

“Change and decay in all around I see”— The social background to *Quartet in Autumn*

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Quartet in Autumn opens, unusually for a novel, with a description of the four characters' hair; it ends with three of them selecting canned food from the store-room of the recently deceased fourth character. As Pym says in the novel: “In some subtle way this reflected their different characters”, and this is equally true of their hair.

Edwin wore his, which was thin, greying and bald on top, in a sort of bob—‘even older gentlemen are wearing it longer now’, his barber had told him—and the style was an easy one which Edwin considered not unbecoming to a man in his early sixties. Norman, on the other hand, had always had ‘difficult’ hair, coarse, bristly and now iron-grey, which in his younger days had refused to lie down flat at the crown and round the parting. Now he did not have to part it and had adopted a medieval or pudding-basin style, rather like the American crew-cut of the forties and fifties. The two women—Letty and Marcia—had hair as different from each other as it was possible to imagine in the nineteen seventies, when most women in their sixties had a regular appointment at the hairdresser for the arrangement of their short white, grey or dyed red curls. Letty had faded light brown hair, worn rather too long and in quality as soft and wispy as Edwin’s was. People sometimes said—though less often now—how lucky she was not to have gone grey, but Letty knew that there were white hairs interspersed with the brown and that most people would have had a brightening ‘rinse’ anyway. Marcia’s short, stiff, lifeless hair was uncompromisingly dyed a harsh dark brown from a bottle in the bathroom cupboard, which she had used ever since she had noticed the first white hairs some thirty years earlier. If there were now softer and more becoming ways of colouring one’s hair, Marcia was unaware of them.”

Pym, the anthropologist, whose novels owe more to observation than imagination, has conveyed in this brief introduction, an immense amount of information in an oblique and economical way. In the course of the novel she uses details of name, dress, speech, behaviour, location and ambiance to tell us, if we decode her allusions, all we need to know about her characters. On the first page, she places them in their social class, Edwin and Letty in the upper-middle class, Norman and Marcia in the lower-middle class. Likewise she has told us that Edwin and Letty both have hair which is “soft and wispy”, as are their personalities. Norman and Marcia, on the other hand, have, respectively, hair which is “‘difficult’ ..., coarse, bristly and now iron-grey”, and “short, stiff, lifeless ... uncompromisingly dyed a harsh dark brown.” We know already how they are going to behave.

At the end of the novel the three survivors have gathered at Marcia’s house, which she has left to Norman in her will, to help him dispose of her possessions.

The three of them had spent an interesting afternoon in Marcia’s house, going through her things ... They had started their work upstairs, but when they came down to the kitchen it had been even more surprising to open the store cupboard and come upon such an array of tinned foods ...

‘So beautifully arranged and clasified,’ said Letty, with wonder in her tone. ‘Meat and fish and fruit, and here soups and macaroni cheese and ravioli...’

‘Light supper dishes,’ said Norman. ‘I’m very partial to macaroni cheese—it was a godsend when I had that time with my teeth.’

‘Yes, it would be.’ said Letty, her tone now warm with sympathy.

‘I think Norman had better have this stuff,’ said Edwin. ‘After all, if the cousin and her son have given you the go-ahead ...

‘Well, I suppose the son might have some—a young man living in a hippy pad would probably be glad of a few tins. Luckily he doesn’t seem to know quite how many there are. Why don’t we all take a few for ourselves now,’ said Norman.

Hesitantly, for it seemed very wrong to be helping themselves to Marcia’s store cupboard like this, the three of them began making their selection. In some subtle way this reflected their different characters. Edwin chose spam and stewing steak, Letty prawns and peach halves, Norman sardines, soup, butter beans and the macaroni cheese.

Then, in the bottom corner of the cupboard, they came upon a bottle of sherry, unopened. It was a Cyprus cream sherry, reputedly made from grapes growing in vineyards which had once belonged to the Queen of Sheba.

Cyprus cream sherry, the least sophisticated choice that there could be. Thus, in the concluding lines of the novel, Pym is still adding little touches to her portraits of the Quartet.

