

## Home for Christmas

As Police Woman Amy Hobbs walked into the police station a small flurry of snow followed her through the door and she was met by a wall of sound. The foyer was crowded with angry women and the desk sergeant was struggling to maintain control. Constable Philips stood behind him with his hand over his mouth and his shoulders were shaking with laughter.

‘Have you any idea how difficult it is to replace them?’ demanded a large woman in a brown hat and grey coat. ‘They’re four coupons each!’ She thumped the desk with her handbag.

‘Everything was as stiff as a board,’ a woman with red hair was saying. ‘Why take them when they’re frozen?’

Amy reached the side door and slipped through.

‘It’s all right for you to laugh,’ an equally large woman retorted to the constable. ‘This is the second time for me.’

The noise level rose sharply. ‘One at a time ladies please,’ bellowed the Sergeant as Amy closed the door.

It was cold in the office. Constable Philips had lit the fire but it struggled to give out any heat. Amy took off her gloves and held her hands in front of it with a sigh. When would this awful war end? They had said when Charles, her brother, was sent off in June that it would be all over by Christmas. Fat chance of that. Tomorrow was Christmas Eve. She glanced about her.

‘This room could do with a few decorations,’ she said aloud.

The door behind her banged. 'Good idea 'Obbs,' said DS Goble coming up behind her. 'You'll find the box in the lost property cupboard, under the unsolved crimes files. You could put them up afterwards.'

'Afterwards?' Amy frowned.

'After you've made me a nice cup of tea, good and...'

'Strong with two sugars,' she said finishing the sentence for him.

Amy set off and then turned back. She chewed on her bottom lip.

'Sarg,' she began. 'I was wondering...'

'I shouldn't do that if I was you 'Obbs. You might strain that one little brain cell you've got.' He laughed at his own joke.

'It's about my Christmas leave,' she said tight lipped.

The door burst open and angry voices flooded into the room. 'You'll have to send for reinforcements, Sarg,' Constable Philips shouted. 'All hell has broke lose out here.'

Amy and the women were dispatched to a police cell. She and Constable Philips commandeered every chair they could find and even with some sitting on the bed, it was a tight squeeze. There were nine of them altogether.

Mo Miller was the unelected spokeswoman. 'We've been coming for days,' she said. 'We can put up with most things but this is beyond a joke.'

Her fellow victims nodded in agreement.

'So what's the problem?' said Amy.

'Somebody's stealing our smalls,' said Mo.

She waited.

'The Sergeant and his lackey thought it was very funny,' said the woman with red hair, Ruby Bates by name.

'It's no laughing matter,' Amy agreed, 'but I will want a little more detail.'

It didn't take long to write it down. For about three weeks, the friends and neighbours living near central railway had suffered a series of thefts from their washing lines. What made this theft unusual was that they had occurred in broad daylight when the victim had gone shopping or to visit a relative.

'Do you think whoever it is has been watching us?' Miss Owen whispered furtively. For a moment Amy wondered if she was afraid, but the glint of excitement in her eyes told a different story. 'How does he know when we're going to be out?'

'I only went over to me Mum's on the spur of the moment,' said Mo. 'And when I got back, there they was... gone!'

Her friends let out a communal sigh of sympathy.

'All of your washing?' Amy asked.

'No,' said Mo. 'Just me drawers.'

Back in the office with a mug of steaming tea for DS Goble, Amy waited until he'd finished guffawing. 'Just some weaselly little pervert,' he said at last.

'I don't think so,' Amy observed. She was hanging Christmas decorations. 'He leaves the dainty stuff and only goes for the more generously proportioned things.'

That set him off again. 'He obviously likes his women with a bit of meat on them!'

'I'd like to investigate this further, Sarg,' said Amy pressing a drawing pin into the end of a crepe streamer which had seen better days.

'Be my guest, 'Obbs,' he said taking out his handkerchief and giving his nose a loud honk.

Amy took a deep breath. 'Sir, I also wanted to talk about my leave. You see I have a problem getting back...'

But DS Goble wasn't listening. 'But before you start with those woman and their washing, we've got a real case to solve.'

Amy climbed down the ladder.

'A fire,' said Goble. 'Fire brigade think it's suspicious. Victoria Park. Number twenty. Apparently we can't miss it. Burnt to a crisp.'

