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For Mum and Dad

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MYSTERY of the NIGHT WATCHERS



A. M. HOWELL





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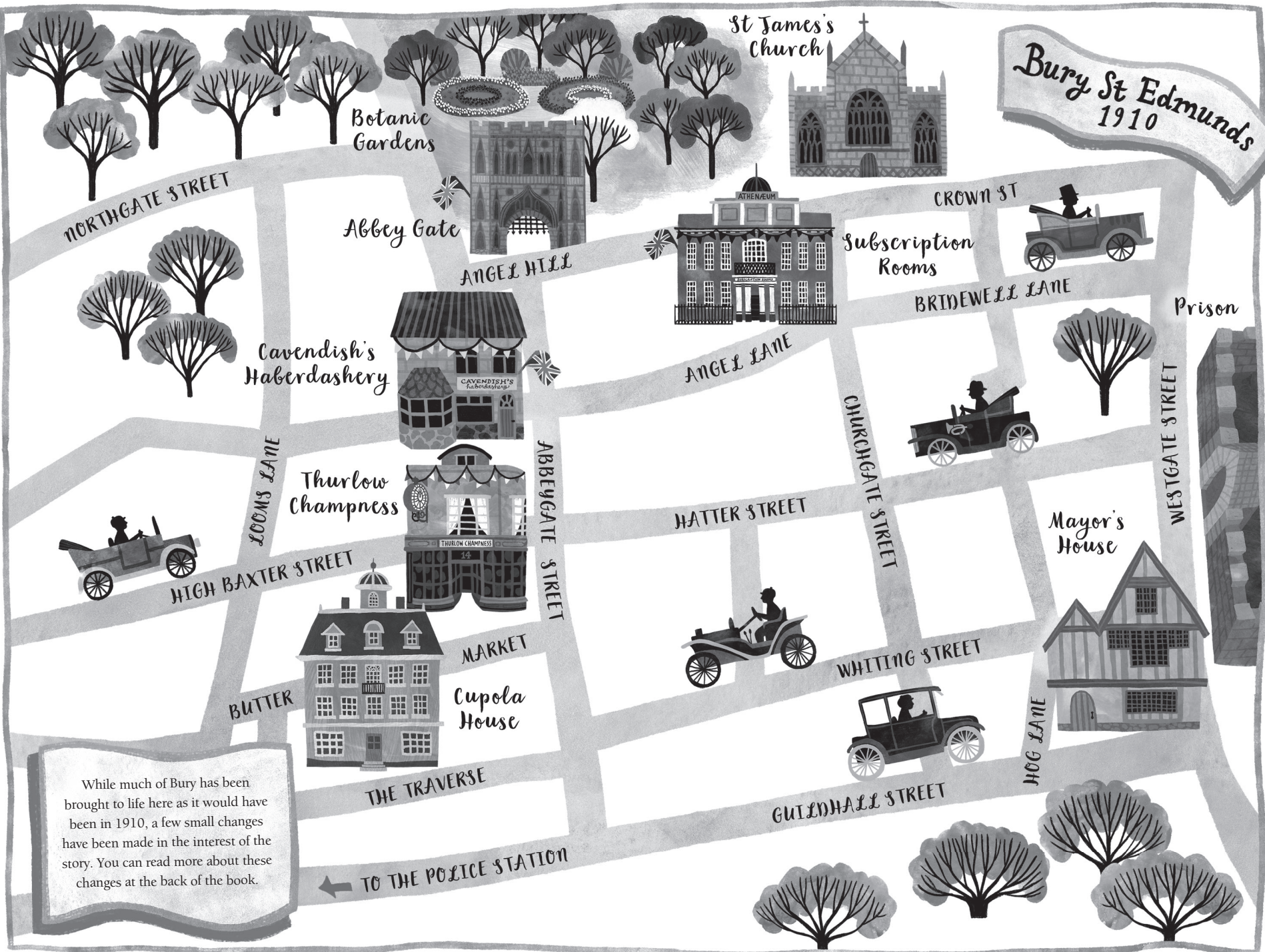
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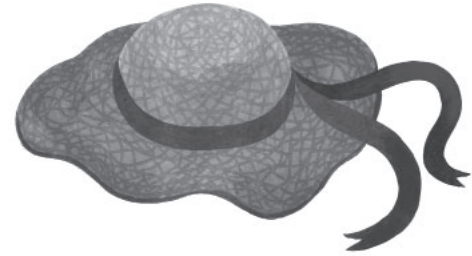
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Bury St Edmunds 1910



CHAPTER I



Anything But Normal

It was not normal for Nancy to see her mother's pale cheeks tilted towards the night sky in their back garden as they had been for the past week, watching for the return of Halley's comet. It was not normal for Nancy to come across her mother cleaning their family's shoes two nights in a row after everyone had retired to bed, her long nightgown covered in thumbprint smudges of black polish. Nancy also felt it was far from normal for her mother to be so mesmerized by the unremarkable table clock in the hallway of their Leeds town house, staring at it in the way you might do just



before a birthday or Christmas, eager for time to march onwards.

