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Opening Extract from...

Miss Perfect

Written by Bernard Hall

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THATCHER
OUT
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Miss PERFECT

Bernard Hall



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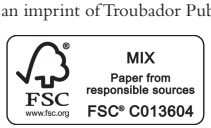
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There was an old woman who lived in a shoe.
She had so many children, she didn't know what to do;
She gave them some broth without any bread;
Then whipped them all soundly and put them to bed.
Anon, 1794

EASTER TERM
1983

Chapter 1

Unlike the old woman who lived in a shoe the middle-aged Miss Madge Perfect, declared age fifty-three, actual age fifty-seven, lived in a cottage not a shoe.

Having started work after training as a child care officer she was now a social work manager with so many children on her team's caseload that there were times when she didn't know what to do but, if they were hungry or cruelly whipped, she went to the court and applied to the magistrates for a care order. More often than not she succeeded. Once in her care she placed them with foster parents, or in a family group home, where they were well fed, neatly clothed and sure of a clean, warm bed. That at least was the theory; that moreover was county council policy. However, theory being one thing, practice another, county council practice lay somewhere betwixt the two.

When she looked back on it all from Ireland what did she see? Only when it was all over, and she remembered her years in the north-east of England, could she pinpoint the day when the first urgent memo arrived from County Hall and changed everything.

Wednesday 13 April 1983

It was one of those mornings when nothing went according to plan and as a result she was not in the best of humour. As Controller, Area 13, Rudham Social Services, based at Moortown, she now found fewer days going according to plan. She sometimes wondered if this was due to the world around her changing or her disinclination to change in step with the world. But then, why should she? It was beyond doubt that things were different now, the world rushing in all directions, helter-skelter, but for whose benefit, she wondered. Then she remembered how older people sang the same old tune when she was young.

The social services were certainly changing with the gobbledegook of highfalutin management jargon, the pressure to drive down costs, always to do more with fewer resources; these were the things eating into the satisfaction she had always found in her work.

Brenda from Typing was standing at her door giving her earache like a bossy pithead gaffer. 'Urgent,' she said, 'a memo from Mr Puttock, Head of Staffing.'

'Urgent?' Madge said snatching the memo from Brenda and dumping it dismissively in her bulging 'pending' basket.

'Sorry, I'm sure,' Brenda said, 'but remember he's County Hall.'

'I know, I know,' Madge said, 'but it's I who should apologise for my irritation. We just seem to get too much thrown at us by County Hall these days.'

'I knaa, Miss Perfect, I knaa.'

Madge was cross she had snapped at Brenda who only ever wanted to be helpful. She noticed that the memo from the blessed Puttock was indeed labelled 'Urgent'. To Puttock everything was urgent. Perhaps that was how he had progressed swiftly from starting as a mere administrative officer to his present lofty position somewhere in the tier of senior men below the Director. The Director was next down from God himself. Although it was rumoured that the Director harboured further career ambitions no one in the department seemed to know where these might lie, for it was beyond belief that in the whole county of Rudham there was anything greater than the Director of Social Services.

As Brenda scuttled out of the room Madge reached down the Puttock memo. It begged to advise that a Professor Mitchell from Rudham University would be visiting Area 13 in the near future and should be 'accordioned maximum co-operation'. As a consultant to the county council and partly funded by a central government 'grunt' his purpose was to investigate the 'efficishency' of Area 13 which had been selected for his case study.

She was becoming convinced that the frequency of errors in memos in the otherwise healthy northern air indicated genetic decay resulting from inbreeding in the south. Few new arrivals on her desk showed signs of healthy tissue, either in their grammar or spelling. Did some deadly virus escape from London, the national centre of physical, moral and spiritual decay, gather strength under cover of darkness and then, borne on the wind head north towards the purity of the lands in the lee

of the Pennines where it fatally infected the memos that reached her from County Hall? Perhaps, just in case, she should wash her hands after reading all memos.

