THE Treasure Seekers

Cathy Faulkner



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In loving memory of
Leonard George Merrifield
1922–2012

I hope you would be proud.

Historical Note

The Treasure Seekers is set just after the First World War. It was a time of great change. So many young men had been killed, injured or left permanently disabled. Others suffered from what was then called 'shell shock' – physical tremors, nightmares and anxiety as a result of their traumatic experiences on the battlefield.

Immediately after the war, those who survived faced another tragedy: a flu pandemic that claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands of otherwise healthy young people. At the time, people mistakenly believed that this illness started in Spain, so they called it 'Spanish Flu' or 'The Spanish Lady'.

Life had changed for the wealthy landowners too, like Martha's grandfather, the owner of Highbridge Manor in the fictional village of Aldwick. Landowners had enjoyed lavish lifestyles and had provided housing and employment for the local community for generations. Changes in the tax system meant that it became more expensive to look after their large estates. Now, they were often forced to sell or destroy their properties.

And lastly – very importantly for *The Treasure Seekers* – lots of the country's treasures, such as paintings and stained-glass windows, had been removed from their original locations and hidden when the war started. This was to prevent them from being destroyed in the German Zeppelin bombing raids or stolen in the case of invasion.

The Aldwick church window panels in this story were hidden by Martha's grandfather. Unfortunately for the village, nobody alive knows where they are…

November 1918

Martha

The chimneys at
Highbridge
are awfully tall –
proud looking.
Like Uncle
Oswald was
in his long
leather boots
and shiny
brass buttons
before he went
to war.

The chimneys at
Highbridge
are awfully tall –
solid and
dependable,
steady and
strong
just like you,
Grandfather,
before they
managed to destroy you.

The chimneys at
Highbridge
are awfully tall –
lonely looking,
d e s e r t e d,
l o s t and
f o r l o r n.
Like me.
Left behind.
All alone,
now that
you're gone.

It's funny that I never really noticed just how awfully tall the chimneys at Highbridge were

until the roof burned down.

How I wish I'd captured Highbridge forever
while that was still possible –
a photograph of my own
to frame in my room,
a drawing with light
to bring relief in the darkness.

But even if I did have a camera,
it's too late now.

It's only been a year,
and already the bracken's beginning
to break its way
into your beautiful garden –
an unwelcome guest from the windswept moors.

It doesn't belong here
and I won't let it take over.

We are the caretakers,
you always told me, Grandfather.
Our job is to preserve
the treasures of the past
for the sake of those who come after.

The bracken rustles gently in the breeze.
There's a feather caught on the spiky fronds –
small, downy and white –
billowing and rippling

unable to tug itself free.

I don't know how long I sit and watch that feather.

But at last, I heave myself up,
enter the ruined Hall,
make my way down
to our secret cellar,
light the four candles
and in the resulting radiant glow,
I gaze at your treasures
and remember,
just like always.

I shouldn't be here.
Mother will be cross.
Aside from the danger,
she'll accuse me of **wallowing in grief** again.
It's all right for her –
you were just her father-in-law,
I don't think she even liked you much.

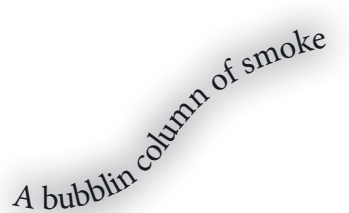
She says that a year's too long,
that I must let go,
accept it and
focus on the present –
make some friends my own age,
find something worthwhile to do.
But I can't,
and why should I?

What's so splendid about the present?
There's nothing and no one here for me in Aldwick –
not since they all turned against you
and destroyed you so cruelly.

There's only Mother with her nagging,
Miss Goodthorpe with her lessons
and Father –
poor Father –
who, despite my attempts
at cheerfulness,
silly jokes,
gifted drawings,
and homemade buns,
has a vacant expression
and a constant sadness
which has robbed him from us all.
Apart from them, there's nothing.

Stanley

I lean on me fork for a moment,
wipe sweat n ash off me forehead
n smear it over me smock.



rises up from hungry flames.
Tis hot work, this ere shovellin –
dead leaves n broken branches –
but it'll be soon done,
n Mister Roberts can stop his grumblin
n his constant goin on:
Gotta kill them pesky pests n diseases, lad,
else land won't be ready for new year.

Forget land –
need a new start meself –
past two years've been nowt but misery n sorrow.
Ain't laughed in all that time,
not like Albert n me used to,
rollin in heather
up on moor,
till us sides hurt.

