The Yellow Room

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Published by Langton & Wood

Extract

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First published in 2009 by Langton & Wood
73 Alexandra Drive, London SE19 1AN
http://www.amolibros.com/bowden

Distributed by Gardners Books, 1 Whittle Drive, Eastbourne,
East Sussex, BN23 6QH
Tel: +44(0)1323 521555 | Fax: +44(0)1323 521666

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-0-9555067-1-0

Typeset by Amolibros, Milverton, Somerset
www.amolibros.co.uk
This book production has been managed by Amolibros
Printed and bound by

Prologue

The Present

Jessica Tate ordered another cappuccino while she waited downstairs in Donatello's, the café near Leicester Square where she and Duncan had agreed to meet. She sighed and looked at her watch. He was late. That was unlike him. He was always on time, always. Still, it was only ten minutes or so. No use in worrying. It was probably nothing.

She pulled a book out of her bag, glanced at the picture on the front and the blurb on the back, and put it face down on the small circular table. She gazed at the glass roof above her, the straggling rain drops inching soundlessly towards the gutter. The drops caught the lightening sky, just visible beyond the damp stone balustrade and the trunks of towering plane trees.

She looked at her watch again, shifted in her chair and pulled at the ends of the dark brown hair falling from her shoulders. She leaned forward on the table and dragged the chair closer. It scraped horribly on the tiled floor. The desiccated couple at the next table glared over bags and packages and tutted in unison. Jessica reddened and reached for the saucer of sugar lumps. They were tightly wrapped in reproductions of Cubist paintings.

There's no point in what ifs, she reflected, as she placed one lump on top of another. It had to be faced. What's

done is done and can't be undone. The leaning tower of lumps wobbled dangerously. How much simpler if she had put back what she found in her grandmother's cottage all those months ago, left things as they were, lying undisturbed. Brockley House would have remained a name unknown, a place unvisited, and she would have been none the wiser. But once she had set off down the road she needed to know where it led. And she wouldn't have met Duncan, either, would she? That was worth all the rest put together. Where was he?

Anyway, she thought, problems were there to be solved. She did not like ambiguity, uncertainty, loose ends. Perhaps it was her legal training, or maybe she just had the kind of mind that made her want to be a lawyer in the first place. And no one had been hurt, had they? Not really. Not much. Not yet.

She coaxed the last remaining Braque onto a wayward Picasso. It was a lump too far. The tower collapsed, sending cubes in all directions. The desiccated couple collected their bags and packages and huffed up the stairs to the street above. A slim man with sandy hair brushed past and patiently gathered the errant lumps.

"Sorry, I'm late," said Duncan Westwood, kissing Jessica warmly on the lips as she jumped up to meet him. She was too relieved to speak. He presented the sugar in cupped hands, like an offering. "Signal failure at Camden Town and a suspect container at Tottenham Court Road." He put the lumps in a pile on the table and sat down close beside her. His hair, she saw, was

covered in a fine spray and the shoulders of his jacket were damp. He paused as Jessica's cappuccino arrived. Then he ordered an espresso for himself and said, "I was thinking about what you said last night. Are you sure you want to go through with this?"

Part One

Coronation Day 1953

Stanley Finch, caretaker of Brockley Village Hall, was stubbing out his cigarette in the chipped scallop shell that served as an ashtray when he heard a noise, almost a squeal, coming from the stage. At least, he thought he did. It was hard to tell above the hubbub coming from the Hall. He went down the corridor, freshly painted in brown and cream, past the open door of the dressing room, up the worn wooden steps and onto the back of the stage. As he fumbled for the light switch he knocked against a bank of bright red fire buckets filled alternately with sand and water. They swung creakily on brackets sprouting from the wall.

The brightly lit stage was completely bare. Finch crossed to the prompt corner on the other side and picked up the dog-eared copy of *Dandy Dick* lying under the chair. He flicked through the heavily annotated script and tossed it contemptuously onto the lumpy cushion covering the seat. He glanced towards the back of the stage, grunted and made for the heavy green curtains at the front. He parted them carefully, his stubbled chin rasping against the braided edge of the velvet, and looked into the body of the Hall.

It was decked with bunting and union jacks. At long tables covered in white cloths the children of Brockley were demolishing plates of sausage rolls, jam tarts and

fairy cakes. They rocked excitedly on the faded canvas seats of the tubular metal chairs. They tapped their feet and scuffed their shoes against the wooden floor, neatly marked out as a badminton court. Impervious to noise and jelly, boy scouts in smart new uniforms brought round jugs of orange squash and lemonade to lubricate the ravening horde.

"Mum," wailed a small girl with red, white and blue ribbons in her hair. "Billy Smith done a wee in my Coronation mug." As an irate adult attempted to pounce, Billy laughed and crawled under the table. He was entirely obscured by the cloth.