In the same way, her eye for detail allows her to paint the society in which they live and act. She provides the reader with more of the practical details of everyday life in London than in any of her earlier novels. In parallel with life in Britain as a whole, the novel is also much less “churchy”. The centre of the action is no longer a parish, but an office. In Britain the 1970’s, the setting for *Quartet*, was a decade of financial crisis, social unrest and industrial strife, very different from the decades in which Pym’s early novels are set. In the course of the seventies there were two periods when a strike or the threat of a strike by the miners caused the government to enforce a three day working week to save energy, and another period when American support for Israel in the Yom Kippur War, and the Arab reaction to this, caused oil prices to rise four-fold. At the end of the decade Britain enjoyed the “Winter of Discontent” when even the grave-diggers went on strike, leaving the dead unburied. What is more, Pym’s characters are approaching their seventies, growing old in a harsher, noisier world. The National Health Service, the Welfare State, large-scale immigration, even the EEC (which was to develop into the European Union), had created a world so different from that of *Some Tame Gazelle*, let alone *Crampton Hodnet*. In some ways it was even a better one.

It was, however, a coarser world, and Pym does not hesitate to reflect this. Returning to the square where he lived Norman encounters “cars, parked side by side, overlapping on to the pavement. Some of them were so large that their hindquarters—rumps, buttocks and bums—juttied over the kerb and he had to step aside to avoid them. ‘Bugger,’ he muttered, kicking one of them with a small ineffectual foot. ‘Bugger, bugger, bugger.’ On her way to work Letty sees a woman “slumped on a seat on the Underground platform” who reminds her of her school-fellow Janet Belling.

[When] a young woman...bent over the slumped figure with a softly spoken enquiry...the figure reared itself up and shouted in a loud, dangerously uncontrolled voice, ‘Fuck off!’ Then it couldn’t be Janet Belling, Letty thought, her first feeling one of relief; Janet would never have used such an expression. But fifty years ago nobody did - things were different now, so that was nothing to go by.

Meanwhile, Marcia, waiting on another platform “noticed that somebody had scrawled in crude capital letters, KILL ASIAN SHIT.... They brought back another hospital memory, of a man who had wheeled her on the trolley to the operating theatre, bearded and with a remote, dignified beauty, his head and body swathed in bluish gauze. He had called her ‘dear’.”

It is often said, and believed, that the Sixties were the great decade of change, the watershed between the old, traditional, deferential world and the new world of freedom, equality and white hot technology. The change, how-

ever, was less consistent, slower, more ragged, than people nowadays imagine. Whoever it was in the London of the Sixties that was permanently stoned and engaged in strenuous wife-swapping, it certainly was not graduates living in Central London, as my friends and I ruefully acknowledged. It was in fact a rather traditional, disciplined society. One day in 1962, when I was living in Ebury Street, on the borders of Belgravia and Pimlico, though more attached to the latter than to the former, the front door bell rang. There stood a large policeman who sternly pointed out that I had not taken in my dustbin, or trash can, since it had been emptied that morning. I hastened to rectify this crime against decency.

For the great mass of people, manners and morals changed very little. Even music changed only by degrees. “The Sound of Music” and “South Pacific” easily outsold the Beatles. Probably the clothes marked a greater change than the music. The invention of tights for women in the Fifties (I remember visiting a cousin who lived in a large cold barrack of an Irish country house, and who astonished me by throwing up her skirt to show that she was wearing tights, exclaiming triumphantly: “These make it possible to live in a house like this!”) made possible the introduction of the mini skirt.

It was in the Seventies that real change occurred. What were the Seventies like? Let’s compare two different accounts of the decade, one written in 2012 from a right-wing point of view, and one written in the same year from a left-wing one. Roughly speaking, the first half of the decade passed under a Conservative government headed by Edward Heath, the second half under a Labour, or Socialist, government, headed first by Harold Wilson, and then by Jim Callaghan.

Our first witness is Philip Johnson, writing in the *Telegraph*.