Nowt's same now,
what wi war –
not since we lost window:
old stained-glass window
from church at top of hill.
Not that I care two hoots
bout some fancy pieces of glass,
all gaudy colours n
strange-shaped pieces.
Never cared much for them painted faces –
sickly n yellow n flat n sad.
But folk do say they're what kept us safe –
from fightin
famine
sickness
n death
for donkey's years,
n they're right,
nowt ever used to go wrong –

nowt at all.
Not til His Lordship made us take it out.
For safe keepin, he said.

Ma said we never should've let him.
N she's right –
I know that now
what wi folks
takin to their beds
n droppin like flies.

Back at me shovellin,
I gaze at amber flames
glowin like molten glass.
For sake of Ald'ick folk
who've lost so much,
n need protectin,
I must get window back –
all four of its separate parts –
if it's last thing I do.

N I know
just who can help me.

Martha

There's someone ere to see you, miss,
Kitty says, making me jump,

charcoal sailing across my page
like a cloud of grey smoke,

consuming my neatly drawn Hall,
and ruining my umpteenth attempt
to cheer my father up.
It's hopeless.
Father's always taught me to be kind,
to show compassion to those in need,
but none of my efforts ever seem to work
on him.

E's waiting in parlour,
Kitty continues.

I ball up the paper
and scrunch up my face.
Visitors to the vicarage don't come to see *me* –
he'll be here for Father
with plans for a christening,
a wedding,
or more likely a funeral.
Or perhaps he'll be one of those bowler-hatted monocled men
who arrive from York with a case full of paperwork
and leave Father with a headache
and a deeper sullenness that lasts for days.
I hope not, for his sake.
There have been
far
too
many
men

like that
since the fire.

Me, Kitty?

Yes, miss. That's wot e said.
A Mister Stanley Rowland.
Shall I let im know yer on yer way?

Mister Stanley Rowland.

My supper turns in my stomach
and I swallow hard
to keep it down.
I know what Father would say
about the need for forgiveness
and turning the other cheek,
but how dare Stanley come here!
How dare he set foot in this house
after all that he did,
or his interfering mother did
at any rate.

All at once I'm back in the Hall,
three days before the fire,
crouching at the door of your study
on the second floor,
listening intently,
scared and confused
by the heat in her complaints,
the fierceness of her demands
and her accusations that burned.

As if you deserved any of it!
You wouldn't have treated them unfairly
or paid them too little –
I know you wouldn't!

Miss?
Kitty asks,
bringing me back
from the fiery dispute.
E's in parlour.
she says again.

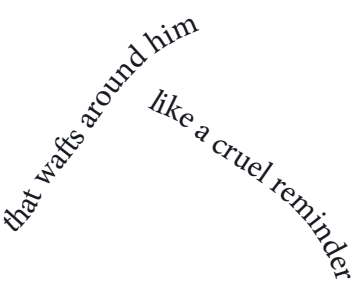
The parlour.
Where the impenetrable dark cloud
crept in from the storm
and first settled over Father
when he received word of the fire,
his face fading to the colour of ash,
his frame reduced to a burnt-out shell.
The idea of a Rowland
standing in there –
my anger flares…

I'll tell im yer on yer way,
Kitty says
and scurries from the room.



Stanley Rowland looks like a fish out of water
standing by the fireside,
ungainly and gangly
in his too-short trousers and muddy hobnail boots.

After all the mess they've already caused,
how dare a Rowland bring in more?
I hold my breath,
determined not to breathe in
the acrid smoky smell of bonfire



of the blaze they started
the night of the storm,
the dreadful damage,
deep depression
and death they caused.
I glare at the awkward-looking boy
as hard as I can.
He springs to guilty attention,
pulls his hands from his pockets
and picks at grubby fingernails.
Stanley's a few years older than me –

fourteen maybe –
but I make myself t
a
l
l,
the way Miss Goodthorpe has shown me.
I lower my shoulders and lengthen my neck,
and, borrowing my words from Father
(if not his kindly tone), say,

Good evening, Stanley.
How can I help you?

I see the boy at church on Sundays, of course,
but I've only ever *gl*a*red* at him
never said a word –
not until now.
And nor has he said a word to me
so I'm surprised that his voice is deep like a man's,
despite his scrawny limbs,
his narrow shoulders
and his timid eyes.

Miss Martha,
I hope tha don't mind me disturbin –
uninvited n out of blue.
But I need thar help –
or us folk of Ald'ick do.

I **do** mind.
Something inside my stomach tightens,

I clench my fists,
nails digging into my palms.
The cheek of it!
After what they did to you, Grandfather –
shouting at you,
blaming you for their loss,
demanding more pay at the mill,
asking for shorter hours,
fairer treatment –
to exploit your good nature,
steal the spark from your son,
to gain from your sacrifice,
to trouble you,
ruin you,
and then
let you
perish
by
fire.