The house, a two up two down end of terrace was indeed a burnt out shell. It was a miracle that the house next door hadn't gone up as well. According to witnesses, it was only the quick thinking of the neighbours that had saved the day.

'Was anyone in there?' Amy asked.

Goble looked down at his notes. 'Harry Dyer.'

'Someone taking my name in vain?' said a voice behind them.

Amy jumped. They turned to see a fairly tall, slim man in his early thirties. His jet-black hair was swept back and heavily Brylcreemed. He was casually dressed but he looked clean and tidy and he smelled faintly of Wright's coal tar soap.

'And who are you?' Goble demanded.

'Harry Dyer,' said the man.

Amy stared at him, speechless. His house was in ruins and yet he was still smiling?

'I must say,' said DS Goble, 'you seem to be taking all this very well.'

'I'm upset about the house o' course,' said Harry, 'but when all's said and done, it's only bricks and mortar. If it hadn't have been for my gal here, I'd have been sitting on a cloud with me harp by now.'

That's when they noticed the woman.

'This is Miss Jessie Randall,' said Harry proudly. 'And as of last night, my future intended.'

The pair gazed at each other lovingly. 'Congratulations,' said Amy.

'Harry was round my place when it happened,' said Jessie. 'He'd been seeing off a rat in my back yard. It was raining and he got soaked to the skin, poor lamb, so I'd invited him in for a cup of tea.'

'Cocoa,' Harry corrected. 'I 'ad cocoa.'

They gazed at each other again.

'First thing we knew about the 'ouse was when the neighbours started hammering on Jessie's door,' Harry went on. 'By the time I was out on the street, virtually the 'hole lot had gone up in flames.'

'Any idea how it happened?' asked DS Goble.

'Well, it weren't an accident,' said Harry, 'and I tell you what, if ever I get my hands on the bugger... oh excuse my French, Miss, but you know what I mean.'

Jessie put her hand on Amy's arm. 'You're shivering, Miss. It's ever so cold. Would you care to come into my place have a nice cup of tea? It's no trouble. I've already got the kettle on.'

'Now that's what I call a very good idea,' boomed DS Goble.

Number 18 was as neat as a shiny pin. They walked from the street straight into the tiny, cosily decorated sitting room and Jessie offered Amy a seat. DS Goble sat down.

Amy followed Jessie into the kitchen. 'How long has Harry lived next door to you?'

Jessie laid a small tray of cups and saucers as they waited for the kettle to boil.

'Oh, he doesn't live there,' she said brightly. 'He was minding the place for a friend.'

'Sorry?' said Amy.

'Harry met Frosty in the pub,' Jessie went on. 'Frosty said he was worried about burglars. Everybody knows we've had a bit of bother around here just lately, so he asked Harry to stay there a couple of nights while he went off to visit a relative up north somewhere...'

Amy let her chatter on.

'Any road,' she went on, 'when I saw this rat outside I screamed. You could have knocked me down with a feather. I haven't seen Harry for years. I invited him in and we'd just got talking and then Mrs Reed banged on my door. Frightened us to death, but when we saw the fire...' Jessie crossed herself. 'Lucky to be alive the way it went up.'

Back in the sitting room with the tea, Amy asked Harry about the owner of the house. 'I met him in the pub,' he said. 'I only did it as a favour. He paid me ten quid.'

'Ten quid?' said Goble. 'That's a lot of money just to stay in someone's house.'

'What's did you say his name was?' asked Amy.

'I only know him as Frosty.'

'He'll probably ask for his ten quid back,' DS Goble chuckled.

Back outside Number 20, Amy toed the rubbish with her foot again, managing to separate a small dark object from the rest. She bent to pick it up.

'A leather glove,' said Amy. She looked at Goble and her eyes widened.

'Belonging to the arsonist?'

DS Goble scuffed his foot around for the other glove but he couldn't find it. They examined it carefully. 'It's awfully big,' said Amy smelling it.

'Petrol?'

DS Goble smelled it too. 'Petrol,' he nodded.

Amy turned the glove's wristband down and a little air escaped from her lips. There was a manufacture's label and a shop label. But there was something else. Beside the Bentalls' label there was a homemade nametag. A piece of white tape and scratched on it, in permanent ink, was the name B. Hoare.

