

'A moving, atmospheric
and suspenseful tale' *GUARDIAN*



BLEEDING HEART SQUARE



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TAYLOR

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Bleeding Heart Square
by
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I

Sometimes you frighten yourself. So what is it, exactly? A punishment? A distraction? A relief? You're not sure. You tell yourself that it happened more than four years ago, that it doesn't matter any more and nothing you can do can change a thing. But you don't listen, do you? All you do is go back to that nasty little green book.

Thursday, 2 January 1930

Tomorrow I shall go to Bleeding Heart Square for the first time. It was young Mr Orburn's idea. I always think of him as young Mr Orburn, though he must be 35 or 40 if he's a day. He is young compared with his father, who used to call at my aunt's, and she would give him Madeira and seed cake. All those years ago – how time flies.

This is my first entry in the diary, and I feel rather awkward as though I were talking to someone I had only just met. My niece gave me the diary when I spent Christmas Day with my brother and his family. I suppose it was kind of them to ask me, and it was certainly better than having to eat my Christmas dinner at the Rushmere Hotel with the other residents who don't have a family to ask them elsewhere. All the same, it was a little awkward.

Anyway, this is the beginning of a new year and I'm going to put my best foot forward. I have made several resolutions – I shall be cheerful, I shall think of others less fortunate than myself and try to help them, I shall reread every book in the New Testament and

make notes as I go. I shall keep this diary. I shall record in it interesting impressions, conversations, thoughts, etc. that come my way. I need to keep active because we all know who finds work for idle hands!

So – back to Bleeding Heart Square. It's such a strange name. I asked Mr Orburn where it came from but he didn't know.

Memo to myself: find out what the name means.

It's as if you hear her talking, as if she's standing at your shoulder. When it's really bad, you imagine you smell her perfume. You think her thoughts, you dream her dreams.

Now there's a thought. Miss Philippa May Penhow is not dead, only sleeping.



At ten past three on Tuesday, 6 November 1934, Lydia Langstone fumbled in her handbag for the latchkey. The house loomed over her like a dirty wedding cake. A cold wind, flecked with rain, nipped at her ankles. In her haste, she dropped the key and found herself laughing with a sort of idiot joy as she stooped to pick it up.

Leaves shuffled along the pavement. The taxi pulled away from the kerb and she glanced over her shoulder at the sound of its engine. The front door was several feet above the level of the pavement and framed by a pair of white pillars.

But this, she thought, will make everything all right. Now. At last.

The key turned in the lock. She pushed open the door. The house was silent, wrapped in the calm that descended on it between lunch and tea when for an hour or two the servants became invisible, wrapped in the mystery of their own lives.

Marcus's hat lay on the polished chest at the foot of the stairs. For once she was pleased to see it. He had been lurching at his club and had said nothing about when he would return. She registered the presence of a second hat, one she did not recognize, but failed in her absorption to draw the obvious conclusion that its owner must be in the house too.

Marcus would be upstairs in his study or the drawing room. Still in her hat and coat, Lydia went in search of him. She ran up the stairs, which were far too large and imposing for the hall below and the landing above. It was that sort of house – it strove to impress and succeeded in sacrificing comfort and convenience.

On the landing, she hesitated a moment and then tried the drawing-room door. The room was empty, the fire unlit. She darted across to the study and opened the door without knocking. Marcus was sitting in one of the armchairs in front of the fire with a cigar in his hand and a glass of whisky at his elbow. He looked up at her and she stopped in the doorway. He stared at her, his face flushed and his eyes wide open.

The visitor stood up and turned towards her. He was slim and dark, with a small moustache and a face like a determined seal's. Marcus, too, rose to his feet, though without enthusiasm as if reluctantly obeying the dictates of a higher power.

'Ah, Lydia, my dear,' he said, articulating his words with the precision of the almost drunk. 'I don't think you know Rex Fisher.' He turned to his guest. 'Rex, this is my wife.'

