and white gloves,



and straightened their scarlet coats. They formed a neat line, and marched into Buckingham Palace.

Elsie's eyes were dazzled by the riches. Never in her wildest dreams could she have believed anyone lived like this. Gold and marble and velvet spread across every space. Oil paintings, sculptures and ornaments lined the hallways. She wanted to stop and marvel at every last one, but there wasn't time. Her Majesty the Queen was waiting.

"Needs a good dust," remarked Dotty. "I've counted three cobwebs."

"Shush!" shushed Titch.

Eventually, a tall pair of wooden doors was opened by the Queen's attendant Abdul.

"Her Majesty has been expecting you," he announced.

At the far end of the room was a little old lady, sitting alone on a chair with a blanket over her knees. Her skin was as white as snow, her dress was black, and her white hair crouched on top of her head in a tidy bun.

It was Queen Victoria. Unsmiling, she looked Elsie straight in the eye.

"So, you must be the urchin who stole my mammoth?"

