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INTRODUCTION

Lara Maiklem

'The house where they all lived was in a narrow street so close to the river that they could smell the mud when the tide was out, and so close to the Black Friars' Monastery that they could hear the chapel bell ringing to prayers all through the day.'

Catching an early tide today, before the city wakes up and restaurants and car exhausts fill the air with twenty-first-century London, the smell of mud still greets you as you approach the Thames. It climbs river stairs, rushes down alleyways and rises to the bridges. While the city that has grown up along the river's course has changed beyond recognition, this smell, along with the twice daily

tides, is London's only constant. It is a smell as recognisable today as it would have been 600 years ago. It is the smell of time itself.

Dolphin House, where young Tamsyn Caunter is sent from Devon to stay with her London relatives, backed onto the Thames, which in the sixteenth century was a great artery feeding the beating heart of London. The river kept the city alive and almost everyone within its walls would have been connected to it in one way or another. It was a highway, a source of food and for many, a means of earning a living. It brought trade, sent ships to discover new worlds and was a focus for celebration and entertainment.

The city's finest addresses were also riverside. The largest and grandest houses crowded the riverbank and even flowed onto London Bridge, the city's only crossing. Where space was a premium, they grew tall and awkward, leaning into each other at the top and turning the narrow streets below into dark, muddy alleyways that all led directly, or indirectly, to the river and a set of wooden stairs. Watermen sat in their boats at the bottom of these stairs, jostling each other, bumping boats and shouting to potential fares, negotiating fees to row people up-river to the countryside at Chelsea and Vauxhall, downriver

to the palace at Greenwich and across to the south side, opposite Dolphin House, to visit the brothels, taverns and bull-baiting rings on Bankside. From the Caunter's house, they would have not just have been able to smell the river, but they would also have heard the crowded waterway below.

The lives of people like the Caunters are preserved in the mud of the Thames. They lost their possessions as they climbed in and out of boats: buttons snagged from jerkins; pins shed from veils and kirtles; children's toys and wafer-thin silver pennies that were fumbled as they paid the watermen for their services. Maids, like Meg the Kitchen, would have pitched their household's rubbish out of windows and over garden walls into the river, which was a convenient receptacle for all the city's waste. Mutton bones scored and scraped clean by knives, oyster shells and broken pottery all settled into the mud alongside more personal possessions, and it is these subtle clues to the past that mudlarks, the most recent incarnation in a long line of river scavengers, seek. Each piece, however small, broken, worn or mundane, is a deeply intimate connection with otherwise forgotten lives – objects that add colour and texture to the past.

History can be brought to life through the tiniest of objects and the smallest of details, and Rosemary Sutcliff was an expert in this. At the age of 14 she attended Bideford Art School in Devon and became an accomplished miniaturist painter, all-be-it with a distinct lack of enthusiasm for it. When she eventually found fulfilment in writing, she transferred this eye for detail into words, becoming a miniaturist writer and a conjurer of the past. In *The Armourer's House*, she brings sixteenth-century London alive through the little dog in a red jacket dancing for pennies in Southwark; the silver hawk-bells and larded guinea fowl for sale at Cheapside; the King's barge hung with tapestries as softly coloured as a pigeon's breast; and a strolling ballad-monger with a rose in his cap. The Caunters themselves also manifest through the smallest of details: the golden spangles on Littlest's (the youngest Caunter) toy 'Lammy'; the ship made by Tamsyn's cousin Piers from a walnut shell, with a splinter of wood for a mast and parchment for a sail; and Uncle Gideon's precious Damascus sword with its age-darkened ivory handle.

Sutcliff's eye for detail was born from an unusual, sedentary and often lonely childhood. Before she reached the age of three, she developed Still's Disease, a type of

arthritis that affected her ability to walk for much of her life. While other children were moving too fast to notice the smallest and most unseen details, she observed them. In her memoir *Blue Remembered Hills*, she writes of being sat outside the gate of her Aunt Lucy's house as a punishment for criticising, and not eating, a pudding that 'both looked and tasted pale grey'. Her stiffened legs meant that she was stuck where she was put, but rather than being bored and frustrated she was perfectly happy, immersed in the minutiae of her surroundings, looking down into an interwoven forest of grass, thyme, scarlet pimpernel and eye-bright, breathing in the honey scent of clover and the almond-paste smell of convolvulus, watching metallic green beetles climb up blades of grass and catching ladybirds.

Sutcliff had a deep love of nature and plants throughout her life and wove this knowledge into *The Armourer's House*. In the sixteenth century, people in cities were far more connected to the natural world than we are today. London was a much smaller place, and the countryside was easily reached on foot or by boat. Customs throughout the year involved the gathering of seasonal flowers, which Sutcliff uses as a way of tracking time and seasons: the bringing back of May branches to decorate

houses for May Day; the Caunter's Easter visit to Chelsea Meadows where they gathered yellow irises and Mary-buds; and the countryman bringing a bale of holly to town for Christmas. When the family heads for the fields beyond Temple Bar to watch the men practice archery, they gather green birch, foxgloves and St John's wort to garland the doorway of Dolphin House for Midsummer's Eve, and when Tamsyn and the Almost-Twins wander off they find a hidden cottage within a magical garden tended by Wise Woman. She gives Tamsyn a tulip bulb as a parting gift with the promise that it would flower for Christmas and bring her heart's desire, which it does.