Fisher limped towards her, holding out his hand and smiling. 'Indeed, we have met, Mrs Langstone.'

'Of course we have, Sir Rex,' Lydia said. 'You came down to Monkshill for a weekend. It must have been just after the war.'

They shook hands. Fisher had a trick of looking very keenly at you as if you were, for the moment, the most interesting thing in the world. It was at once flattering and alarming.

‘And how are Lord and Lady Cassington?’ he asked.

‘Very well, thank you.’ She smiled at him. ‘I know it must sound awfully rude, but would you mind if I took Marcus away for a moment? There’s something I need to tell him.’

Fisher stood back, the smile still in place. ‘Of course not, Mrs Langstone.’

Marcus made an inarticulate sound that might have been a murmur of protest. But she gave him no time to think. She left the room and crossed the landing to the drawing room. She heard her husband apologizing to his guest, the closing of the study door and his footsteps behind her.

Once they were both in the drawing room, he shut the door. Irritation made him puff out his lips in what was almost a pout, and his eyes looked larger than ever. When they were children she had thought of it as his angry frog face, though of course she had never told him that. She realized with dismay that he was drunker than she had thought.

‘You bloody little fool,’ he said. ‘What the hell do you think you’re playing at?’

‘Marcus, there’s something I—’

‘Do you realize what you’ve done?’ he interrupted in a low voice. ‘You’ve probably scuppered my political career before it’s even begun.’

‘That’s nonsense, you know—’

‘Rex has got Mosley’s ear. But he’s prickly as hell, always ready to take offence. And he was about to offer me—’

She took a step towards him, her hands outstretched. ‘You don’t understand,’ she began. ‘I—’

‘I understand only too well,’ he snapped. ‘Marrying you was the worst thing I ever did in my life.’

It was as if her mind was seized by a sudden frost. She felt nothing but cold. She could not think, let alone move. She stared blankly at her husband. Something about her passivity seemed to enrage him further. He lunged forward and slapped her cheek with the palm of his right hand. It was a relatively light blow that made her head jerk to one side. She gasped and lifted her left hand to cover the spot where his blow had fallen.

‘Dear Christ,’ he said. ‘You’re such a silly little bitch.’

As he was speaking, she knew he was going to hit her again. It was in a sense a continuation of the first blow. Having slapped her cheek with the palm of his right hand, he reversed the thrust of his arm and increased the impetus of the swing. The back of his hand smashed into her cheekbone. The force of the blow was enough to drive her against a chair. The top of its seat caught her just below the knee. She lost her balance and fell inelegantly so her body sprawled partly on the floor and partly on the chair. A jolt ran through her. She cried out with the snaking pain it brought in its wake. She was dimly aware of Marcus standing over her.

‘I hope I don’t have to remind you again,’ he said, speaking slowly and clearly as if to a slow-witted servant. ‘You must not interrupt me when I’m in the study. Never. Understand?’

She shut her eyes and listened to the roaring in her ears. She heard his footsteps receding, the door opening and closing. She rested her head in her arm. Her body was a dark continent like Africa, she thought, full of strange peoples and unexplored places, a source of plunder for greedy men. She tried to make her mind empty, like the Sahara Desert, a perfect vacancy.

Time passed. On the mantel, the horrible French clock that Marcus's parents had inherited from some dusty Langstone great-aunt ticked like a metronome. The pains in her cheek throbbed obediently in time with it. The Langstones controlled even her pain. She thought her cheek might be bleeding but did not want to find out.

At one point the men went downstairs. Fisher was saying something. He had been plain Mr Fisher when Lydia had met him at Monkshill. Just out of the army. His father had done rather well out of the war, she remembered, and Lloyd George had given him a baronetcy – or more probably sold him one. The old man had died a couple of years ago and Fisher had come into the title. Prickly, Marcus said, and he might be right. The *nouveaux riches* always looked for slights where none existed.