The country in the Seventies was still in the grip of a down-at-heel, post-war shabbiness that reflected the failure of successive governments to create a modern economy.

It was a period of unremitting gloom, when the country known on the Continent as ‘the sick man of Europe’ almost expired. In 1972, I and my schoolmates were doing our homework by candlelight after the Heath government clashed with the miners over pay and Arthur Scargill’s flying pickets blockaded the coal depots. By 1975, after another miners’ strike, Heath was gone, Harold Wilson was back in No 10 and a woman few people had heard of was in charge of the Conservative Party.

Only with the recent release of Cabinet papers have we learnt how close to the edge we were then. Lord Balogh, the Labour government’s economic adviser, warned the chancellor, Denis Healey, that the country faced a ‘possible wholesale domestic liquidation’. Then, as now, the fault lay with uncontrolled and unsustainable debt-fuelled economic growth—but in the early seventies it was engineered not by Labour but by the Conservatives. The so-called Barber Boom—named after the Tory chancellor Anthony Barber—had pushed inflation to above 20 per cent and interest rates into double digits...

In 1975 we still had a heavy industrial sector—but much of it was in state hands, inefficiently run and an intolerable drain on the taxpayer. The fatal combination of state control and union militancy had turned the mines, the steelworks and the shipyards into the least productive in Europe. But they employed hundreds of thousands of people, were heavily unionised, and the Labour government was unwilling to carry out any reforms that might have ensured their long-term survival.

The unions held the nation by the throat and were throttling it to death. Every news broadcast seemed to contain a report from a factory car park somewhere with hundreds of men raising their hands to approve yet another strike call in support of a 35 per cent pay rise. The union shop stewards—Red Robbo and his like—were the real power in the land, the hedge-funders of their day. They drove the economy into the ground and almost wrecked it.

So it came as no great surprise that the 1975 referendum on whether to stay in the Common

Market resulted in a “yes”... We had been to Germany and the Benelux countries and could see that other countries were better off than we were. Without Europe, we were sunk; or so we thought...

The centres of our big cities, which have been transformed out of all recognition over the past 30 years, were squalid and dirty, especially when the bin men went on strike. Town Halls and public buildings were black with the accumulated grime of a century of pollution, while the brutalist concrete architecture of the Sixties, erected just 10 years earlier, was already falling apart. The inner-city estates were becoming the crime-ridden hellholes they remain to this day. On top of all that, out country was in the throes of a terrorist war, with troops on the streets of Northern Ireland and bombs a frequent occurrence on the mainland. In 1974, IRA attacks killed dozens in Birmingham, Guildford and on an M62 coach. Bombs were far more prevalent then than they are today; and yet the response in civil liberties terms was much less draconian than it has been recently in the face of the jihadi threat...

If there was a musical movement that captured the spirit of the times it was punk. Seen as an anti-establishment reaction to the pseudo-intellectual prog rock of Genesis and Pink Floyd, it was more than just counter-cultural. It was loud, crude, unhygienic, boorish, seedy and delivered with a snarl on its face. Just like the decade. I loved it—even the weather.¹

Our second witness is Dominic Sandbrook, an historian who in 2012 wrote a series on the 1970s for the BBC. After admitting that in November 1974 even James Callaghan told his colleagues ‘If I were a young man, I should emigrate’, he goes on to say,

And yet the strange thing about the 1970s is that although many people vividly remember the power cuts, strikes and shocking headlines, they often have surprisingly affectionate personal memories of the decade that taste forgot.

It has become a cliché to look back through rose-tinted glasses at the world of Bagpuss, space hoppers and Curly Wurlies... [Bagpuss was a children’s TV programme, space hoppers were large inflatable balls with two handles on the top astride which one could bounce down the street, and Curly Wurlies were a brand of chocolate bar still popular in some countries to this day.] But in a funny way, those things actually work very well as symbols of the decade, because what they represent is the reality of everyday affluence.

The fact that so many children had space hoppers, ludicrous as it may seem, is testament to the fact that even working-class families now had a solid disposable income and could afford toys for their younger members... The truth is that behind all those terrible economic and political headlines, most ordinary families in 1970s Britain were better off than ever.