Amy tried to put it on. It was huge, definitely a man's glove and of good quality, but she couldn't get her hand into it.

'Come on,' said DS Goble snatching it from her. 'It's perishing cold out here, Let's get back to the station.'

'But sir...' she began but he wasn't in the mood to listen.

They were just about to get into the car when they heard the sound of breaking glass.

'What was that?' said Goble.

'Looks like some kids with a catapult have broken the window in the pub,' said Amy.

Just then, the landlord came out with a broom in his hand, his face as black as thunder. He caught one boy by the arm and dragged him, protesting, inside. The rest of the boys ran away. Amy followed them across the park.

'Where are you going?' shouted DS Goble.

'Shan't be a minute, sir,' she called breathlessly over her shoulder.

He didn't wait. She heard the engine start up and he drove off.

Amy caught up with the boys at the other end of the park near the football goal posts.

'I didn't do nuffin',' one boy protested as he saw her uniform. 'It were Roger, Miss. He broke the winder.'

'His Dad thumped him and made him go indoors,' said a second boy.

Amy held the stitch in her side. 'I'm glad to hear it. Names?'

Sullen faced, they told her.

'My Mum's going to kill me when she hears about this,' sighed John.

'And we'll never win it now.'

'Win what?' said Amy writing the last of their names into her pocketbook.

'The catapult championship.'

'The winner gets a piece of that Heinkel 111 that was shot down over Salvington Hill,' said Brian.

'And two quid,' John piped up again.

'Mr Dobbins saw it shot down,' said Colin.

'Who is Mr Dobbins?' Amy wanted to know.

'Our scoutmaster,' said Brian.

'He's the one giving out the prize,' said John scuffing the ground with his toe. 'But we won't win it now.'

'Don't give up too soon,' said Amy encouragingly. 'I'm sure if you put your minds to it, you'll win.'

'Roger was our best shot,' said Colin glumly.

Amy cut to the chase. 'Boys, did any of you see the fire last night?'

'Cor, Miss it was terrific,' said John, his face lighting up. 'They had two fire engines and loads of firemen.'

'I wanna be a fireman when I grow up,' said Colin.

'My Mum made me get back in bed,' said Brian. 'I only saw a bit of it.'

'Did you see anyone hanging around?' said Amy. 'Someone watching the fire, perhaps?'

The boys shook their heads. 'Only the neighbours,' said Brian.

Denis, up until this moment very quiet, said, 'There was this bloke in a trilby hat standing on the corner...'

Amy took down the details, such as they were and finally, when her fingers were too cold to write any more, she returned to the pub.

The landlord, Thomas O'Reilly, told Amy Frosty had a garage at the back of Browning Road.

Back at the station, Amy informed DS Goble of the latest developments.

DS Goble yawned. 'We'll go round to the garage first thing in the morning.'

'But sir,' Amy began.

'It's getting dark, 'Obbs,' he said. 'Nasty things 'appen in the dark. You write up the report and don't you worry your pretty little head about it.'

'About my leave,' she began again. 'I have a bit of a problem, sir. I should like to go home to my parents. I can get the train to London all right but I can't get a train back in time for Boxing Day duty. Is it possible...'

'Count yourself lucky you're 'aving Christmas Day, 'Obbs,' DS Goble rounded on her as he got up. 'I don't want to hear any more on the subject.' And grabbing his coat, he slammed the door behind him.

It was warm and cosy in Martha's little sitting room. Her landlady had invited Amy to spend the evening with her and her daughter.

'Save a bit on coal won't it,' she said as Amy came in. 'They say it's going to be a hard winter and the coal stocks are very low.'

Martha was busy darning socks. Elsie, Martha's daughter was busy with a jigsaw puzzle on the dining room table. Amy went to join her. The radio was playing a Bing Crosby song.

*'I'll be home for Christmas, you can plan on me, please have the snow and mistletoe and presents on the tree...'*

A tear trickled down Amy's cheek. She sniffed and brushed it away angrily.

Elsie and Martha exchanged an anxious look.

'Something wrong, dear?' said Martha.

'I know I should be grateful to have Christmas day off,' Amy said, 'and it's very kind of you and Elsie to offer to share it with me, but it's so frustrating that I can't go home.'

