



Mingled With Venom

Gladys Mitchell

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Contents

Chapter 1: Three Houses in Cornwall
Chapter 2: Family Dinner
Chapter 3: Headlands
Chapter 4: Champions and Seawards
Chapter 5: Hallucination or Fact?
Chapter 6: The Smugglers' Inn
Chapter 7: Threats and Legacies
Chapter 8: Speculations and Near Certainties
Chapter 9: Death of a Matriarch
Chapter 10: Unexpected Ending to an Inquest
Chapter 11: Last Will and Testament
Chapter 12: Arrested and Charged
Chapter 13: Monkshood
Chapter 14: Family Matters
Chapter 15: A List of Suspects
Chapter 16: What's in a Name?
Chapter 17: Gamaliel's Law

“A hoop of gold to bind thy brothers in,
That the united vessel of their blood,
Mingled with venom of suggestion...
Shall never leak, though it do work as strong
As aconitum...”

Henry IV, Part 2, IV, sc.4

Chapter 1

Three Houses in Cornwall

‘A full family reunion can be a very chancy business,’ said Maria Porthcawl.

‘This one looks like being a chapter out of Ivy Compton Burnett,’ said Fiona Bute. ‘Mrs Plack has already thrown a fit of hysterics and retired to her bed with a migraine at the thought of all the cooking involved.’

‘Madre has left me to issue the invitations. Surely she must know better than to seat Rupert and Diana at the same table. They haven’t spoken a civil word to one another for years.’

‘They need not sit next to one another.’

‘Then what about Gamaliel? Does she know he’s black?’

‘I doubt whether she even knows of his existence. Anyway, it’s a legal adoption, so he counts as one of the family. Then there are Quentin and Millament, Diana’s twins.’

‘But they’re only twelve years old. Surely they won’t be expected to dine with the rest?’

‘If she said everybody, she meant everybody.’

‘Well, let’s hope some of them won’t be able to come. What with Parsifal’s allergies, Diana on a diet and Bluebell being a vegetarian, no wonder Mrs Plack has taken to her bed! It’s enough to send any self-respecting cook to the madhouse, not to mention Garnet’s antisocial habit of trying all his food on his dog before he touches it himself.’

‘It is because Parsifal collects strange herbs for Blue to cook, but as for coming, they’ll all turn up if they know what’s good for them. Nobody knows yet who is mentioned in the Will.’

‘Oh, goodness, give her a chance! She’s only just over seventy. She isn’t going to die just yet.’

‘Everybody has to go at some time or other and she takes big chances scrambling about on the cliffs the way she does.’

‘I wonder whether I could fiddle the invitations a bit.’

‘In what way?’

‘Make a judicious selection and not invite them all.’

‘Those who weren’t invited would find out. Off you go. Get the job done and the cards delivered. The notice is short enough as it is. It is only a question of cards, not letters, I suppose?’

‘Cards, yes. I shall be as formal as the printed message allows. The more off-putting the invitations sound, the more likely they are to be turned down.’

‘Don’t you believe it!’

‘Just wishful thinking, that’s all. Is your own future secure?’

‘Is yours? We may be giving the best years of our lives, as the saying goes, but nothing in this world is a certainty. She takes us both for granted, and that is no advantage when it comes to receiving benefits.’

Maria was the daughter of seventy-five-year-old Mrs Leyden. She was a widow of fifty-two and had been known to refer to herself as her mother’s unpaid housekeeper, but this was an unfair assessment of her position in Romula Leyden’s household. She did pretty much as she pleased most of the time and was generously treated, although her mother had never approved of her marriage to Vannion Porthcawl,

an actor who was far more often out of work than in it, and Romula had made no secret of her satisfaction when, having lived long enough to see his twin children, Garnet and Bluebell, reach the age of twenty, he obtained a part in a London pantomime, got drunk on the strength of this and was run over by a bus in Oxford Street and killed. Maria had lived at her mother's house in Cornwall for the ten years which succeeded this accident.

Fiona Bute, aged thirty-five, was nominally the secretary, but was, in fact, a protégée. Romula had been disappointed in both her own children: Maria had made a marriage which deeply displeased her and Basil had fathered an illegitimate child. What was worse, in Romula's opinion, was that neither he nor the woman had ever wanted to be married but had lived happily together until the woman died. When this happened, Basil begged his sister Maria to bring up his boy Rupert with her own two children, and unable to live without his lover, he put an end to himself by blowing his brains out.

Bereft, as she saw it, of both her offspring—for she had never had both of them together in her house after they had formed what she regarded as their disastrous partnerships—Romula had taken unto herself the orphaned child of a second cousin, so that Fiona Bute found herself in the position of adopted daughter. When, forgiven after her husband was dead, Maria returned to the maternal fold, Fiona went out of her way to make a friend of her. This was first because, with Maria's advent, she wondered whether her own standing with her protector was likely to be put in jeopardy, and later on because the two women genuinely liked one another. Between them the house ran smoothly.

'And now this upset!' thought Fiona, shoving gilt-edged cards into envelopes she had already addressed. 'Why on earth does she want to draw the family together for a dinner party? It must be to discuss her Will. But why all of them? She thinks Rupert comes of tainted stock; she's often told me so. She disapproves of Garnet and Bluebell because they're Vannion Porthcawl's children, and what she's to make of Gamaliel goodness only knows!'

She wondered whether she had uttered this thought aloud, for the door opened and a girl of twenty came into the room.

'Did you call?' she asked.

'No, Ruby, I didn't,' replied Fiona testily. 'Here, lick some of these envelopes for me while I go and call up Lunn to act as postman.'

'What's all this? A dinner party? Oh, good! We'll get something decent to eat.'

'We always get something decent to eat,' said Fiona. 'Anyway, I expect you'll have to stand down, or there won't be enough men to go round.'

'I could provide my own. Barnaby would love to come and it would give him a fine chance to meet the abuela and ingratiate himself with her, wouldn't it? After all, she foots his bills for my singing lessons.'

Ruby Pabbay's position in the household was an ambiguous one. As a girl of sixteen she had been taken on as kitchen-maid, having been recruited from the local orphanage. Less than a year later, Romula, paying an unexpected visit to the kitchen, had heard her singing as she prepared the vegetables. The upshot was that she was being groomed and trained for the concert platform; the peeling of potatoes and the rest of her mundane duties had long been things of the past.

She was a tall, good-looking girl, sensible enough not to abuse her new position, a ready learner of upstairs speech and manners and very anxious to shine in the sphere which Romula had chosen for her. She had proved adept at picking up languages, could sing in French, German and Italian, and called Romula madame in public and abuela (which Romula herself had chosen) in the house, but not in front of the servants. Mrs Plack, the cook, hated her and called her 'that jumped-up hussy'; Redruth Lunn, the chauffeur, made amorous approaches to her, was unmercifully snubbed, and remained faint but

pursuing, and Maybury, Romula's personal maid, petted and spoilt her. Some of the servants thought that this was in the hope of future gain when Romula died, but in fact, Maybury was Ruby's natural mother, although Ruby herself did not know this.

The house was called Headlands and was aptly named since it stood, in a somewhat isolated position, between two of these, Scar Point and St Oleg's Head. Its immediate surroundings were the downland turf. The views from the back windows were of a superb stretch of the Cornish coast and there was no garden or surrounding wall or fence and no approach except for an unmade-up track just wide enough to take the car and the tradesmen's vans. The outbuildings consisted of a double garage, the stables which housed three well-bred horses, two large kennels for the guard-dogs and a cottage shared by the chauffeur and his sister who groomed the horses. Her name was Mattie, but she preferred to be called Matt. She wore men's clothes, whistled through her, teeth and was a regular customer at the pub in the village, where she slapped people on the back, stood her round and was the local darts champion.

The house in which Romula's grandson Garnet lived was very much smaller than Headlands. It belonged to him and he shared it with his sister Bluebell, her husband Parsifal Leek and their adopted son Gamaliel. The house was called Seawards and was as romantically situated as its name suggests, for it was built literally on the coast and from the back of the house a slipway for boats ran down to a strip of rough beach and the opening of a tiny cove. Built originally towards the end of the seventeenth century, it had been altered and added to by its various owners until its original builder would hardly have recognised it.

Seawards was approached downhill. A short slope curved down to it from the road which led to the village, the hotel and, further off, the pub. An iron gate near the culvert over a small but noisy waterfall opened on to a garden with crazy paving, florabunda roses, fuchsias and lavender. Against the stonework of a high wall, the tall stems, broad leaves and sinister flowers of monkshood made a patch of green and purple in an angle of the steep-stepped little enclosure.

At the back of the house, which faced the sea, strong wooden shutters were attached to the windows to offer a defence against the winter gales. From the french-windows, unshuttered in the lovely June weather, there was a wide view of the Channel, for the house was on a curve of Veryan Bay. From these french doors, which were on the second and third floors, steps led down from the balconies to a long, stone-flagged back garden, walled on the one side, but bounded on the other by the small stream which rushed in a waterfall past the side of the house and down to the cove and the sea.

The stream was nowhere very wide. It could be crossed by stepping stones and then a long ascent of narrow steps, cut into the hillside and mounting steeply upwards led to an overgrown track which marked what had been the smugglers' path to the inn. The inn, since those days, had been greatly enlarged and was now a holiday hotel, although the oldest part of the building was still in use, thanks to extensive renovation and repairs.

In spite of their grandmother's wealth, neither Garnet nor Bluebell was comfortably endowed. Each received an allowance from the old lady, but they felt it was grudgingly given and even after their father's death it had not been increased. Romula had forgiven her daughter Maria for marrying, but she could not bring herself to forgive Garnet and Bluebell for being Vannion Porthcawl's children.

Almost needless to say, the inhabitants of Seawards boasted no servants except a daily char and a weekly washer-woman and lived plainly.

Parsifal, Bluebell's husband, was a minor poet whose romantic Christian name was off-set by his less poetical surname of Leek. Apart from his wife's allowance from her grandmother, he kept the wolf from the door by publishing an occasional slim volume, begging sycophantically from Romula when the big bills came in, and also by writing verses to be printed on Christmas and birthday cards and,

when he could get the work, by doing research for authors too busy, too incompetent or too lazy to do it for themselves. He lived his own life and wandered about the countryside in search of what he called inspiration.

Bluebell was a painter who sold an occasional picture to the summer visitors to the hotel. Her brother Garnet wrote moderately successful romantic novels under the pen-name of Gertrude Fosseway, and bore most of the household expenses.

Bluebell's adopted son, the negro boy Gamaliel, was still at school. He was a beautiful and intelligent lad, a splendid swimmer and the school boxing champion. His hero was Muhammad Ali, and his immediate ambition was to be chosen for the next Olympic Games. He saw this as the best means of turning professional later on and becoming world champion at his weight whatever, in adulthood, that weight turned out to be.

He kept these ambitions mostly to himself, being well aware that they differed very considerably from Bluebell's conception of his future. She wanted a university scholarship for him and a professional career of a very different sort from that which he had mapped out for himself. He was down on the school register as Gamaliel Leek, but he detested both names and always called himself Greg Ubi on the covers of his exercise books, the name under which he intended to fight later on.

He was popular with the masters and particularly so with the women teachers to whom he was always courteous and cordial; thus he was allowed to get away with his assumed name, the staff and the head teacher feeling sympathy, no doubt, with one who disliked his adoptive cognomen so much.

The registers were never called, the easy-going staff being content to cast a non-militant eye over the class, put a black zero against the names of any absentees and fill in all the red markings on Friday mornings while the school was at hymn practice in the hall with the head teacher. It was not a school which gained university scholarships, but nobody had told Bluebell that, and, as the school was in a town fifteen miles away and she had no car, she had made no enquiries, content to thank God for the school bus which made farepaying for Gamaliel unnecessary.

Only to Garnet did the lad ever unburden himself and only occasionally at that. He would sit on Garnet's bed while the novelist tapped away at a typewriter set on a table in the window and remain there, silent and unwinking as a statue, for perhaps a couple of hours or more. When Garnet knocked off work they would drink beer together, eat ginger biscuits and sometimes talk, sometimes not. Gamaliel had taught Garnet to swim. In return, Garnet had dedicated a book to him: To my splendid friend, Greg Ubi.

Gamaliel had not read the book, but in his own room he mouthed the dedication over and over again. As neither Parsifal nor Bluebell ever read Garnet's books, they never asked who Greg Ubi was.

On the other side of the hills, high up, since it was built on top of the cliffs although some fifty yards inland, stood the rambling, somewhat decrepit Edwardian house known as Campions. Here lived the rest of Romula's relatives, Rupert Bosse-Leyden, his wife Diana and their twelve-year-old twins Quentin and Millament, when the last-named were not away at boarding-school.