Spluttering at the mistakes she painstakingly inserted corrections till her biro ran out of ink and she focused instead on the content. Apparently Professor Mitchell's project was largely funded by some government department in London, something called the Home Office, an odd name for what appeared to be a place of work. The project had the full backing of both senior management and the social services committee. Any clients interviewed by him were to sign in triplicate at paragraph 31.3.17 to confirm they had agreed to be interviewed. Copies of these signed agreements would be included in the subsequent report and findings. The appropriate forms would follow from headquarters and must be 'countersinged' by the Area Controller before all copies were returned marked 'Confidentshull' to County Hall.

Well, Madge thought, I will 'countersinge' them with pleasure, but to think that this level of literary incompetence was presided over by the Director, that smug man who loudly proclaimed his insistence on high standards.

Nevertheless she must put these distracting thoughts out of her mind and set about arranging a visit by this nosy parker busybody who had nothing better to do than go around poking his nose into other people's affairs.

She lifted the phone and dialled the university number given on the memo. A woman with a clipped, upper-

class voice answered, 'Sociology Department, Professor Mitchell's secretary speaking. How can I help you?'

'Well,' Madge said, 'I think it is I who can help you. I've been asked to make an appointment for your Professor Mitchell to visit my social services area office. I'm Perfect by the way. Might I have a word with him please?'

There was a pause before the answer then, 'Not possible I'm afraid, he's away down a mine taking photographs for his research project on colliery accidents.'

'If this talk of a miners' strike comes to anything it should cut down on colliery accidents,' Madge said. She laughed at her own joke but the remark landed like a rock fall in an underground tunnel, not even a chuckle from the other end.

'Indeed,' replied the same polished accent, 'I have his diary beside me so I can arrange a day and time convenient for you both. He will probably be accompanied by his research assistant.' No chit-chat here then, just brisk and business-like efficiency from the seat of learning.

In the pause that followed Madge tried to picture this world of which she knew nothing. She saw a vision of this secretary person: long-limbed and slim, probably aged about thirty with manicured nails and flaxen hair falling loosely on to her shoulders after a recent and regular hour or two reading magazines at the posh hairdresser in the Market Place in Rudham City. Her make-up was tasteful and perfectly applied. She wore perfume not scent. Jewellery? Yes jewellery but she could not picture that. Pearls perhaps? Pearl stud earrings in her perfectly formed ears? Certainly discreet. At home there would be a husband

and no doubt children, well-mannered and not at all like the young people Madge dealt with in her daily grind.

The voice at the other end regained speech. 'His diary is in the most frightful mess, there's something scribbled down about a darkroom meeting, don't know what that's about,' it said, followed by further silence.

Madge pondered the likely attributes of the research assistant who would of course be younger, even more attractive than the secretary person. As for the professor there could be no doubt that a glamorous wife would be waiting with his meal on the dining table when he arrived back at their comfortable home each evening. He would read to the children at bedtime. How different from her work, her empty home life. How was it that she had allowed her life to run its course with so little other than her work to show for it?

The plummy voice of the snooty secretary at the other end returned. 'Professor's diary drives me mad and I know it's very short notice given today is Wednesday but would Monday morning at ten be all right? He likes to start early and I know he regards it as urgent on account of the tranche of Home Office funding.'

Early indeed. If her staff arrived in after eight-thirty they were, under council policy, liable to a reprimand.

Madge glanced at her diary which was also in the most frightful mess. At least they would have something in common. 'I can just about fit them in but they'll have to be brief.'

'The professor is rarely brief,' his secretary said, then added, 'May I just ask, you said you are Perfect, is it Mrs, Miss or Ms?'

'Miss!' she snapped, irritated at the increasing emphasis on what was coming to be known as 'political correctness'. At moments like this she thought how much less irritating it would be just to answer 'Mrs', not that matrimony was a price she had ever been prepared to pay. Then she reminded herself that her willingness to pay the price had never been put to the test, now surely never would.

Stuck-up tart, no doubt a Tory voter, Madge thought, this secretary, a younger woman, her looks undimmed by age or real work pressures, sitting cosily with a two-bar electric fire beside her desk in an office in the university where nobody ever need get their hands dirty sorting out the lives of less privileged people; a world where people could go home at five every day of the working week, probably early on Fridays, and never a social work client in sight. Only a few miles up the road was this different place where some workers, for that was all they were, even those dubbed 'professor', enjoyed the privilege of a secretary to make their phone calls.

