

## Grace

Grace strode through the open gates of Billington Park, swinging her bag of library books, and revelling in the autumn sunshine .

With luck she'd find her special bench vacant, and be able to spend an hour in the fresh air, enjoying her favourite author.

She paused briefly, to watch a group of schoolgirls playing football with energy and expertise. How different from her own schooldays!

She would have loved to be a player. She had never got the hang of hockey or tennis at school, but a *football* , that was different.

Being so tall and well built, she'd have had the advantage of her size and reach in goal, and probably felt right at home on the pitch. Now that would have been something else!

Grace walked on deep in thought, beyond the duck pond and through the rustic arch, until she entered the formal rose garden surrounded by a high beech hedge.

It was her special place of peace and privacy, where just a few late roses perfumed the autumn air.

Good! Only one bench was occupied and by the usual gentleman who always remained hidden behind his newspaper, discouraging any attempts at conversation.

"Lovely morning" Grace remarked politely, as she passed him by.

"Ghruuuuuuumph!" he retorted.

Grace could live with that .It was a normal Saturday morning.

Placing her books beside her, she removed her gloves, loosened her jacket and raised her face to the warmth of the October sun..

Life had been no rose garden, but overall she was content The trouble had been that Grace, in spite of her name, was not a graceful, or feminine, woman.

In her young days, women had been expected to be feminine, but tall, big-boned and inclined to be clumsy, Grace had learnt at an early age to make the best of reality and not waste time dreaming of what might have been.

After a long and tedious career in the haberdashery department of a well-known department store, at last she was free!

No more 9-6, Monday to Saturday. Her pension was meagre, but her tastes were modest.

Life was good.

She opened her eyes quickly at the sound of a rustle and a whoosh. Through the beech hedge a black and white football shot like a cannon ball.

Instinctively, Grace leapt to her feet and caught the missile in her large and capable hands.

What sounded remarkably like a chuckle came from behind the newspaper.

Grace stood and waited to see what would happen next.

Around the corner of the hedge appeared a freckled face wearing a worried frown.. On spotting the ball the face heaved a sigh of relief.

“That’s my football! Sorry-I didn’t mean to kick it so hard! Did *you* catch it?” The skinny boy was staring with admiration at Grace’s hands.

“Yes. In time to save the rose bushes.” Grace handed over the ball.

“Great hands! Goalie’s hands!” He nodded his young head approvingly. ”Fancy a game now? Just shooting in. You in goal.”

Grace became aware of the newspaper shaking uncontrollably.

“Well, I ...I have never actually played before..”

“Never mind that! Come on!”

Within seconds, Grace found herself positioned between a discarded shabby anorak and a grey woollen scarf.

After a few shots and fairly comfortable saves by the novice goal keeper, the boy advanced with his grubby paw held out.

“I’m Byron” He announced, and then in way of explanation, ”My Mum likes poetry”.

“Grace”, she responded.

He considered this for a moment.

“That’s no good for a footballer! Got any other names?”

There was no way Grace was going to admit the name of Felicity to this extraordinary young boy. Grace was bad enough.

“Dalglish. Miss Dalglish.”

Byron beamed approvingly.

“Great! I’ll call you Kenny. Come on, Kenny. Two more shots and then I must go.”

Grace returned to her bench pink and glowing with exertion. She felt really alive.

The taciturn gentleman folded his newspaper and rose from his seat.

“Well done!” He murmured as he passed by.

Goodness gracious! Whatever next, Grace thought , as her pink flush deepened to crimson..

The following Saturday brought with it a keen and biting wind. Grace decided to sit for just five minutes at her favourite spot before returning home for a nice cup of tea.

As she sat, Byron’s slight figure loped through the arch.

“Hi Kenny! Can’t play today. I’m sorry” He apologised.

Grace looked down with concern at the pinched face, and the hands blue with cold.

Then she realised that his right hand was clutching a piece of string-the other end being attached to an extremely shabby hearthrug. On closer inspection, the hearthrug proved to be a dog.

“It’s Albert, see. Got to find him a home. I thought he could live with us, you know, in the yard, but Mum says it’s too cold, and anyway, the neighbours wouldn’t like it.

He costs too much to feed as well. What with me and Mum being on our own. Well, along with Keats – he’s my baby brother.”

Byron was now regarding her with a very solemn expression, as if somehow she would find a solution to his problem.

“Oh dear! ” She exclaimed feebly.

“Have you got a dog, Kenny?” he asked eagerly.

“Well, no,” Grace began to see where all this was leading.

“A cat?”

“No cat either.”

“Well, there you are then!”

With as much ceremony as handing over the crown jewels, he carefully placed the dirty piece of string into Grace’s hand.

“Don’t overfeed him. He’s ever so greedy.”

“Oh, no! I can’t.... I wouldn’t know what to ..Oh, come back!” But with a flashing smile, Byron had disappeared round the hedge, confident in his friend Kenny’s capability.

“No dogs allowed unless on a lead,” a deep voice commented from her side.

“Well he is on a ..well.. a piece of string,” Grace finished weakly, but Mr Newspaper had a broad smile on his face.

“Had her long? What’s her name?” He bent down to give the hearthrug a friendly pat.

“It’s not actually mine and it’s name is Albert.”

“Oh! Funny name for a lady dog”

“A lady dog!” Grace gasped and stepped back until the string was at full stretch.

Albert moved towards her and sat down neatly at Grace’s feet, looking up at her with an expression of utter adoration. She lifted a paw and placed it in Grace’s hand.

Laughing, Grace bent down and smoothed the tangled hair on Albert’s head.

A sudden warmth suffused her being. She had always wanted a dog. A dog of her own to walk across the common...

But first, she had to get both of them home. A bath for Albert first, followed by a good groom to get out those tangles. And then a nourishing meal..

“You will have to change her name,” Mr Newspaper commented.

“No, I think not,” Grace decided. After all, she herself had been misnamed for sixty years, and besides, Albert had a nice, comfortable ring to it.

“I’ve a good leather collar and lead at home,” Mr Newspaper was saying. “I’ve no use for them now, so I’ll bring them here for you tomorrow.”

He smiled, a friendly, see-you-again smile as he strolled away without waiting for her reply.

He really did have the most pleasant voice...

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