There was nothing unusual about the house except that it stood on land belonging to the National Trust. Rupert and Diana lived rent-free in return for keeping the environs free of holiday makers' litter and the surrounding footpaths clear so that the public could have access to the cliffs and the impressive and beautiful views.

To help with the work involved, the occupiers gave free lodging at Easter to students who were willing to lend a hand with clearing and opening up woodland paths and in summer by going out early in the morning tidying up cans, bottles, cartons and paper left by holiday visitors. They also good-naturedly

helped with the household chores and exercised the owners' three dachshunds.

At other times of the year Diana was bored. She had never wanted children and when, in the second year of marriage, she produced twins, she was highly resentful of having to tend two babies instead of one. After the children were old enough to be sent to boarding-school and she and her husband became more and more estranged, she began a flirtation, which developed into an affair, with Garnet Porthcawl. An affair, however, taken much more seriously by her than by him, for whereas Diana was frustrated and bored, Garnet was contented with his home life, got on well with his sister, loved Gamaliel and looked upon the weak and often peevish Parsifal with tolerance, if not with affection or respect.

Another reason for Garnet's reluctance to be married was that, although his income was rather more than enough to support himself and contribute towards, the support of his sister, her husband and Gamaliel, he doubted whether he could stretch it sufficiently to support a wife as well, for, married or not, he had no intention whatever of deserting Bluebell and Gamaliel. He knew that Parsifal could do little for them.

Rupert's estrangement from his wife had begun with her resentment at what had been a difficult birth of the (to her) unwanted twins, followed by the discovery that Romula, Rupert's wealthy grandmother, far from forgiving him for his illegitimate origins now that he had legitimate children of his own, refused an invitation to his children's christening and declined to see him when he called to remonstrate with her.

He earned a sufficient although not a considerable income by writing educational books, but his magnum opus was to be a work of the flora of South Cornwall, for which he sometimes enlisted the help of Parsifal, whose poetic wanderings occasionally produced fairly rare specimens of the local plants. To console himself for the breakdown of marriage, Rupert had what was supposed to be a platonic friendship with Fiona Bute. She would have been prepared to marry him if she had not felt that Romula would disown her if she did. Divorce from his wife, however, was not one of Rupert's priorities.

It was not until they were nine years old that Quentin and Millament became aware of the strained atmosphere of the house. This had nothing to do directly with their actual age, but was due to their having been sent home from school in the middle of the spring term owing to an outbreak of infectious illness.

Suddenly the house was different. During the Easter and summer holidays there were the students, a father who liked children and would take them for walks in the woods, a mother who would put up packets of sandwiches and provide fruit and there were always dogs and puppies about the house and garden. At Christmas their adopted cousin Gamaliel, who had taught them to call him Greg Ubi, always came to stay and they went back with him to Seawards, that mysterious, exciting house, for the New Year and to finish the holiday.

But in the middle of the spring term it was as though a blight had settled on Campions. The weather was cold and wet, so that it was not possible to go out into the woods, there were no puppies to play with, the thoroughbred dachshund sire was out at stud, the bitch was heavy with her next consignment and was more or less in purdah, one of the maids was under notice of dismissal, the others were sullen because they were on her side and against Diana who had sacked the girl in a fit of petulance and knew it but would not retract, and as for Rupert, the children's companion at holiday times, he was immersed in his writing.

Even Gamaliel's company was denied them, for he still had to attend school. Moreover, his homework, however carelessly or badly he did it— and he refused to ask for help—occupied his evenings. The twins, however, were resilient. When the next school holidays came round, all was as before, and, at

their age, they neither knew nor cared about the sympathies and antipathies of those in the family circle. They knew that they had a great grandmother whom they had never seen and a grandmother who paid occasional visits to Campions and brought sweets. They knew from her that she had fostered their father when Rupert was a boy, and had brought him up with her own two children.

They were well acquainted with Bluebell through Gamaliel, less so with Garnet. Of Parsifal they knew little, for he was not at ease in the company of children and was apt to make himself scarce when they paid visits to Seawards. His, however, was a presence they could easily dispense with. Bluebell, who was an excellent cook, fed them, Gamaliel was their play-fellow and Garnet was sometimes available to join in a game or tell jokes and show them card tricks. Parsifal was, for them, a redundant member of the household and, for his part, was content to be so. Whatever the weather, his daily walks grew longer when Quentin and Millament were in the house.

Chapter2

Family Dinner

The task of arranging the seating had devolved upon Fiona. Romula had made only two stipulations. She would sit at the head of the table (Fiona had taken this for granted) and facing her at the foot was to be one of the men.

Fiona, in pursuance of her usual policy, sought out Maria for a consultation. 'There are all sorts of things to consider,' she said, 'and I don't want to boob.'

'For one thing,' said Maria, 'the two children must be placed side by side. They will be shy and awkward. They are at an in-between age. It would be unwise and unkind to separate them. Then their parents had better be near enough to them to tender advice and exercise authority if that is needed.'

'Yes, I had thought of all that, but I can't put Rupert and Diana together. I don't even think it would be a good idea to put them directly opposite one another. The first thing to be settled is which of the men to place at the other end of the table, don't you think? It is a position of some importance.'

'It ought to be Garnet. He is her grandson and my son. It is his obvious place. After all, if everybody was given his rights, Garnet should be her heir.'

'Granted, although I have a feeling it won't work out that way.'

'Blood is thicker than water.'

'Meaning that that marks the difference between us?'

'Well, let's not go upon those lines, but there is a difference, I suppose. I'll tell you what! Let us each take pencil and paper, make our own dining plan and then compare the results. That way there is a basis for rational discussion.'

'Fine! Let's do just that.'

In spite of what both saw as a slight passage of arms between the prodigal daughter and the chosen favourite, the two women had no intention of quarrelling. Each made her list and put her point of view and without acrimony a compromise was reached with which both were satisfied.

The invitations had been greeted by their recipients with mixed feelings. There was no doubt in anybody's mind that there was some sufficient reason for the unexpected summons and all except the

two children and Gamaliel concluded that it had something to do with Romula's disposal of her property.

'Not that we're likely to come in for much,' said Rupert almost amiably to Diana. 'She can't forget that I was born on the wrong side of the blanket, although how I could help that happening I can't possibly say.'

'I don't intend to go.'

'Oh, I don't know. Better humour her, I think.'

'Why? She's never been here, she has never shown the slightest interest in the children or in me and she repudiated your father. Why should you suddenly turn round and lick her boots?'

'Is there any need to be offensive? I should like to go if only to please Aunt Maria. She brought me up when my parents died and was kind to me. Besides, if my grandmother has invited us, she will have invited the others. I wouldn't mind having a talk with Garnet and Bluebell again. They were like brother and sister to me when I was a boy. Then there are our own youngsters to consider. She may pass me over, but surely she won't attach any stigma to Quentin and Millament? We ought not to stand in their way and they are included in the invitation.'

'They are at school until the middle of July.'

'The invitation is for a Saturday. There would be no difficulty about their getting weekend leave.'

'Well, you must please yourself what you do. I certainly shall not go.'

'Oh well, if you want Fiona and Ruby to bounce your children out of their inheritance, I have nothing more to say.'

'Fiona and Ruby? But they're not family! They couldn't have the slightest claim!'

'That's what you think! One thing I can tell you, and I'll give it you straight. If she does cut them, or either of them, in for the lion's share, I shall not contest the Will and Maria, Garnet and Bluebell can't afford to go to litigation, so bang will go her money straight out of the family and there you have it.'

'My price is a new dinner gown.'

'Done!' Rupert was tempted to add: 'I knew you'd see reason if I mentioned Ruby' but he bit the words back and merely remarked, 'will Truro or Exeter do, or will you want to go up to Town to buy it?'

Garnet and Bluebell were equally convinced that something was in the wind.

'I haven't known her call the whole family together since my father died, and that was long enough ago, goodness knows. Do you think she means to spill the beans about her Will?' said Garnet to his sister.

'I can't think of any other reason for calling up the clan. What chance do you suppose we stand?'

'She can't leave us out altogether.'

'I'm not so sure. There are Rupert's children.'

'I wouldn't worry so much about those. She thinks Rupert comes of tainted stock. No, it's Fiona and Ruby who tangle in my hair.'

'Well, they are on the spot, of course, but so is our mother, and we do not come from a marriage over the tongs.'

'We're our father's children and she was bitterly opposed to mother's marriage. Besides, she may have a colour bar. What is she going to think when she sees Gamaliel?'

‘Do we need to take him with us?’

‘He received a separate invitation. I think Fiona did that deliberately to put you and Parsifal in a quandary,’ said Garnet. ‘I don’t see how you are going to explain to him that he can’t go. He showed me the card he’s had and is bucked to death about it. It would be inhuman to cut short his pleasure. Besides, he’s such a handsome, delightful boy that grandmamma may take a liking to him.’

‘I’m not so sure. She’s very much the memsahib, you know, and she was neither consulted nor informed when we adopted him.’

‘Anyway, I don’t see how you can do him out of what he obviously regards as a treat. Of course, he’ll need a dinner jacket.’

‘Oh, nonsense! He’s only sixteen. His dark suit will do very well.’

‘I’ll tell you what then. I’ve got a white mess-jacket somewhere. I’ll rout it out and get it cleaned and pressed. That, with his dark trousers, will fill the bill. Stick a red carnation in his buttonhole and he’ll knock grandmamma for six. Want to bet on it?’

‘I wish you wouldn’t spoil him the way you do.’

‘Spoil him nothing!’ Garnet turned away whistling and went out of the room. Parsifal said: ‘I would prefer that Gamaliel wore his dark suit. He will be quite conspicuous enough without being dolled up in a white mess-jacket and a red carnation.’

‘I know, but what can I do? I’ve no doubt Garnet has already promised him the mess-jacket,’ said Bluebell.

At Headlands preparations for the dinner party were going ahead with what Fiona, who was superstitious, decided was uncanny smoothness. Mrs Plack had recovered from her *crise de nerfs* and had actually agreed without fuss to Maria’s suggestions for the menu; Garnet, contacted by Fiona in person, had told her that he no longer had a dog; Bluebell now accepted meat as a suitable food and Diana was no longer on a diet.

It was all far too good to be true, thought Fiona, and was soon justified in this assumption.

The places at table had been settled and the place-cards written so that there could be no confusion as to where everybody was to sit, when Ruby sprang a most unwelcome surprise announcement. ‘You’ll have to put those two brats at a separate table or something,’ she said.

‘Of course we can’t,’ said Maria. ‘Mother has said definitely that she wants them at table with the rest of us. I showed her the list and it has her full approval. I don’t want to hurt your feelings, Ruby, but actually those children have far more right to sit with the rest of the family than you have.’

‘Dee dah dee dah!’ said Ruby. ‘All I meant to say was that Barnie is coming. That’s why I think you’ll have to move them.’

‘Barnie?’

‘My music master, Barnaby Orme-Head.’

‘Does madre know?’ asked Fiona sharply.

‘Certainly. I asked her if he could come and she agreed at once when I told her he was my singing teacher.’

‘But we shall be thirteen at table!’

‘That’s why I still say you’ll have to move the brats, dear. They probably chew with their mouths open

and spill things in their laps, anyway, so you'll be better off without them. Besides, I did promise you that I could get Bernie when you said you'd be short of men. Actually I thought I would be doing you a favour.'

Gamaliel went into Bluebell's room to admire himself in her long mirror. Bluebell stood behind him, a tall, cadaverous woman with short-sighted, vaguely kind eyes, hair prematurely grey and bony, long fingered hands with which she was patting her hair into place.

Gamaliel turned to her. 'But I am a prince!' he said. 'The Black Prince! Was he as black as I am?'

'No. He wore black armour, that is all.'

'Black is beautiful, don't you think?'

'I think so. In a little while we shall find out what my grandmother thinks.'

'Oh, she will like me. Everybody does.'

'How fortunate you are!'

'What shall I call her?'

'Mrs Leyden, unless she suggests anything else.'

Her long hands fluttered about his bow tie. 'And remember not to scrape your plate. It isn't done in the best circles.'

'Yes, I must make a good impression. Do you think this jacket suits me? It is tight across the shoulders.'

'It makes you look very distinguished.'

'Do I bow or shake hands?'

'Bow first and then see how things go.'

'Are you a society woman?'

'No, thank God, I am an artist.'

'And I am the Black Prince.'

'And you are the Black Prince, but do not get above yourself if the people at Headlands are kind to you. It is not good manners to become exuberant in public'

'I shall remember. Do you think I shall be head boy at school next year?'

'You know that better than I do.'