While people shook their heads sorrowfully over the breakfast table, digesting the news of some new IRA bombing or absurdly petty British Leyland strike, their surroundings often told a rather more optimistic story. The lurid furnishings of their new suburban homes, the swanky hostess trolley in the kitchen, the bottles of Blue Nun and Black Tower cooling in the fridge, the brand new colour television in the lounge, the turmeric-coloured Rover SD1 in the drive, even their teenage children’s painfully tight flared trousers—all of those things, which are so easy to satirise today, reflected the realities of a brave new world, forged in the crucible of mass abundance.

And although we often think of the 1970s as the end of something—the tired, miserable hangover after the long party of the Swinging Sixties—it makes much more sense to see them as the beginning of a new chapter in the story of modern Britain.

For most ordinary people, after all, the 1970s brought new experiences that their parents and grandparents could barely have imagined. The most obvious example is the package holiday abroad, which 30 years earlier would have seemed like something from science fiction. In 1971, British tourists took some four million holidays abroad—which then seemed an awful lot. But by 1973 that figure had jumped to nine million and by 1981 it was more than 13 million. For even relatively poor, working-class families, holidays no longer meant Blackpool and Bognor but Malta and Majorca. And “abroad”, once regarded with such suspicion, now meant two weeks of sun, sand and sangria.

The boom in foreign holidays was only one example of a nation broadening its horizons. Yes, the TV schedules were still full of casual sexism and astonishing racism, while teenage boys who wore make-up in emulation of Marc Bolan and David Bowie often risked a vigorous kicking. But from professional working women to long-haired footballers, from pornography in the corner shop to computers in the office, the cultural texture of British life probably changed more quickly between 1970 and 1980 than during any other post-war decade.

As late as 1971, women were banned from going into Wimpy Bar fast-food restaurants on their own after midnight, on the grounds that the only women out on their own at that hour must be prostitutes. Yet only eight years after that rule was lifted, Margaret Thatcher was walking into Downing Street as Britain's first woman Prime Minister. There could hardly be a better symbol of change.

Of course Mrs Thatcher's election victory is often seen as the decisive watershed in our recent history—the moment when everything was radically transformed, for good or ill. But Mrs Thatcher won in 1979 not just because she offered something different, but because she understood how much Britain had changed already. As a working woman distrusted by the traditionalists, she was a fitting representative of the changes that had remade Britain in the previous ten years. She appealed to a new spirit of self-interested materialism—the same spirit that the Yorkshire miners' leader, Arthur Scargill, of all people, had captured as early as 1970, when he told an interviewer: "You only get as much as you are prepared to go out and take." And she appealed to a new ethic of populist individualism, the same ethos of permanent self-reinvention that David Bowie had captured, when as the androgynous Ziggy Stardust, he told Britain's teenagers that "one isn't totally what one has been conditioned to think one is".

Thatcher, Scargill and Bowie. You could hardly imagine three stranger bedfellows—the grocer's daughter from Grantham, the Marxist miner from Barnsley, the gender-bending rock star from Bromley. But in their different ways, they captured the complicated, contrary spirit of a decade that was richer, more interesting and a lot more important than most of us realise.²

How does Pym, with her remarkable gift for observation, work the society that was seventies Britain, the society that she was living in, into the texture of her novel? I think the answer to that divides itself into six categories: the **Welfare State**, increasingly important to her as she faced serious illness and important to her characters as they faced retirement and old age; **Immigration and Race**, two concerns that were growing in importance and have continued to do so ever since; **Nutrition**, something that was attracting more attention, and that nowadays is something of an obsession, and which, or rather lack of which, of course played a major part in Marcia's existence; **Class**, which continued to attract Barbara's attention; the **National Health Service**, which was of personal importance to Barbara, experience of which she used in Marcia's story; and lastly, **Lifestyle**, something of a catch-all category which covers changing fashions, aspirations, prejudices and sensitivities, the everyday attitudes of Londoners.

