

Enid and the Lost Boys (1362 words)

Doctor Enid Mayhew had loved Durham ever since she'd first arrived, all those years ago, as a student. Brought up in a London suburb, she had been bewildered by the bustle and noise of the city: had known she would never fit in. She'd been born into the wrong century, she sometimes thought: Jane Austen's time might have suited her better – slower, gentler, with all things regulated by decorum and custom. But then again, she wouldn't have done very well in the marriage market. And the only real alternative for a spinster then was to be a governess – and she knew full well that, for her, taking care of unruly small children would have been a very special kind of hell.

She walked along by the river, enjoying the peace of it all: the steep wooded banks, the old mill house, the weir, the boats – and above it all, the glorious crown made up of the cathedral and castle. She remembered the first time she'd seen that view, from the window of the train as it crossed the viaduct on the day she'd come up for her interview. It had taken her breath away, and she'd known instantly that this place would shelter her.

Her subject was English, and she'd studied hard. She wasn't brilliant, she knew that quite well; but she didn't have the distractions that the other students had. Parties would have terrified her, even if she'd been asked to any; she'd divided her time between her all-female college and the lecture halls and seminar rooms, where she'd sat, taking copious notes and listening carefully, her – actually rather beautiful – hazel eyes blinking behind her thick-lensed glasses, her short hair clipped back neatly from her face, her pleated skirts below the knee when other girls flaunted miniskirts. She didn't care that she had few friends: she found life between the covers of her books, as she read them in the nooks and crannies of the ancient library on Palace Green, in her room at college where she studied and wrote notes in the light of an Anglepoise lamp.

She'd got a first, and gone on to gain an MA and then a PhD. She'd specialised in the Romantic Period – even she realised there was something faintly ironic about that, but there was something about Byron, Keats and Shelley that enchanted her. She thought of them as her lost boys: younger brothers who had lived too hard and died too young. Her own life was beautifully organised, from the little house which overlooked the cathedral to her neat office at Elvet Riverside. She seldom left Durham; everything she needed was there. And if, as she read her carefully prepared lectures, she occasionally looked up and saw that the faces turned towards her were bored or indifferent, she would certainly feel a pang of disappointment: but then, blinking a little, she would return to the words and lives of her lost boys and all would be well.

She had been desolate when she'd reached retirement age, but the college had allowed her to stay on various committees, and once a week, she went to dinner there. She was lonely, but that was nothing new. And she continued to study, with the thought that one day – quite soon – she really would write the definitive book about the intertwining lives and work of her boys.

She was feeling a little tired, she realised. She found a seat and sat down. It was the tiredness that had made her go to the doctor's. She'd expected to be told that it was her age and it was to be expected, but he'd done some tests and just that morning, he'd told her that actually, there was a problem, and it was a serious one.

And there was nobody she could talk to about it.

She closed her eyes for a few moments, suddenly weary of all the peaceful beauty.

When she opened them, she wasn't sure how much time had gone by. But the shadows had lengthened and the air had cooled. It was time to go home.

As she walked slowly up the hill, stopping rather frequently to look at the view and rest, she thought about her life. What did it add up to, really? She had been contented, but could she claim to have been happy? What good had she done? What difference had she made to anyone's lives? So many more years she'd had than the lost boys – Byron had died at 36, Keats at 26, Shelley at 28. So young, so very young. And yet how much life and work they'd packed into those short years! Whereas she... The doctor had spoken of an operation, but really, what was the point?

At home, she looked round the pretty living room. Two walls were lined with bookshelves; the others were hung with pictures, mostly watercolours and prints of the places where her boys had travelled to. She'd never been to any of those Mediterranean countries. She'd always meant to, but somehow it hadn't happened. And now it was too late.

She moved around, picking up a paperweight here, a piece of china inherited from her mother there. She stopped in front the cherrywood table. It wasn't, on the whole, a useful table, though it was a very pretty one. But it had a drawer. And inside the drawer was her secret – her precious, wicked secret.

She opened the door and lifted it out. It was a first edition of Byron's collected poems, beautifully bound and exquisitely illustrated.

And it was stolen.

She had found it in a dark corner in the inner depths of the library on Palace Green. It had been pure chance. It wasn't where it should have been, and she'd only noticed it because it was sticking out slightly – and because it looked out of place among the puny history books on either side of it. She had drawn it out, and, opening it, she'd known straight away exactly what she was looking at. It was a direct link with the dashing Lord Byron: she knew it was very rare and very valuable, and she also knew that she had to have it. After all, what good was it doing down here, lost and unappreciated?

It had given her the most enormous pleasure over the years. When she sat down to look at it, pleasure settled over her like an exquisite shawl, glowing with bright embroidery and silken tassels. She had never regretted taking it, and it was too late to give it back – Palace Green wasn't even a library any more. And what good would it do to anyone in need if she handed it over to the university, with all its millions from hard-pressed students and wealthy benefactors?

Her eyes – those lovely, short-sighted eyes – lit up. No. She had a much better idea. In fact, she had several.

Six months later, a woman sat sipping wine on the balcony of a house overlooking the aquamarine waters of a small port on Italy's Adriatic coast. Her silver hair was short and stylishly cut, and she wore a simple linen dress. She was pasting newspaper cuttings into a scrapbook. She read the headlines again.

Rare book attracts record price at auction

Unknown benefactor sets up fund to encourage and support young writers

Durham charity for homeless receives large donation

Then she closed the book, smiling. Her operation had been a success, and she'd done what she wanted to do – what she *needed* to do. And now here she was.

She looked across at the boats bobbing gently in the ancient harbour, with beyond them, a line of blue mountains. Soon, she would go down to the small restaurant in the square, where, if the distinguished-looking Italian who had nodded courteously to her last night was there again, she would smile at him. If he wasn't, it didn't matter: she had her book. It was nothing remotely academic – it was a detective novel, set in Sicily, and full of glorious characters.

Life held so much pleasure. The lost boys had known that, and now, so did she.