'I think I shall. I am very popular.' He turned to the mirror and preened himself.

Parsifal came into the room. 'The car has come for us,' he said. 'You had better sit beside the chauffeur, Blue, so as not to crease your dress. We three men can squash up on the back seat. I must say it was very civil and thoughtful of your grandmamma to offer the car. Taxi hire from Truro would have been a great expense.'

'We could have hired from Trewith in the village.'

'His old rattle-banger? Hardly, on such an occasion. Oh, well, come along. We mustn't keep Lunn waiting.'

'Lunn is a great deal too big for his boots,' said Bluebell. 'Just because he serves a household of women, he thinks he can do as he pleases. Kindly hand me my cloak. How do you think I look?'

‘Splendid, my dear, and Gamaliel too.’

‘And,’ said Bluebell, ‘for a last word of warning, Gamaliel, remember not to criticise the food. If you do not like what you are given, say nothing, just put your knife and fork beside one another on your plate, sit back and wait for the servants to collect. And remember that everything will be served over your left shoulder, so sit up straight and do not impede the service.’

‘Are you going to be ashamed of me at table?’

‘Indeed I hope not. You have natural good manners and should succeed admirably.’

‘That is what I think,’ said Gamaliel, smiling broadly.

With the inclusion of Ruby’s Barnaby Orme-Head, the seating arrangements had suffered some changes and Fiona and Maria had decided to dispense with the seat opposite Romula’s at the lower end of the table.

‘It’s going to look so odd otherwise, madre,’ explained Fiona. ‘We’ve given Maria the seat on your right, next to her we’ve put Mr Orme-Head, then Diana, then Gamaliel, next to him Ruby (who is nearest his age) and then Parsifal.’

‘On the other side of the table,’ said Maria, ‘next to you we’ve put Garnet, then Fiona and next to her are the two children. The boy Quentin will be opposite his mother so that she can keep an eye on him, and Rupert is to be next to the little girl to fulfil the same purpose. The children go to a very good boarding-school, so they should not be too uncouth. Bluebell is to neighbour Rupert and that concludes the seating arrangements.’

‘Oh, well, I suppose it will have to do,’ said Romula. ‘You seem to have given thought to the matter.’ She looked older than her seventy-five years, a cossetted, selfish woman dependent upon others just as much as they were dependent upon her. ‘I would have preferred to have Fiona next to me rather than Garnet.’

‘It would make the party less symmetrical, madre, that’s all, but just as you wish,’ said Fiona. ‘I have no desire to sit between Garnet and a fidgety little boy, I assure you.’

‘Oh no, let be, let be. Who is this Gamaliel? Is he Jewish? Will the food suit him? I believe they have fads.’

‘Oh, no, he is not Jewish, madre,’ said Fiona, when she had exchanged glances with Maria. ‘He is an orphan whom Parsifal and Blue adopted some years ago.’

The introduction of Gamaliel when he arrived provided something of a sensation.

‘But he’s black!’ Romula exclaimed, leaning heavily upon her silver-topped ebony stick and gazing astoundedly upon the comely youth.

‘Black is beautiful,’ said Gamaliel. ‘Do you not think so, dear old Mrs Leyden? I like old ladies. They also are beautiful.’

‘You are a very astonishing young man,’ said Romula. ‘I will have you next to me at table.’

The rearranged seating at table proved not unsatisfactory so far as most of those present were concerned. Fiona and Maria saw no reason for giving the music teacher a place next to Romula, so Maria remained on her right with Barnaby next and Diana on the other side of him.

Fiona was opposite him and next to her sat Garnet, so that she was between him and Gamaliel who, although mindful of the table manners which Bluebell had been at pains to teach him, still managed to entertain his hostess in his own way.

‘Have you ever been mugged, dear old lady?’ he enquired. ‘After dinner I will show you what to do if it ever happens to you. Also I have a manual on karate. I will lend it to you and then you will be safe under any circumstances. I will teach you the killer chop. You may not use it in competitions, of course, but it can be a very good thing to know.’

‘Does your pupil make the progress you would wish, Mr Orme-Head?’ asked Diana in the voice she kept for what might be termed state occasions.

‘Oh, yes, indeed,’ the shock-headed young man replied. ‘She works hard, practises assiduously and is unusually gifted.’

‘How nice,’ said Diana, dismissing him in her mind (despite his handsome appearance) as a stuffed shirt and abandoning her intention of flirting with him. This had been intended to stimulate Garnet, who appeared to be having an absorbing conversation with Fiona, punctuated, to Diana’s envious fury, by laughter.

Meanwhile, Gamaliel was consolidating his position with the giver of the feast.

‘Do you believe that women are superior to men?’ he asked Romula.

‘No. I think the sexes complement one another.’

‘Women are superior. They give birth.’

‘Well they most certainly could not do that without the help of men in the first place.’

‘The Virgin Mary did, if you believe the story. Suppose I had not been born? What a tragedy! Do you think white is superior to black?’

‘Mrs Leyden will be in trouble if she says so,’ said Maria with heavy humour. ‘You might invoke the Race Relations Board, Gamaliel, and they are a sensitive body.’

‘Ham, Shem and Japheth were brothers. Black, yellow and white, but Ham seems to come first and he was black,’ said Gamaliel. ‘Three kings came from the east, too, black, yellow, white. They brought gold, frankincense and myrrh. Gold comes first. Gold is black. Black is beautiful.’

‘Get on with your dinner, or you will be less than equal with the rest of us; you will be all behind,’ said Maria.

‘So you believe all men are equal,’ said Gamaliel, obediently shovelling food into his mouth. ‘Does God believe that?’

‘Of course He does,’ said Maria stiffly.

‘Then God must be cross-eyed. All men are not equal. I am not equal. I am a prince. Mrs Leyden is not equal. She is very rich. Muhammad Ali is not equal. He is the best boxer in the world. Who wants to be equal? Only those who cannot be superior.’

‘Then I think I must be one of those,’ said Maria.

‘Your black boy is only keeping madame amused, I hope. She is not likely to take him up to any serious extent, is she?’ said Ruby to Parsifal. ‘She likes playthings, and that is what he is.’

Parsifal, always diffident and unsure of himself, wondered whether to ask the obvious question and then discovered that there was no need.

‘I began by being one of her playthings myself,’ Ruby went on, ‘but I don’t mind that, so long as I get what I want in the end.’

‘And what is that?’

‘A first class musical education and then, when I am ready, a proper launching. She has the money and I have the talent. People think I suck up to her for what I hope she’ll leave me when she dies, but it isn’t that. I only need her backing. The money will go to her family, as it should.’

‘Do you really think along those lines?’

‘Fiona thinks she stands a chance,’ Ruby went on, her pert little face settling to a hard stare as she caught Rupert’s sardonic eye across the table and realised that he had heard every word of the conversation, ‘but I could tell her something different. Do you want to hear it too?’ she said to Rupert.

‘Eat up your chicken, Millament,’ said Rupert, transferring his attention to his daughter. ‘You’re messing about with it.’

‘I like chicken alive, not dead,’ said Millament. ‘Can’t I have some more of those little sausages?’

‘They’re made from dead pigs,’ said Quentin. ‘Dead pigs with maggots in them.’

‘Be quiet, Quentin! Don’t be disgusting,’ said his mother from further down the table.

‘Oh, Lord!’ said Ruby. ‘Bloody kids!’

‘Black is beautiful,’ said Gamaliel. ‘Maggots are not.’

‘Has anyone noticed that we are thirteen at table?’ asked Parsifal, desperately changing the subject. Everybody except Maria and Fiona, both of whom already knew the score, took a hasty glance around.

‘Dear me!’ said Romula. ‘These superstitions! Only the weak-minded would pay any heed to them. Well, they can clear now and the men can have their port while we repair to the withdrawing-room.’ She made as though to rise.

Gamaliel seized her arm. ‘Not you!’ he said. ‘Let somebody else be first!’

Ruby skipped along to Barnaby. ‘You don’t want any nasty old port. Let’s go out and look at the sea, maestro,’ she said.

‘Not just now, Ruby,’ said Romula. ‘Mr Orme-Head has to get home.’

‘Oh, yes, rather!’ agreed Barnaby, who had done full justice to the dinner and the wine. ‘I had better be moving.’

‘Well, you have your port,’ said Romula kindly, ‘and then pop in for some coffee if you would like it. You have a long journey and will be doing some of it after dark as it is. I am never very happy about motor cycles at the best of times and after dark they are extremely dangerous. You have to get to the outskirts of London, I believe.’

‘Well, not exactly, no. I’m staying with a friend in Exeter.’

‘Well, have your glass of port and then we will say goodbye to you for the present. The withdrawing-room, Ruby.’

Ruby pouted, but followed the other women out of the dining-room.

‘Really, mother!’ said Maria, when they were seated and the maid had served coffee. ‘That was rather cool of you, wasn’t it?’

‘Yes, it was worse than cool; it was very uncivil of me,’ Romula agreed, ‘but if I had not made myself plain he would have stayed on. There is family business to attend to when the men join us. You, Diana, had better run your children home. It must be past their bedtime. Rupert can tell you what is said.’

‘Rupert needs the car as much as I and the children do. At what time shall I return and pick him up?’

‘Oh, whenever you like, of course.’

‘Better still, if madre doesn’t mind, and to save you the extra journey, we can put him up here for tonight and Lunn can run him home in the morning,’ said Fiona. ‘Is that all right, madre?’

The children were not anxious to leave, as it was clear that Gamaliel was to stay for coffee, but Diana, accepting dismissal, ushered them out. Gamaliel, who had opened the door for her, returned to the room and seated himself on the floor at Romula’s feet. As though she were unaware of what she was doing, she grasped a handful of his springy hair and rubbed it gently through her fingers. Gamaliel leaned back so that he was resting half against her chair and half against her knee. Fiona said: ‘You’re rather a big boy to be sitting on the floor.’

‘St Paul sat at the feet of Gamaliel,’ said the black youth. ‘Now Gamaliel sits at the feet of his great grandmother.’

‘I hope she feels complimented,’ said Fiona, laughing. Romula gave Gamaliel’s thick hair an affectionate little tug before she took her hand away.

‘It may surprise you to know that I do feel complimented,’ she said.

‘I am very pleased to hear it, grandmamma,’ said Bluebell. ‘Well, it is getting late.’

‘Oh, Lunn will drive you home,’ said Maria, as the men came in. ‘Mother said she had family business to discuss, so you must stay a little longer.’

‘I thought I had,’ said Romula, taking up another handful of Gamaliel’s hair, ‘but I believe I am too tired and, in any case, it is more than time this young man was in bed. He may be of heroic stature, but he is still at the stage of growth. Goodnight, Gamaliel. Goodnight to the rest of you.’

Gamaliel rose to his feet in a fluid, effortless movement and stood to face her. ‘Goodnight, dear old lady,’ he said. He made the appropriate gestures as he concluded. ‘My hand, my head, and my heart at your feet.’

‘Well!’ said Maria that night at bedtime to Fiona, pausing with her fingers on the handle of her bedroom door. ‘This is a nice state of affairs, I must say! Not a word of her intentions and that black boy literally the nigger in the woodpile! Besides, what on earth induced you to call her bluff about putting Rupert up for the night? She had to agree, but she won’t forgive you for that. No wonder she changed her mind about making any disclosures!’

‘If he had not been asked to stay the night, Diana would have had to come back for him. I had no ulterior motive in getting him to stay,’ protested Fiona.

Maria made no comment on this obvious lie.

‘Mother is still downstairs,’ she said. ‘Perhaps she wants to speak to me alone. I think I will go and find out.’

Chapter3

Headlands

Because neither of them was related by ties of blood to Romula and because both of them were her dependents, Fiona and Ruby maintained an uneasy truce and were even, in some respects, in one another’s confidence.

On the morning after the dinner party both rose early and walked over to the stables where, without previous arrangement, they met.

Ruby arrived first. She greeted the groom: 'Morning, Mattie. How's tricks?'

'You'd better take Brutus this morning. He can do with a gallop. Great doings up at the house, I hear. Seem Redruth was ferrying folks there and yon all day.'

'Yes, we had a family get-together.'

Owing to their having shared a common background in that both had attended the same State school, although Ruby from an orphanage and Mattie by bus from her village home, there was a free-and-easiness still between the two young women, for Ruby was afraid of Mattie and dared not put on airs and graces in her presence.

'What's new, then?' Mattie enquired, as she led Brutus out.

'What's new,' said Ruby, 'is that, unless we all take care, that black boy the other lot adopted is going to scoop the pool.'

'Oh, yes? How come, then?'

'Mrs Leyden has taken a fancy to him.'

