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The Green Door

Written by Christopher Bowden

Published by Langton & Wood

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The Green Door

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LANGTON & WOOD

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First published in 2014 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 978-0-9555067-3-4

Typeset by Amolibros, Milverton, Somerset
www.amolibros.co.uk

This book production has been managed by Amolibros
Printed and bound by T J International Ltd, Padstow, Cornwall, UK

The church clock was striking ten. A strident reminder of the lateness of the hour, mournful and insistent, as if chiding her for being there at all. The door clunked to a close. She stood for a moment on the worn top step of Number One Partridge Court, flanked by a pair of standard bay trees in square lead planters. The mid-summer sun was well below the surrounding roofs now but the court itself, enclosed on three sides, retained the heat of a sweltering day. Clare Mallory was struck by the sense of calm and quiet, reinforced rather than disturbed by the steady splash of the fountain in the middle and the distant buzz of traffic on the Embankment.

Number One housed the chambers of Gordon Russell QC, a barrister of flair, energy and brilliance admired and feared by his opponents. Rated ‘a first class set’ by *Wise Counsel* magazine, the chambers comprised some forty barristers practising in a wide variety of fields. Clare was one of them, called to the Bar six years earlier and considered ‘a promising junior’ by the same magazine. Plaudits from anonymous but

well-satisfied clients declared that she was ‘sensible, level-headed and shrewd’, combining ‘an intellectual grasp with a pragmatic approach’. Quite why she failed to demonstrate these qualities outside the office during the events of the following weeks was something on which she, and others, would have cause to reflect for some time to come.

She made her way over the cobbles, past the familiar cluster of red brick buildings. Solid and reassuring, they exuded a sense of continuity and tradition, discretion and quiet confidence. The benches outside them, normally packed at lunchtime, were deserted at this hour. Even she was rarely here this late, preferring to stay on to tackle a last-minute brief than cart the bundles home.

Without warning, a figure stepped into the sickly glow of a lantern sprouting from a bracket on the wall.

“Ill met by moonlight, proud Titania.”

It was James Daly, twenty-six going on forty-five, dripping sweat in the Harris tweed suit and bright yellow waistcoat in which it was rumoured he had been born. He was only a little less handsome than Mr Toad, the nickname bestowed by the clerks of Boswell Buildings where he had at last secured a tenancy.

“James,” she said, her heart pounding. “Don’t do that.”

“Sorry, my dear. Did I give fright?” It was hard to believe he was younger than Clare.

“How are you, anyway? I hear that congratulations are in order.”

“Indeed, indeed. I’m uncommonly fine, thank you, and not a little dandy. What a splendid evening.”

With that, he straightened his bow tie and shuffled away, past the last remaining Ferrari in the car park to the discreeter bike racks down the ramp on the other side.

A narrow escape. Had he been waiting for her, lurking in the shadows beyond the lantern’s reach? The thought was unsettling. Thank goodness he didn’t linger longer or suggest a visit to the wine bar. After half a bottle of the house claret, James had revealed (‘vouchsafed’, as he might have put it) at a previous visit to Benchers that his interest in Clare was more than professional. Only the timely intervention of her friend Jessica had enabled a tactful departure and undue loss of face.

She went through the archway at the bottom of Middle Temple Lane and strode to the Embankment, pausing briefly to look across the river to the buildings on the South Bank and the final, snatched reflections of a dwindling sun. As she headed towards Temple underground station, she was suddenly overwhelmed by tiredness; the hours of concentrated work without a break were taking a toll. She needed to be at home. She raised a tentative arm; a taxi screeched to a halt. From force of habit, she gave the driver the address of her Hornsey flat, only to remember some minutes later that she had recently moved. Luckily, he was in high spirits and had no objection to turning round and going south of the river.