She entered the meeting in her diary. The review of the waiting list for admissions to the Brownlow Aged Persons' Home would have to be postponed. Somehow she must fit the professor into her crowded schedule. Neither Puttock, nor the Director, nor the cushy councillors on the social services committee would expect less.

But why had Area 13 been chosen rather than any one of the Areas 1 to 12? Men were the answer. All the other area controllers were men. Puttock was obviously shielding his mates and their work from prying eyes. It

might even be a ploy to undermine her position. She had no doubt that some in the higher ranks would prefer all thirteen areas to be ruled by men.

When she came to look back it was this memo that rang the bell signalling the unexpected changes that would eventually sweep away the life she had known and loved.

***

Thursday. 8.30 am. A distant telephone broke into the silence, ringing insistently. The sound came from somewhere down the long corridor that housed the welfare in the leaky prefabricated huts that smelled of mould, summer and winter. The duty social worker and the telephonist should be in by now. Clearly they were not. Brenda, queen bee in the admin office, was always early. Not today. Young people could no longer be relied upon. But she must stop repeating, 'young people nowadays', must remember she too had once been young. The phone continued to ring, drang-drang, drang-drang, drang-drang…

She hauled herself up and moved quickly towards the door, carefully dodging the desk corners that in careless moments left purple bruises unseen on her thighs. Not that she was obese, she comforted herself, just a teensy bit overweight. There had been times when she laughingly described herself as having 'a touch of middle-age spread'. No longer, things had moved on, bits had moved out, there was evidence of sagging, and traces of creases were starting to vein her face.

When she reached the phone it was young Simon, one of her social workers, on the other end. 'I've a right crop from last night, Miss Perfect. Moortown and Brownlow went mad, not least the Farrants.' The Farrants came high on the list of 'problem families' or, as she preferred to think, families with problems.

The fact that Simon still called her 'Miss Perfect' was one of the things she liked about him. He had joined the staff not long before Lorraine, another newly qualified social worker. Lorraine was from Cape Town, said 'ach sus' all the time, oozed brash informality, and was inclined to be far too touchy-feely with the younger men. Regrettably, some amongst the younger men visibly enjoyed such attentions whereas Alan, and most of the mature men, bristled at such inappropriate behaviour.

'Sounds like a tough night, Simon,' she said. Out-of-hours duty through the night or at weekends could sometimes be uneventful, making the welcome overtime money something of a steal. At other times the number of calls and the complexity of problems demanded stamina, sympathy and brain power beyond all reason. She remembered all that from her early days, remembered not knowing what this night or that weekend might bring. No wonder Simon was tired.

'Can I give you the details?' he said. Simon was one of the few who volunteered for the out-of-hours team. As long as people of his calibre were willing to train and come in to the profession as basic grade workers the future of social work as she knew it was assured. Not like Dan, a little older than Simon and on the make from day one until, in what

seemed no time at all, the Director had promoted him to be her deputy. Simon was nice; Dan was not nice. She tried hard not to be judgmental. 'Take folk as you find them,' her father used to say or, 'If you can't say something nice don't say anything at all', not that her father ever practised what he preached. She had taken Dan as she found him and so far, albeit with difficulty, had somehow managed to say nothing at all. Her thoughts she kept to herself. Thanks be to her father who, for all his many faults, bequeathed to her a few useful pointers for coping in a hostile world.

'Nothing too serious I hope, Simon?' She felt she knew him well enough by now to feel comfortable calling him by his first name.

'Mainly the Farrants over in Brownlow I'm afraid. The police were involved in one of their fracas. A disagreement between mum and dad. The police reported bruising on little Gary aged eight. Mum got a poke on the nose as well.'

'One of your cases isn't it? What did you find when you visited?' she asked. She was writing down the details as he spoke, hoping all the while her pencil lead did not break.