'She took a fancy to me once. Wanted me to go in for show jumping or eventing or something of that. "My neck's my own," I said. "I'll break it my way, not yours".'

'This wretched boy is playing up to her.'

'Not to worry. She'll see through him in time if that's what he's up to.'

'She hasn't seen through me yet.'

'That's different. She's got ambitions for you and I reckon they're the same as you got for yourself.'

At this point Fiona turned up at the stables. Mattie, who was facing that way, had seen her leave the house. But for her breeches and boots, Fiona would have walked well, but in her riding clothes she needed to be in the saddle before she became graceful once more, thought Mattie.

'Hullo,' Fiona said, coming up to the other two. 'Oh, I see Ruby is taking Brutus. What do I get, Mattie?'

'Emperor. You're longer in the leg than Ruby.'

'I'd rather have Clytie.'

'I had her out yesterday. Emperor needs a run. You'll find him frisky. Don't let him gallop you over the edge of the cliff.'

'That'll be the day.' Fiona mounted and soon put the good-looking horse to a canter over the downland turf. The June morning was fresh and cool at that early hour, but there was a mist over the sea which gave promise of heat to come.

There was half a mile of level ground before the cliff-top dipped between the two headlands. The canter changed to a gallop, but as they approached the downward slope Fiona pulled up. The horse tossed his head and snorted, but otherwise stood steadily enough while his rider looked southward at the sea.

Far beyond her, the headland called Scar Point, craggy, dark and forbidding, stretched out its long neck towards a single rocky island. Around this the sea creamed and snarled. When, letting the reins fall slack, Fiona turned sideways in the saddle to look back, the great bulk of St Oleg's Head stood guard

over one of the many tiny coves by which the surf-thundering waters encroached, as far as the rock-coast would allow them, upon the turf-clothed land.

On the cliff-top clumps of gorse hid rabbit burrows.

Rabbit droppings and those of the downland sheep were everywhere. A solitary Scots pine, either an invader or the last sentinel left behind by an army of trees long gone, was growing almost on the edge of the cliff. The wide, unbroken sky was too nebulous and pale to be called blue and, so early in the morning, there was no distinction to be drawn between it and the misty sea, for the vague horizon could not be defined. A herring gull swooped, dipped and glided, and then took powerful wing towards the tiny harbour where the fishing boats came in.

There was the regular rhythmic drumming from the hoofs of a cantering horse and then Ruby reined in beside Fiona and said: 'I want to talk to you.'

'This is neither the time nor the place. I'm out for a ride, not an argument.'

'You know how difficult it is to hold private conversations up at the house. Madame calls it 'whispering in corners'. I suppose being so rich makes her suspicious when two of her hangers-on start getting together and going into a huddle.'

'You may be a hanger-on; in fact I think you are one. I happen to work for what I get.'

Ruby was not prepared to take umbrage. 'Look, I know you don't like me very much,' she said.

'Sometimes, and this is one of them, I don't like you at all. I suppose you want to talk about last night,' said Fiona, regretfully resigned to abandoning her contemplation of cliffs, island, sea and sky.

'Well, you and I are in the same boat, you know,' said Ruby placatingly.

'I am rather particular about my shipmates.'

'Until the boat begins to founder. People are glad enough of them then, if only as companions in distress, which I reckon we are.'

'I don't envisage any distress.'

'Then there's something wrong with your eyesight. Madame talked nothing but family last night and has obviously taken a fancy to that black boy, into the bargain.'

'Well, he is family, I suppose. It's a legal adoption and he counts as Bluebell's son.'

'The little beast was sucking up to Madame the whole evening.'

'No, I don't believe it was that. I think they simply got on well together. I was watching them.'

'You know how easily she's flattered.'

'I have no doubt you do.'

'You won't gain anything by quarrelling with me. We've got to get together and protect our interests.'

'Look, Ruby, I am not quarrelling, neither am I a gold-digger. This question of gain is as unimportant to me as it seems to be obsessive with you.'

'You'll find it important enough when Headlands is sold up and whichever one of them has been left the property slings us out on our ear. Wake up! We've got to do something about it,' said Ruby.

At the house itself another colloquy had taken place the night before.

'So we are all on probation, mother,' said Maria. 'Do you think that's quite fair?'

‘I fail to understand you. Am I being taken to task?’

‘No, of course not. I meant only that you may have raised false hopes in several breasts.’

‘Why false hopes?’

‘Well, you will hardly intend to divide up your property equally. In fact, you as good as said that you would not.’

‘As good as saying is not precisely saying.’

‘That is what I consider unfair. It was a time to say everything or to say nothing. You spoke of my marriage when the others had left, and referred obliquely to Garnet and Blue, my children. You spoke of Garnet’s bachelorhood and mentioned your obligation to maintain Fiona and Ruby. Then you insulted Rupert by your very unkind remarks about his father—as though it is Rupert’s fault that he was born out of wedlock—and finished up by claiming in the most derogatory way that I was completely dependent upon you.’

‘Well, so you are,’ said Romula. ‘I no longer hold it against you that you made a foolish marriage, but the fact remains that you did and, as a result, are left penniless on my hands.’

‘I work hard enough here for my keep and so does Fiona. How would you like it if we both walked out on you?’

‘I should not like that at all. Fortunately for all three of us, there is npt the slightest chance of it.’

‘I would not be too sure of that if I were you. Everybody has a breaking point and I have nearly reached mine.’

‘Don’t talk so foolishly. Where could you go if you left me?’

‘To my son and daughter, of course.’

‘You would impose yourself upon Blue and Parsifal? I think they would scarcely thank you for that. They can hardly make ends meet as it is. Parsifal begs from me, as you must be aware.’

‘Garnet is there, too, and I believe his books assure him of more than a competence. He is my son, not Parsifal.’

‘Oh, well, if being here does not satisfy you, you must do as you please, but don’t think you can return here later on.’

‘That is a threat, is it?’

‘Yes, it is,’ said Romula with spirit. ‘If you dare to walk out of my house for no better reason than that I do not disclose to you the terms of my Will, you need never enter it again, whether I am alive or dead.’

‘I said nothing about the terms of your Will with reference to myself. I was speaking of the general confusion and discontentment you have caused by saying so much and yet so little to us all. It was ignoble of you and very embarrassing for your family.’

‘Oh, well,’ said Romula, seating herself in her favourite armchair and contriving to look old and frail, ‘perhaps my sense of fun has led me astray. Later on—in the autumn, perhaps—we will have another dinner party and my lawyer shall come and put an end to all uncertainty. Perhaps people would prefer to know that they have been left out, rather than go on hoping that they are still in.’

‘Left out? Still in? Is that another threat?’

‘Oh, a nod is as good as a wink if you think along those lines,’ said Romula, closing her eyes as a signal that the interview was over.

Maria, however, had not finished. 'If nothing else,' she said, 'I think you owe it to all of us to tell us what you propose to do about the coloured youth.'

'Yes, he is coloured; most delightfully coloured,' said Romula, opening her eyes. 'Black is beautiful. That is what he said and I agree with him.'

'He came from an orphanage.'

'So did Ruby. Both seem to be turning out well.'

'I wish you joy of them! If you are thinking of introducing Gamaliel as well as Ruby into your household, there certainly will be no place here for me.'

'You really are leaving me, then?'

'Oh, mother, how can you be so heartless!'

'I had a good marriage prepared for you, but you preferred to go off with that mountebank.'

'At any rate, I did better than Basil. I did at least get married and have children who are legitimate.'

'I don't want to hear Basil's name mentioned.'

'No, I don't suppose you do. A suicide in the family is not much of a recommendation, is it?'

'If you are intending to leave my house, you had better go soon.'

'Very well. You'll miss me, but that can't be helped. I have done all I can for you, it seems.'

'You have done nothing that Ruby, Fiona and Maybury could not do.'

'Ah, yes, Maybury,' said Maria, referring to Romula's personal maid. 'You know, of course, that Ruby is Maybury's natural daughter, I suppose?'

'Yes, and I dare say I could tell you who the father was, unless you know already,' said Romula.

Maria turned plum colour. 'It's a lie!' she said thickly. 'Really, mother, I wonder you could bring yourself to listen to such calumny.'

'So you did know,' said Romula. 'You should have confided in me. I would have helped you. Anyway, it seems I was right to advance the girl and also to have her present at the dinner. She has some sort of family connection with us, dubious though it may be.'

Maria gave her mother a look of hatred and walked towards the door. There she turned. 'You need give me your charity no longer,' she said. 'I shall not forgive you for this. I shall leave your house.'

'My daughter and I had a set-to last night,' said Romula, when Fiona came back from her ride.

'You quarrelled with Maria?'

'Yes, when the party was over. It was on account of the coloured youth. She thought I favoured him unduly.'

'Well, you did make rather a pet of him, I must say.'

'Maria attempted to take me to task and that I will not suffer in my own house and from a pensioner.'

'How can you say that? Maria earns her keep. You have pensioners, but she is not one of them, and neither am I.'

'I think Maria will leave me.'

'Go out of this house, do you mean?'

‘Yes, I mean that.’

‘I think you would do well to make your peace with her. Look, madre, we were all a little on edge last night. I expect you both said more than you meant.’

‘I took a skeleton out of its cupboard, dusted it and gave it articulation.’

‘You intrigue and alarm me, madre. What on earth do you mean?’

‘I shall not tell you. There are lengths to which even I am not willing to go. I am sorry now that I said as much as I did.’

‘It must have been something pretty awful for you to admit to feeling sorry that you said it.’

When Fiona met Maria, she said: ‘Oh, there you are! Maria, I’ve been having a heart-to-heart with Ruby... You look startled. What have I said?’

‘Nothing, nothing. What did you talk about?’

‘Madre, of course. What else? Madre and her wretched testamentary dispositions.’

‘What had Ruby to say about those?’

‘I think she wants us to close the ranks and keep young Gamaliel out. As though it’s any business of hers!’

‘I think I have queered everybody’s pitch except yours,’ said Maria, going off at a tangent. ‘Perhaps I have gone too far.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Look, ’ said Maria, ‘please don’t take anything I say personally. I liked you from the beginning. I shall always like you and I don’t begrudge you anything. If she remembers you in the Will that’s all right so far as I am concerned and I want you to know it.’

‘All the same, when you came here ten years ago, you did not expect to find me installed, did you?’

‘Well, no. I hadn’t been in her confidence for ages and I knew nothing about you until she gave me a home.’

‘A thing I’ve always wanted to ask you,’ said Fiona, ‘is why Garnet bought Seawards instead of coming with you to live here. I know madre suggested he should come. Why didn’t he?’

‘He said she would never allow him to go on with his writing.’

‘Oh, but, surely!’

‘No, I think Garnet was right. She would have expected him to dance attendance in return for board and lodging. Now, in a sense, the boot is on the other foot. Blue and Parsifal dance attendance on him, ably seconded, I have no doubt, by Gamaliel. Besides, Garnet and Blue are very fond of one another. Even as children they always said that they would live together when they grew up. They are twins, as I expect you know.’

‘Yes, I do know. Garnet told me.’

‘How I wish he would marry you, Fiona!’

‘Small chance of that with Mrs Bosse-Leyden in the field.’

‘Whatever do you mean?’

‘Oh, surely you know that that affair has been going on for months.’

‘I didn’t know. Really, what with Blue marrying a man who can’t keep her and never will be able to, and their adopting Gamaliel, which, in their circumstances, they had no right to do...’

‘The adoption society must have thought it was all right, or they would never have allowed it.’

‘My dear Fiona, don’t you ever read the papers? These child-care people do the most extraordinary things. But tell me about Garnet and Diana. They must both be mad!’

‘With Garnet I think it’s sheer infatuation. With Diana I expect it’s just to score off Rupert. But what’s all this about your queering the pitch?’

‘If I go to Garnet, as I intend to do, mother will cut us both out of the Will. She can’t stand Diana and she despises Rupert. That leaves you and Ruby, Rupert’s children (possibly) and Gamaliel. I am determined she shall not favour him by taking him up and making a sedulous ape of him.’

‘Why should she, anyway?’

‘Oh, Fiona, you know how she does take up people. Look at you and Ruby! I felt certain last night that she was utterly charmed with Gamaliel and I dare say the youth was fully aware of that. It would flatter any adolescent of his age to be taken up and made much of by a woman as rich as mother.’

‘He did not strike me as a young man whose head would be turned by early marks of favour. I think he is simple and goodnatured and perhaps had his own way of showing gratitude for a very good dinner. Food looms large on the horizons of healthy boys.’

‘Yes, but even if he himself is too inexperienced to cash in (literally, I mean) on his advantages, Parsifal the Parasite is not so naïve. That is one reason why I am going over there as soon as I can. Garnet will have to support me and that will settle matters.’

