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LITERARY REVIEW

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Laura
Wilson

MY BEST FRIEND

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Gerald

It wasn't the first time I'd come across a hand. I remember thinking at the time, what a coincidence it was. Two hands. Mind you, it was wartime, so I should think that must have shortened the odds a bit. I'd been with Eric on the first occasion – one of the few times I can recall when he'd let me play with him. We were in the woods when we heard the plane explode. Flames everywhere – whoever was in there didn't stand a chance. We went to have a look, and I remember running – neither of us had seen a plane go down at close quarters before, and I was excited, we both were. We were hoping it was German, because German souvenirs were better for swaps than British ones, and in 1943 there wasn't much American stuff around, at least not where I lived. They were still building the new airfields – lorries full of sand and stone rattled through our village all day, every day.

I must have been about three hundred yards away from the blaze when I saw the glove. Worn brown leather, lying on the grass, palm upwards. The fingers were curled over like a violinist's and the moment I touched them I felt the solidness inside. The glove was still . . . well, *occupied*. I dropped it, wiped my hands on my shorts, and carried on running towards the plane. I can't say I thought anything more about it until I found the second one, a year later.

It was autumn and I was in the wood again, but by myself. I think I must have been playing soldiers, because I remember lying on my stomach behind a thick tree root, pretending I was shooting from behind a parapet. I wriggled forward to look over the top, and there it was, a couple of feet from my face. No glove, just pinkish-grey flesh, sticking out of a pile of leaves. Wrist bent, palm downwards and fingers spread out as if it was about to crawl towards me.

I didn't try to pick it up, but pulled myself a bit nearer and stuck

out my own hand in imitation of its shape. I think I mustn't have quite made the mental switch from my game of soldiers, because I remember thinking that the two sets of fingers, opposite each other in a sort of confrontation, were like armies on a battlefield. Then I saw how delicate the hand was. Pretty, almost, even with the dirt on the skin and the soil that was wedged underneath the long fingernails. I inched my own hand a little closer, and I think I would have touched it, but I suddenly saw that not all of the nails were the same length. The one on the little finger was bitten off short. The instant I saw that, a picture came into my mind of my sister Vera at Christmas, the cheerful, bright sitting room and her with a sketch-pad in front of the fire, drawing, and Dad leaning over her, picking up the hand with the pencil in it. 'If you go on chewing your nails, you'll grow up to look like George Formby.'

She'd giggled. 'Then I'll only bite the little ones, so I'll only look a *tiny* bit like him.'

They told me afterwards that I ran into the house covered in mud and earth and shouting Vera's name.

Dictionary of Children's Literature

HALDANE M(arjorie) M(aud) (1904–1967), creator of Tom Tyler, Boy Detective, was born in Suffolk, where she spent most of her life. Daughter of a bookseller, she wrote of her early childhood that she and her younger sister, Matilda, had ‘an enchanted existence, living a perpetual delight from day to day’. Their happiness was shattered in 1916, when their father returned, shell-shocked, from serving in the First World War. His subsequent mental breakdown, which Haldane was later to describe as ‘an evil shadow’, took its toll on both her parents’ marriage and the family finances. Both girls became actresses, although Haldane worked only briefly in the professional theatre before marrying stockbroker Arthur Haxton in 1922.

When Haldane became depressed by the couple’s failure to conceive a child, Haxton suggested writing as a distraction, and in 1924 her first book, a retelling of Shakespeare for children, was published. Folk tales and fairy stories followed, and her first original work of fiction, *Kitty’s Unicorn*, was published in 1929. This was followed by *Kitty’s Birthday Wish* and *Kitty’s Christmas Wish* (both 1930). The ‘Kitty’ books were followed by a series of ‘Amy’ books, beginning with *Amy’s Secret* (1931), but it was not until the publication of *Big Bad Bessie* in 1934, with its eponymous heroine, the naughty schoolgirl Bessie Brown, that Haldane became one of the best-selling children’s authors of her day.