‘Can’t you get the train?’ Martha asked.

‘No trains at all on Christmas Day,’ said Amy. ‘I can get home if I travel late on Christmas Eve but the earliest train on Boxing Day will get me back here one hour too late for duty.’

‘Only one hour?’ cried Martha. ‘Couldn’t you tell him? I’m sure someone would cover for you for one hour.’

‘He won’t listen,’ sighed Amy.

‘Oh pet,’ said Martha soothingly. ‘I’m sorry.’ She pulled off the sock and put the darning mushroom back into her sewing box.

Elsie leaned forward. ‘Mum says we’ll have a great time.’

‘Of course we will.’ Amy dabbed her eyes with her handkerchief. ‘I’m just being silly.’

Martha wound the spare darning wool carefully into a ball. Nothing was wasted. As Amy watched her tidying, two thoughts crossed her mind.

‘Martha, do you know a man called Frosty?’

‘Bernie Hoare, yes, why what’s he done?’

‘Nothing so far as I know,’ she said. ‘Tell me about him.’

‘He runs a garage at the back of Browning Road,’ said Martha. ‘He’s a bit of a dodgy character I would say. A couple of years ago he was accused of supplying illegal petrol coupons but they couldn’t make it stick. Too many friends in high places, I reckon.’

‘What does he look like?’

Martha shrugged. ‘Medium build, medium height. Brown eyes, or maybe blue. Ordinary looking. I wouldn’t swoon over him, that’s for sure.’

Amy grinned. ‘So I’m not looking for Ronald Colman then?’

Martha didn't laugh. She was still thinking, 'He always wears a trilby,' she said.

Amy walked to work, taking a small detour through Victoria Park. The schools had broken up for Christmas so Amy spotted John and his mates quite quickly.

'Hello boys,' she said as she caught up with them, 'could I have a look at your catapults?'

The boys looked from one to the other. 'What for?'

'You can't take them off of us, Miss,' said John defensively. 'We ain't done noffin' wrong.'

A boy she hadn't seen before stepped forward. Roger she presumed. 'Show her what she wants,' he said.

'Umm,' said Amy admiring the catapult. 'Quite a sturdy machine. I'm impressed. Where did you get the wood from?'

'Titnore Woods,' said Brian. 'But it's alright. We did ask permission first. My dad works up there.'

Amy turned it over in her hand. 'And the elastic? Where did you get the elastic for the pulley?'

There was a frozen silence.

'My Mum gave me mine,' said Colin.

'What about you, John?' Amy could sense his discomfort.

'I found it.'

'On a washing line perhaps?'

Colin looked as if he was about to wet himself. 'I told you you'd get into trouble.'

Amy took a firmer line. 'Don't look at me as if butter wouldn't melt, young man. I know what you've all been up to. You've been stealing ladies bloomers from washing lines, haven't you?'

'We didn't mean no harm, Miss,' Brian wailed.

'We had to have elastic,' said Roger. 'They don't work without the elastic.'

'Are we going to go to prison?' asked John.

Denis began to cry. 'I don't want to go to prison.'

Amy's heart went out to them but she had to make them understand the seriousness of the situation. 'Taking things, even washing off people's washing lines is stealing,' she said firmly. 'I should take you all straight to the police station.'

'We didn't mean to steal,' Brian said, 'We just couldn't get any elastic and John said...'

'It wasn't just me!' John cried. 'I'm not taking all the blame.'

'But you said...' Brian began again.

'Three crimes have been committed here,' Amy interrupted.

'Conspiracy to rob, stealing and receiving stolen goods. They are all very serious, you know. You've upset a lot of people.'

Roger hung his head. 'We're very sorry, Miss.'

Amy tugged at the sleeve of her coat in an effort to stop the cold creeping up her arms. 'When is the competition?'

Roger looked a little nonplussed. 'This afternoon.'

Colin let out an exaggerated sigh. 'We'll never win it now.'

'Oh yes you will,' said Amy. 'You get out there and win that competition.'

The boys' faces lit up. 'Yes, Miss. Thank you Miss.'

'Hang on, I haven't finished yet,' said Amy. 'When you win, you don't keep the money. That goes to the children's hospital.'

There was a collective groan.

'But you can keep the piece of the Heinkel 111....'

