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Alison Morton

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Albert pulled his shoulders back and allowed himself a smile as he watched the members of the Trucklington Working Men's Club applauding him. It was the third year they'd elected him branch representative for his union. Now they were sending him forward to district. A doughty fighter for his men, he would face anybody off, including Mr Bradley, the factory owner. It was Albert who'd insisted on the mid-morning break, even though they were on a productivity push. The men returning from the war that had stolen their youth grabbed their jobs back with eagerness and a desire to recapture something of their life before the nightmare. Ex-corporal Albert would make sure they had a good place to return to.

Starting on the shop floor as an apprentice after the First World War Albert had worked every machine in the factory. His dedication and persistence had taught men and bosses alike to respect him. When his sturdy figure marched across the factory floor it pulled along with it a natural authority.

Betty, his wife, loved the new respectability the position gave him. Albert said little, secretly content to be able to buy them both good clothes at Millery's department store, including the treat of a natty silk scarf to go with his new wool coat. The salesgirl had made a point of repeating that the price was a guinea, as if he couldn't afford it. He'd given her a look as if she was one of his apprentices who'd made a cheeky remark.

But Albert hung on to his new NHS spectacles. His generation has fought hard for free glasses and he was damned if he was going to pay good money for what he had by rights.

As he nodded in thanks to men buying him a beer in the bar after the meeting, he smiled again. They were good honest folk. Loud, rowdy sometimes, but warm-hearted and true. His fellows, no, his comrades. Like him and Sam Smith. They'd joined as lads on the same day, served their apprenticeships, married local girls within two months of each other and marched off together in 1939. Sam liked his liquor a bit too much, Albert thought, but only found himself in the cells on Saturday nights now and then.

'Well, Albert, goin' off to be the great man, are you?' Sam's wide smile lit up his whole face, but his eyes mocked his old friend. 'Don't be getting above yourself.'

'Give over, Sam,' Albert replied. 'It's only part-time and nobody else wanted it.'

'That so? I saw you fighting off Davy like you was still scrapping in the playground.'

Albert was affronted that Sam had ever thought he'd "scrapped". Albert was more of a word warrior. But he smiled back. 'You have to put a show on for the lads, don't you?'

'S'pose so.'

Albert looked down at his beer. The circle of foam stuck to the sides of glass, bubbles flattened. The dark colour looked solid, implacable, indigestible. And the taste in his mouth was more bitter than usual.

'Well, I'd best get back, he said. 'Betty will be waiting up with a bite of supper.'

'Haven't seen her in a while,' Sam fixed his gaze on Albert's face and took a long swallow of his own drink before he continued. 'Ruby thought she saw her all dolled-up coming out of that fancy tea shop with some sour-faced trout in a fur-collar. Ruby waved to her from across the street. But your Betty didn't seem to see Ruby.' Sam's lip had drawn into a tight line.

Drat. That had likely been Jean Burroughs that Betty had been to school with. Done well for herself had Jean when she married Tom Burroughs; he owned the hardware shop on the high street. Not that Albert and Betty had been invited to the wedding. Jean queened it over

the local Townswomen's Guild. Albert prayed Betty wasn't going to allow herself to be drawn in by that bunch of snobs.

Albert looked directly into Sam's hurt eyes. 'Ruby must have made a mistake.'

The weight of the beer pressed down on Albert's stomach. It wasn't helped by the depression that settled over him from Sam's words. Walking back in the wintery drizzle the two miles to the red-brick terrace he and Betty shared, he tried to face up to what Sam was really saying.

Albert had a secret he didn't want to share with anybody, least of all Sam. Not that he read the great authors in his spare time, stuffing the books away in the sideboard cupboard when his old friends and union colleagues called. No, he'd enrolled with the college in the city part-time, evenings. Workers' education, they called it. Albert had a burning ambition. He wanted to be a teacher.

His father, Joe, had died from overwork and ignorance when his own father had condemned him to leave school at fourteen for a life of hard graft. The teacher had urged Joe's father to let his son stay on to take the school certificate so he could work in an office, even study more – the key to a better life for Joe, a clever, inquisitive boy. Albert only heard this story from his mother later, but he remembered watching his dull, angry father fade into his grave in his mid-fifties. He vowed he'd never allow anybody to do that to him. Whenever Albert felt tired, his eyes drooping as he studied, the memory of his father's defeated face fired him up again.

Albert would catch the bus twice a week after work, his leather briefcase bulging with books for that week's class. A week ago, the next to last evening of the winter term, the paint shop foreman had stepped on to the bus and recognised him.

'Hello, Albert. Off to the city? Got a union meeting?'

'Oh, hello, Radford,' he said and gave the man a nervous smile. 'Yes, yes. Got to hammer out resolutions with district.'

'I'll walk along with you, then.'

Albert was forced to watch through the chrome-framed window as the college bus stop slid past. He almost stood up and got off the bus, but his nerve failed. He was trapped by his lie.

Neat flowerbeds dull with dark-leaved shrubs only relieved by a few red berries lined the frontage of the town hall. Inside, the two men parted at the foot of the grand civic staircase, on whose walls hung worthy portraits of worthy people. As he hurried off to re-trace his journey back to the college, Albert felt invisible accusing eyes looking down on him between the images of crowds dutifully cheering as the Lord Mayors rode by in their gilded carriages. He dismissed it as fanciful nonsense.

They couldn't possibly suspect his other secret.

'Albert.'

Betty's voice called down the passageway, higher pitched than usual.

'Albert, come quickly.'

Now he heard panic in her voice. What was the woman doing, interrupting his reading? Yesterday, the teacher had set them a task “to stretch them”, so he said. Albert had to read three new books before writing a long essay for next week’s end of term class.

Probably the cat stuck in the coal-hole again.

He closed *Great Expectations* and laid it carefully in the sideboard cupboard on top of the other hundred he’d accumulated. He heaved himself out of his armchair, nested his pipe in the Bakelite ashtray and narrowly missing the poinsettia newly perched on the side table, trudged out of the room.

Betty held the front door open, letting in a blast of sleet. Two large blue-uniformed figures blocked the entrance.

‘Albert Postlethwaite?’

‘That’s me.’

Had one of the young lads got into trouble and wanted his union rep with him? Or was it his elderly mother? Surely nothing else would bring them out on an evening like this.

‘What is it, officer?’

The older one handed him a folded paper and couldn’t meet Albert’s eyes. Albert recognised him as Radford’s older brother.

‘You’ll have to come with us. We have a warrant for your arrest for theft of municipal property.’

Nobody spoke. Betty’s fingers were tight locked round the door handle, the expression on her face frozen. Albert stood stock still, as if rooted to his patch of hessian carpet.

The younger policeman coughed; his spotty face meant he couldn’t be more than nineteen or twenty.

Betty’s face crumpled and tears fell. She looked up at Albert, pleading for his reassurance that it was a dreadful mistake.

Albert pushed his glasses he was so proud of back up to the bridge of his nose as if anxious he would lose them. He stretched out, picked up his jacket from the hallstand and shrugged into it. He reached out his hand for his natty silk scarf and new wool coat. Unable to look Betty in the face, he patted her forearm. She looked down at the spot where he’d touched her and her eyes darted back to his face. He smiled briefly at his reflection in the hall mirror and followed the policemen out.

All for pinching some damned library books he could have afforded to buy. And on Christmas Eve.