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Silent and Strange

by Sue Hitchcock

In the cold, dark early morning Bernie strode to work at the Harlesden sorting office for his first day of work delivering Christmas post. It was the best pay you could get for a short time and he had done it for several years. He wanted to be an actor and had been pleased to get an opportunity to work as an extra on a Hollywood production filmed at Pinewood Studios. It was “Cleopatra” and would star Elizabeth Taylor. He had hoped he might get discovered and given a speaking part. Unlike his scrawny contemporaries he was tall and well-muscled. He would look good in a toga or in Roman armour or even in a loincloth!

The English autumn was bleak and Elizabeth Taylor was under the weather too. The filming stopped. She had pneumonia. It seemed unlikely that filming would start again for a while, so working at the Post Office was a good stop gap for Bernie and he was used to making an early start on the film set, besides some of the students who were recruited were girls, some even pretty.

One of the girls seemed interested in his stories, but he wasn't sure if she really believed his boasting, so he asked her if she would like to see the set. Their working day was from seven thirty until the two deliveries were finished, but until the last days before Christmas, they were free by mid afternoon. So Bernie drove to work the next day in his old jalopy and when work was over the young woman accompanied him down to Pinewood Studios. The sky was darkening but he sped along and they arrived before nightfall. Bernie still had his studio pass and the guard on the gate admitted them without problem.

Before them was a sad replica of Alexandria. Ionic columns supported the pediment of a palace and in front of it stood an obelisk. They walked around, along a quay where sections of ships represented whole ones. The darkness of the sky was the beginning of a rain shower and puddles began to form on the wide pavements. The palm trees which had suffered badly from being transplanted blew in the wind and the leaves sagged with the weight of the rain. It was time to go.

Bernie drove the girl home, too dejected to try to impress her any more.