By 1937 there were eight ‘Bessie’ books, and Haldane created the child who was to become her best-known character, the ‘boy detective’ Tom Tyler. For the next thirteen years she produced, on average, three ‘Tom Tyler’ books a year, culminating in *Tom in Trouble Again* in 1950. Tom’s adventures with his cousins Peter and Jill and their dog Scruff invariably include unmasking spies, bringing thieves to justice, and finding lost treasure. They have

been adapted for the stage, televised and serialised as a comic strip that ran for over thirty years in *Buster* magazine.

Haldane and her husband adopted a daughter, Vera, in 1928, and in 1930 a son, Gerald, was born. However, the couple's relationship, difficult from the beginning, did not survive the tragic death of Vera in 1944. After the war, Haldane wrote little except to continue the 'Tom Tyler' series.

Although her work has generally received a favourable critical reception, Haldane's last book, *Friends in Spirit* (1959), thought to have been influenced by her interest in Spiritualism, was universally reviled as morbid and sentimental. It was, as one critic put it, 'such a far cry from the robust common sense displayed by Tom Tyler and his fellow thief-takers that it is hard to understand how they could have been created by the person who wrote this book'. Haldane, whose health was deteriorating, was said to be very upset by such attacks. She spent the last five years of her life in a nursing home and died in 1967.

'Get in there, you kids,' said the man with the eye-patch, 'and remember, if I hear a sound from either of you, there'll be trouble!' The tall man slammed the door shut, and Jill and Peter heard the sound of a key turning in the lock. The room was pitch black.

'At least there doesn't seem to be any furniture to bump into,' said Peter, 'but I can't find a light, either.'

'There's something nailed across the window,' said Jill. 'Boards, I think.' She sat down on the floor and rubbed her ankle. 'Oh, Peter, whatever shall we do?' Peter wanted to comfort his sister, but he could not think of anything to say. With all his might, he wished that Tom were with them. If only Tom could find them, he'd get them out of this fix all right!

'I wonder where Tom is,' said Jill, as if she could read her brother's thoughts.

'So do I,' said Peter. 'And I'm starving. I wish we had some of that delicious picnic with us.'

'We ate it all up,' said Jill. 'Every scrap. I'm rather hungry, too. Supposing they leave us locked in here all night?'

'Don't worry, Jill. I'm sure that Scruff will stay by our bikes until Tom comes back, and then they're bound to come and sniff us out.'

'Poor old Scruff,' said Jilly. 'I hope those beastly men didn't – hullo, what's that noise?'

Tap-tap-tap! Tap-tap-tap! 'It's coming from the window,' said Peter. There it was again! Tap-tap-tap-TAP!

Then they heard a voice, whispering, 'Peter! Jill! Are you in there?'

'It's Tom!' shouted Peter. 'Good old Tom! Good old Scruff! I knew they'd find us!'

'Keep your voice down or those men will hear us!' said Jill.

'Come on, let's see if we can get the boards away from the window.' They pulled as hard as they could, and after a moment, a crack of light appeared, with Tom's face behind it. *'How on earth did you get up here, Tom?'*

'Climbed up the back porch, of course. Scruff's in the yard. What happened?'

'Those horrible men came back to the clearing while we were tidying up the picnic things,' said Jill. *'We tried to hide, but they caught us and pushed us into their van. Scruff tried to follow, but they threw stones at him. He is all right, isn't he?'*

'He's fine. He showed me the way here. It would take more than a few stones to put him off!'

'Jill's sprained her ankle,' said Peter. *'She's being awfully brave about it, but I know it's hurting her dreadfully.'*

'There's something much more important than my silly old ankle,' said Jill. *'You'll never guess what we saw in the van, Tom! Aunt Sarah's picture!'*

'And half a dozen others, as well,' said Peter.