Two

Number twelve Mulberry Grove was a two-storey, flat-fronted house in a run of properties that looked much the same when seen from the street, apart from a spot of post-war infill near The Golden Goose, a local pub that attracted customers from further afield at Sunday lunchtimes when jazz was played upstairs. At the rear, the houses had been altered and extended in various ways. Not least number twelve, whose previous owners, Roland and Marcia Turnbull, had built an uncompromisingly modern kitchen extension, predominantly glazed, designed to complement what remained of its early Victorian host. The architects had described it as a 'box of light', providing a desirable increase in floorspace to meet the needs of a twenty-first century lifestyle; the neighbours had called it an eyesore that was out of keeping and damaging to residential amenity. Ten years on, no one remembered what the fuss was about or even noticed it was there.

The Turnbolls had commissioned furniture for their new extension, including an oak table of such

enormous dimensions that it would not fit into the Wiltshire cottage to which they were about to move. They agreed with Clare to leave the table and its eight matching chairs for a modest consideration plus her own more manageable scrubbed pine affair and an odd assortment of kitchen chairs.

It was on this large oak table that Clare placed a small card shortly after the taxi had delivered her safely to the gate of number twelve. Not the card the driver had given her in lieu of a proper receipt but the one she had found on the mat next to the bill that represented that day's post. She lined it up with the others. Five of them now, each a different colour but all saying the same thing in gilt letters: 'MADAME PAVONIA. Clairvoyant. Your future told, your problems solved.' No contact details, no other information to suggest how anyone could avail themselves of Madame Pavonia's services. Even if they wanted to.

The latest one was blue, following on from red, orange, yellow and green. Five days, five cards, five colours. A rainbow sequence, thought Clare, but incomplete. Were there two more to come? Then what? They were well produced but why go to the trouble and expense of printing them and pushing them through letter boxes without revealing where Madame Pavonia was based or how to get in touch with her? Perhaps, she reflected, it was the start of a wider campaign or was softening people up for personal visits.

Anyway, what problems did she want solved? She didn't have time for problems. Not her own at any rate,

what with Jessica's shameless affair with a married man who never quite got round to leaving his wife and her feckless brother's inability or unwillingness to secure gainful employment after the trouble he had caused the family last year. On the other hand, Jessica and Duncan had been an item for a while now and seemed pretty relaxed about it. And at least Colin got work from time to time with that Enigma Theatre Company, not that you could call acting a proper job with prospects.

She hauled herself up and over to the freezer to find something microwavable, did what was required and slumped back at the table with a glass of wine to wait for the beeps.

Indigo and violet slipped through the door on succeeding days, as expected. Rather satisfying, she felt, to predict what a fortune-teller was going to do, even if the pattern was fairly obvious. Yet why the cards were sent was no clearer. Quite the contrary; brief mention of the rainbow series in snatched conversation with the neighbours on either side met with blank looks and shaken heads. Just the usual collection of junk mail, they said: instantly binned, the only cards among them advertising plumbers, tree surgeons, mini cabs and the like.

It was not a comprehensive survey, of course. Other occupiers of the terrace may well have had Madame Pavonia's material. But somehow she thought not. Whether it was her or the house that was being targeted was another matter. Few people had her current

address. The cards could have been meant for Roland and Marcia. She had spotted a few books of the mind, body, spirit sort on the shelves when she first came to see the house. Not a very Roland thing, surely. Maybe Marcia had contacts in the psychic world, in which case the cards could be some kind of private joke among members of the fraternity or sorority or whatever they were called.

Clare pressed her forehead against the glazed door and stared into the garden, landscaped for the Turnbulls by a celebrity gardener when the extension was built and now well matured, despite replacement of some of the less resilient specimens that had succumbed to frost. A small stand of silver birch at the end shimmered in the late morning sun; tall grasses swayed in a gentle breeze. In the glass of the folding door, a reflection: seven rectangles of colour, end to end, along the edge of a large table.

The sharp metallic click of the letter box. On the hall carpet, floated beyond the mat, a plain white sheet of paper. She picked it up and turned it over. A Grand Summer Fair, she read, taking place the following Saturday. It was in the local park, once the grounds of a Palladian mansion when this area was still in the country and The Golden Goose was an isolated building called The Mulberry Inn. After many years languishing under Council control, the mansion had been refurbished and now accommodated a smartish restaurant with a function room on the floor above.