Before we go any further, perhaps we should have a look at what the Welfare State actually was (and indeed, still is).

When, in 1941, the government commissioned a report into the ways that Britain should be rebuilt after World War Two (a wonderfully optimistic move, since 1941 was the worst year of the war for Britain), William Beveridge (1879-1963), former director of the London School of Economics, was chosen to carry it out. He published his report in 1942 and recommended that the government should find ways of fighting the five 'Giant Evils' of 'Want, Disease, Ignorance, Squalor and Idleness'. Although the Labour Party was initially reluctant to embrace Beveridge's plan, when it won the 1945 general election, the new Prime Minister, Clement Attlee, announced that he would introduce a welfare state based on the Beveridge Report. This included the establishment in 1948 of a National Health Service providing medical treatment for all free at the point of delivery. A national system of

benefits was also introduced to provide 'social security' so that the population would be protected from the 'cradle to the grave'. The new system was partly based on the national insurance scheme introduced in 1911, but the benefits provided were much greater. It was funded three ways. Those in work still had to make a contribution each week, as did their employers. The remaining third was provided by the government.

There are some twenty references to the Welfare State, not always by name, in the novel. Early on Marcia is described as spending her lunch hours in the public library where she picks up 'leaflets and pamphlets setting out various services available for the elderly in the Borough of Camden'. She 'took every opportunity to find out what was due to her in the way of free bus travel, reduced and cheap meals, hairdressing and chiropody, although she never made use of the information'. When, after lunch, the conversation turns to hypothermia, Marcia fingers a leaflet in her handbag, 'something about extra heating allowances for the elderly—but she kept the information to herself.' Letty, for her part, encounters the woman slumped on a seat who shouts 'fuck off' when approached by a well-meaning younger person. Later, when Norman mentions that a delay to trains on the Underground had been caused by 'a person under the train at Hammersmith', Letty mentions her upsetting experience. 'Dear me,' said Norman, 'that looks like a good example of somebody who's fallen through the net of the welfare state.' Care in the community for the mentally ill, instead of confinement in institutions, was formally introduced by the Thatcher government in the 80s, but the idea had been around for a long time. Impetus was given to the change by several scandals in the seventies concerning the appalling conditions in mental institutions. The reform was long overdue; the problem was underfunding, which meant that mentally ill people did not receive adequate care or supervision, resulting, among other tragedies, in several cases of deranged persons pushing other citizens under trains at Underground stations. When Marcia gets home she remembers that the 'almoner, or medical social worker as they called it now, at the hospital had said how important it was for a working woman to have a good meal...in the evening.' Scarcely had she decided to make do with a biscuit with her tea when the bell rang, 'shrill and preremptory', and she found herself invaded by Janice Brabner, the volunteer social worker at the 'Centre,' where they 'have been worrying about the lonely ones.' Janice corrects herself: 'I mean, the people who live alone.' She has been tipped off about Marcia by the medical social worker. Janice gets very little change out of Marcia, and as a last effort wonders whether she would like to come along to a get-together at the Centre. When Marcia firmly declines the kind offer, saying that her evenings are fully occupied, Janice wonders what Marcia could do in the evenings since there is no TV aerial on her house. When she gets back to the Centre an older, more experienced colleague says the chief thing is to 'make contact, by force, if necessary. Believe me, it can be most rewarding.'

When Letty's friend Marjorie organises a picnic, and says that David Lydell will be coming too, Letty protests 'doesn't he have to visit the sick and the old people?' Marjorie replies 'There's only one sick person at the moment and he's in hospital, and the old people don't want visits from the clergy'. Letty is made to 'realise that it was no good thinking that such old-fashioned notions could be applied in these days of the welfare state....' Nevertheless, Edwin, who has been reminded of Marcia and her mastectomy by a newsagent's display of magazines featuring topless young women, feels that she will not be neglected by her local church so there was no need to worry about her. 'Although [he] was not of the school that regarded the church as an extension of the social services, he knew very well that it was the attitude of a number of very good people nowadays, conscientious and well-meaning.' The church people did make a mild effort with Marcia, and tried to get her to go on a coach trip, but were rebuffed. Janice Brabner too was concerned that Marcia didn't seem to be getting a holiday, and was rebuffed in her turn. 'She's so difficult,' Janice complained to her friend, who was a medical social worker. 'People like that don't seem to want to be helped. And yet some of them are so grateful, it's lovely, really, makes it all worth while...' she sighed.

