

Northern Lights

Poems and stories from the
North of England

by

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and

Guest writers

Illustrations by Gladys Hobson

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Nothing To Fear

‘Anyone there?’

No answer, so what the ‘ell were the chancel lights doing on?

‘Huh!’ she said, locking the door of the west porch behind her and waddling up the centre aisle. ‘If I’d left them on there’d be the Devil to pay.’

Chuntering to herself, Doris made her way to the vestry, switched on the nave lights and took the vacuum cleaner and dusters from a corner cupboard.

‘They’ve ‘ad the kids in again,’ she grumbled when she saw the state of the floor near the outside door. ‘Blooming mud and rubbish all over the place. What the ‘ell are these nails doin’ ‘ere?’ She looked around the floor. ‘Whackin’ big hammer, and what’s this? Looks like a stapler. God knows what’s been goin’ on.’

She tossed the offending equipment inside the cupboard. ‘Vicar can sort it out. Must be somethin’ to do with Lent — God knows what.’

There was a tap on a window. Something shaped like a head draped with a sheet was being waved about outside.

‘Flippin’ kids; always tryin’ to scare me.’

She raised her fist in the direction of the vestry window.

‘Bugger off!’

She took off her coat and was about to hang it over the vicar’s surplice on a hook near the door: ‘Huh, that could do with a wash. And what’s ‘is clothes doin’ dumped on the floor? Vicar’s wives aren’t what they used to be: too busy doin’ their own thing. Mind you, Vicar’s no better. I don’t know — church’s goin’ to the dogs.’

Putting the offending clothes over a chair, she threw her coat inside the cupboard and took out a broom. Pulling on a wraparound pinny, she swept the mud into a pile and left it until she could sweep it outside. Then she noticed the vestry key was in the lock.

‘Good ‘eavens, the door’s unlocked. Must have been open all night. Huh! No wonder the place is in a mess.’

Opening the vestry door wide, she swept the mud outside. In the churchyard, the kids were playing with their skateboards — footing them along the steep paths, leaping on and off the fallen gravestones.

'No respect for the dead. They need their 'ides tanning,' she muttered, waving her broom at them. Sighing and shaking her head in disbelief at the antics of modern youth she hurried back inside, locking the door behind her.

She dragged the vacuum cleaner out of the vestry into the nave.

'Funeral in less than an hour, Lent service this afternoon — what the 'ell do we need that for? Vicar's a right killjoy. Can't even eat a bit of chocolate without feeling guilty. Oh well, got to get cracking.'

Muffled noises echoed around the church. The hairs on her arms stiffened and her heart rate zoomed. 'Don't be stupid,' she told herself, it's that coffin sitting in the side chapel that's spooking you. Get the job done and get out.'

A thought struck her. Suppose the coffin's occupant is still alive?

'Huh! Imagination running riot again, Doris. Time you gave this job up, you'll be seeing ghosts next!'

Starting from the back of the church, she plugged in the cleaner and began her work — another half hour and the vicar would be arriving. She began singing 'Abide with me.'

Just outside the side chapel she found empty beer bottles strewn around.

'My goodness! No respect for the dead these days. Mourners drinking beer last night? Celebrating their inheritance? Huh! No business comin' in the church and leavin' the vestry door unlocked. I don't know, whatever next?'

She trotted off to the vestry for a black plastic sack.

'More work to do. The vicar will be here any minute. Better not be in one of 'is moods.'

She started picking up the bottles. Muffled moans sounded from the side chapel just behind her. Fear immobilised her body. Bottles dropped from her hands with a crash. Icy fingers gripped her heart, stiff pimples covered her flesh, her hair uncurled and stood on end.

She forced herself to move. She was being stupid again: it was just kids messing about, the central heating playing tricks, timbers shrinking, or....

Slowly she turned to face the coffin.

'Is there anyone there?' she croaked, unable to think what else to say.