A Great Day Out! Fun for all the family! The flyer proclaimed a startling array of attractions in a startling variety of fonts. Dog-walking and gymnastic displays she could do without, falconry and sheep-shearing had left her cold at the ‘country fête’ held in the grounds of Gordon Russell’s Suffolk home last year, and fire engines from the local station held little allure. Even if the men were in uniform. The community and craft stalls might be worth a look, she thought, and so might the horticultural club marquee. And at the bottom of the sheet, squashed in like an after-thought, the simple statement that a fortune-teller (Madame Pavonia) would be present at this year’s fair.

The door of number twelve had begun to blister in the scorching sun. The chrome knob, one of the Turnbulls’ anachronistic additions, was painful to the touch. Clare held it with a handkerchief as she pulled the door to and set off towards the park, feeling slightly furtive in dark glasses and Italian straw hat. Focussed on the matter in hand, she did not notice the battered white van on the other side of the street. It started up and followed her progress, heedless of the traffic building up behind.

She heard the fair well before she saw it. Over the Tannoy, ear-splitting announcements about lost children, the avoidance of litter, and the day’s unmissable events were punctuated by blasts of ‘Summer Holiday’ and other songs thought appropriate to the season. A pound coin tossed into an empty ice cream tub on a table

at the park gates bought her a lucky programme and entrance to the fair.

It was too hot to push and shove in the hope of bargains. She maintained a sedate pace as she moved along stalls that sheltered from the sun in stuffy gazebos, looking as best she could over heads and between shoulders, darting forward when gaps appeared. A few new hardbacks at a fraction of the published price – review copies, the woman said; some hand-made cards; two jars of apple chutney; a pottery badger for Jessica. Basket bulging, she made her way to a stall selling iced lemonade, oblivious of the man in the sweat-stained tee-shirt loitering nearby with a glass of beer in one hand and a mobile phone in the other.

She saw the tent beyond Professor Swozzle's Punch and Judy show, the booth silent until the next performance later in the afternoon. The professor himself, aka children's entertainer Ron Gently from Tooting Bec, was taking advantage behind the booth with a slice of frittata on a paper plate. The tent, she thought, would not have looked out of place at the Battle of Agincourt. With broad stripes in yellow and red, it was round and had a pointed roof. A sign propped against a barrel said:

MADAME PAVONIA
Famous Clairvoyant
Your future revealed, your questions answered
Special offer for Summer Fairgoers
Today only
£10 for a half-hour session

The canvas at the entrance of the tent parted abruptly as a red-haired woman, pale as milk, left in haste, snaked between stalls and was absorbed by the crowds beyond. Clare walked past, turned by the Rotary Club tombola, and ambled back again. She was in two minds. This was her chance to put a face to the name on the cards, she told herself, to find out why they had been put through *her* door and no one else's. On the other hand, she could be wrong about being singled out and what on earth would she say then? Either way, there seemed little prospect of sustaining a conversation lasting anything like the allotted thirty minutes. She pretended to look at postcards on the local history society stall while she decided what to do.

A man with a mobile phone was stationed outside the tent, as if to prevent other potential clients from entering. He had the seedy and menacing air of a night-club bouncer. But as she approached he looked up, spoke into his phone and slid away.

She took a deep breath, pushed through the thick gauze inner curtain and penetrated the body of the tent. It was hard to see in the gloom after the brightness of the sunshine she had left behind. Her foot caught the edge of a rug laid over the grass. She stumbled forward and steadied herself on the back of a chair.

"Care, my dear." She started at the sudden intervention. A voice from nowhere, rather mannered, almost theatrical, to Clare's ear but with more than a trace of Cockney in the mix.