'So they're the art thieves,' said Tom. *'No wonder your mother thought they were suspicious characters. Well, we'll soon put a stop to their tricks, shan't we?'*

Tom in Trouble, 1939

Jo

Well, I didn't know whose son he was. I still think he's creepy. It's not anything he *does*, so much, it's just the way he sits there by himself, really quiet. He's just like this big white *blob* sitting opposite me, and . . . I don't know, he's just really *odd*. Like when he has his lunch, it's the same thing every single day, fishpaste sandwiches. He brings them from home and they smell disgusting. Then he has an orange and he makes this big thing about peeling it with a special knife he keeps in his drawer. He's a total slaphead as well. There's this bloke, John, who works in our loading bay, and he's quite funny, some of the things he says. Well, I was down there last week and I was talking to him when Gerald comes in and he starts going on about something. You could tell John was getting pissed off with him because it was really straightforward, but Gerald just wouldn't leave it alone. When he'd gone, John goes, 'I've got more hair on my bollocks than he's got on his head.' I was really trying not to laugh, because Gerald was only in the corridor and I thought he'd heard, but he never came back. Then I said something about I suppose his mother loves him or whatever, and John said, 'Do you know who his mother was?' I said, 'What do you mean, who she was?' and he's told me that Gerald's mother was M. M. Haldane, the children's writer. I said, 'I don't believe it,' because she'd have left him all her money, wouldn't she?, but John says it's true.

I mean, I didn't even know M. M. Haldane was a woman. I used to love those stories. I had all the books and I read them loads of times and I kept them and everything. Mel's got them now. Mel's my daughter. She's twelve. Gerald's always asking me about her. I think he thinks he's being friendly, you know, like he always asks me if I've had a nice weekend, but it just comes out really strange. It's like, I told my mum about him and she said, 'Oh, you're being mean,' but she doesn't have him sitting there

looking at her all day, because that's what he does, he watches me. I'm, like, checking a list or something, and then I look up for a second and he's staring straight at me. My mum goes, 'Oh, he probably fancies you.' I said, 'Thanks a lot, Mum, that's like saying Mr Blobby fancies you.' Actually, he did something quite sweet the other day. Our boss at work, Neville, he's got this really annoying thing where he always calls everyone by their initials. It's stupid, because I never know who he's talking about. He comes into our office and says to me, 'Oh, JF, can you tell PG to have a word with CS about an order?' and I'm going, 'Who?' Anyway, he came in last week and he said, 'Have you seen JP?' and Gerald goes, 'Try the WC.' I thought that was quite funny, really.

Apart from that, I'm sorry, but he is *really* strange. I was saying to Mum about his shirts, the collars and cuffs are all frayed and dirty, and I said, 'I don't understand why he doesn't buy new ones,' because I *don't*. I mean, even if he didn't get the money from his mother, I earn less than he does and I don't go round with my clothes falling to bits. *And* I've got Mel to look after. He's only got himself. Actually, she's being a real PAIN at the moment, you know, buy me this, buy me that, when she knows I can't afford it.

I was only seventeen when I had Mel. When I found out I was pregnant I was really scared to tell my mum. I thought she'd do her nut because she had me when she was really young as well and she was always saying to me, you know, 'You want to wait . . .' so I was really nervous, but I kept thinking, I've got to tell her, I've got to tell her, I was getting really stressed about it, and one night I just burst out, 'Oh, Mum, I'm going to have a baby.' She would of shouted at me, but Colin – that's her boyfriend, but they've been together for so long he's more like my stepfather – he was really nice to me. But my mum, though, all credit to her, she never said, 'You've got to get rid of it,' you know, have an abortion. Tell you the truth, I did think about it, but then I saw this doctor, and he was all 'Are you sure you want to do this?' and then he started telling me about the baby and how it was growing inside me . . . He didn't show me a picture or anything, but I could sort of see it

in my mind, this little pink thing with tiny hands and everything, and then it was like, that was that, and I really wanted to have it.