Letty and Marcia reach the day of their retirement. Their firm lays on a small lunchtime reception for them with sandwiches and medium Cyprus sherry. 'Each would be given a small golden handshake, but the State would provide for their basic needs which could not be all that great. Elderly women did not need much to eat, warmth was more necessary than food, and people like Letty and Marcia probably had either private means or savings, a nest-egg in the Post Office or a Building Society. It was comforting to think on these lines, and even if they had nothing extra, the social services were so much better now, there was no need for anyone to starve or freeze. And if governments failed in their duty there were always the media—continual goadings on television programmes, upsetting articles in the Sunday papers and disturbing pictures in the colour supplements. There was no need to worry about Miss Crowe and Miss Ivory.'

But someone did worry about Miss Ivory.

'You'll be retiring,' Janice Brabner had said. 'Have you thought at all what you're going to do?'

'Do?' Marcia stared at her blankly. 'What do you mean?'

'Well ...' Janice faltered but, as she afterwards recounted, pressed on regardless. 'You'll have a good deal of time on your hands, won't you – time that you gave to your job?' ... She wished [Marcia] wouldn't keep staring at her in that unnerving way, as if she had no idea what was meant by Janice asking what she was going to do when she retired.

'A woman can always find plenty to occupy her time,' Marcia said at last. 'It isn't like a man retiring, you know. I have my house to see to.'

'Yes, of course.' And it could do with seeing to, Janice thought. But was Marcia capable of doing what was necessary? Physically she seemed able to do housework so that there was no question of getting a home help for her, even if one could be found, but keeping a house in order needed a certain attitude of mind and it was here that Marcia seemed to be lacking. Did she not notice the dust or care about it? Perhaps she needed new spectacles – a word here might be in order ... Janice sighed, as she so often did when considering Marcia. There seemed to be nothing she could do at the moment beyond keeping an eye on her and calling in occasionally to see how she was coping.

As it turned out, Marcia wasn't coping very well. Some weeks later Janice found herself at Marcia's funeral, sitting next to her neighbour Priscilla.

'I'm glad I was able to come, whispered Priscilla, neighbours and all that – and to give you moral support. Janice was not sure that she liked the way Priscilla had put it... For there was no question of Janice needing moral support.... The discovery of Miss Ivory's slumped body in the kitchen and her subsequent death in hospital, although unusual, not to say unfortunate, in no way reflected on the social services and there could be no implication of neglect on Janice's part.... It was impossible to help some people, to guide them in the way they should go for their own good, and Miss Ivory had certainly been one of those. Janice's thoughts clothed themselves in the language of a report, for it did appear from what one of the doctors at the hospital had said that Miss Ivory had quite definitely been in a terminal situation, even before her last collapse. The only trouble was that there might possibly have been a lack of liaison, that Miss Ivory might be said to have fallen through the net, that dreaded phrase...

Large scale immigration from the West Indies in the '60s, largely organised by London Transport who were finding it hard to induce the native English to drive their buses and Underground trains, had introduced new problems. Before that time very few English people had even seen a black person unless they had served overseas in the Empire. During the Second World War people in the country had been shocked by segregation in the American Army, and had very much taken the side of the black soldiers. Immigration changed this, and had led to government campaigns to combat racial prejudice, and these had clearly had some effect, as we are assured that Edwin, biting

the head off a black jelly baby, had exhibited nothing racist about his action or his choice; he simply preferred the pungent licorice flavour of the black babies. That the government campaigns had not been wholly successful is made clear when Marcia notices the graffito 'Kill Asian Shit'. One effect of this is to make Marcia remember the Asian hospital porter who had wheeled her to the operating theatre. Then, and to a far greater extent now, the National Health Service relied heavily on immigrant doctors, nurses, and ancillary staff.