‘You don’t really intend to put a spoke in Garnet’s wheel? But why? He is, after all, your son.’

‘I can’t forgive Blue for marrying Parsifal, who is worthless,’ said Maria, changing the subject slightly.

‘Oh, I don’t think that’s true, Maria. He can’t help being poor.’

‘He is a weakling and a failure. She could have done much better.’

‘I begin to see you as madre’s daughter.’

‘Oh, well, perhaps I do understand mother’s point of view about my marriage. Also, I can’t forgive Blue for adopting Gamaliel. It was her idea, you know. Parsifal had nothing to do with it. I ought to have had proper grandchildren, and obviously there’s no chance of that now. But what about you and Ruby? What do you mean?’

‘If you have indeed queered everybody’s pitch, as you claim, except for myself and Ruby, Ruby’s wishes will have been fulfilled. She is not really after madre’s money as such. What she wants is to complete her music studies and be given her chance.’

‘As a singer?’

‘Of course.’

‘I want to talk to you, Fiona,’ said Romula, coming downstairs at eleven.

‘I thought you wanted these letters to catch the post. They need your signature.’

‘Oh, there’s time for all that.’

‘Very well, although perhaps I ought to remind you that there is only one postal collection each day from the village.’

‘Oh, if that is all, you can drive into Truro this afternoon and post the letters there. An outing will do you good and you could do a little shopping. Perhaps I will come with you and Lunn can drive the car. He has far too much time on his hands. In fact, I am thinking of dispensing with Mattie and getting him to look after the horses as well as the car.’

‘That won’t suit either of them.’

‘Why not? She can still live in his cottage. I should make no objection to that. But I don’t want to talk about the Lunnns. Have you spoken to Maria this morning?’

‘Yes, of course. I always do.’

‘You are misunderstanding me wilfully. Don’t be impertinent. What did she have to say?’

‘Are you deliberately driving her out of this house?’

‘Is that what she said?’

‘Not in so many words. It amounted to that, I thought.’

‘Is she really going?’

‘Such appeared to be her intention when she left me.’

‘I am not driving her away. She is in a mood. I think she is angry because I did not disclose the contents of my Will last night. Why should I?’

‘Well, when you began to speak, I think we all expected to hear something about it. I must say that you gave me to understand as much when you told me to issue the invitations. We all concluded that that was the reason for calling us all together.’

‘Yes, well, I had some such intention in mind, but, over dinner, I abandoned it.’

‘With Gamaliel in mind, one assumes.’

‘You have no right to assume anything of the kind, Fiona. Where did you sleep last night?’

‘Oh, so that is what you wanted to see me about, and not Maria’s doings at all.’

‘I should like an answer to my question.’

‘It is an impertinent one and I do not feel disposed to answer it. However, if you want to know, I slept in my own room, as usual.’

‘With whom?’

‘I had very little choice so I slept with Rupert. I think you knew I would when you agreed to his spending the night here.’

‘He will get a divorce, I suppose.’

‘What about his children? Divorce would come hardest on them and neither he nor I would want to cause them distress. Children, for all their nuisance value, are helpless and should be shown mercy.’

‘Those particular children would be better away from their parents, it seems to me—from both parents.’

‘Oh, you know about Diana and Garnet, as well as about Rupert and me, do you? Can none of us keep our indiscretions a secret?’

‘I did not know, but I know now. Fiona, you had better leave my house. What Diana and Garnet get up to is their business, but I will not condone your goings-on and under my roof.’

Chapter 4

Campions and Seawards

‘But we can’t have both of them,’ said Parsifal, his long-lipped camel-face lengthening lugubriously. ‘Will they pay us anything?’

‘If they don’t, we truthfully plead poverty and say they simply must.’

‘Are you prepared to tell them that?’

‘Perfectly. Why not? It is not our place to support them, even if we could afford to do so.’

‘We had better find out what Garnet thinks about it all. This house is his.’

‘Like me, he can hardly refuse point-blank to have our mother here. Fiona is a different matter entirely. I think we must tell her she will have to share mother’s room. That should put her off.’

‘Could we suggest she goes to stay at Campions for a bit?’

‘Diana wouldn’t like that. She wouldn’t agree.’

‘She doesn’t know anything about Fiona and Rupert.’

‘Don’t be too sure about that.’

‘You surely don’t think she does know!’

‘She not only knows; she condones it because of herself and Garnet. Rupert’s misdeeds are a cloak for her own and, of course, a welcome one.’

‘There ought to be a divorce, then Rupert and Fiona could marry and so could Diana and Garnet. A divorce would settle everything.’

‘Except the fate of Rupert and Diana’s children.’

‘Each party could take one of them.’

‘There speaks a childless man! Besides, what would Gamaliel do without his foster-son?’

‘His what?’

‘Oh, have you not fathomed the relationship between Garnet and Gamaliel? Gamaliel has adopted my twin brother. I am thankful it is nothing worse than that.’

‘Even supposing a divorce did take place, I am sure that Diana would never tolerate Gamaliel as a member of her household.’

‘Isn’t that what I’m saying? Anyhow, although the sighting-shots regarding mother and Fiona have been fired, nothing is settled yet. There is another thing, Parsifal. If we have my mother and Fiona here, we can say goodbye to anything grandmother may have decided to leave us in her Will.’

‘That Will is a will o’ the wisp. We have discussed it so often that I have abandoned all belief in it. I thought we were to hear something at the dinner party, but, beyond vague hints and what I took to be undertones of warnings, nothing tangible emerged.’

‘I think grandmother likes playing cat and mouse with our hopes. Wealthy people can be very cruel.’

‘All power leads to cruelty and the power of wealth is very great. Do you think she took a fancy to Gamaliel? Not that I would wish our future to depend on him.’

‘Oh, it will not. Gamaliel is well-meaning and amiable, but he is also the complete egoist. If our interests clashed with his, ours would go to the wall. Besides, why should he benefit us? We adopted him for our own reasons, not for his.’

‘That is the reason people have children, their own or by adoption. The child has no choice in the matter, and Gamaliel had none.’

‘Suppose grandmother wanted to take him to live in her house?’

‘Then he would be old enough to have a choice, and rightly so. We could hardly stand in his way.’

‘So long as we are agreed upon that.’

‘But if he should find favour and should decide to benefit us, you would not refuse his bounty, would you?’

‘Anything she leaves him will be held in trust for him, I expect. She would see to it that he could not touch it until he comes of age. By that time he would be off our hands and would (rightly) have no further use for us.’

‘That is in two years’ time, but she is not dead yet. I don’t think we need count any chickens.’

Gamaliel joined them. ‘We could have a picnic today,’ he said, ‘with some of the things my great grandmother packed up for me after the party.’

‘Why haven’t you gone to school?’ asked Bluebell.

‘The O level people are excused. We are to study at home for the rest of the week because the examinations begin on Monday.’

‘Well, you had better go off and study, then.’

‘No picnic?’

‘We will have lunch here on the terrace. Won’t that do?’

‘Oh, yes, if you say so. When shall I see my great grandmother again?’

‘You asked me that yesterday. You must wait to see her again until she invites you to her house.’

‘She has promised that her groom will teach me to ride.’

‘It will make you bandy-legged.’

Gamaliel looked down at his bare, brown, handsome limbs. He was wearing nothing but a pair of the briefest of shorts and looked superb.

‘I will go and study,’ he said. ‘I am not looking forward to my O levels. I am taking nine subjects, far too many. My mind has not that number of sides to it.’

‘If you pass in five we shall be satisfied. I myself think nine is too many,’ said Bluebell. ‘When we know how well you have done, we shall know what to choose for your A levels.’

‘The school will choose those for me if I stay on, but I don’t want to stay on. I am entitled to leave school at sixteen and that is what I want to do.’

‘I thought you wanted to be head boy next term. It would help your career to end up like that.’

‘It would not help the career I have chosen.’ He turned and went indoors.

Bluebell seated herself in one of the basket chairs on the verandah and gazed out to sea. Beyond the narrow cove with its bare rocks and its smugglers' cave rose a high green hill up which a narrow, well-worn path climbed slantingly to a rounded shoulder below which the sea rolled in against a tiny spit of sand. From the shoulder of the hill, but out of sight from where she sat, Bluebell knew that a narrower path, rough, steep and uneven, made a walker's short cut to the woods around Campions, the house occupied by Rupert and Diana. There was a much longer way to it by a road through the village past the hotel and the pub, a road which branched off into a bridle-way. This would be the route, Bluebell reflected, by which her mother and Fiona would travel, for surely Romula would not refuse them the services of her car and chauffeur, however bitterly she had quarrelled with them.

Parsifal stood irresolutely beside his wife's chair for a few moments and then said: 'I feel like a good stiff walk. How would it be if I toddled over to Campions and had a word with Diana? She will be on her own with Rupert at his desk or out botanising and the two children at school. She may have gathered more of your grandmother's intentions than we did and she will be interested to hear the news about your mother and Fiona.'

'To take a walk will only follow your usual custom. It is barely half-past nine, so on your way back you could call at the hotel for a packet of their crab sandwiches. Gamaliel likes those and they will help to make lunch out here into more of a picnic. Ask Garnet whether you shall also bring him some beer. Gamaliel likes that as well, and Garnet will pay for it. There will be a bottle for you, too, I dare say, and perhaps you could bring me a bitter lemon drink if you are bringing beer. Take Diana the smaller of my two sponge sandwiches. It will make an excuse for calling on her.'

Parsifal took a haversack and his favourite ashplant, descended to the basement and the back door, went through the garden to the stepping-stones in the tumbling little stream and mounted the grass-grown steps cut long ago by the smugglers. At the top an ill-defined path followed the line of the cove and led to the back door in the oldest part of the hotel. He went to the bar and gave his order for the sandwiches and drinks, then he crossed the road which led down to the shore and the fisherman's boats and climbed the hill which overlooked the tiny harbour. As he walked, the open sea came in sight, but he lost it again when he turned inland to take the path which led to his objective.

The little bare trackway mounted and dipped, mounted and dipped until, at the top of the hill, it reached an open space whose outcroppings of rock offered the chance of a seat and a view, once again, of the sea. Far to east and west, the long headlands ran out into the Channel, helping to shelter innumerable tiny coves, each with its spit of beach. There were also a couple of large, clean, sandy bays, sought after every summer by holiday-makers with children.

Parsifal unhitched his haversack, dropped it upon the ground and seated himself upon a flat outcrop. Around him were bracken and gorse and patches of ciliate heath, the Cornish heather, green-growing but not yet in flower. Far out in the Channel a ship the size of a toy was voyaging from Southampton to Cork. Parsifal took a notebook from the breastpocket of his bush shirt and put down some rough notes and a first line which he intended to extend into a sixteen-line poem for one of the women's magazines which sometimes took his work.

When he resumed his way the path became rougher and less well-defined. At one place an almost perpendicular descent of ten or twelve feet necessitated sliding down it on the seat of his khaki shorts, but after that the going was easier and it was not long before he came upon a broad stretch of turf and could see the woods which surrounded Campions.

He did not expect to find anybody about except Diana, and there she was in the big, uncared-for garden surrounded by what Parsifal might have thought were Walt Disney's 101 Dalmatians except that they happened to be dachshunds and numbered only five, the sire, the bitch and three ecstatic puppies.

He paused at the wicket-gate which opened on to the rough lawn, for the whole tribe of dogs had set up a staccato chorus and had lolloped up to the gate at his approach.

Diana followed and screamed at them. Pandemonium reigned until she got them under control and into their wire-mesh cages. Then she came up to the gate again. 'Well!' she said. 'Surprise, surprise!'

'Yes, I suppose it is,' said Parsifal. 'If I'm not interrupting anything I'd like to speak to you.'

Diana unlatched the gate. 'Come in,' she said. 'What's it all about?'

Parsifal did not answer until they were seated in a large room which would have been pleasant had it been tidier. 'I'd better come straight to the point,' he said. 'Have you heard that my mother-in-law and Fiona have had a fracas with Mrs Leyden and are going to leave her house?'

'No, I hadn't heard. I can't say I'm surprised after the way she behaved at the dinner party. I have nothing against Gamaliel, but the fact remains that he is 'family' only by adoption. I am certain she called us all together to tell us something. That something, or so Rupert and I concluded, was to do with her Will and who was to get what, so long as they behaved themselves. But, except for vague hints and what Rupert and I interpreted as veiled threats, nothing of any interest came out at all. Right?'

'Right. She took this sudden, and, as you say, irrational interest in Gamaliel and, by this time, may have changed all her plans.'

'Maria and Fiona must believe that she has, otherwise they would never have quarrelled with her and threatened to leave her house.'

