

She Moved On Mike Cockett

John did not feel old. He didn't consider sixty eight to be old, not these days. indeed he had been willing to carry on working but staffing levels had been reduced and he was persuaded that it was time to go. The problem was that he had not really given any thought to what he would do in retirement. in particular he had failed to anticipate how the lack of routine and order would affect him. He was prone to prowling around the house straightening ornaments and checking the kitchen cupboards. There was an additional factor. He had hoped after a retirement event enthusiastically engaged in by his erstwhile colleagues that they would, as they had assured him, be in touch and indeed would call him in if some problem arose which required his vast knowledge and experience. There had been no calls and on the one occasion when he had joined them in the pub on a Friday night, something he had never done when working, the talk had been of developments of which he had not been part.

His had not been the stellar career that he had once imagined. So, over his boredom was a sort of dust of disappointment. He had spent all his career in the archive office. Over the years he had become the go to person for any lost or misplaced document. His great talent, as he was often told, was his phenomenal memory combined with a sense of order. It had been one of his greatest pleasures to find something misplaced or wrongly filed and to triumphantly correct the error. If he could identify the careless culprit he would offer a gentle reprimand so that the office, his office, became a beacon of well ordered efficiency.

He lived as he always had done, as a bachelor in the parental home, bequeathed jointly to himself and his widowed sister. She had moved in on the death of her husband. Their relationship was edgy. She seemed determined not to retire herself for which he was grateful but she was constantly trying to get him to show an interest beyond placing the herbs and spices in alphabetical order and organising the cutlery drawer.

Her latest proposal concerned an organisation called the U3A. University of the Third Age. The word University, of course, put him off but she persisted. Finally she handed him a leaflet, a sort of news letter. She had been given it at work by one of the younger members of staff who had talked enthusiastically about how the U3A had given her parents a new interest in life. His sister had pointed to a particular reference to an open meeting on a Friday afternoon.

"Look," she had said, "See what it's about."

He had taken the newsletter reluctantly. "Mysteries of the Archives" he read out loud, "an exploration of some of the quirks and mysteries in the national archives by Dr Dorothy Halverson."

"Quirks and mysteries" he sneered. Perhaps he would go along and point out that archive work was not about quirks and mysteries but about the good order of society. His sister suggested that he might go along and listen to what was being said before being too ready to make a comment and that it was at least a subject of interest and he might well find he could make a contribution.

The first impressions were not favourable. The hall was full of people, a lot of people, all old, some infirm. There were animated conversations but little opportunity for him to join in. He sat at the back ready to slip out if he found the lecture difficult to endure. There were notices about trips and holidays and a few thank yous for one thing or another and then the lecturer was introduced. Dr. Dorothy Halverson a senior archivist at the national archive in Kew. She approached the lectern and her image was displayed on a large screen to one side. John gasped and two people on either side turned to him to check that he was alright. He controlled himself. Dorothy Halverson well it hadn't been Halverson. Dorothy Bostock much older now but still entirely recognisable.

John sat at his desk and counted his paper clips. It was a morning routine from which he derived some comfort but also an impression of whether his territory had been invaded or not. He quickly stored the paper clips and slid a document box towards him, glancing as he did at the glass partition which guarded the senior archivists office. The door held the legend Dr. R V Grunwald D/CPS ARM PhD. As he did each morning Dr Grunwald was now peering through the glass to check that his domain was well ordered and industrious.

John knew he had found his place working in the archive office. He was at home with the past. The present had always been a threat. He could not exactly put his finger on why. He was neither good or bad looking, a sort of in between looks which, as he observed, was what most people had. Most of the human race had to get by somewhere in a hinterland of average. He knew he had no outstanding talents. This was something else which he had concluded even after much encouragement from parents and teachers. He had always detected an edge of over emphasis in their exhortations. Sport had been a no go area due, he was told, to something odd with his hips when he was born. He did not care. All that energy expended on either running around or the opposite, slumped in front of some match on TV he found boring. Perhaps if he hadn't made his indifference so clear he may have been more acceptable to he contemporaries. No, that was not the way it was. The fact was that

he found the unpredictability of human relationships a threat. He simply couldn't predict what other people were going to do next. He knew his constant surprise at a turn of events could easily make him a laughing stock. For a time, even, he had enjoyed a brief reign as a class clown but it was short lived when his classmates realised he was not being deliberately funny.

His one ally had been the history teacher. He could escape into history because it had already happened. Yes, you could be surprised by a new discovery or a new insight but the past didn't laugh at you. It remained to be explored and discovered but it was done with. It could be investigated and catalogued and set in order but it didn't bite back.

His second class degree in ancient history had been enough to get him the archive office job. Others had joined with him or soon after but he knew they were there simply for the money. It was a way of passing time between weekends. He knew he was the only one with ambition, an ambition to discover something that would make his name.