Immigration impinges directly on Letty's life. Her landlady, Miss Embrey, reveals that she has sold the house in which Letty has a bed-sitting room. The new owner will be occupying the ground floor and basement. Miss Embrey is circumspect, not to say evasive, in describing the new owner. Whether this is an early manifestation of political correctness or a desire not to shock her tenants is not clear. There had been Race Relations Acts in 1965, 1968 and 1976. The first banned discrimination on racial grounds, but was not very effective. The second made it illegal to refuse housing, employment or public services to anyone for reasons of race, and the third incorporated the provisions of the earlier Acts and banned discrimination on grounds of race, colour, nationality, ethnic and national origin in the fields of employment, the provision of goods and services, education and public functions. It also set up the Commission for Racial Equality. Letty asks tentatively

... whether their new landlord was perhaps not English – a foreigner, if one could put it like that, and Miss Embrey is equally circumspect in her answer, implying that, in a manner of speaking, he was.

'What is his name?' Marya asks.

'Mr Jacob Olatunde.' Miss Embrey pronounced the syllables carefully, as if she had been practising them.

'He is black, then?' Again it was Marya, the Hungarian, who dared to ask the blunt question.

'Certainly his skin is not what is usually regarded as white, but which of us, for example, could say that we were white?' Miss Embrey looked round at her three tenants – Letty, with a pinkish skin, Marya, a sallow olive, Miss Spurgeon, parchment – all quite different. 'As you know, I have lived in China, so these distinctions of skin colour mean very little to me. Mr Olatunde comes from Nigeria,' she declared....

Afterwards there was talk on the stairs as the tenants went back to their rooms.

'We must remember that until very recently Nigeria was British,' said Miss Spurgeon. 'It was pink on the map. In some old atlases it still is.'

Letty felt that the way things were going nothing was pink on the map any more.

Letty recounts this exchange to her work-mates. 'Of course you won't necessarily have to leave your room in London,' said Edwin. 'The new landlord may be a very good man. A lot of splendid West Africans come to our church and they do very well in the sanctuary. [Edwin's experience is not unusual. A quarter of all Anglicans worldwide come from Nigeria.] They have a great love of ritual and pageantry.' This was cold comfort to Letty, for it was these very qualities that she feared, the noise and exuberance, all those characteristics exemplified by the black girl in the office which were so different from her own.

After Mr Olatunde moves in, Letty crouches in her room, listening to bursts of hymn-singing and joyful shouts. 'How had it come about', she wonders, 'that she, an English woman born in Malvern in 1914 of middle-class English parents, should find herself in this room in London surrounded by enthusiastic shouting, hymn-singing Nigerians? It must surely be because she had not married. No man had taken her away and immured her in some comfortable suburb where hymn-singing was confined to Sundays and nobody was fired with enthusiasm.'

Edwin decides to help solve Letty's problem. He approaches Mrs Pope, a woman he knows from church.

'You see, it's like this. A woman who works in my office is in a difficulty. The house where she lives has been sold with the tenants in it and the new landlord and his family aren't quite what she's been used to, rather noisy, in fact.'

'Blacks?' asked Mrs Pope sharply.

'That's about the size of it,' Edwin admitted in a genial way. 'Mind you, Mr Olatunde is a very good man – a priest, in a manner of speaking.'

'How can he be a priest in a manner of speaking?' asked Mrs Pope. 'He must be either a priest or not a priest. There can be no qualification.'

'He is a priest of an African religious sect,' Edwin explained. 'And of course the services are not quite like ours – there's a lot of noisy singing and shouting.'

'And this woman – lady – she *is* that, I assume?' [asks Mrs Pope - and Pym once again reveals her acute ear for the vocabulary of class distinction.]

'Oh, certainly. There would be no difficulty on that score,' said Edwin casually, feeling that Letty was in every way superior, if that was the criterion to be applied.