As her eyes adjusted, she made out a woman at a round table covered in a green cloth, the crushed velvet lustrous in the light of a candle burning low. The woman waved her to sit down. Clare saw not the veiled Gypsy fortune-teller she had imagined, all rings and bangles and topped by a turban, but a neat woman in, what, her mid-ish sixties?, conventionally dressed for a summer's day, set apart only by the thick woollen shawl round her shoulders. She was staring at a small sphere, balanced on a wooden stand in the middle of the table. The ball glowed in the soft light of the candle.

After the warmth outside, the air of the tent felt cold. Clare rubbed the goose bumps on her bare arms, struck by the intensity of the silence. It was becoming oppressive. She shifted in her seat, basket clamped between her feet, straw hat balancing uneasily on top. When would something happen? Was she supposed to speak first?

“Madame Pavonia...?”

“Indeed,” she acknowledged, with a gentle incline of the head.

“Not tarot, then, or palmistry or...tea leaves,” said Clare, for something to say. Her courage had deserted her. She felt foolish and tongue-tied, not at all the brisk and confident young barrister from Partridge Court. “You use a glass ball.”

“A *crystal* ball is my chosen tool. I stay true to it. This is natural quartz, my dear. Do not underestimate its power.”

“No. Sorry,” she said, fingering the gold locket that dangled at her throat. “I just...”

“How may I help you? Have you suffered a loss or bereavement? Do you wish to make contact with a departed? Or do you seek guidance in matters of love or the direction of your life?”

“Er, nothing specific. Just curious, really. I saw your cards and your name on a flyer.”

“Ah, yes. Let us see what counsel we may give you. But first I fear we must attend to the money side. I find it best to deal with this before a reading; it is so easy to forget by the time we have finished.”

Disposing discreetly of the ten pound note, Madame Pavonia asked Clare to put her hands on the table, close to the crystal but taking care not to touch it. The fortune-teller shut her eyes and appeared to relax, breathing slowly and evenly. Her lips moved but no sound emerged. Was she in a trance? Gradually, she unclosed her eyes and gazed into the ball. Clare noticed it had minor cracks and imperfections. They caught the light of the candle and sparkled.

“I see the number one. Perhaps you are alone or too self-reliant. I see a well. It runs deep. You keep your feelings hidden or reserved for someone or something important. I see a ship or a boat. It is capsizing. This could mean a failure to communicate with a person in the past.”

Madame Pavonia looked more deeply into the ball and frowned.

“I see a tower: you feel trapped or imprisoned in some way, maybe in a job or a way of life. There is a bridge. It offers an opportunity, but use it wisely. Once

that path is taken, there is no going back. Yet there is a barrier, a wall, an obstacle that must be overcome before progress can be made. Or perhaps it is some resistance on your part. I see the letter P...and a hand outstretched. This could be someone you know who wants to help you. Even if you do not yet realise it. Even if you do not think you need such help.

“Does any of this make sense to you, my dear, provide some pointers that may assist you in life’s journey? If you have any questions, do feel free to ask me.”

Clare stared for a while into the flame of the candle, guttering, sputtering its last. Madame Pavonia leaned back in her chair on the other side of the table and coughed gently. Then Clare said, “Thanks but it’s rather all-purpose, isn’t it? A bit indefinite. I mean, it could apply to pretty well anyone. To a greater or lesser extent. And are we talking past, present or future?”

“Life is a continuum. The future becomes the past soon enough. The present is barely the blink of an eye.”

“The board outside says you reveal people’s futures.”

“I *see* their futures, as a rule. Sometimes it’s best not to reveal all that I see. People are looking for a positive outcome.”

“And in my case?”

“The crystal remained cloudy. Whatever was there was obscured.” Madame Pavonia faltered. “There is nothing I can add.”

“What do you mean?”

“My dear, I saw no future.”

“I have no future?”

“The crystal offered nothing that I could interpret with any certainty beyond the symbols I mentioned. It happens sometimes.”

“Where does that leave me?”

“My advice would be to reflect on what I said earlier. Do you know who P might be?”