It was against this background that John opened the new box. A mustiness rose from the faded letters and photographs, his favourite smell. He inhaled. The documents were part of a store discovered when the National Trust had taken over Littlefield Manor and the county archive service had been asked to evaluate and if necessary restore and store them, his favourite activity, assessing the residue of long dead lives and deciding how to classify, to decode and record.

He was just lifting the first document from the box when the door of the office opened and a young woman entered. She was dressed in what seemed to John to be a random selection from a jumble sale. The headband and glasses seemed designed to conceal. She smiled and asked "where do I find...eh..". She consulted a paper in her hand, "Dr. Grunwald?" David Martin who was nearest the door indicated the door of the senior archivist's office. She wound her way through the tightly packed chairs and desks. With one exception it was an all male office and although she seemed to have made special efforts to appear plain, she could not conceal the femininity of her swinging hips. All male eyes in the room watched her progress. She knocked on the door of the inner office. Dr. Grunwald called 'come in' and she entered.

Once again in unison the males realised they were under the cynical gaze of Mrs Samuels, Dr Grunwald's secretary and they turned back to their tasks. John continued to lift documents and letters from the Littlefield house document box.

The door of the inner office office opened and the great man himself peered round.

"John," he said. "Could you step this way a moment?"

The 'John' was a surprise. He had never previously been anyone but Mr. Sinclair. He rose under the mocking gaze of the others and entered the inner sanctum. The young woman was seated in a chair by the desk which filled an impressive acreage of the room. Dr Grunwald was perched on the desk in a casual manner smiling first at the young woman and then, even more surprisingly at John.

"Let me introduce you," he said. "Mr. Sinclair, John, this is Miss Bostock, Dorothy....?" John shook her hand and continued to stand since there was no other chair available.

"Miss Bostock.. Dorothy," Dr Grunwald continued, "is embarking on research leading to the award of Doctor of Philosophy a PhD." He smiled conspiratorially at Miss Bostock implying that John, being a mere 'two two' might not be au fait with the higher academic orders and incidentally referring to his own elevated status. John waited for further developments.

"Perhaps, my dear, it would be better if you explained your intended research." said Dr Grunwald with a smile which this time seemed to attempt the fatherly.

"Well," Miss Bostock began, "I am interested in aspects of Elizabethan England. Who isn't, but I am particularly interested in the spy networks operated by Walsingham and possibly the connection with Christopher Marlowe, the playwright who died in mysterious circumstances. I'm sure you know all this."

John wasn't so sure that he did.

"Well, I have uncovered a rather oblique reference to a Sir Richard Littlefield. He was, we think, one of Walsingham's spy masters, possibly significant in the spy school he set up. So I heard that this office was examining the Littlefield House archive and I wondered if I might sit in on the process." She smiled at John. He blushed.

"I have said, of course she is welcome" said Dr Grunwald "and since you..eh..John..are starting on the process, I hope you and she will be able to cooperate. John is one of our bright young archivists." Said Dr. Grunwald, which was the first John had heard any such opinion expressed and he blushed again.

There followed one of those periods in life which remain vivid and constantly mulled over in future years. Dorothy, as she insisted he called her had spent many hours with him pouring over documents that were uncovered in the extensive archive. Sometimes it seemed something of significance was emerging and she would exclaim over the discovery and touch his arm with electrifying effect but would

immediately pull back. On a number of occasions as they stood putting on their coats at the end of the day, John had been on the verge of suggesting they go for, what? That was the problem. He had no knowledge at all of the places they might go. What would be appropriate? A cup of tea, a drink in a pub? At these times there was a hesitation about her which made John think that perhaps she was expecting something but he was painfully aware of how bad he was at interpreting these signs. He did what he now did habitually. He left things unsaid.

He did put in many extra hours on the project, sure that if he could make one clinching discovery then perhaps he could break through to some more personal contact. It had therefore been with great excitement, that one morning he handed her a bundle of letters in Sir Richard's own hand, letters, which, though in code, clearly linked him to Walsingham and Marlowe. He had been right. Her gratitude almost overflowed. She moved towards him as though to give him a hug but John flinched and she blushed and held back.

The time came eventually when the research, as far as the archive office was concerned, was finished. They had stood by the door of the office building. "Well, John," she had said, "I really am most enormously grateful for all you've done. You've been most helpful." Once again she seemed make move towards him and he stiffened. They shook hands and she left.

A book appeared. "The Letters of Sir Richard Littlefield." A copy arrived for him in the post. Inside she had written "to John Sinclair with most grateful thanks for his expertise and diligence. With kind regards Dorothy Bostock." Underneath she had written a number, he assumed a phone number and then the additional note. "Please stay in touch." What a world of unknowns that phone number threatened. He had kept the book but the call was never made.

Dr. Dorothy Halverson nee Bostock finished her lecture which from the reactions of the audience had been amusing and stimulating. John had heard nothing. He stayed rooted to his seat as others filed out and eventually the great lady herself passed down the aisle. She glanced at John as she passed and seemed to hesitate. She made a step towards him. John quickly looked away. She moved on.

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