

No good deed goes unpunished

Harding always felt a pang of regret when he approached no. 1 Palace Green, the home his architect friend had designed for his clients. Whilst there wasn't much of a resemblance between the stately new build and his idyllic Red House, which his friend had designed for him and had to be abandoned after only five years because the needs of the firm had pulled him back to London, they were both constructed of red brick and that was enough for him to wish things had been different. His family had been reduced to living above a shop, which was far from ideal. Whereas his country home had a garden and an orchard, and friends wanting to escape the city had visited most weekends, ensuring there had been merriment and experiment in equal measure. It was where they had come up with the plan to set up a company which designed beautiful furnishings for ecclesiastical and domestic settings. It was where they had made their first stained-glass quarries, painting everything from walls and ceilings to furniture, and his wife and her sister had sat and embroidered.

A large drop of rain splattered on the top of his head. It had stopped raining, but he had made the mistake of walking under some trees.

Upon ringing the doorbell, his associate Mr Reid and his master decorator, Mr Willis, answered. It was writ large on their faces that they didn't think the dining room was a success.

"Are Mr and Mrs Howard here?" Harding asked.

"No. We've not seen them for some weeks," answered Mr Reid. "Will Mr Finchley-Browne be coming?" the Cambridge man enquired.

"No. He's has another engagement," Harding answered.

He removed his hat and, looking straight past them, enquired, "How is the decoration of Mrs Howard's boudoir progressing?"

"Very well," answered, Mr Reid. "You will be most satisfied with the colours..."

Harding couldn't bear the delay in seeing the dining room a moment longer. He knew his agitated hand had betrayed that he wasn't listening anyway, so he hurried off without excusing himself. He burst into the room without taking pause to steel himself first.

Certainly, the room was light and pleasant as Mrs Howard had specified but, to his great disappointment, the white panelling made it look as appealing as a room covered in dust sheets, one might even say unfinished. They had settled on white as he didn't want to create another 'Green Dining Room',

which had been the firm's interpretation of a commission from the South Kensington Museum.

As for Finchley-Browne's canvases, which had been fixed end to end under the ceiling, so they formed a frieze, the abundance of white made his colours look drab. Harding liked to put contrasting colours and patterns next to one another, but Finchley-Browne's paintings jarred with the soft colours of the ceiling paper to ill-effect.

Certainly, Finchley-Browne had produced some of his best work. His figures were graceful and pleasing and his compositions had made a virtue of the long and narrow canvases. Nevertheless, he would have to return and brighten his palette.

Harding didn't need to be told the room simply would not do.

The Howards were either related to or acquainted with the great and the good. Anyone invited to dine at their house would talk of his failure and their damning verdict was sure to reach the ears of his critics at the arts magazines, whereupon it would be spread about in print. The firm was still in its infancy and had to compete for work against all the established firms, therefore, he could not afford to produce anything less than wondrous.

It seemed Mr Reid and Mr Willis had anticipated his disappointment as they hadn't followed him into the room.

He passed them as he stormed out the house, flinging the door wide open. As he negotiated the steps and resolved to go to the South Kensington Museum for inspiration, he called back to them, "Something must be done about the dining room but I'm at a loss as to what".

The omnibus stop was just round the corner on Kensington High Street, but he needed to walk and think.

"What to do? What to do?" he kept muttering to himself, though not nearly quietly enough as he was aware of passers-by turning to stare at him.

He had only walked for fifteen or so minutes when his path became blocked by a group of ladies admiring a window display. He stepped off the pavement and, as he passed them, looked between their heads to see what held their attention: bottles of eau de Cologne, the '4711' brand, standing side by side in stepped tiers. He nudged his way to the front of the crowd and stared into the shop window, unaware of the annoyance he had provoked by his rudeness.

The sunlight had the dazzling effect of brightening the greenish old gold on the labels. The display brought back memories of visiting the '4711' shop in Cologne on his honeymoon and meeting with an

experience akin to being a manuscript hunter and finding a particularly beautiful, illuminated volume.