Left to herself, she might have stayed there for ever with her eyes fast shut. It was only the thought of the servants that made her move. Sooner or later the maid would come in to draw the curtains and light the fire, and the kettle would go on the range downstairs in the basement, ready for someone to ring for tea. She couldn't face the servants. She couldn't face anyone. She stood up, swaying, and opened her eyes. The light was already fading out of the short November afternoon. She went upstairs to her bedroom.

Of all the rooms in this horrible house, this was the one that seemed the least unwelcoming. She locked the door. Most of the furniture had come with the house – in other words the pieces were grim, ugly and built to last, like almost everything else the Langstones owned. But she had brought a few things of her own from Monkshill and these at least connected her with her former self. And she had her own bathroom.

She went into it and sat down on the lavatory. After a

while, she looked at her face in the mirror over the wash-basin. Her left cheek was unmarked. But there were signs of a bruise and a faint reddening where Marcus's knuckles had hit her right cheekbone. His signet ring had broken the skin, leaving a smudge of blood, now dried. She squeezed the flesh between finger and thumb. No more blood. *All gone now*. But she still felt the pain.

It struck her as curious that her reflection looked so normal, so completely unaware that it belonged to somebody quite different now.

When her maid knocked on the door, Lydia sent the girl away, saying that she had a sick headache and did not want any tea. By this time, she had the smallest of her suitcases open on the bed.

Packing was not something she usually did, and she was surprised to find it so difficult. At first she put in all her jewellery, but then she took it out and sorted through it, piece by piece, discarding anything that had come from the Langstones. She kept her wedding ring, because it was a statement of fact, but decided to leave behind her engagement ring, a diamond solitaire that had once belonged to Marcus's grandmother. She took her Post Office savings book, which was still in the name of Lydia Ingleby-Lewis, but left her chequebook and bank deposit book, which belonged to Mrs L. M. Langstone.

She did not know which clothes to take because she had no idea which clothes she would need. After a while, she lost patience with herself and filled the case with whatever came to hand. At the last moment she dropped a snapshot of her sister Pamela inside. Her pulse seemed to be accelerating. Delay was dangerous. Sometimes it was better not to think. One should act instinctively, like an animal.

When the suitcase was full, Lydia put on her hat, coat and gloves and picked up her handbag. She carried the suitcase downstairs. It was surprisingly heavy. The study door was shut. She glimpsed the glow of the fire in the drawing room. She heard voices and the clatter of crockery from the basement. The two hats were no longer on the chest. Lydia opened the front door, went outside and closed it softly behind her.

The cold air caught her throat. She wished she had brought a warmer scarf. She walked carefully down the steps and on to the pavement. The road was empty. There was still light in the sky but it was the grey, dispirited kind that was worse than darkness. She walked along the pavement, slightly lopsided because of the suitcase, and told herself that she was free. She had assumed that freedom would have at least an element of euphoria about it. Instead it seemed to be characterized by a dull sense of misery, a certain amount of physical discomfort and a worrying lack of certainty about anything whatsoever.

She reached the Bayswater Road, a river of hooting, grinding, rattling traffic. On the other side, beyond the railings, was the park where the dusk was further advanced than elsewhere. She saw a taxi approaching and raised her arm. The driver's thin little face was almost invisible beneath an enormous cap. She wanted to say, 'It's as if you've got a mushroom on your shoulders.' That would have been foolish. She wondered whether she were feverish.

'Where to, miss?'

Until he asked the question, it had not occurred to Lydia that she would have to tell the man where to take her. The problem was, there was nowhere she wanted to go. But the suitcase was heavy and seemed to be growing heavier. She couldn't walk the streets of London for ever. She couldn't

go to family or friends, either, because they belonged to Marcus as much as to her. She could have asked the man to recommend a hotel, but she wasn't sure how much that would cost or how a respectable establishment would react to the unannounced arrival of an unattached woman with a small suitcase and a bruised face. There was, now she came to think it, only one possibility open to her, and it had a pleasing sense of finality to recommend it.

