

THE WOMAN IN RED

Rob had worked for almost two years as a pharmacist at Central Middlesex Hospital since qualifying from Manchester University. Living in Ruislip made his journey to Park Royal a daily procession in the thick of traffic. As he drove along West End Road and pointed his car in an easterly direction, Rob saw the Western Avenue flanked by housing and industrial buildings. But he appreciated that behind this lay a past era, symbolised by three ancient churches. Two were visible from the Western Avenue- St. Mary Northolt and Holy Cross Greenford. One was hidden down behind the Myllet Arms- St. Mary, Perivale. Always a bit of a history-nut (although a Chemist, he had joined the University Historical Society) Rob was fascinated by the thought that only a hundred years ago, these were country churches set amid fields. Following the course of the hedgerows, meandering paths would have connected the three tiny villages.

As he journeyed to work, Rob came to think of the Western Avenue as a bridge over history, insulating him from the past. Ploughing through the traffic on auto-pilot, he wondered about what life had been like before the coming of seamless suburbia. He often experienced a desire to leave the main road and explore this part of Ealing Borough. However, he worked as much as possible during the week, and at week-ends, rushed back home to see his fiancée in Manchester. Little time was available for tourism.

Now, his life was about to change with marriage and a new job in Manchester. So, Rob decided to take a day's annual leave and explore. He steered his car out of the drive and headed towards Park Royal as usual, but this time, turned off at the Greenford roundabout and drove the few yards along Oldfield Lane South to Holy Cross Church. It was 7.30am as he walked into the churchyard. The noise of the Western Avenue continued, like a tenacious tinnitus, but the autumn sky looked promising with a red glow from the east cutting across the dark blue expanse.

The effect of the light was stunning.

The old Church floated on grass surrounded by grave stones, rather like a ship navigating waters full of treacherous rocks protruding above the surface. There were graves everywhere, some grouped higgledy-piggledy, some standing tall and isolated. Rob reflected that each of these represented a life, a family, a history of cares and joys, hope and despair-but now all gone and completely forgotten, oblivious of the toils and trials of those who came after them. One day, his life would follow in the footsteps of these forgotten people and be just as inscrutable to future generations.



It was a sobering thought.

As the light increased he could read some of the dates on the head stones going back to the 17th century. Some bore the skull and crossbones motif. As he scrutinised the inscriptions, Rob was startled by a bright and cheerful voice.

“Hello there. Come to visit the church?”

He hadn't heard approaching footsteps. It was a woman who was opening the east door of the church, rattling her keys.

“I’ve just come to do some cleaning. Want to look inside, dear?”

Rob was enjoying his churchyard reverie and company was not what he wanted at this point.

“Oh, no. Thanks. I’ll just look around the graveyard.”

“OK” said the woman “Come in later if you wish. I’ll still be here.” She went in to do her chores.



Rob observed the fine red brick Rectory in its own grounds just behind the church. The flyover section of the Western Avenue was also visible from this point, and of course, audible, reminding him remorselessly of his normal pattern of behaviour at this time of day.

He went over to the north east wall of the church and found the headstone from 1783 bearing the name of Rector Edward Betham and tried to read the script. Something made him look up and he saw another woman.

Busy place this, Rob thought, looking at his watch. It was 8.10am. The woman came out of the rectory garden and walked hurriedly across the churchyard and entered the church on the north side. She moved swiftly, but Rob observed that she was wearing red, her hair was dishevelled, long and curly and her face was creased with distress. Rob felt concern. Perhaps she needed help? He walked towards the door through which the woman had entered.

There was no door.

And yet Rob had seen the woman walk into the church. Feeling suddenly very uncomfortable Rob went round to the east door and opened it. There was the woman he spoke to earlier, duster in hand. The smell of polish re-assured him a little.

“Hello again.”

“Yes, hello. Did you see, er, is there another woman here today?”

“No, not today. Were you expecting someone?”

Rob looked around to see if someone had slipped in without being noticed.

“Are you alright? You look a little pale. My name is Lorna by the way”

“I’m Rob Castle. I’ve just had a bit of a shock, actually.”

“Sit down for a minute. What sort of a shock?”



Rob told Lorna what he had seen, ending with a bemused summary “But, the woman can’t have entered the church through the north wall as there isn’t a door, is there? I must have been imagining things.”

Lorna’s face told Rob that there was more to this than met the eye.

“Well, actually, there used to be a door on the north side. It was blocked off many years ago. They didn’t like the cold north wind you see! That’s where it would have been under the Coston memorial.”



Lorna pointed to the wall just under the Coston family memorial.

“That would have been exactly where the woman came in.”

“Strange. Couldn’t have come in there of course. And I would have noticed her anyway. Are you sure?”

Rob knew what he had seen, but he could find no explanation for it. To lighten the mood, he asked Lorna a question.

“What’s the story behind that memorial, the

Coston memorial did you call it?”

“Yes. Splendid isn’t it. That’s Simon Coston in the background and there’s his wife Bridget and their six children. The story is that Bridget died in 1637 at the age of 36, leaving poor old Simon with five daughters and a baby boy to look after. Sad little story but a really excellent memorial. Must have cost old Simon a bomb...”

As Lorna launched into her enthusiastic explanation, Rob looked up at the face of Bridget Coston.

It was familiar.

Rob suddenly felt the need to make an exit.

“I’m late. Must dash. Thank you...”

“I hope we’ll see you again, Rob!”

Rob returned to his car. Somehow, without thinking, he found himself on the Western Avenue, heading towards Park Royal.

When he arrived at work, everyone was surprised.

“Hi, Rob. What are you doing here? We thought you were having a day off with your old churches?”

Rob was pleased to see his colleagues.

“Yeah, yeah. I knew you couldn’t manage without me! Let’s do some work, shall we?”

NEIL RICHARDSON