

A Woman's Place: A Glimpse into Kingston's Past

A short fictional story by Catherine Raby

Kingston Ontario

1880

The clip clop of horse's hooves echoed forebodingly through the air as we made our way up the long drive. Lost in my own thoughts I had not paid attention to the direction the carriage was headed until we turned off Front Street and made our way along the drive toward the large stone building that was set far back from the road.

A large formidable structure with a central dome and roof towers, the building was an architectural marvel. Its beauty, however, was incongruent with what it held within. My heart started to pound and before we had even come to a stop a chill slithered ominously up my spine.

I speared my father with an icy glare.

"Why are we here? What business could you possibly have in a place like this?"

In my heart I already knew the answer.

"How could you?"

He turned and gave me a sad smile. In an uncharacteristic display of affection he grasped my hand.

"Elizabeth, you know I have no choice."

I pulled my hand from his and turned away. Tears stung my eyes.

"Elizabeth you have been unwell."

"I have been in mourning."

"It has been five years since the passing of George and Benjamin. You are in a deep melancholy state that is unnatural."

"It is not unnatural to mourn the loss of a husband and son!" It was not until I heard my voice reverberate out into the early morning air that I realized it was raised.

He slammed his fist hard against the seat.

"No! It is not unusual to mourn such a loss. However, that period should have been over and done with three years ago. You have not made any effort to find a husband—and it is time

the responsibility of your care is given to another. I will not have a widowed daughter still in her prime continue to be dependent upon my pocket book.”

His cold words stung as if he had just slapped me in the face. Never have I hated anyone as much as I did my father in that moment.

“So that is what this is all about,” I said. my voice cold and hard. “The problematic daughter no longer wanted and therefore shipped off to the lunatic asylum.”

His eyes softened a little and his head bowed slightly.

“Elizabeth, that is not at all why I have brought you here and I apologize for my harsh words. They did not convey what I truly meant them to say. It is just—your mother and I are concerned about your well-being and we want you to be well again.”

“There is nothing wrong with me. I am not ready nor do I wish to remarry. It does not please me in the least that I am beholden upon your charity. George, God rest his soul, left me with naught but debts and no means to repay them. If I could support myself then I would not be so dependent upon your monthly allowance. I so want to learn new skills and have the knowledge to save lives. I felt so helpless when George and Benjamin took ill.”

“Through your work with the Benevolent Society you already help the sick.”

“It is not enough. I don’t want to simply ease people’s pain with a cold cloth and soothing voice I want to cure them so that others don’t have to suffer the pain of loss that I have had to endure these past five years.”

“Elizabeth you are very trying! A woman’s duty is to marry, have children and oversee the running of the household. Women do not do the work of men and certainly do not become doctors. Women do not have the mind or the constitution for it. Now I will hear no more on the subject.”

Will there ever be a day when women will be able to work alongside men as their equals, I wondered? Not in my lifetime, but I hoped someday it would come.

“You can’t make me go.”

His eyes narrowed and his jaw tightened. His face turned a mottled red and I realized this time I had pushed him too far.

“I am your father and you are my dependant. You will do as I command you to do or you will be cut off of your monthly allowance and left destitute!”

I felt numb from shock. I could not believe my own father would do this to me. Suddenly the door opened and my father got out of the carriage. The next thing I knew he and our driver grabbed me and dragged me out of the carriage. I fought with all my might and yelled,

“No, no, no! Please don’t do this to me.”

My pleas fell on deaf ears. I must have looked like a mad woman as they dragged me kicking and screaming into the Rockwood Lunatic Asylum.

I learned quite quickly that becoming the model patient and doing everything asked of me was the key to my survival. If I remained in a calm state, less treatments and medications were needed to be administered for my “nervous disorder”. I made sure that I ate every meal, and did not voice any of my “unconventional” thoughts or ideas. I tried to act cheery even when I was not, for the less I displayed the symptoms of “Hysteria” The sooner I would be cured and released.

I am now returned to my father’s house.

I still dream of becoming a doctor. After my “miraculous recovery” my father continued to give me my monthly allowance and I still aid the sick and the dying. I hope to save enough funds to enrol in the newly opened medical school for women. Now that a determined few have made the dream of women doctors a reality I have been given new hope that my dream may too come true.

Note from the author:

Originally I had planned to focus my story around the history of the Warden’s Residence at Canada’s Penitentiary Museum in order to link the archaeological excavation that was done this summer during our “*Can You Dig It?*” © Summer Camp.

During my research I was reminded of the fact that prisoners had been conscripted to build the Rockwood Asylum in 1859-1868. I am continually amazed of the unusual connections between different aspects of Kingston’s history. As I continued my investigation of the Warden’s residence my thoughts kept going back to Rockwood and my research soon did a complete turn-around. This story idea gave me an opportunity to incorporate another subject that I have had an interest in “Hysteria Disorder” which was so prevalent among upper class women during the Victorian era.

“*Hysteria*” became a generalized term for women suffering from a multitude of ailments and disorders which had a large assortment of symptoms such as: faintness, nervousness, insomnia, fluid retention, shortness of breath, irritability, loss of appetite for food or sex, depression, muscle spasms, having an “excitable nature”, or having non-conventional views.

Women during the Victorian era were thought to be more vulnerable to mental disorders as it was believed that they did not have the same mental capacities as men. If they had any kind of outbursts or acted in an unconventional way they were considered “mad”.

Canada’s first licensed female Doctor:

In 1871 Jennie Kidd Trout and another female student enrolled in the University of Toronto’s School of Medicine. They were not given a warm welcome and were subjected to humiliations and lewd jokes by both male students and instructors. After completing one year of studies Jennie left Toronto and transferred to the Women’s Medical College in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. She graduated in March of 1875. She returned to Canada, passed the stringent Ontario College of Physicians and Surgeons exam and became Canada’s first licensed female Doctor.

In 1883 she opened the Kingston Women’s Medical College. In 1895 The Kingston Women’s Medical College merged with the Toronto Women’s Medical College and became the Ontario Medical College for Women.

Rockwood Lunatic Asylum:

The Rockwood Lunatic Asylum property was originally owned by John Cartwright. After his death in 1856 the estate was sold to the government. Rockwood was then built to house the “criminally insane” convicts from the Kingston Penitentiary and was designed by architect William Coverdale. Penitentiary prisoners were conscripted to build the new asylum and construction began in 1859. The first non-criminal patients were admitted in 1868. The Asylum building is situated on the grounds of what is now the Providence of Continuing Care Centre. Up until 1997 the structure was still being used. The vacant building is now the responsibility of the Ontario Realty Corporation and is for sale.