

A Flicker of Light

By Lynne Colgrave

We arrive at the entrance to Endcliffe Park and, with the help of the taxi driver; I roll Dad down the ramps. Bathed in sunshine, the lawns look inviting and blossom overcomes the stale biscuit smell of my father's clothes. Labouring with the decrepit chair on loan from the care home, I make an effort to point out Queen Victoria's monument, the adventure playground, the ducks on the river and anything else I can think of. Dad sits unmoved, his granite face a mask of resignation. The invisible man. To cheer him, I buy ice-creams. Mine drips down my forearm and his into his lap, as the sun climbs. My father's face is covered in the stuff, just like a two year old.

We cross the road to Bingham Park, dodging the cars that glide over the smooth bumps, and I try not to tip him out. Hidden behind the grand Victorian terraces that fringe Rustlings Road, this green space was bequeathed to the children of Sheffield by a wealthy industrialist as a gift to his wife. I read out this information, kindly supplied by the Council on a wooden board, in an attempt to ignite my father's interest. Throughout my childhood, he was always interested in such things as local history, but Dad is preoccupied with ice cream, so I wheel him inside the park where flowers embroider the lawns. A group of people are congregated by the river. Intrigued, I wheel Dad's chair in amongst the crowd who are watching a play about the water mill. The actors, three men dressed in flat caps and braces, pull us into the past, making us part of a landscape far removed from this pleasant and sunny afternoon. Three stoop-shouldered men are grouped around a makeshift campfire, like sallow-faced witches. Their hunched shoulders, repeatedly lifted so as to raise the chest to breathe, and the occasional deep throated coughing, give away their

profession as Victorian mill workers. There is an argument happening – one of the men is being rough-handled into joining the grinders’ union but he cannot afford to risk his pay (A Flicker of Light)

packet. The row escalates into a struggle before he breaks away from centre stage to disappear into the bushes. Then, a hush. We watch as the two remaining men plan to waylay the other to give him a beating. I glance at Dad, wanting him to be caught up in the drama, wanting him to enjoy being out in the open, here with me, on this singularly beautiful day.

“Let’s go,” he says. Reluctantly, I struggle to my feet and grip the sticky handle of the wheelchair. We set off juddering along the broken pavement. As we approach the main road, he’s suddenly alert. “There!” he barks. “There!” He’s pointing across the road up towards Banner Cross. I have to take a circuitous route over the road via the pedestrian crossing in order to calm him. I push the rickety chair up the steep hill from the roundabout until I’m exhausted. When we reach a row of terraced shops, he raises his hand to signal me to stop.

“What Dad? What?” The sweat is beginning to trickle from my hairline and my hands are sliding from off the handles of the wheelchair as he squirms, trying to sit upright. I have to rest the chair against my knee whilst I fumble for the brake to prevent it from rolling backwards down the hill.

“Peace,” he says, unmoved by my struggles. He’s staring at a shop window at the display of photographs of houses advertised for rent, most of which appear to be student accommodation.

“Peace?” I echo, stupidly. Dad is still pointing, waving his finger in the air as if it didn’t belong to him, his eyes still fixed on the shop. In the back of my mind, something is beginning to surface. My eyes scan the dirty grey slabs of the wall, searching. Soon, I find

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it; the number of the house in discreet black lettering to the left of the doorway next to a narrow alleyway so narrow an average man could hardly squeeze through it.

959, Ecclesall Road.

It is only then that I remember a story that Dad told me long ago, long before this disease held him in its grip.

“Peace...Charlie Peace! Right Dad?” He lowers his finger, rests his hand back on his lap and sighs heavily. At last. Together we stare at the alleyway and see the dark shape of the murderer concealed there. We hear the hollow echo of his steel-capped boots as he enters the alley, soon followed by the piercing shrieks of a woman in distress. A door bursts open, sending gaslight flickering through the passageway and a man’s raised voice is suddenly silenced by the hard thud of two bullets. A slightly-built man runs through the shadows out onto the lamp-lit cobbles and down the street, only to disappear into one of the many alleyways that crisscross the area of Bannercross. Then, the stink of the gun-smoke dissolves into exhaust fumes and the noisy chaos of traffic that is choking Ecclesall Road. “They hung him, didn’t they, Dad? Charlie Peace. He got what he deserved in the end, I suppose.”

“Death penalty,” Dad says fiercely, and turns to stare straight into my eyes. For a long moment, he holds my gaze. We head back in silence towards the park gates where the

taxi is humming by the kerb, and as the taxi driver pushes him back up the ramps, my father is staring blankly.