'Yes, was mine but now transferred to Lorraine. Sorry, but I had no time to visit, there was too much else going on I'm afraid.'

'We'll talk about that when you come in later today. It should have been your priority to make a home visit, examine Gary, try to establish the facts, who alleged what.'

'I'm sorry. I seemed to spend most of my time trying to get a mental welfare officer to turn out for Mr Timms who was being Napoleon again.'

'The silly hat and the hand stuffed into his waistcoat as usual?'

'Afraid so, plus the promise to create a world empire with Moortown as its capital.'

'You arranged for him to be packed off to St Helena?'

'Yes, an ambulance and police escort landed him in the secure ward at St Clement's Psychiatric Hospital. He is now safe on his isolated island.'

She had always liked Simon: lacking experience but an essentially decent man, someone she could trust, her kind of person. She had watched him slowly rebuilding his life after arriving in the office leaving behind a lectureship at the university when his wife went walkabout with a woman. Had she gone off with another man that would have been tough but something he could have lived with. That sort of thing happened all the time. It was the fact that she had taken off with a woman that seemed to hurt most. The office tittle-tattlers gnawed hard on that bone. Surely if Simon had been man enough with rock-hard lead in his pencil it would never have happened. Perhaps he was too clever-clever; people like that were just not up to it; all brain and no manhood.

She headed towards the sounds of life now emerging from the social workers' office: a kettle boiling, mugs clinking, chit-chat.

Most of her staff had drifted in by the time she entered the open-plan room where tides bearing the flotsam of conversation drifted around the islands of desks. The topics never changed: last night's television programmes, Thatcher, the possibility of the miners going on strike,

or the end-of-season travails of the rival local football teams. It mattered not at all to her that Newcastle United were doing well in the Second Division while Sunderland were languishing in the First Division but to most of the men it mattered a great deal. No sign of Dan. Absolutely typical.

It was Lorraine's case now. She was expecting Lorraine to be late as usual. For once she was wrong, a rare misjudgement she liked to think. She paused as Lorraine announced, 'Sus, I've started my monthly, make me a cup of tea, someone.'

Old Alan twisted his face in disapproval. Alan disapproved of a lot of things with youth followed by women high on the list. Young women were in fact top of the list, number one. He had begun his working life down the pits, joined the merchant navy in the war, seen many of his mates drown on the north Atlantic convoys, become a social worker. Now he stared blankly at Lorraine in her short yellow skirt sitting with her legs spread-eagled at the adjacent desk. They shared a telephone, a cause of endless battles. Miss Perfect guessed he was thinking Lorraine did not behave as young women were meant to behave. She could not help but agree. Times had changed and certainly not for the better.

'Lorraine.' The name came out louder and more imperiously than she had intended. The slim young South African looked up and nodded.

'Ja Madge?'

She ignored the unwelcome use of 'Madge' and said, 'I've just had Simon on the phone. He was out-of-hours

last night. One of yours has blown up. It's the Farrants over at Brownlow. It's little Gary, bruising on his face. We must ensure that he is medically examined, we may need a hospital admission.'

They moved into the office labelled 'Miss Perfect' where Lorraine sat facing her looking ready for a fight.

'Madge, you know I've just taken over the Farrants. I've not made an introductory visit yet. And I've got a lot on today. Simon should have followed through on it.'

Miss Perfect's resentment was accentuated by the guttural South African accent. How she hated that South African accent. It was an irritant which, unlike grit in an oyster, produced no auditory pearls. And it was Lorraine who had opened the mineshaft into which standards of conduct were rapidly falling. Over-familiarity was but one example. Now more and more of the staff called her Madge rather than Miss Perfect. If only she had been more alert, seen what was happening, stamped on it when it started. She never minded 'Miss P' or even 'Miss' but would have much preferred to draw the line short of 'Madge'.

'Ah, yes. A lot on.' From the rumours sweeping the office she knew that Lorraine frequently had a lot on, or in some senses a lot off. Or perhaps not with her 'monthly' and Simon working out of hours. The office gossips had the two of them on the way to becoming an item.