Harding and his new wife had gone on a six-week tour starting at Paris and continuing eastwards to Basel, which is happily situated on the banks of the Rhine. They had continued northwards, following the river's course, visiting cities on its banks as they went. Thereafter, they had made their way slowly back to the coast, taking in Belgium's medieval highlights.

At Cologne, his wife had bought him a bottle of '4711'. Its intricate label had, by his calculation, been printed to great effect using only three wooden blocks, one for each colour: black, gold and Bremen blue. The bottle was topped with a wax seal, which served a dual purpose: it hid the stopper and secured a matching cardinal-red ribbon, through which the golden, ringed-top screw for pulling out the stopper was threaded.

The artist James Wickham had told him the story of how he and a friend had run out of money in Cologne and had been forced to extend their stay. On his daily visits to the post office to see if money had been sent by an acquaintance, so they might pay their hotelier and return to London, Wickham had also been drawn to the '4711' shop by the allure of the bottles on display in the window.

Upon his return, Harding had shown the bottle to his friends and collaborators at the firm. It had been a factor in deciding the colour scheme for the South Kensington Museum's 'Green Dining Room', although the finished design was very much the work of his architect friend, who had brought various influences together.

Harding had wanted to create a unique dining room for the Howards but, gazing upon the bottles of '4711' in the London shop window, it served to remind him that, if a design is good, one never tires of it and, if one changes perfection, in all likelihood, one will end up with something that is less than perfect. He settled then and there to use a similar blue for the Palace Green wood panelling, one that is just as green as it is blue, although a more muted shade as he didn't want to upstage Finchley-Browne's canvases. And, he would paint the edging of the ceiling braces a cardinal red and apply a motif in gold. Lastly, he would give the mid-section a gold background but patterned so that it imitated worked leather. As for the small panels, perhaps he would apply a Turkish floral motif in silver.

He then continued to the nearest omnibus stop where he waited impatiently for the bus to come.

In his bedroom, he located his bottle of eau de Cologne, which he pocketed. Then, he began sketching at his desk. He knew exactly what he wanted so it was just a matter of getting his vision down on paper.

Drawing interiors was not one of his strengths but it would suffice to convey to Mr Reid and Mr Willis what he wanted. He then picked up a brush, which he dipped into a jar of water, and began mixing paints, which he applied in washes.

Next, he rummaged through his fabric swatches until he found the exact pleasing colour to be applied to the Palace Green panelling. Whilst it didn't match the shade used on the '4711' label exactly, it was true to it in spirit by being neither blue nor green.

As for the other considerations, he could simply show Mr Reid and Mr Willis the effect he wanted.

Returning to his design, he found it needed more time for the paint to dry, so he pulled a piece of blank writing paper onto his pad of blotting paper, dipped his pen into the pot of ink and began to write.

'Mr. Reid. Go with Mr. Willis directly to the 'Green Dining Room' at the South Kensington Museum. I will meet you there. I will explain how Mr. Howard's dining room can be saved. Mr. W. Morris.'

He had an errand boy called whom he sent to Palace Green with his message and enough coins to pay his omnibus fare to get him there and back and a generous tip.

Harding pulled the bottle of '4711' out of his pocket and spoke to it.

"I wish I knew who designed your label as I would shake him by the hand and tell him he had saved the day."

He then curled his sketch around the bottle and slipped it into his pocket, whereupon he set off again. This time he would not be denied a brisk walk across Hyde Park.

"That's it? That's the end?" asked Russell, the IT specialist.

"Yes," said Nina, pulling off her reading glasses and putting down her printed sheets.

She glanced round at her fellow writers and waited for the next person to give an opinion. The delay, that wall of silence, was telling. If a story was good, the attendees would talk over each other in the rush to be the first to compliment it.

"I'm confused. Which object inspired the story?" asked Alexander, the accountant.