The ships and dockyards in *The Armourer's House* are described by Sutcliff with equal knowledge and detail, taken from her own childhood experiences of growing up in naval dockyards and following her Navy officer father from posting to posting. She was familiar with the smell of 'rope and pitch and salt and woodsmoke' that Tamsyn finds at the King's dockyard in Deptford and the 'salt-stained clothes of sailors'. Like Tamsyn, she also watched the ships come and go and dreamed of lands beyond her reach.

So settle down, turn the page and immerse yourself in sixteenth-century London, courtesy of one of literature's finest detailists. Open the door to Dolphin House, duck under the lintel, breathe in the smell of the workshop forge and climb the creaking stairs to where the Caunters are waiting for you ... and don't forget to listen out for the sound of Morris Men dancing down the street.



CHAPTER ONE

Sails at Billingsgate

Tamsyn Caunter stood on the doorstep of the little grey house and watched the grey sky above the tree-tops, and shivered in the grey March wind that seemed somehow colder than any wind she had ever known before. Her Uncle Martin, who had come out from Bideford to see her off on her journey, stood on the doorstep too, holding her hand in a large, warm, consoling clasp, and talking cheerfully about the glories of London Town; but he was almost as miserable as she was, and they were both listening all the time for the clip-clop of horses' hooves

on the cobbles, because Uncle Gideon had just gone to bring round the horse on which he was going to carry Tamsyn away to London.

The little grey house had been Tamsyn's home ever since she could remember, because she had been such a very small baby when her parents died and she came to live there with Grandmother, that there might just as well not have been a before-time at all, as far as she was concerned. And now Grandmother was dead, too, and Tamsyn must go right away and live with Uncle Gideon, whom she had never seen until three days ago, and with his family, whom she had never seen at all; she must leave behind her all the things and people she loved, like Uncle Martin and Sibbly the Cook. That was why she was so desperately unhappy; not because of Grandmother, for she had never really been very close to Grandmother, who was the sort of person you respect enormously but do not dare to love.

'If only I could have gone to live with Uncle Martin!' she thought desperately.

Uncle Martin was a merchant of Bideford Town (what people call a 'Merchant Venturer'), and had two ships of his own trading with countries half the world away, and a third ship a-building in Master Braund's

shipyard, that was to be swifter and more beautiful than either of them. She was to be called the *Joyous Venture* because she was to join in the new trade with the West Indies, which would be a very great adventure indeed. It would have been lovely to have gone and lived with Uncle Martin, and watched the *Joyous Venture* built, and seen the tall ships come and go; but he was not married, and Grandmother had not thought that anyone could bring up a little girl really properly without a wife to help him; so she had arranged long ago that Tamsyn was to go and live with Uncle Gideon, because *he* had Aunt Deborah.

But Tamsyn did not want to be brought up properly, she only wanted to be happy, and she gave a small, woeful sniff.

'Think how nice it will be to have other children to play with!' said Uncle Martin heartily, as though in answer to the sniff. But Tamsyn did not want other children, she much preferred ships. 'And of course you could always come home when you are grown up,' said Uncle Martin, even more heartily.

That did cheer her a little, though being grown up seemed a long way off, because she was not quite nine yet; and she stifled the next sniff.

And next moment she heard the clatter of hooves

she had been listening for, and Uncle Gideon came riding round the corner of the house and reined in before the door, looking down at the two of them in a grave, kindly sort of way. 'I think it would be as well if we started at once,' said Uncle Gideon.

Tamsyn's few belongings had already been stowed in the saddle-bags, and she had said good-bye to fat, kind Sibbly the Cook, who was now crying in the back kitchen with her apron over her head; and there was nothing to wait for. So she and Uncle Martin hugged each other good-bye, while Uncle Gideon sat his fidgeting horse and watched a rook flapping up into the wind, as though he had never seen one before.

'Why aren't you a boy, Tamsy?' Uncle Martin demanded indignantly at the last moment. 'Then Grandmother would never have got this crotchet into her head, and you could have come and lived with me, and later on you should have been Master of the *Joyous Venture*.'

'I wish I was a boy,' gulped Tamsyn. Oh, I *wish* I was! She had always wished that ever since she could remember, so that one day she could have sailed out over the Bar with one of those tall ships of Bideford Town and seen all the strange and wonderful things

that sailors talked about when they came home again from their voyages. But she had never wished it half as much as she did now.

But it was no good wishing; and it was time to go. Tamsyn managed not to cling to Uncle Martin when he stopped hugging her and lifted her up to the pillion saddle; she twisted her hands obediently in Uncle Gideon's belt, when he told her to; and when he asked her if she was All Right Behind, she said she was, in a voice that hardly wobbled at all.

So Uncle Gideon leaned down and gripped hands with Uncle Martin, and said, 'See you in London one of these days, Martin.'

And Uncle Martin said very cheerfully, 'Aye, that you will, old lad. I shall come up to see my Tamsy before any of us are much older.'

Then Uncle Gideon touched his heel to the horse's flank, and they were off and away, tittupping over the moss-grown cobbles. Tamsyn looked round once, as they swung out through the gateway into the steep lane that led down to Bideford; and the last she saw of Uncle Martin, he was standing where they had left him, waving after them, with his flat merchant's cap slipping wildly over one ear. (Uncle Martin never could keep his