'Bleeding Heart Square,' she said.

As they travelled east in fits and starts, the driver drummed his gloved fingers on the steering wheel. Outside Selfridges, a woman in an enormous fur coat was buying a red balloon from a man with only one leg. Lydia had been up and down Oxford Street hundreds of times in her life. Now, for the first time since childhood, it was strange to her. She had changed, and Oxford Street had changed with her.

The taxi moved slowly eastwards. Holborn was a different country from Oxford Street. It was darker here, too, as though the sun rarely penetrated. The taxi inched its way into the traffic around Holborn Circus and turned left into Hatton Garden. They swung right, and the driver swore at a man weaving his way across the road with the ramshackle absorption of the truly drunk. He pulled up at the kerb opposite the opening of a cobbled alley on the right-hand side. The entrance was partly obscured by a brewer's dray.

The cabby slid back the partition. 'Here we are. Too tight to drive in, but it's just in there.'

Lydia opened her handbag and found her purse. There was a pub called the Crozier on the corner of the alley, its lower windows still shuttered. It was painted a curious shade of red, so dark it was almost purple, that reminded her of a joint of beef in a butcher's window.

The taxi driver made no move to help her as she got out. He hadn't driven into the square or offered to carry the suitcase. Not that it mattered. It was simply that it meant something. She was no longer the mistress of a house in Frogmore Place and another house in Gloucestershire. She was a woman in a plain coat and hat, carrying a small suitcase, who had asked to be taken to Bleeding Heart Square.

She paid the cabby, giving him a smaller tip than she would usually have done. He grunted, peering impertinently into her face, and drove off. Lydia crossed the road, trying to walk like someone who knew where she was going, and marched up the entry. It led to an ill-lit open space, much darker than the street she had left behind. A man passed her, walking quickly, his face no more than a white blur above his upturned collar.

Lydia glanced from side to side, fighting panic. Smudges of smoke drifted across a grey sky. Buildings reared up on every side, some with lighted windows, none matching its neighbour. In front and to the right was the jagged outline of what might have been a small church. From somewhere on the left came the sound of hammering. There were too many shadows for comfort and it was all too easy to imagine the presence of invisible watchers.

Her eyes adjusted slowly to the lack of light. No one seemed to be about. The so-called square was an irregular quadrilateral, with the pub and the church on the two longer sides. She picked her way across greasy cobbles towards an uneven row of houses on the right. The houses were built of smoke-blackened brick, and the ground-floor windows, a mixture of modern and Georgian sashes, were protected with vertical bars. At the far end of the row was a short flight of steps leading up to a panelled door with a grimy

fanlight above and a tarnished brass 7 above the letter box. There was a card in the window on the right of the door, bisected by one of the bars.

**M. RENTON - DRESSMAKER
LATEST FASHIONS - ALTERATIONS
CUFFS AND COLLARS TURNED
APPLY WITHIN**

At least the address really existed. Lydia rang the bell and waited. Nobody answered the door. She tried again, ringing the bell and giving a double rap with the knocker.

Almost immediately the door opened, as though someone had been standing just inside waiting for her to use the knocker. A small, plump man stared at her with intense curiosity. He had fair, curly hair and wore gold-rimmed pince-nez attached to his lapel with a black ribbon. His tweed suit looked as if he had slept in it. He smiled at Lydia and rubbed his right hand up and down his trouser leg.

‘Yes?’ he said.

‘Good afternoon,’ Lydia said. ‘I’m looking for Captain Ingleby-Lewis.’

‘First floor,’ the man said, standing back and holding the door open with an expansive gesture. ‘Second door on the left.’