Nowadays girls like Lorraine seemed to think nothing of having sex as casually as they might say 'yes' to a cup of tea. She remembered times in her own brief youth when she would have preferred a cup of tea. But then her

thoughts strayed back to the love of her life, the young man who had spoiled it all by going away and shattering her dreams. That had been different. She had been loyal to him. It was about loving a man, feelings for a man, not just animal lust. Clearly Lorraine, a 'daughter of the veld' as she liked to call herself, fell into the lust camp.

She did so hope young Simon was not taking a wrong turning in befriending Lorraine. He had explained at interview how he had come into social work 'to make the world a better place', perhaps his first mistake. High ideals had been attainable goals when she started out as a child care officer but that was in a different age — then was then, now was now. Hopefully Lorraine was not his next mistake. She was fond of Simon.

She looked at her notes and said, 'Please bear with me while I try to decipher my writing…'

Lorraine sat looking as though it was all too much for her. Surely she must know by now that it was in the nature of the job that these crises never arrived to suit the convenience of the workers? Miss Perfect remembered from her training course that in his book on asylums Goffman pointed out how workers often meet their own needs rather than the needs of those they care for. It was one of a very few ideas learned from a book that lodged an insight in her brain that remained there down the years.

Her immediate task was to placate Lorraine. 'Simon was snowed under with difficult calls.'

Lorraine looked unimpressed. 'That's all very well, Madge, but Simon would have been on big bucks with

overtime rates and, anyway, Dan's my line manager and he says with all the work we have on here we don't have time to take on out-of-hours work as well.'

'No, no, only our own work of course. Perhaps Simon should have done as you say but that is not for now. Besides, there are some of us, myself included, who think these things are best done by the family's regular social worker when that's at all possible.'

'Ach sus man,' Lorraine said.

Miss Perfect struggled to conceal her irritation and find a soothing tone. 'Sometimes night and day overlap as you may discover quite quickly if you get around to joining the rota.'

Lorraine scowled at this. Looking at Lorraine Miss Perfect wondered what it was about her she did not much like. There must be more to it than her accent. As her manager, she was aware that she ought to be objective and as a social worker she knew she ought to be non-judgmental. It was unreasonable to think badly of a young woman who, coming to the north-east corner of England from Cape Town, had in all probability never heard of Goffman. Young, pretty and vivacious she certainly was but – was there something cold and grasping in those restless green eyes? Time would tell. Or not. 'You never can tell' was after all a well-known fact – even if known only to her father, mercifully long deceased.

She went on, 'I will ask one of the senior practitioners to go with you. We need to investigate thoroughly and, if necessary, case conference it early next week.'

'Do we really need to do all that, Madge? I mean it's Thursday, tomorrow's Friday, ach sus it's almost the weekend…'

'It's county policy. Which of the senior practitioners is in today?'

Lorraine grinned. 'None. Dan let them all take a day's leave.'

'Oh dear, then I'll have to ask Dan to go with you. He won't be pleased.'

Lorraine laughed. 'He's not coming in today. He's at a management training session with the Director at County Hall.'

Dan should have consulted her before allowing all the senior practitioners to take leave on the same day and, at the very least, told her he would be up at the Hall on a training day. Now there was no alternative but for her, as the senior member of staff present, to accompany Lorraine on a home visit to the Farrants. That after all was county policy where non-accidental injuries were suspected. Besides — whisper, who dares — though now 'middle management' there were remnants of Madge that secretly enjoyed going hands-on once in a while.

'In that case it will have to be me,' she said, knowing that all the while Dan would be ingratiating himself with the Director.

Lorraine smiled so sweetly that it felt as if she was silently saying 'Up yours, Madge'.

'We'll set off in ten minutes,' Miss Perfect said, shepherding Lorraine back into the social workers' room. At the sight of the re-entry of the boss the chatter dried,

magazines were shuffled out of sight, heads went down, telephones scrambled for, notepads scribbled on, and files minutely examined. Ah yes, how busy they all were, a suddenly silent monument to the commitment of the modern slave labourers of the people industry. That was after all what social work was becoming: a branch of industry.