'It is more than a threat, I'm afraid. They propose to come and plant themselves on us.'

'Well,' said Diana, sharply, 'you've got plenty of room for them at Seawards.'

'We wondered whether, if we took my wife's mother, you and Rupert would have Fiona.'

'Oh, now, look here, Parsifal!'

'Just a moment. Hear me out.'

'There is no point in my doing that. Your mother-in-law is your business, of course, and I quite see that you must do what you can for her. Fiona, on the other hand, is nobody's business. Mrs Leyden adopted her unofficially and she is nobody else's responsibility. If she chooses to quarrel with her benefactor, that's up to her. She can't expect any of us to interest ourselves in the matter.'

'So you won't have her here if we agree to have Blue's mother? I wonder what Rupert will say when I put the point to him? After all, this is his house, not yours.'

His tone was so full of meaning that Diana looked venomous, but, instead of the outburst of which Parsifal knew she was capable, all she said was: 'There are reasons why neither Rupert nor I would want to have Fiona here. You may or may not understand what I mean. If you don't, there is no explanation I should be willing to give you; if you do, then you should have known better than to suggest such an arrangement.'

'I see,' said Parsifal, 'and I apologise. I'm afraid that, from our point of view, it was any port in a storm.'

'This port,' said Diana, 'is open only to well-found, properly insured vessels, not to drifting wrecks that no underwriter will look at.'

'I see,' said Parsifal again. 'Oh, well, that's that, then.' He picked up his haversack which he had dumped by the side of his chair, where it struck no incongruous note in the untidy room, and walked towards the door. 'I just thought I'd put you in the picture.'

‘Shall you let Gamaliel go and live with Mrs Leyden if that is what she wants?’ asked Diana, before he reached it.

Parsifal turned round. ‘It will depend upon what he wants,’ he said. ‘Blue and I would not stand in his way.’

It was Diana’s turn to say that she saw.

‘I see,’ she said. ‘Oh, well, we have very few expectations for ourselves or our children. She thinks Quentin and Millament come of tainted stock since Rupert’s father did not marry his mother. Unto the third and fourth generation is her contention, I suppose, plus visiting the sins of the fathers upon the children, but it’s hard luck on our two brats, especially as the last thing they did at the dinner party was to make a hit with the giver of the feast.’

‘Millament couldn’t help knocking over her glass.’

‘Quentin couldn’t help spilling his soup. They are not usually clumsy or boorish at table. All the same, they hardly endeared themselves at a time when it mattered most that they should. Come and sit down again, Parsifal, and we’ll have a glass of sherry.’

‘Thank you, Diana, but I must be getting back. I have to stop and pick up some food from the hotel. Gamaliel has school lunch at soon after twelve, but he has permission to be at home today to study for his exams, and will be getting hungry.’

‘Well, will you make me a promise?’

‘To say nothing to Rupert about my visit here this morning?’

‘You are always so intuitive, Parsifal. No wonder you are a poet.’

Parsifal knew the compliment was a false one and that in reality Diana despised both him and his work, but he felt gratified, none the less, by her words. ‘I won’t say anything at all to Rupert unless he asks me a direct question,’ he said. ‘If that happens, I shall, of course, feel bound to give him a straight answer.’

Diana looked at him. ‘I think he’ll pay for Fiona’s keep if I put it to him in the right way. You’d be glad of that, so you need not threaten me,’ she observed.

Parsifal looked astonished. ‘Very glad indeed of it. It would ease matters all round. But, well—’ he began.

‘I know all about Rupert and Fiona. That’s why—I may as well speak frankly—neither Rupert nor I could possibly have her here,’ said Diana, still eyeing him.

‘It will be better for her and Blue’s mother to remain together. It was only a question of the expense,’ said Parsifal, still looking mystified by Diana’s sudden offer of help.

‘Think no more about that. It will be taken care of. If ever you go to prison, Parsifal, it will be for blackmail.’

‘Blackmail?’ said Parsifal blankly, more and more indicating that he was out of his depth.

‘Well, isn’t that what this visit of yours has meant?’

‘Certainly not, Diana! How can you suggest such an ugly interpretation of my call! I simply have no idea what you’re getting at.’

‘Sorry! I thought you were cleverer than you look,’ said Diana spitefully. ‘Are you calling at Headlands as well as coming here?’

‘Why should I do that?’

‘I thought perhaps your grocery bill was due.’

Chapter 5

Hallucination or Fact?

By walking through the woods to the cliff-top and then taking a track (well-marked thanks to Diana’s Easter-tide students earlier in the year) which followed the line of the coast, Parsifal took his homeward way intending to return by a longer route than the one he had used on his outward journey.

He had emerged from the tangle of trees and bushes which hid Campions from view when, hitching his haversack a bit higher, he remembered the sponge sandwich which was supposed to have been bestowed upon Diana.

He did not want to go back. Her spiteful reference to blackmail had put him out of countenance and he was still wondering how she knew that he sponged on Mrs Leyden. Meanwhile still in his possession was the edible gift. Bluebell, he knew, would be disappointed if it were not delivered. She had very few things to give away. He sighed, half at the thought of retracing his steps and carrying out his errand, half in sympathy with a wife who accepted poverty so unselfishly and with so much patience and good grace, and who had never reproached him over the years for failing to give her a child of her own or for being unable to keep her in the manner which, as Romula’s granddaughter, perhaps she had a right to expect.

Sighing, but conscious of where his duty lay, he turned about and made his way back through the tress. As he approached the back fence of Campions, he heard women’s voices and, from the fact that the dachshunds were not barking, he deduced that one of the voices belonged to Diana.

As he drew nearer he heard one of the women say, ‘There is no need for me to come in and sit down. I am not in the least fatigued. There is just one question I would like to put to you. Where did my grandson, Garnet Porthcawl, sleep last night?’

‘Good heavens, how should I know?’ The voice, Parsifal decided, was most certainly that of Diana. ‘Why do you ask?’

‘I am not to be deceived or hoodwinked, Diana. You will answer me.’

‘But what business is it either of yours or mine where he slept?’

‘I would have supposed it was very much your business, since Rupert slept at my house and therefore was not at home last night to know what went on in his own.’

Parsifal decided that it was high time he made his presence known. He broke into song and stepped out briskly.

I will give my love an apple without e’er a core;

I will give my love a house without e’er a door;

I will give my love a palace wherein she may be,

And she may unlock it without any key,

carolled Parsifal in a thin but not displeasing tenor. He emerged in view of the startled women.

‘Good gracious me!’ exclaimed Diana, who was leaning on the wicket-gate while Romula stood like a ramrod outside it. ‘What on earth have you come back for?’

‘Ah,’ said Parsifal. He unshipped his haversack and opened it. ‘Blue sent you a sponge sandwich.’ He produced a package. ‘I daren’t go back with it after she made it especially for you.’

‘I bet that isn’t true,’ said Diana, taking the gift as Parsifal handed it over the gate and Romula stepped back. ‘Thank her, all the same. She’s a better cook than I am, Gunga Din.’

‘Since you are here, Parsifal,’ said Romula, ‘you may escort me home, or as near my house as your way takes you. I shall be glad of your company along the cliff-top. I had a very unpleasant experience on my way here. As I have told Diana, I nearly fell on to the rocks below the cliff.’

‘Indeed, Mrs Leyden? I am sorry to hear that,’ said Parsifal, preparing to follow her along the woodland path. ‘Missed your footing on the cliff-top, did you? I really think you would do well to take a companion when you go on these treacherous walks.’

‘It is not the walks which are treacherous, Parsifal.’

‘Landslides?’

‘I have not known of one in this part of the countryside.’

‘Then somebody in a hurry, perhaps, brushed against you in passing and upset your equilibrium a little. People can be very clumsy at times.’

‘Parsifal, I shall require you to protect me.’

‘Of course, Mrs Leyden.’

‘Dead! And never called me Mother!’ said Diana.

Romula turned on her as though she could have struck her. ‘If I am found dead at the bottom of the cliffs, I shall come back and haunt you. You are a strumpet,’ she said. ‘Come, Parsifal.’

Thankful that the uncomfortable interval was over, Parsifal followed her until the trees thinned and they were in the open. ‘You don’t really mean that you were attacked on your way over here, do you?’ he asked, falling in beside her.

‘I don’t know what else I mean. Which way did you come?’

‘By the hill path. It is more difficult than this route, but a good deal shorter and, of course, more easily reached from Seawards. I shall have to rejoin it later on. I must pick up some things at the hotel.’

‘Oh, well, that will do for me, too. I can telephone from there and tell Lunn to bring the car. I have had a shock, Parsifal.’

‘I am sorry.’

‘I was bending down to dig up a root of sea-pinks with my little trowel—I have a blue pot at home in which I thought the little plant would look well—when I was heavily struck by a human body and sent over the edge of the cliff.’

‘Some loutish holiday-maker who could not wait until there was room to pass.’

‘Nonsense! I was not impeding anyone. I was not on the path; but on the grass verge between the path and the cliff-edge.’

‘You might have been killed! Did you see anybody?’

‘Of course I did not. Fortunately I fell into a dip which arrested my descent, but of course I am neither

of the age, the build or the physical power to be able to climb to the top again. Fortunately the cliff-path is a favourite haunt of the holiday walkers, so I thought that if I called out and continued to do so, in the end some passer-by was certain to hear me and either render assistance or go in search of it.'

'And somebody came.'

'After what seemed a considerable interval, yes. Of all people it turned out to be Garnet. He said he was out for his morning constitutional. I took this to mean that he was on his way to see Diana, but when, after he had climbed down and assisted me to the top, I told him that I myself was on my way to Campions, he must have thought it better to change his mind. He accompanied me through the woods as far as the Campions garden fence and then left me.'

'You have had a lucky escape.'

'Lucky do you call it?'

'Miraculous, then. But surely it could not have been intended as an attack on you? It must have been either a sheer accident or dangerous, thoughtless horseplay.'

'I have my ill-wishers, Parsifal. You reached Campions before I did, it seems. You were paying a return visit when we met.'

'But, look!' said Parsifal in an incredulous tone. 'You're not accusing me of pushing you over the edge of the cliff, are you? I came by the inland route, over the hill, as I told you. I was never on the cliff-top at all.'

'If I thought you were my assailant, should I have asked for your escort on my homeward way? I wondered whether you had seen anybody in the woods, that is all. But, of course, you entered them from the other side, did you not?'

'Yes, I saw nobody.'

'You are very late back,' said Bluebell. 'Gamaliel, poor boy, says he is starving. Did Diana keep you talking too long? She is lonely and tends to become loquacious, as lonely people usually do when they get a sympathetic listener.'

'Let us have our lunch. I will tell you all about it later. It is not for Gamaliel's ears. I do not want to upset him so near to his examinations. Where is Garnet? He will be hungry too.'

'He will not be in for lunch. He went out soon after you had left and said he would have a bread and cheese lunch at a public house.'

'Oh? Did he say where he was going?'

'Out for a walk, and that he would call at Headlands on his way and ask how our grandmother felt after the party.'

'I suppose he really went to see Diana. He slept with her last night while Rupert was at Headlands, I expect. At any rate, he did not sleep here.'

'Oh, well, I suppose they must make the most of their opportunities, as I expect Rupert and Fiona did,' said Bluebell tolerantly. 'How oddly things arrange themselves! If only Garnet had desired Fiona instead of Diana, how beautifully simple everything would be.'

'Not for us and Gamaliel. We should have had to find other lodging and how that could have been afforded I hardly know. From our point "of view, things are much better left as they are.'

When the picnic lunch, at which he was in high spirits, was over, Gamaliel went off to resume his studies. Parsifal and Bluebell cleared the table and washed the dishes and then settled in deckchairs on

the balcony above that where they had lunched.

‘One gets a wider prospect from up here,’ said Parsifal.

‘Yes. You are going to tell me about your visit to Diana.’

‘About that there is nothing to tell. I was with her a very short time and did not stay long at the house. It was Mrs Leyden who delayed me.’

‘You have not been to Headlands?’

‘No, I met her at Diana’s gate. I think they were having an altercation.’

‘That means she knew Diana slept with Garnet last night.’

‘That was the lesser of her complaints. She claims that she was attacked on her walk along the cliff-top and might have been killed.’

‘Attacked? But people don’t do that sort of thing around here.’

‘Our own people, no, but one cannot go bail for holiday-makers and there are already plenty of them around here.’

‘What does she say actually happened?’

Parsifal, who had a good verbal memory, quoted Romula’s words.

‘Oh, it must have been an accident,’ declared Bluebell. ‘All the same, surely the person who did it could have stayed to find out whether she was hurt.’