And so Letty is accepted into Mrs Pope's bleak and silent house.

In the seventies there began to be more interest in nutrition. Janice is appalled by Marcia's diet, consisting as it does of tinned food. 'Fresh vegetables, even if only a cabbage, would be better than processed peas, and apples or oranges than tinned peaches.' Edwin is more health conscious, arranging 'his lunch on what had been Letty's table, spreading out slices of bread, a tub of polyunsaturated margarine, cheese and tomatoes. And of course, 'a packet of jelly babies'. How right Janice is to be concerned about Marcia's diet is borne out at the lunch party arranged by the men for 'the girls'. Marcia has just a cheese salad and no bread. 'You'll get so that you can't eat if you're not careful,' Norman pronounced. 'Anorexia nervosa, they call it – there was a talk about it on the radio.' Letty, while choosing apple pie and ice cream for 'sweet, pudding or dessert, as the Americans say', thinks that she could have 'a low calorie supper' that night.

Pym continues with her interest in the language and attitudes of social class. We may be in the Seventies, but the English have not lost their obsession with the subject. As we have seen, she has already divided the Quartet into two groups based on their hair; Edwin and Letty (very posh names) are definitely what she would call 'gentlefolk', Norman and Marcia are definitely not. At lunch break in the office Edwin has Earl Grey tea, Norman and Marcia instant coffee. Letty has water, but then she has had her lunch out. Edwin, when he finds himself in the road where Marcia lives, sees class divisions, albeit unspoken, between Norman and Marcia on the one hand and himself and Letty on the other. The snobbish David Lydell, who suffers from diarrhoea, replies pityingly, when Letty suggests Enterovioform as a remedy, 'All those English on package tours on the Costa Brava may find it helpful, but my case is rather different...' He goes on to think 'how agreeable it was to be in the company of gentlewomen.... The rough voices of the village people grated on his nerves and sometimes they said cruel things.' When Marcia goes to view at a safe distance Mr Strong's house, she notices, among other things, 'that there were no net curtains here, they did not seem to go with Mr Strong.' She was right. Posh people have a horror of net curtains.

The National Health Service is mentioned in comparatively few places, given that Pym's own experience of it informs so much of Marcia's story. It first appears when Norman visits his brother-in-law Ken who is in hospital with a duodenal ulcer. Pym recalls a lot of hospital detail, the bottle of lucozade beside the regulation plastic water-jug and glass, the metal bowl for vomiting, the curiously shaped 'vase' of a grey, cardboard-like material which he suspected was something to do with passing urine. 'Seems quiet tonight', he remarked. 'The telly's broken

down.’ ‘Oh, so that’s it... When did this happen?’ ‘Yesterday, and they haven’t done anything about it. You’d think it was the least they could do, wouldn’t you?’ When Ken says that the tea’s too strong, Norman was nonplussed.

‘Couldn’t you ask Sister or one of the nurses to make it weaker or put more milk in it?’

‘You’d still taste the strength, even so. It’s strong to begin with, you see. Anyway I couldn’t ask Sister or one of the nurses – it’s not their job.’

‘Well, the lady that makes the tea, then.’

‘Catch me doing that,’ said Ken obscurely.

Wonderful though the NHS no doubt is, this exchange points up its weaknesses. First-class doctors and nurses, hopeless management, waste and chronic underfunding. When Marcia visits her own GP she observes the other patients. Most of these, in her opinion, need not have been there at all. ‘All they wanted was a certificate. Wasting the doctor’s time, she thought – no wonder the National Health Service was in such financial trouble’. Norman visits his National Health Service dentist, a rather too jolly Yorkshireman. Unlike the medical side of the NHS, which is and was completely free, citizens are expected to make a contribution towards the cost of dentistry. ‘Thank you for nothing’, thinks Norman, when he has to ‘fork out quite a lot of money for a considerable amount of discomfort.’

As always, Barbara has perfectly captured the flavour of a particular time and place - in this case, the Seventies.

Works Cited

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