When Nancy questioned her mother about these things, she would just give her a distracted smile and set her a task, like folding ironed clothes, helping her younger sister Violet perfect the curves of her handwriting on her school slate, or taking their terrier Monty for a walk.

But these strange things Nancy noticed about her mother had settled in her mind, making her alert for other strange behaviour. Which is why Nancy was staring hard at her mother now as she bustled about clearing away teacups and saucers and kipper-smeared breakfast plates. Mrs Bell, their home help, normally came in to do this after she and Violet had gone to school.

Knowing that she was unlikely to get a satisfactory answer to why her mother was behaving like this, Nancy sighed, left the kitchen and walked into the hall to say goodbye to her father as he prepared to go to work. She brushed past Violet, who was sitting on the bottom step of the stairs feeding an already portly Monty the remains of her breakfast sausage, her school socks around her ankles, a smear of brown sauce staining the sleeve of her white school blouse.

“Goodbye, Father. And good luck today,” Nancy said, passing him his black hat and umbrella from the coat stand.

Her father’s forehead crinkled into a frown as he adjusted his hat and bent to give Nancy a quick kiss on the cheek. “I’ll do my best. I know you think the punishment is harsh, but theft is a serious crime, no matter what the circumstances.”

Nancy pushed her hands into the pockets of her navy-blue school pinafore, thinking that while her father as a solicitor had to respect the law at all times, it would be most unfair if the children in his case today were sent to prison for stealing a few apples. They were only hungry after all.

Her mother rushed down the hallway, wiping her hands on her apron. “It worries me that you take your father’s court cases to heart so, Nancy,” she said, passing him a fresh handkerchief from a drawer in the sideboard.

“It worries me too, dear. It worries me a great deal,” said Nancy’s father, pushing the handkerchief into his trouser pocket and putting on his mackintosh. “Not that Nancy takes my cases to heart, but that these boys at fourteen – just two years older than she is – should

have their young lives take such a terrible turn for the worse. You should be proud of our daughter for having such a strong moral compass. I know that I am.”

“Do I have your moral compass too, Father?” piped up Violet, lifting up Monty and kissing his wriggling ears.

Nancy’s father did up the last brown button of his mackintosh and smiled. “Yes, little darling. I am certain of it.”

Nancy looked up at her father, and then at Violet and saw how alike they were with their amber-flecked eyes. Nancy might have the same moral compass as her father, but she hadn’t inherited his eye colour. Her birth father had died when she was just one. With no remaining family in Suffolk, Mother had told her that a year later she had packed up their things and moved to Leeds, with Nancy in one hand and a single suitcase in the other, to lodge with an old family friend. She had soon met and married Jacob, and Nancy’s half-sister Violet had arrived a few years later.

After kissing their father goodbye and closing the front door behind him, Nancy’s mother glanced at the table clock ticking on the sideboard. “Come along, girls. We don’t want to be late for school,” she said.

“But it’s still early, we don’t need to leave yet,” said Nancy, also looking at the clock. Her mother was in her peculiar mood again, just as she had been all week.

“Violet, your blouse,” fretted their mother, noticing the stain and looking at her youngest daughter in dismay. “Nancy, please help Violet find a clean one upstairs.”

“But…” Nancy started to protest.

“Now, please, Nancy,” said Mother in a voice that meant business.

“I can find it on my own,” piped up Violet.

“No, your sister will help. Off you go. I expect you both to be downstairs in five minutes with your coats, hats and shoes on,” said their mother firmly, taking off her apron, smoothing the fabric of her long, dove-grey skirt and adjusting the enamel brooch at the neck of her blouse.

Nancy sighed and looked down at her little sister, her dark wayward hair and pink cheeks. She raised her fingers to her own walnut-brown, shoulder-length curls that were neatly braided, and reminded herself that Violet was only seven and could not be expected to do everything by herself, no matter how much Nancy might wish for it.