‘Perhaps not, if he thought he might have killed her. I would put him down as a sort of pedestrian hit-and-run.’

‘Oh, well, yes, perhaps.’

‘She claims, moreover, that she was not on the path when she was pushed. That means the way was clear. There was no need for any pushing.’

‘She is getting on in years. Do you think she made the whole thing up? She may have a persecution complex. Elderly women sometimes get some very peculiar notions in their heads.’

‘I had not thought of that. All the same, perhaps she ought not to take these lonely walks while so many strangers are about. One does hear of muggings and kidnap and suchlike unpleasant things, and I don’t suppose her wealth is any secret.’

‘I believe I am what is called unworldly, but I wish I thought that some of it would come our way.’

‘I wonder whether it would be a good idea if I walked over to the village Post Office and telephoned Headlands to ask whether she got back safely and how she feels after her experience?’

‘It could do no harm, I suppose, and it might please her. All the same, I do not care that she should have any excuse to class us as sycophants.’

‘There is no question of that where I am concerned, Blue,’ said Parsifal, suppressing the fact that he often begged from Romula. ‘She knows that I have no expectations under her Will.’

‘She might think I sent you. Oh, that Will! If only she had made her intentions known at the dinner party we should all be relieved from the burden of uncertainty.’

‘I do wish your mother and Fiona were not coming here.’

‘I know what you mean. It affects Garnet, too. Grandmother may think he ought to forbid them in the

house. After all, he is the master here. Oh, well, go and do your telephoning if you think fit.'

'And if she does ask me to call?'

'I will expect you when I see you.'

'I think it might be a few pence well spent.'

'It is better not to think so, but off you go.'

Outside the little Post Office he met an acquaintance. 'Why, good afternoon, Miss Pabbay,' he said. 'So you are not yet back in London? How is Mrs Leyden after her accident?'

'You had better come back with me and find out.'

'I was about to telephone.'

'Oh, I have Lunn and the car just up the road. Excuse me while I buy some stamps. We've run out and I think she wants to write to her lawyers.'

'That sounds interesting.'

'Or ominous, depending upon how you look at it.'

Romula received Parsifal with unusual cordiality. 'It is kind of you to call and enquire after me,' she said, 'but I am fully recovered.'

'Perhaps you should inform the police of your dangerous experience.'

'I have already done so by telephone, but, of course, I could give them little information. I do not even know whether my assailant was a man or a woman.'

'Surely no woman would behave in such a manner?'

'If you knew the way some women behave nowadays, you would not ask such a stupid question. Is my grandson giving house room to my daughter and Fiona?'

'Well, really, that is nothing to do with Blue and me,' protested Parsifal, looking alarmed.

'I am aware of that. Pensioners seldom hold the whip-hand.'

'We pay our way, thanks to some help from you.'

'Barely. You live rent-free, I suppose, and are largely dependent upon the allowance which comes to Bluebell out of my purse.'

'I am sorry you grudge it to her.'

'Who said I grudged it? I think it is a pity you do not earn enough to keep her in the style she deserves, but that cannot be helped. No doubt you do your best, such as it is, if only as a beggar when the big bills come in.'

'Yes, I do my best. It is not easy to follow one's star. I still hope to make something of myself as a poet.'

'As a poet, yes, perhaps. As a business man—well, that is beyond your grasp, although, as I say, you know how to beg. You had better put pressure on Rupert to pay for Fiona's keep. I shall do nothing to help if she leaves me. But I won't threaten you. You were of service to me this morning. How is my Black Prince?'

'Gamaliel? Oh, he flourishes. I am sure he would have wished to be remembered to you had he known I was coming here this afternoon.'

‘Cupboard love!’

‘Oh, no! You do him an injustice.’

‘Yes,’ said Romula, after a pause during which Parsifal found himself surprised by his own bold comment. ‘Yes, I believe I do. Of course, your adopting him confirms me in my original estimate of you that you are neither prudent nor far-seeing, but he is an amusing and pleasant person. I may remember him later on.’

‘Well, I’m thankful you’re not prudent,’ said Bluebell, when she heard the story after tea on the terrace was over and Gamaliel had taken his books into Garnet’s room in order to con them while Garnet banged away on his ancient typewriter. ‘If being prudent means blackmailing her into getting Rupert to pay for Fiona’s keep, I hope you never will be prudent. Think no more of her unkind remarks and do not build your hopes for Gamaliel too high.’

‘You haven’t had any extra news while I was paying my visit to her?’

‘The only extra news would be the actual arrival of mother and Fiona and they have not come. Of course the quarrel with grandmother may have been made up by now.’

‘You sound as though you would regret that.’

‘Well, I should not be averse to the company of other women in a house which contains myself and three men.’

‘So it was not the money side of it which concerned you? It is a good thing you leave the financial side to me. I don’t know where we should be if you did not place the allowance your grandmother makes you in my hands.’

‘Yes, you are clever with money, Parsifal.’

‘So you don’t mind having Fiona here?’ said Parsifal, finding it unnecessary to disclose Romula’s views of him as a businessman.

‘Since you ask me, no. It is pleasant for a woman to have the company of other women. There are things they have in common which a man would not understand.’

‘I see. I have always thought, until now, that Gamaliel and I sufficed you.’

‘So you do. I said it would be pleasant to have some female society for a change. I did not say it was a necessity and I am far from thinking so. Would you mind taking on the washing-up? It is only three small plates and the cups and saucers, not anything greasy or unpleasant. The light is just right for a picture I want to paint. There are some new visitors at the hotel, you say, so it may be profitable to get a few pictures done while they are here, especially as, if mother and Fiona do come, I shall have less time to myself than I have at present.’

‘One of his new visitors, so Trev Poltrethy informed me this morning, is a very wealthy and important woman who is staying for a whole month. She has her own chauffeur who has been accommodated at the pub further up the hill. He is to report for duty each day.’

‘An important woman? Have we heard of her?’

‘Dame Beatrice Adela Lestrangle Bradley. Her secretary, a Mrs Gavin, and two friends, travelled down with her, but Poltrethy gathers that the holiday marks a reunion of the three younger women, who have now gone off together. Dame Beatrice belongs to a much older generation than the others, and wishes them to enjoy a more adventurous time than the hotel can provide.’

‘Perhaps each of the others will buy a picture later on. When one member of an adult party shows

interest, the others often feel inclined to follow suit. They are sure to return and pick her up, so I will have pictures ready.'

'Then away with you, my dear, and put brush to canvas. Of course I will wash up the dishes.'

Bluebell collected her materials and, so burdened, did not attempt the route by way of the garden, the stepping stones and the smugglers' track, but went through to the front of the house and took the steep but made-up slope which led to the village street and so down to the hotel and its small grey beach.

'Somebody pushed my great grandmother over the edge of the cliff?' said Gamaliel to Garnet on the following morning. 'But who would do a thing like that to an old lady?'

'How do you know anything about it, Greg?'

'Oh,' said Gamaliel, with a gesture which showed the pinkish palm of his hand, 'I heard my mother and father talking about it. They also said you had done yourself a bit of no good by having Fiona here. Does that mean she will not give you her money when she dies?'

'No, of course it doesn't. In any case, she isn't going to die for years and years yet.'

'It must have frightened her very much, that fall. Old ladies are easily scared.'

'Not this one. She was mad at herself, not scared.'

'But how could she be mad at herself? She ought to have been mad with the man who pushed her.'

'I'll tell you something, Greg. There wasn't any man. Nobody pushed her. She said there was because they are—I mean my mother and Fiona and even Mattie Lunn—they are always warning her that she ought not to be taking these cliff walks alone at her age. Her sight isn't good, you see, and also, if she takes a fancy to a plant or a flower, she is apt to scramble after it. The cliff-path is perfectly safe for ordinary walkers, but not for a half-blind old lady who seems to think she's a goat.'

'So you think she slipped and was not pushed?'

'Yes. She confesses she was digging up a plant. She shouldn't have been doing that, anyway. Conservation, you know, and all that.'

'So Allah, the conserver and the judge, pushed her over the cliff to teach her a lesson, but because He is all-merciful, all-compassionate, and because Mohammed is His prophet she was not hurt.'

'Eh?' said Garnet, taken aback by this evidence of discipleship. 'What's all this about conservers and judges?'

'My conception of my faith. I am a Mohammedan with Hindoo thoughts. When my boxing career is over I shall found a new religion. My people are good at religion. Swing low, sweet chariot. Jewish, Old Testament. Virgin Mary have a baby boy. Christian, New Testament. The bird of Time has but a little way to fly. Persian, Omar Khayyam. If the red slayer think he slays. Buddha, by understanding English poet of enlightened kind. Leave this chanting and singing and telling of beads. Hindoo poem of Rabindranath Tagore. Do what thou wilt is the whole of the law. Aleister Crowley, a bad man, perhaps, but with his ideas I have sympathy, as I have with witchcraft watched over by the Great Mother and the Horned God. All religions are good in their own way, and my religion will be a mixture of them all. Meanwhile, I am thinking like Muhammad Ali, the Muslim way.'

'I don't know why you say you won't pass your O levels,' said Garnet.

'I think too much, that is why. O levels do not require thought, only a good memory to produce what my teachers have said.'

'Well, to get back to the subject of my grandmother's fall down the cliff—'

‘You say it was only a fall, not a push.’

‘If she’d really been pushed, she would have landed on the rocks below. No, no. She lost her footing and fell just a dozen feet or so. She bellowed for help because she couldn’t scramble back to the path again, although you or I or an active girl or woman could have done it easily.’

‘And you helped her up to the top.’

‘Yes, that’s about it. She’s a proud and obstinate old lady and she would never admit that other people had been right and that she ought not to take these walks and scrambles alone.’

On the following day, however, Garnet was compelled to alter his opinion about Romula’s mishap on the cliff path. He set out early in the morning from Seawards and took the rough, hilly route which Parsifal had followed to reach Campions and concealed himself in the woods there until he saw Rupert come out by the wicket gate. He waited until the sound of Rupert’s car could no longer be heard and then announced himself to Diana, who had come to the wicket gate to let her dogs out for a run in the woods.

‘Hullo,’ he said. ‘Will you give me some breakfast?’

Diana was in shorts and a bolero which showed her midriff. Garnet thought she was beginning to show her age, too. For the first time he saw her as a pathetic figure, a woman trying to protect herself against the onset of middle age. She let the dogs loose and held the gate open for him.

‘Sometimes you are in the right place at the right time; sometimes you’re not,’ she said.

‘You mean there’s no breakfast for me?’

‘Of course I don’t mean that.’ He followed her in to the house. ‘Will eggs and bacon do?’

‘Yes, and I’ll cook them if you’ll allow me. I know how I like them done.’

‘All right. Do some for me, too. I never eat breakfast with Rupert. He’s always in such a hurry.’

‘Gone to Truro, has he?’

‘No, botanising for this new book of his. Sometimes I wish he’d fall into a quarry and break his neck.’

‘Or over the cliffs like my grandmother,’ said Garnet, dealing with his cookery in an expert manner. He began to laugh. ‘The old fraud,’ he concluded.

‘What do you mean by that?’ asked Diana.

‘What I said to Gamaliel yesterday. She was no more pushed over the cliff than I was. She lost her footing and tumbled down, that’s all, but she made up that story to forestall criticism. My mother and Fiona are always warning her against taking these cliff walks on her own.’

‘But Garnet, I think she was pushed.’

‘Oh, well, all right, if you think so.’

‘Garnet, I don’t just think. I know.’

‘Don’t tell me you got behind her and did the pushing, because I shan’t believe you.’

‘Maybe not, but what would you say if I told you that the same thing happened to me?’

‘What! You’re joking!’

‘All right. Is this a joke?’ She came up to the stove and spread out the palms of her hands almost under his nose. They were badly lacerated. ‘Gorse prickles,’ she said. ‘I was lucky enough to grab a bush as I went over the edge. I’d gone out with the dogs to give them a run and I had knelt down to look at

Beethoven's paw, because he was limping, when somebody gave me a dirty great shove in the back and sent me flying.'

'Good Lord! Did you see anybody?'

'No. The dogs set up hell, of course, and the next thing I knew was that I'd fetched up clutching this gorsebush.'

'But nobody would push you over a cliff.'

'The fact remains that somebody did.'

'One of the dogs lurched against you and you imagined the rest.'

'I hope your eggs and bacon choke you!'

'Oh, well, they're ready. Where's the toast?'

'There isn't any. You'll have to make do with bread.'

'That cliff-path ought to be patrolled. There must be some kind of maniac about, unless—'

'Unless what?'

'Unless somebody with a grudge wants to murder somebody in our family.'

'Why pick on me and your grandmother?'