They cheered loudly and waved their arms.

'...and then you're to come to the police station and give the ladies their elastic back.'

There was a horrified silence.

'They won't be there, will they?' Roger gasped.

'Possibly,' said Amy.

'Do I have to?' Colin groaned.

'Listen boys,' said Amy. 'I'm not arguing about this. The alternative is no competition and you come with me right now to tell the Sergeant what you've done. Is that understood?'

They all stood with their heads bowed as they answered collectively.

'Yes Miss.'

'Be at the station no later than four,' said Amy as she turned to go.

'What happens if we don't win?' John called after her.

Amy waved her arm expansively. 'You'll win.'

As soon as she told him, DS Goble was eager to go to Browning Road and see Bernard Hoare.

'Bit of luck, your landlady knowing him,' he remarked.

They were just setting off when Constable Philips called after Amy.

'Telephone for you,' he said holding out the receiver.

DS Goble glared at her. 'You know the rule. No private calls,' he snapped.

Amy took the receiver. It was her mother. 'Is something wrong?' Already her stomach was in knot. Mum knew she wasn't allowed calls so it had to be an emergency. Her thoughts went immediately to her brother Charles. Had she had a telegram? Was he injured, or a POW or, God forbid... 'Is it Charlie?'

'Everything's fine,' he mother said. 'Are you coming home for Christmas?'

'Put that phone down,' Goble bellowed from the door.

'Mother, I can't,' said Amy. 'I can't get back for duty the next day.'

'Now 'Obbs!'

Her mother was still talking as Amy handed the receiver back to PC Philips. He gave her a sympathetic shrug of his shoulders.

'Come on then,' DS Goble cajoled.

'Coming, sir,' she said miserably.

'Leave the questioning to me,' said Goble as they walked towards the garage.

As soon as Mrs Hoare saw them, she burst into a flood of tears. 'I can't believe it,' she wailed. 'They said the whole place went up like a torch.'

‘Does your hubby have any enemies, Mrs H?’ DS Goble wanted to know when she’d calmed down.

‘Everybody loved Frosty,’ said Mrs H. ‘He was a bit of a tease but a good man. A saint.’ She wept again.

Amy thought she looked a bit out of place in a garage. Although she wore overalls which weren’t very dirty, her hair was neatly permed under her skimpy headscarf and her nails were newly varnished. Mrs H picked up a framed photograph and kissed the glass.

‘We think it may be arson,’ said DS Goble. ‘Any chance of a cup of tea?’

Mrs H was horrified. ‘Arson! Does that mean the insurance won’t pay up?’

‘Not if it was deliberate,’ said Goble. He walked over to a cluttered table at the back of the garage and picked up a half empty milk bottle. ‘Where’s the kettle then?’

Mrs H had turned away but not before Amy heard her mutter under her breath, ‘Bloody idiot.’

While Mrs H busied herself with making the tea, Amy took the opportunity to look at her husband’s photograph. Martha was right. A non-descript man stared out of the frame. He was stroking a dog, a vicious looking brute. She looked at Frosty’s hand. Ah ha! She’d been right all along. All she needed now was proof.

As they drank tea, Mrs H established her alibi for the previous evening. But why did she use the past tense when she spoke of her husband?

'When do you want me to identify the body?' she said as they turned to go.

'What body?' muttered DS Goble. 'There's no...'

Amy accidentally put her whole weight onto his foot. He let out a roar and Amy apologised profusely. 'We'll take you to the station now if you like, Mrs H,' she said once the DS had recovered enough to limp to the waiting police car.

The grieving widow reached for her coat.

Inspector Fry, brought out of retirement to boost the numbers, stroked one of his many chins. 'A brilliant piece of detective work, Knobble,' he beamed. 'When did you realise the fire was an insurance scam?'

'Goble,' said the DS in a tired voice. 'G-o-b-l-e.'

'It was the glove that first alerted you, wasn't it Sarg?' said Amy. She put two cups of steaming tea down in front of them.

DS Goble was sitting at his desk with his foot in a bowl of warm water. A dark bruise had spread from his toe to his ankle.

'The glove?' asked the Inspector, his eyes shining with excitement.

'What glove?'

'I found it on the ground outside,' said Amy. 'The right hand index finger was stuffed.' She leaned over with the kettle and added a little more water to the bowl. DS Goble moaned with a mixture of pleasure and pain.