“Why is Mother in such a hurry today?” Violet asked, as they traipsed upstairs.

“I have no idea,” sighed Nancy. “I have a mathematics test at school and I certainly don’t want to be early for that!”



The drizzle dulled everything to grey as Mother hurried Nancy and Violet along on their twenty-minute route to school. Nancy tightened the ribbons on the straw hat that she wore day in day out, now that spring had supposedly arrived, and walked ahead, enjoying the distance from Violet, who chattered incessantly. She strode past the greengrocer’s, admiring the arrangement of imported pineapples and mandarins in the window, past the newspaper boy on the corner who tipped his cap to her and bellowed, “Halley’s comet...get your latest news here.” She stood for a second and looked at the headlines on the front of his stand.

* FRIDAY 13TH MAY 1910 *

NATION CONTINUES TO MOURN
THE DEATH OF KING EDWARD VII.

FEARS OF HALLEY’S COMET ARE FOOLISH AND UNFOUNDED!

Every evening for the past month Nancy had been scouring her father’s copy of the *Leeds Mercury* newspaper for articles about Halley’s comet, which was due to pass by the Earth after an absence of seventy-five years. Advances in science meant that this time the presence of a toxic cyanogen gas in the comet’s tail had been detected. Her father had explained that this in itself was not thought to be a problem, but as the Earth was due to travel directly through the comet’s tail in less than a week’s time, there had been some talk that the gas would be deadly to humankind. The closer the comet got to Earth, the clearer it became, and for the past week Nancy had watched for it from her bedroom window, wondering if she should be worried about it. For some scientists were telling people to stay indoors, seal up their windows, wear protective gas masks and take preventative anti-comet pills to stop themselves from being poisoned. Nancy knew her father was firmly of the opinion that the comet would cause no ill effects and anticipated its arrival keenly, but she noticed her mother’s cheeks would become drawn and pale when

anyone spoke of the comet. This caused a glimmer of unease to rise in Nancy's chest and she wondered whether her mother perhaps had a different view that she was keeping to herself. Could that be why she had been standing in the garden looking at the night sky a little fearfully?

Nancy nodded to the paperboy and strode past two women wearing the fashionable hobble skirts that her mother despised so, preferring more fluid skirts and dresses instead. ("They are called hobble skirts for a reason, Nancy," she would say. "I will not have my stride restricted by such a ridiculous garment.") Omnibuses rumbled by, passengers packed like sardines on their way into the city for a day of work. Motor cars occasionally overtook the buses – there were more on the roads than ever and her father had even said quite casually the week before that he had been wondering whether they should buy one. Leeds became as hot and smoky as a factory chimney in the summer and it would be nice to drive to the coast and take in the sea air more frequently.

Nancy was so distracted by her thoughts of gently lapping waves between her toes, that she realized she had passed their usual turning to the school. But when she looked behind, she saw their mother had also

missed the turn and was marching straight ahead with a determined look on her face. Violet was pulling on Mother's arm.

Nancy came to a halt and waited. "We missed the turn," she said. It was then that she noticed their mother was clutching something in her left hand. A moss-green carpet bag. "What's that?" she asked, her nose wrinkling.

Mother gave Nancy a quick glance. "We're going away for a few days."

Nancy stared.

"Does that mean no school?" said Violet with a grin. "Hurrah."

"What do you mean, *going away*?" asked Nancy. She looked at the carpet bag again. Caught between the bag's clasp was the hem of her best cream nightgown. She swallowed. "But I have a mathematics test at school and—"

"There will be no mathematics test – in fact there will be no school for either of you today, or the early part of next week," their mother interrupted, adjusting her grey felt hat. "We are going on a journey and I need you both to be very well behaved and not ask too many questions. Now, the omnibus stop we need to take us

to the train station is just over there.”

Nancy frowned. A *train* journey on a school day? She watched Mother take Violet’s hand and march onwards. Nancy looked back in the direction of her school, a jolt of unease tightening her throat. This was anything but normal. Why would their mother suggest such a trip and where was she taking them?



CHAPTER 2



Train Station

Nancy gripped Violet’s hand firmly, the smell of oil and smoke smarting in her nose, the occasional train whistle blasting, as they hurried to keep up with their mother, who was moving quickly through the station.

“Keep close, my darlings,” their mother said, turning briefly to glance at her children, her gloved fingers clenched around the leather handle of the carpet bag. The sight of the bag again brought Nancy to a sudden halt, as bursts of steam punctured the air, the trains groaning as they pulled in and out of Leeds station.