

COLOUR BLIND.

By CHRISTOPHER OWEN

Laura Turner met Bernard Thompson through her friend, Lucy Carter, and was greatly attracted to him. He was a high ranking manager with a Water Utilities Company. He had the same sense of humour as that of her late husband. He had, he told her, made a study of Queen Victoria, and he knew a great deal that was of interest about Prince Albert. Moreover, as he confided to her one evening in a Chinese restaurant in Belsize Park, he was of Lithuanian extraction on his mother's side, and was distantly related to Lithuanian royalty. It was this, as Laura was later greatly to regret, that played some part in persuading her that she liked the man.

Laura observed that Bernard always wore a red rose in his buttonhole. There was even red among the colours and patterns of his waistcoat. And the colour suited the man. It was, as he was, cheerful and confident. She decided she'd make herself a red cotton dress, and when she wore it on one of their outings, he complimented her, said how it suited her. So she had added a little red to her hair, which pleased him. One day he arrived wearing a red necktie,

and the next day, she went out and bought a red handbag. She and Bernard were a match. It was all such fun.

It was decided that for his fiftieth birthday, she and Bernard would dine out at the Savoy in the Strand. It was to be a celebration. Her female intuition convinced her that he was intending to use the occasion as an opportunity to propose marriage, and she went out specially and bought herself a brand new outfit, a long evening dress of poppy red satin, with a black-lined poppy red shawl. For several nights before the big day, she lay awake beneath the new red eiderdown on her bed, and talked it all over and over with her late husband. Should she or should she not marry Bernard Thompson? Did he approve? If only he was there to help her, she complained, as he had been when he had been alive.

The day before she and Bernard were to dine out at the Savoy, he sent her a handwritten note, calling the whole thing off. He didn't give her any sort of explanation or apology. She was thunderstruck. She vowed she would never see or speak to the man again. To walk out on her like that, it was intolerable. And it was all so out of character. It was then that she began to wonder whether something dreadful had happened to him. Had he had some

sort of accident? Was he in some sort of trouble? Was there something of which he was ashamed to have her know? She tried again and again to ring him, but he never answered. She was further surprised and alarmed to discover that neither she nor Lucy Carter had a note of his address, and Directory Enquiries obdurately declined her frequent and increasingly frantic demands that they give it to her, claiming that to do so would be contrary to Company regulations. She rang Lucy and arranged to meet her for coffee at Delancey's in Camden Town. Lucy brought along her brother, James. Laura hadn't met him before. Both he and Lucy repeatedly assured her that neither had seen nor heard of Bernard, not since the time Laura herself had been introduced to him.

Laura visited the Chinese restaurant in Hampstead where she and Bernard had been a number of times and which, he had said, was a favourite haunt of his. She went to Burlingtons in Camden, where they'd also been, and where he seemed to have been a regular customer. She asked the waiters and proprietor - oh God, she was so embarrassed - if Bernard Thompson had been in, and they all said he hadn't. She described him in detail, but still they couldn't recall having seen him, not for many weeks, not since she herself had accompanied him there. She was convinced they were lying, however.

They were covering up for him. She could see it in their eyes. Something dreadful had happened to the man, he had lost his job or had fallen seriously ill. Her late-husband would have known what to do. If she had talked with him as she had been accustomed to do as she had lain awake at nights, then she would have known what to do. But those past weeks she had forgotten to share her thoughts with him, had lost the habit, and was no longer in a state of mind to make the attempt.

She knew that Bernard lived in Paddington. Not far from the railway station, he had said. She took the tube train to Paddington, and, for more days than she realized or understood, she roamed the neighbouring streets, repeatedly looking in all the shops, until the managers and staff viewed her with suspicion. Once, God help her, she saw a man wearing a red rose buttonhole and thought 'it's him', and she ran over, and she called out 'Bernard!' But it wasn't Bernard. It was some other man, who looked at her with surprise and alarm, then excused himself and walked away. And she felt she was going out of her mind. So she extended the area of her search, and resented anyone, man or woman, who had the colour red about them - whether it was in the tie or shirt, bag or shoes.

One cold morning just after nine, she saw a man wearing a red jacket. He was walking from the station towards Bayswater Road. He was crossing Sussex Gardens. She called out to him, but he ignored her. She ran after him, oblivious to the traffic that hooted and screeched to a halt. She caught him at the sleeve, turned him about, saw it was not Bernard. 'Don't wear that, please,' she cried out, and she tried to tear the jacket off him. The man pushed her away. 'You need help,' he said to her.

Laura took to her bed. Lucy and her brother, James, came to see her. James was a nice man with a quiet confident voice. He sat with Lucy on the settee in Laura's living-room, he with his green tie, and with a green handkerchief in the top pocket of his beige linen jacket. It was Lucy and James who instigated a change in Laura and helped her to regain her will to live. Little by little, Laura pulled herself together. She put her mind to charitable work, became a volunteer helper at the local Mental Health Centre, and during the months ahead exorcised the despair and sense of loss that had consumed her. She burnt the red dress she had bought. She burnt all that was red in the house, everything, even the red velvet curtains which, since soon after meeting 'the monster', had been hanging in the bay window in her front bedroom. She made a bonfire of them. That night, as she lay in

her bed, *she* spoke for the first time in what seemed to her ages to her late husband. 'My God, the troubles we women have to endure,' she complained, 'Thank goodness that's all over,' she told him, as she pulled up and about her neck and shoulders her brand new green and beige counterpane.

END

Words 1,241