'And we had an eye witness,' Amy went on, 'who saw a man with a trilby hat on the corner the night of the fire.'

'I'm sorry,' said the Inspector, 'you've lost me.'

DS Goble looked lost as well.

'Frosty Hoare lost his right index finger,' said Amy. 'A dog bite I think.'

'Ah,' said the Inspector. 'And you wouldn't want to walk around with a floppy finger on your glove would you?'

'Absolutely,' said Goble.

'We've since found out that Frosty has run into debt,' Amy went on.

'Mrs H told us that he started the fire himself.'

'But he asked Harry Dyer to look after the place,' said Inspector Fry.

'To collect life insurance,' said Amy, 'he needed a body.'

'Good Lord!' cried Fry. 'So we're looking at arson and attempted murder!'

DS Goble slurped his tea.

Inspector Fry gave him a painful thump on the back. 'I heard you were good Knibble but I never realised you were this good.'

There was a sharp rap on the door and PC Philips came in. Once again, the sound of raised voices followed him.

'What is going on?' said Inspector Fry.

'We've got about twenty-six kids in Reception, sir, and they all want to see Police Woman Hobbs.'

The voices had gathered to form a chant. 'We want Amy, we want Amy...'

'Kids? What kids?' said DS Goble. He rose to his feet and hobbled painfully to the door, his wet foot making damp prints on the brown lino.

'Sounds like they've won the catapult competition,' Amy laughed.

‘Will somebody please tell me what’s going on?’ Inspector Fry demanded.

‘Didn’t he tell you, sir?’ said Amy. ‘As well as solving the arson, D S Goble has cleared up the washing line thefts as well.’

DS Goble put his hand to his forehead. ‘I don’t feel well,’ he said lamely.

‘Shall I go and take their statements, sir?’ said Amy.

DS Goble waved his hand and hobbled back to his chair.

Outside in reception the boys gave Amy a rousing three cheers. Roger handed her two pounds for the children’s hospital fund and one by one the boys gave the desk Sergeant a piece of elastic, each with a brown luggage label and a name; Mrs Miller, Mrs Bates, Miss Owen, and finally, Denis handed him a pile of neatly laundered ladies bloomers. Then wishing her a very happy Christmas they made their way out.

The desk Sergeant looked up at Amy. ‘Is this what I think it is?’

She nodded. ‘Waste not, want not, Sergeant. There’s still a war on, you know.’ And they laughed.

The boys had left the door open. A waft of cold air swirled around the reception. A soldier walked in and for a moment she was totally speechless.

‘Hello sis,’ he said with that familiar lop-sided smile. ‘Coming home for Christmas?’

‘Charlie, oh Charlie!’ Amy flung herself at him, laughing he gave her a bear hug. ‘How long are you here for?’

‘Got a five day pass,’ he said. ‘Come on, you must be off duty by now.’

Tears sprang into her eyes. 'I can't, Charlie,' she said.

'Can't come?' he cried. 'But Christmas wouldn't be Christmas without you.'

'But I'm back on duty on Boxing Day,' she said, 'and there are no trains.'

'I'm bringing you back,' said Charlie. 'Since PC Philips told her about it, Mum's got it all worked it all out. Dad's saved up the petrol coupons and Uncle Albert said I can borrow his car. Hurry up, or you'll miss Mum's mock apricot tart.'

'Not carrots smothered in plum jam again,' Amy winced.

'Don't worry.' Charlie laughed and patted his knapsack. 'I've got a real Christmas pudding in here.'

Inspector Fry came out of DS Goble's office. 'Off for the holidays?'

Amy glanced at the station clock. 'Not for another hour, sir.'

'Where have you been, son?' he asked Charlie.

'Arnhem, sir.'

They heard DS Goble calling from his office. 'Where's 'Obbs. Send 'Obbs in here with some aspirin will you?'

'If we get a move on,' said Charlie, 'we could catch the six o'clock train.'

'Off you go,' said Inspector Fry. 'You deserve it.'

Amy hesitated but only for a second. Pushing her arm through Charlie's, she headed for the door.

'Happy Christmas,' said PC Philips.

'And a very happy Christmas to you too!' cried Amy.

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