How can they even think to ask for help?
This Stanley must think I'm stupid.
I want him to leave right away.

But … part of me is curious.
What on earth can they want from me –
a miserable twelve-year-old vicar's daughter
without any friends
who can't even cheer her father up?
The villagers of Aldwick

have already got
exactly
what they wanted
by starting that blaze.

Tha see, Miss Martha,
Stanley continues,
wi all that Ald'ick has been through,
village needs its protection back.

Huh! That's rich.
The protection you gave them, Grandfather,
for so many years –
the jobs you provided,
the houses you let,
the security you offered –
now they want that protection back!

And it is *we* who have suffered in any case –
My poor father and I.

Stanley glances at your portrait by the fire.
You smile back at him with kind blue eyes,
and the grubby boy in front of me
swallows hard.
That there window His Lordship had us remove,
piece by piece before war,
tis needed more than ever.
Our David's watched over parish
wi his stone n slingshot
for hundreds of years...

I can't believe the ridiculousness of it.

The David in the window, Stanley?
The
ancient
figure
painted
on
glass?

Stanley's face reddens.

Aye, miss.
I know –
Mister Roberts reckons tis a load of old rot too.
Says windows protect us from nowt
but wind n rain.

I've no idea who Mister Roberts is,
but I'm in full agreement.

N once upon a time,
doubtless,
I'd have agreed wi him,
Stanley says.
But not now.
Not now so many've died –
first on battlefield
then from flu.
He pauses,
looking sheepish.

So I were wonderin
if tha might help me –
look for it, I mean.

I cross my arms firmly across my chest
and dig my heels into the thick carpet.
If Stanley Rowland
thinks I'm ever going to give up my time
to help him in his search,
he's got another think coming.
So what if you took that window away?
It doesn't mean *I* have to help him find it.
No.
Stanley can beg
and plead
and reason as much as he likes,
the four panels in that window are staying
just
    exactly
        where you hid them.

Stanley doesn't deserve them.
His mother doesn't deserve them.
No one in this stupid
self-centred
selfish
superstitious village
will EVER
deserve
them.

For the first time,
Stanley looks at me directly.
Despite his boyish discomfort,
there's an adult determination
in his eyes and on his brow –
he's clearly not about to give up.

Like I said,
Mister Roberts reckons window
ain't got nowt to do wi war.
Wars just happen,
he says.
N he's right about that,
I suppose.

He shifts his weight awkwardly
onto the other leg.

But what don't 'just happen' is,
soon as war's over,
flu comes along –
six in Ald'ick just last week
taken by Spanish Lady
wi her fever n chills n whatnot!
Who knows where it'll end
if window ain't returned.

I try my best to hold his gaze.

This is all very well, Stanley,
but I don't know what it has to do with me.

My eyes flicker up towards you.

I simply don't know where the window is.

After all, even if I wanted to,
what would be the chances
of finding all four of its panels?
Two mere children
taking a shot at a giant task like that,
with nothing to guide us!

Stanley glances up at your portrait again
as if searching for the strength to go on.
Miss Martha,
His Lordship –
he must've told someone.

Not me, Stanley,
I reply, in all honesty.
I will not betray your memory
by playing my part
in helping the people of Aldwick
claim back the window
you loved so very much.
Not after they stole
every
last
thing
from you.
So kindly leave me alone.

But there's no stopping Stanley,
and he's waving his arms about now,
grubby and gangly.

Wi respect, miss,
that makes no sense.
His Lordship wanted to protect window
or so he said—

And so he did!
I retort,
uncrossing my arms,
placing both hands on my hips,
angry at the faintest suggestion you might lie.
And if only he hadn't
***died** too soon –*
I place extra emphasis on the word
and glare at him,
hard,
– he'd be able to tell us
just exactly where it is,
***wouldn't** he?*

Stanley looks uncomfortable.
Sure miss, but—

I won't be interrupted!
And who wouldn't have done the same,
Stanley Rowland,
after what happened
to the windows in Hull
and Hartlepool,
in Scarborough,
and Whitby?
All bombed by Zeppelin airships!

I'll have you know that
Grandfather did the right thing –
*no, he did the **only** thing –*
when he did what others had done
with the windows in York Minster:
when he removed them for safekeeping.

But can't tha see?
Stanley exclaims,
heat rising in his boyish face.
Us window's a bit different
from ones in York.

I picture ours,
bright gleaming gems of colour
throwing radiant beams onto Father
as he stands in the pulpit,
a warm smile on his face.
I fail to see how.
Smaller, no doubt,
but no less ancient.

But us window –
tis special –
it's looked after us
n kept us safe—

What nonsense you speak,
Stanley Rowland.
Just listen to yourself!
And with that, I ring the bell to summon Kitty
who shows him to the door.