He stood back to allow her to pass. But the hall was not wide and his arm brushed hers as she passed. She caught a whiff of his sweat, too, overlaying other smells which had something to do with old cooking and inadequate drains and rotten fish. Breathing through her mouth, she walked upstairs, her shoes tapping on the bare boards. She knew he was watching her.

On the landing she paused. The smell was really rather

bestly, even up here. She tapped on the second door on the left. The plump man was now climbing the stairs.

‘He may be dozing,’ he called up to her. ‘Try the door. It won’t be locked.’

Lydia knocked again. She waited a few seconds, turned the handle and went in, partly to escape the man behind her.

The room beyond was at the front of the house. There were two tall windows. At one end was an unlit gas fire. At the other stood a heavy dining table, its top scarred with cloudy rings and dark burns. An old man in a shabby black overcoat slumbered in an armchair near the fireplace.

Lydia glanced from side to side, taking in unwashed plates, empty bottles, a pile of broken glass beside a table leg, a patched hearthrug and a pair of shoes, lying on their side at the old man’s feet. The uppers were well polished but the heels were worn down and there was a hole in one of the soles. She touched the top of the table with her gloved finger. It felt tacky, like drying paint, and left a grey oval smudge on her glove.

A change in the man’s breathing alerted her. She glanced at his face, which was dominated by a blunt, swollen nose and a neatly trimmed moustache. His eyes were open.

‘Who on earth are you?’ he asked, and yawned.

‘I’m Lydia,’ she said. ‘Your daughter.’

Herbert Narton slipped back into Bleeding Heart Square. He was just in time to see the girl who had passed him by the Crozier going into number seven. That fat little man Fimberry had let her in so she probably knew him or someone else in the house.

The door closed. He glanced around the square. No one was about, though the mechanics at the other end were

making one hell of a din in their workshop by the row of garages. He stood back, sheltering in the shallow recess in front of a gate on the other side of the alley from the pub. It wasn't dark but it was such a gloomy afternoon that there was little risk of his being seen unless someone passed close to where he was standing.

At number seven, they had already turned on the electric light in several of the rooms – in Mrs Renton's on one side of the front door, and Fimberry's on the other. There were also lights in the two windows on the first floor which belonged to the old drunk. Narton had seen him an hour or so earlier, weaving across the square from the saloon bar of the Crozier.

He waited. His feet and hands were freezing. His left wrist was itching again and he scratched it under the glove. In the end his patience was rewarded by a glimpse of the girl on the first floor. He watched her drawing the curtains across the windows. He was too far away to get a good look at her face. But she wasn't wearing her coat any more. So her connection was almost certainly with old Ingleby-Lewis.

Now that was interesting because, of all the people in that house, Ingleby-Lewis was the closest to Serridge. Perhaps the girl was one of his, and he'd sent her here with a message. She looked a bit old for Serridge but the bastard had been known to stretch a point when there was money to be had.

The doors of the workshop opened, and light and noise spilled onto the cobbles. There were signs of life in the Crozier – it wouldn't be long before they opened up for the evening. Better to call it a day, Narton thought, get out while the going was good.

He walked to Liverpool Street to save the bus fare. The exercise warmed him, and so did the sense that the day had

not been entirely wasted. At the station he had time before his train to buy a cup of tea at a stall. While the tea cooled at his elbow, he took out his notebook and jotted down the afternoon's movements.

Not a bad day, taken all in all. No sign of Serridge, of course, but at least he was building up a detailed picture of the house and its occupants. Also, at three o'clock he had seen the young man again, the one Narton suspected might also be watching the house. The chap didn't fit the picture, and he had looked shifty in the unpractised way that people had when they were generally honest.

Finally, just before he had gone off duty, there had been that girl. He had a hunch about her, and he had learned to trust his hunches. She meant something. She was going to be important.

Around him swirled the crowds hurrying home through the glare, the din and the racket of the station. He didn't want to go home. There was nothing he wanted there, not now. He wanted to go back to Bleeding Heart Square and wait for Serridge.