I'd have liked to go to college and travel and do all that and then have children, I mean, I think I did the right thing having Mel but it was just at the wrong time in my life. Don't get me wrong, OK? Because I love Mel, she's my baby and I'd do anything for her, but if I had my time again I'd have waited before I had kids. But my mum's been really brilliant, because she knows what it's like when you've got a baby and you're on your own. I was still living at home and everything, and she looked after Mel when I did my computer course. I got the qualification and when Mel started school I got a job, and that's when I moved into my flat. It's just rented, I don't have a mortgage or anything, but it's better with a place of my own. My mum does loads of babysitting – I sometimes think it'd be nice if Mel's dad lived with us, but I know he couldn't be as much help as my mum is. Sean – that's Mel's dad – he was only eighteen when I found out I was pregnant. At first, it was 'Oh, I'll get a job, we can get married,' and all this, but when she was born he couldn't handle it and he started being really . . . you know, he never came round to see me or anything, and his mum was horrible to me, she started going on about how Mel wasn't Sean's kid and I was just trying to get money off them. My mum was furious, especially 'cause I never asked him for any money, and she was going, 'Oh, that bitch, I'm going to go round there and sort her out,' but Colin wouldn't let her. They moved away in the end. It did upset me, but it wasn't like, *disaster*, I mean, I used to try and imagine the three of us living in this nice little house and – oh, I don't know, going on holiday and all that – but I knew it wasn't going to happen. It's like those books, the ones that Gerald's mum wrote. When you're reading them and you're really into the story and everything, it's like you're part of this whole world and you just want it to go on for ever, but at the same time you know it's not, like, *real*.

It's funny about his mum writing those books. They're about fifty years old, so it must have been when he was little. I can't imagine him as a kid. I sort of want to ask him about it, but I haven't got the guts.

Gerald, 1938

My name is Gerald Arthur Haxton. I am 8. I live in a house called Broad Acres, in a village called Finching in a county called Suffolk. I am going to do a dairey but it is only paper because I have not got a book yet. When I get one it will be proper. Now I have to say the peopel that live in our house. It is me and my sister Vera. She is 11. My mother is Miss Haldane but her name is Mrs Haxton really. My father is Mr Haxton. His name is Arthur and he goes to work in the train to London where his work is. And there is Mrs Paddick, she looks after us and cooks the food and Mrs Everit but she only comes in the morning. Tom is the gardener. Our dog is Sammy. He is black and white. He is super but he is not any specil sort of dog but lots of diffrent ones. Aunt Tilly comes to stay. She is nice. And that is all the peopel in our house.

Monday, September 19th

Mr Chamberlin went to Munick. It was his first time of flying in an aeroplane. I wish I could go in one. He had ham sandwiches and wiskey on the way and chicken sandwiches and clarit on the way back. Clarit is a sort of wine. I would have the same but with lemonade. But he did not get pudding. Mother says there wont be a war now. Father says he should of stood up to Hilter. Mother said I would like to see you do better.

Tuesday, September 20th

It was noisy in the kitchen. Mrs Paddick said don't worry there wont be any war but then Tom came in and he said if Hitler wants a war he will have one and then we will have one too wether we like it or not. Mrs Paddick was cross

because mud from his boots came on the floor. She gave me a cheese and onion sandwich and then was more crossed because I piked the onions out.

Wednesday, September 21st

Tom said a rude word. He said the war was bad and he would kill Hitler and Musaliny too if he could but I think he is silly. Mrs Paddick says Mussoleny only kills blacks. Then he said not to tell Mother about the rude word and I said I wont. We had ham and salad for tea and stewed damsins and custud.

Thursday, September 22nd

I went downstairs after I went to bed. The wierless woke me up and when I went to the door of the sitting room it was an argument. She was shouting but he did not say anything. She said he was a mouse and not a man. Then he said if there is a war I will go away and then you will get rid of me. She dropped her cig on the blue rug and went to pick it up but it made a hole and she said it will spoyle everything. Then he saw me by the door and said go back to bed theres a good chap. She looked at me and I thought she would shout at me but she did not. I don't want Dad to go away.

Friday, September 23rd

I want a book to write in because my paper has nearly run out so I asked her. She was writing and she said don't distrub me how many times have I told you. I said about the book because she promised but she said I never said you could have one of my specil books. But she patted her hair at the back when she said it and that means A LIE. Mrs Paddick said she had some paper and I can have it. She gave it to me and I sat at the table and Tom came in and they were talking about gas masks. Mrs Paddick said they are horrid things you can suficate in and she may as well go to the semitrey and dig a hole and get in it now.

Monday, October 3rd

I have not done the diary for two days because I forgot.

