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The Little Red Book

by Garf Collins

Albert Hall wandered across the little garden, which surrounded his block of flats reading the morning paper. Ever since his parents had named him with a misguided sense of humour, he had lived the life of a down trodden outsider. He felt at home in the garden which he thought, like him, lacked any human care and few people used it. As usual the garden was deserted except for a red book which lay sunning itself upon the gravel path. As Albert noticed this he thought it was completely out of keeping with its dowdy surroundings. He was about to kick it into some scrubby grass when an idea occurred to him and he picked it up for a closer look. It had many pages all of which were clean. “Just what I needed,” he said to himself, “now I’ll be able to really get the buggers.”

The block consisted of 32 flats and Albert occupied the ground floor flat nearest the main entrance. He noted every coming and going of his neighbours of whom he thoroughly disapproved. He made mental notes about their behaviour in the belief that with enough evidence he could get the landlord to get rid of them. Because he had difficulty remembering all his observations, the idea of writing a detailed dossier in his new notebook appealed to him. As soon as he arrived home he divided the pages up, giving each flat its own section.

Over the next few months he accumulated observations with a summary for each flat which was enhanced from time to time.

‘Flat 9. Miss Elthwaite. Several men every night and occasionally women. She has some stamina that women but it’s no place for a hussy like that to run a brothel.

Flat 22. Mr Morrison. Not here very often but keeps a woman in his flat. Not his wife but he says it’s his sister. I think it’s his floozy.

Flat 15. Johnny Lake. Always having pizza delivered. No one likes pizza that much. Bet he is getting drugs from a fake delivery boy.

Albert had copious detail on all his neighbours but hardly spoke to them. Their ways of life repelled him. Then one day a single mother with a five year old moved into the flat next to him. His notes on her were uncompromising.

Flat 4. Single woman with child. Expect that she’ll attract all sorts of undesirables as so called boy-friends. Dreadful hair- multicoloured plaits -and a dress like some middle European peasant.

The red book allowed a greater focus for Albert’s antipathy towards his neighbours and his notes, based purely on observation, cemented his poor view of those around him. Then one day there was a knock on his door. When he opened it he saw the child from the next flat standing meekly there.

“Hullo Mr Hall. Mummy said would you like to come to a meeting in our flat on Thursday about how to improve our neighbourhood?”

“No thank you very much,” he said brusquely as he shut the door firmly. But afterwards he felt a rare moment of compassion. After all the girl was only the messenger.

In the weeks that followed Albert noticed many changes. The woman next door had organised a band of volunteers who were transforming the garden - trimming bushes, planting flowers and collecting rubbish. It actually began to look rather nice. Other projects followed such as repainting the corridors between the flats. It made the place much more welcoming Albert had to concede. Following all this activity the little girl knocked on his door again.

“Mummy said would you like to come to the party for the flats on Saturday. It will be in the garden.”

Albert didn’t want to be as rude to the girl as he was on her last visit, so he said, “What’s your name?”

“Millie and Mummy’s name is Emily. Most people call her Emmy.”

“OK Millie tell your Mum that I’ll come if I can,” he replied with no intention of attending.

Early on the day of the party the garden was transformed. Bunting was hung between the few trees. The bushes were given coloured baubles and a barbecue was set up with a few small tables and chairs around it. Albert was so busy spying on these preparations that he forgot to go for his paper until the event had started. Nervously he tried to edge around the garden to get to the newsagents but before he got very far his neighbour blocked his path.

“I’m so glad you decided to come Mr Hall. Let me get you a drink.”

Unable to think of an excuse, he allowed himself to be settled in a chair near the centre of the event. One by one the neighbours sat with him and chatted. He was astonished at what he found out. Far from being a woman of ill repute, Miss Elthwaite was a sports masseur. Her clients came in the evening after their work or training. Mr Morrison’s sister really was staying in his flat because she had lost her own and had nowhere to go. He had to work far away so wasn’t there every day. Johnny Lake was a computer geek who was trying to create some obscure financial system that Albert couldn’t understand. Johnny didn’t have any imagination left over for eating anything other than pizza. His neighbour of the flaming plaits worked in the costume department at the National Theatre. Her husband had died of cancer three years before.

As he heard stories such as these, Albert realised that he had been completely mistaken and despite accurately recording many innocent activities had come to the wrong conclusions entirely. After the party he became good friends with Emmy and Millie. He volunteered to help in the garden where he often chatted to his neighbours. He began to see in their reaction to him a respect, which until then he hadn’t even given himself.

A week after the party the bin men came and emptied Albert’s rubbish into their truck. Mixed in with the trash was a little red book.