"Bedlam," muttered Finch as the curtains fell gently to a close.

Twenty years ago the Hall was a barn. It was converted at the initiative of the Brockley Women's Institute, who found the local Reading Room too crowded for their monthly meetings. The proceeds of fêtes, whist drives and 'dramatic entertainments' over several years, together with a grant from the National Council of Social Service, raised enough to fund the conversion of the disused barn donated to the small Hampshire village by Sir Miles Brockley.

Finch had been working for Sir Miles up at the House in those days, doing the odd jobs and running repairs of which there never seemed to be a shortage. But the war had changed all that. After six years in the army he was not going to go back to that way of life, taking orders from toffs, thank you very much. It was not right.

Not any more. Mind you, Muriel, his wife, did for Lady Pamela two or three mornings a week. And her an earl's daughter into the bargain. He did not approve but every little helped.

Finch clumped back to the corridor. The door of the dressing room was now closed. He continued to the kitchen where Mrs Box, in charge of sandwiches, was rinsing lettuce in a vast ceramic sink. She scooped the lettuce into a colander, dried her hands roughly on a stained tea towel and turned unsteadily. "Shame about the rain," she said. "On today of all days."

Finch sat down with a grunt. "It may be a New Elizabethan Age but it's the same old weather."

She poured him a cup of tea from the big brown teapot lurking under its cosy on the scrubbed pine table. "People are saying Mount Everest should be called Mount Elizabeth in honour of our new Queen."

"Can't think why. It's not ours to call what we like. It wasn't even a Briton who made it to the top." He slurped his tea noisily.

"Well, the papers said Everest was British too. Whoever he was." She eased herself onto the other chair.

"Makes no difference."

"Are you coming to the sports on the recreation field? Lady Pamela is presenting the prizes."

"I'll be clearing up this place. Have you seen the state of the Hall?"

"But won't your May be competing in the sack race?"

"She's too old for that sort of thing these days. More

interested in fashions and film stars. Where is the girl, anyway? Never here when she's wanted, always around when she isn't."

"She was helping with the sausage rolls earlier but I haven't seen her for a while."

Billy Smith was in disgrace. Banished from the Hall, he loitered on the rough ground used from time to time for parking cars, of which there were now several in the village. He kicked stones and jumped in puddles, spattering his new grey shorts with mud. He let down the tyres on Finch's bike and hid the pump behind the dustbins. He swung on the chain link fence and scrawled on the posts with a damp piece of chalk. Bored, he went to the telephone box on the pavement and pressed button B. He pocketed two pennies and went down the path that ran along the far side of the Hall.

The privet hedge that separated the land from the field next door was ragged and overgrown and strayed across the path. But Billy was used to that. He had been here before. He pushed his way through the wet hedge and stopped outside the window of the dressing room. The glass was three-quarters obscured to keep out prying eyes. Billy was not disheartened. With a practised hand that belied his eleven years, he rolled out a beer keg from under the hedge, tipped it on end and climbed on top of it.

The dressing room looked empty at first. There was no light on but the sky was beginning to brighten now that the rain had stopped. As his eyes adjusted, he made

out two figures writhing noiselessly on the lino. What were they doing? Was it a fight? Or a game? He tried to see more. Straining on tip-toe he lost his balance. As he tried to regain it, his hand struck the window with a thud. The sound made the man look round. Billy recognised him instantly. The man recognised him too.

"Miles, have you seen my badger?" said Lady Pamela Brockley. She was sitting at her dressing table in Brockley House, a short distance from the village. "I was going to wear it when I presented the prizes this afternoon."

"Any particular badger?" said Sir Miles, lying on the bed reading *The Times*. He radiated unconcern.

"The silver badger brooch your mother gave me years ago."

Miles sat bolt upright. "Oh, Lord. Not recently, no. Are you sure you haven't left it pinned to something? Have you tried your wardrobe?"

"I've looked everywhere. It's simply vanished."

"Surely someone has seen it. Have you asked Mrs Finch?"

"She disclaimed all knowledge of it. She was cleaning in here the other day, though."

"You don't think she…?"

"Who knows? I've no proof. She's always seemed pretty reliable."

"What about May? She comes with her mother sometimes. I remember her admiring it."

"Mrs Finch says May knows nothing either. And Max is a complete blank too."

"He always is."

"That's unfair."

"Could Prodgers have taken it?"

"I've worn it since he left."

"Well, it must be somewhere. It's bound to turn up eventually. Things always do."

It was some hours after the last event, the egg and spoon race won by Neville Filbert, that they found Billy Smith. He was under the bridge on the road to Easthampton. His neck had been broken.