Scripture 8/10 Spelling 5/10 Arithmetic 6/10

There are two new boys in the class and they are twins. I said I am a twin too and they said wheres your twin then and I said he was dead and they said well it does not count. I said I am because it is true but they said no because there is two of them and only one of me. I did not know what to say but IT IS TRUE.

Tuesday, October 11th

Not well all day. Had wierless in bed and ate dijestiv biscuits but it hurt. Missed arith test. Talked to Jack. She says his name is Leslie because it is on the sertificat but I know it is Jack because he told me.

Wednesday, October 12th

Dad came to see me. He said is there anything you want old chap and I said a book to write in. He said are you going to be a writer like your mother? But I said no it is just for a diary.

Gerald

Stacey was on the box office tonight. I went to say hello and she told me she'll only be there for another week because she's getting married and then she's going off travelling with her husband. They've got the money saved. I said that's nice, because she told me they're going to Sri Lanka. She asked me if I had a lady-friend, which was a bit cheeky, but I don't mind. When I told her no, she said, 'What a pity.' I asked her why it was a pity, and she said, 'Then you'd have someone to come with you to the theatre,' but I told her I like coming on my own. They had two new ones in the chorus tonight, both boys. I kept a look-out for them, but it went off all right.

I always meet the cast. *Cats* I saw 105 times, and I knew all the people. One of them – Becky, her name was, Becky Stocker – she said to me, 'Don't you get sick of it, coming back to see the same show week after week?' Because that's what I do, Tuesday and Thursday nights, I go to the theatre. I said, 'I never get sick of it, it's always wonderful.' She said, 'Well, I'm getting sick of it and I've only been in it three months.' I told her, 'You should stick with it, it's a good show, this one.' I've been going to another show as well, *Starlight Express*. I've seen it 215 times so far, which is my personal best. But you've got to have a change sometimes, so last summer I stopped with *Cats* and went to *Oklahoma* instead. That was a bit of a departure for me, and I don't mind admitting I was a bit worried about it at first, because I thought, being as old as it is, it might be a bit slow for modern tastes, but it's first rate. There's good singing and dancing, wonderful set, clever story, everything you want. The first few months with a new show are always difficult, but once I've got it all off pat I can really settle down and enjoy myself. Tonight was my thirty-ninth performance.

I always eat after the show. I make myself a sandwich before I

leave the house, granary bread with tuna fish and lettuce. I put it in a Tupperware in the fridge for when I come back. I share the kitchen with my landlady, you see, and with the best will in the world, it's not unknown for things to go missing. I pour myself a glass of milk, too – the proper milk, not this half-water stuff – and that goes in the fridge with a playing card on top. The ace of spades, face down.

I like to know what I'm doing, get it all organised. Some people find their happiness with money or fast cars, but for me, it's when I've got things planned out. Knowing what the next step is going to be, that's the key to happiness for me. I know some people find me a bit strange. I've even had them calling me a mentalist before now, but I always say, well, at least it keeps me happy. A lot of folk go through their whole lives and never find happiness, so I say I'm better off than most.

I had a good old chinwag with Jack on the way home. It's always the best time, after a show. I wouldn't call it talking, exactly, it's more like signals, sending them out and getting them back, all in your mind. Just as well, because people really would think I was mad if I sat on the bus talking to myself – well, that's what they'd see, anyway. They wouldn't understand what was really happening. Because it's hard to explain – if I'm honest, I don't understand it myself. I don't want to be big-headed, but I will say I'm special in that regard. Being a twin is special – from the moment you're born it makes you different from other people, because they're only one. If you're a twin, it makes you less and more at the same time, if you see what I mean. You're yourself, but you're something else as well – part of a pair. You're a whole and a half, both at once.

Jack was stillborn. There's no point in saying, 'What if,' because you can't put the clock back, but I sometimes think it would have been nice if we could have started a business together. I'm in the hiring game. Not cars or vans or JCBs, but props for stage and television. That's where I get my interest in the theatre. It runs in the family, because my aunt was an actress. But if you've been to the theatre or watched TV in the last forty years, you'll have seen some of the things we've supplied. Bathchairs, dressing-