Their monthly meetings followed a set pattern. Everyone turned up at Grace's house, engaged in some awkward small talk until everyone who said they would be attending had shown up and placed their mystery item on the dining table as they took their places. The writers could choose any item which inspired a story. They then had half an hour to write. When the time was up, they'd go round the room clockwise and attendees would read out what they had written. These writing exercises were intended to

sharpen their wits and improve their technique. Victoriana and gardening fanatic Polly had had pieces published in several magazines so one had to assume she wouldn't bother coming out on a cold, dark, rain-lashed night, if it had no value.

Aside from the lemon, Nina could have written about a travel book on New York, a man's watch from the 1950's, a piece of clay pipe, a post card of a Hieronymus Bosch painting, a nautilus shell, a woolly hat or a skull box Angus the archaeologist had brought along. He had to assure the squeamish that it hadn't been used to store bone in it... yet.

"It makes one grateful that certain other professions aren't represented at our meetings," Alexander had quipped.

John had chosen the lemon too. He had read out a letter to his younger self. He was to be brave and talk to the dark-haired beauty in the lemon grove, to seize the day. Nothing much happened but he had described the scene with lashings of purple prose: the scent of the lemons, the buzzing insects, the delicate breeze, the dazzling sun, the woman's doe eyes. It was a given that anyone who wrote in a literary style attracted praise.

"I wrote about the lemon," Nina answered. "It reminded me of the '4711' scent and I've been reading a biography on William Morris, so I combined the two."

"Perhaps you should be less ambitious next time, dear," suggested Polly, patting her hand.

She might have shrugged off the remark more easily if she hadn't brought along some walnut whips for her as she had complained the previous month that she hadn't seen any for years and really liked them.

Nina had her revenge by taking the last chocolate biscuit from the plate Grace had put out for her guests and made a pact with herself to become published in a magazine before the year was out.

"I don't flipping well believe it!" Nina cried out. "The little, bespectacled, insole-wearing, tea leaf!"

She instantly regretted her outburst.

"Don't believe what?" enquired the man with whom she shared the bench.

She had spotted him a couple of months back. They often arrived at the park around the same time to have their lunch. She had managed to sit on the same bench as him before but he hadn't initiated a conversation and she didn't know what she could say that sounded natural and required more than a 'yes' or 'no' answer.

"This lady at my writers' group took one of my story ideas and got her version published."

Nina told the man her 'lemon story'.

"How did she end her story?" he asked.

Nina lifted her magazine and began to read.

'Dear Miss May, I trust this letter finds you well. I was prompted to write to you after a curious incident at a recent dinner party I gave at Palace Green. Had Mr. Harding still been with us, I'm sure he would have taken great delight in it. Owing to bad weather, we were down in number, so I asked Murray to bring an acquaintance. To avoid thirteen at the table, in desperation he brought along a gentleman who was stranded in London because he couldn't sail and had nowhere else to be. He was a manufacturer of eau de Cologne by way of an inheritance. When he entered the dining room, without any prompting, he recognised at once that your father's design had been based on the bottle label of his most ardent competitor. As one might expect, he was most put out, and swore he would redress the balance and take a design element in the room and use it as his trademark. The man spent the rest of the evening feasting on his surroundings and without having his share of the conversation. As he parted company, he paid us many compliments. Yet, he would not be persuaded to reveal which design element he had chosen but he assured us he had settled on one. He has repaid my hospitality by taking me prisoner every day. Instead of going straight to the obituaries, I find myself compelled to scour my newspaper for advertisements for eau de Cologne to see what caught his eye. As the saying goes, no good deed goes unpunished.'

"There you have it," said the man, "she managed to get in a twist. It sounds like there's essentially nothing wrong with your writing, but everyone likes a satisfying ending."

By the time he got up to return to his work, Nina had got his name and had made him laugh twice, and was quietly thanking the tea leaf. There was even an outside chance he might attend the next Writers' Meeting.