'Somebody knows something about her Will and possibly the same person knows about you and me.'

'The only person who cares anything about our relationship is your grandmother herself. At least, that is what I suppose. Oh, no, she isn't, though! What about the black boy? He resents our relationship, I'll bet, and he thinks, after the way he greased round her at that dinner party, that he stands to gain something when she dies.'

'Don't talk such utter nonsense! Gamaliel doesn't have any expectations at all.'

'Yes, he does—well, most likely he does. At the dinner party Mrs Leyden promised that she would have him taught to ride and made a tremendous fuss of him.'

'Gamaliel's a good kid, one of the best.'

'That's what you think. You and Parsifal have your occupations and Blue has her painting. How much do any of you really keep tabs on that boy? I tell you, Garnet, you have no idea what goes on in his mind, no idea at all.'

Remembering a recent conversation with Gamaliel—'A bad man, perhaps, but with his ideas I have sympathy'—Garnet began to wonder whether she was right. What did he know of what went on in Gamaliel's mind?

Chapter 6

The Smugglers' Inn

With becoming modesty the hotel called itself The Smugglers' Inn. It was the kind of place which attracts the same visitors year after year. It was expensive, but not ruinously so, children were not encouraged and dogs were barred. It was a family business and Dame Beatrice Lestrangle Bradley had

visited it at various times over the years and had known the proprietors, grandfather, father and son, for more than half a century. Old John Poltrethy had been dead for the last twenty years, his son Paul had retired and bought the house opposite the hotel, and the Smugglers' was now in the possession of young Trevelyan Poltrethy, known to his constant and appreciative guests as Trev.

The original inn and the much larger annexe, which had a private bathroom to every bedroom, were separate buildings; but by an ingenious use of a passage made between the cellars of both, the lounge, the bar, the dining-room and the reception desk, which were all in the old building, could be reached without crossing over in the open air. Unless it was raining, however, most of the guests preferred to come out on to the terrace of the annexe, descend a short flight of steps and reach their objectives by crossing a corner of that courtyard which acted also as a car park.

This route was being taken by Dame Beatrice when a boorish man, thrusting past her on the steps, knocked into her and, with his momentum and his greater weight, caused her to lose her footing. She might have sustained a fall had not a dark-skinned, supple boy, who had been seated on the bottom step, leapt up and fielded her.

'Well!' she said, as he set her on her feet in the courtyard. 'Whom must I thank for that?'

'Gamaliel,' said the youth, 'but I like to be called Ubi.'

'Where?'

'Yes, Ubi for where. Where do I come from? Where am I going? The first I don't know. The second is different. I am going to high places. I am going to be world champion.'

'So far as I am concerned, you are world champion already. You have saved me from a very unpleasant fall.'

'Yes, you are too old to be falling downstairs.'

'I'm afraid you spilt your drink when you leapt up. You must let me get you another.'

'No, because you would have to bring it out here. I am not allowed in the bar.'

'Why, what have you done?'

'Oh, nothing, and it is not my colour, in case you thought so. I am under age.'

'Really? I should never have guessed it.'

'No,' said Gamaliel, well pleased. 'Nobody thinks so, but there it is. I am sixteen years old and, of course, a man, but they do not allow me in bars. It is really very silly, because out here, if somebody brings me a bottle or a can, I can drink as much as I like.'

'I hope that is not too much.'

'Oh, no. I am very abstemious. Garnet would buy me anything I asked, but I am in training, also studying for my O levels.'

'Oh, really? Good fortune attend you.'

'It will. Either I pass and stay on at school to be head boy, or I fail and leave school and take up my career. My career is to be gold medallist at the next Olympic Games and then professional boxer like Muhammad Ali and into the big money.'

'Splendid. I will get you your drink if you will tell me what you would like.'

On her way round to the bar she saw Bluebell, who was beginning to pack up her traps preparatory to returning to Seawards to cook the supper. In the bar was a thin man whose Viking head was supported

on a scrawny neck balanced on an emaciated body. She ordered the beer for which Gamaliel had asked and a glass of sherry for herself.

As she made for the door the thin man caught up with her. 'Let me take the sherry and open up for you,' he said. He stopped when they reached Bluebell. 'Ready to leave?' he asked. 'I won't be a minute.'

Gamaliel beamed when he saw the brimming tankard.

'Garnie,' he said, 'you must always catch old ladies when they fall downstairs. That is the way you get free beer.' He tipped up the tankard, half-emptied it, lowered it, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and added, 'Is it correct to drink a lady's health when she buys you some beer?'

'Certainly, Ubi.'

'Should she reply?'

'That is up to her.'

'What is your name, dear old lady?'

'Beatrice Lestrangle Bradley.'

'I drink your health.'

'And I yours.' She took a sip of sherry.

'We must be off. Blue is ready to leave,' said Garnet. Dame Beatrice, glass in hand, followed them with her eyes until they turned the corner. A car came round from the village street and turned into the car park. Three women got out.

'We're not stopping,' said the largest and handsomest of them. 'Just called by to ask whether you've settled in all right. Why are you drinking out here?'

'Because a man too young to be allowed in the bar has just saved me from a tumble down these stone steps.'

'Good for him. Who is he?'

'The future boxing champion of the world. And now, let me speed you on your way, or you will be missing your dinner in Falmouth. Goodbye, Mrs Trevelyan-Twigg; goodbye, Miss Boorman, my dear. Enjoy your sightseeing.'

'I'll be back in a fortnight,' said the member of the trio who had spoken. 'I'm like the poor; you have me always with you.'

'Au revoir, then, my dear Laura.'

'Did you really almost fall down these steps?'

'Only because an unmannerly man jostled me. Have no concern on my account.'

She watched their car drive off and then went into the hotel.

Gamaliel, carrying Bluebell's belongings in the wake of her and her brother, said: 'Old ladies are very kind people. Do you think this one is as kind as my grandmother?'

'Your great grandmother, Gamaliel.'

'That makes her sound older than she is.'

'She was married at eighteen.'

‘How long will she live?’

‘Quien sabe?’

‘Yes, a silly question.’ He hitched up Bluebell’s easel and folding stool and followed the other two in silence up the village street.

When he had dumped his burdens in the hall and gone off to have a last swim before supper, Bluebell said: ‘That was a strange question.’

‘What was?’

‘How long will she live?’

‘Well, you gave the only possible answer.’

‘Yes, I suppose so. He does not know yet that our grandmother has asked for him and that mother has capitulated and is to stay on at Headlands and that only Fiona is to come here.’

‘I wish she were not coming here.’

‘Well, she could hardly go and stay at Campions. That would be too embarrassing for Diana, as she made clear.’

‘Yes, of course. I wish grandmother had not asked for Gamaliel. I shall miss him terribly.’

‘Perhaps he will elect not to go. He is of an age to make up his own mind, as we’ve agreed.’

‘He might have expectations if he does as she wishes. I would not attempt to stand in his way.’

‘Neither would Parsifal and I, but the decision must be made by him and by him alone. It is not as though he were our own child. If he were, I might think differently.’

‘I believe I love him better than if he were your own, but, so far as you are concerned, what is the difference?’

‘Not in the degree of my love. But if Gamaliel were my own child I think I would be selfish enough to keep him here, whatever advantages grandmother was able to give him. As it is, for his own sake, I must let him go if he decides that way. It is so petty to be poor! If we weren’t, I’d see grandmother at the devil before I’d let him go!’

‘Did the old lady he rescued show any interest in the picture you were painting?’

‘I don’t think she so much as glanced at it, although she had passed from the dining-room to the annexe while I was there and, later on, passed me again to visit Trev in his office, and returned to the annexe once more.’

‘I noticed, when she came to the bar counter when I was there, what very fine rings she was wearing. Trev told me she had booked in at the hotel for a month and that will cost her a pretty penny at today’s prices. He tells me that she runs a luxurious car and has her own chauffeur.’

‘Then I hope that I can interest her in a picture. I wonder whether she would like to have her portrait painted?’

The object of these remarks had gone to her room to get ready for dinner. The room, booked for her by her secretary, Laura Gavin, overlooked the cove and from the window she had a view of rocks and headland and the lower end of the Seawards slipway from the garden down to the strip of beach from which Gamaliel and Garnet swam and Parsifal and Bluebell occasionally splashed about in the shallows when the weather was warm.

Nearer to hand, although she could not see them, the young students who were spending part of the

long vacation acting as supernumeraries to the hotel staff, were shouting and laughing in the fishermen's tiny bay before they dried and dressed in their own little annexe in the car park before resuming their uniforms and preparing to wait at the dinner tables.

Dame Beatrice took her time and went down to dinner at eight.

Trev came up to the table. 'Everything to your satisfaction, I hope, Dame Beatrice? Would you care for anything to drink?'

Dame Beatrice inspected the wine list and selected her half-bottle. 'Who is that very charming young negro who went off with a man and the woman who was painting an adequate but uninspired view of the cove? He told me his name was Gamaliel, but that he prefers to be known as Ubi,' she said.

'Oh, he is an adopted boy. They live in that house just below the Methodist chapel which perhaps you can see from your bedroom window. The artist is the woman who adopted him.'

He went off to fetch the wine she had ordered and Dame Beatrice, with no premonition of what was to come, settled to her meal and enjoyed it. After dinner she took coffee and brandy in the dark little snuggerly which was called the lounge, then went through the bar on to its narrow balcony for a last look at the sea before she retired to bed or, rather, to read in bed until she felt sleepy enough to put out the light.

In the morning she was awakened by the screaming of impatient gulls waiting for the fishermen to come in. It was barely six o'clock, but by seven she was out of the house and exploring a rough path which led from the hotel car park along the cliff. Houses clung to the hillside, with other houses, separated from them by the steep, winding hill which led out of the village towards Tregony and St Austell, rising above them, so that from where she was there appeared to be tier upon tier of white, silent edifices like a scene on a backcloth or in a dream.

Further along the path she came to some steep stone steps, but she passed these, pushed her way through long, flowering grasses and blackberry trails and came upon another flight of steps, but these led downwards and were so little used that they were grass and weed grown.

She descended cautiously and came to the little stream which marked the garden boundary of a fairly large house. There were stepping stones across the stream, but it ran fast and turbulently and, in any case, if she crossed it she would be trespassing.

As she stood there studying what appeared to be another tiny cove even smaller than the one beside which the hotel was built, a youth and a woman came out of the house and made their way towards the water. He was the dark, beautiful young man whom she had met on the previous evening. The woman was a stranger. Hers was a tall, slim figure dressed in a towelling bath-robe which reached to her knees. Her legs and feet were bare and as she let go of her clutch on the front of her robe to push aside an untrimmed bush on the other side of the garden, it was clear that the robe was her only garment. The boy was in bathing trunks and he was running and leaping ahead of her until he was suddenly aware of the visitor.

He checked, stared and then came over to her. The tall woman walked on, entered the cave which opened out by the far side of the cove and emerged wearing a bikini. She stood looking irresolutely at the incoming tide and then nerved herself and waded in.

'Do you want to come across?' the dark-skinned boy said winningly. 'Take my hand and don't slip on the stones.'

'No, I am content to be where I am, thank you, Ubi,' she replied.

'All right. Then I shall join Fiona. She has come to live with us. My great grandmother wants me in

exchange, but I shall not go.'

'You have a choice?'

'Oh, yes. There is nowhere to swim where my great grandmother lives. Besides, I won't leave Garnet. What would he do without me?'

'I cannot think. Enjoy your swimming. I am going back to breakfast.'

'Could I have breakfast with you at the hotel? It will be a better breakfast than here, and I don't have to go to school today.'

'It will be a pleasure to give you breakfast and your companion, too, if she would like to come.'

'Oh, yes, that will be great. I will let the others know.'

'Very well. I will go back and make the arrangements. When may I expect you?'

'In one hour. I myself could make it sooner, but—' he jerked his head towards where Fiona, a timid naiad, was floundering about in four feet of water on a spasmodic, tentative breast-stroke— 'you know what ladies are like.'

He ran back towards the house and shouted. The artist who had been painting a view of the cove on the previous day came out on to the lower balcony. Dame Beatrice climbed up the smugglers' steps and, from the top, looked down again. The cliffs hid Fiona's splashing struggles from her view, but out in the open she saw a dark, bobbing head which might have been that of a seal.

'Laura would be hard put to it to keep pace with that boy,' she thought. She cackled gently to herself. 'I must make sure that it is a better breakfast than he gets at home. Fiona has gone to live with them and it was to have been in exchange for Ubi, but he has jibbed. Well, we should not be short of conversation at the breakfast table.'

Neither were they. Fiona said little, but Gamaliel more than made up for her taciturnity and by the end of the meal Dame Beatrice knew all about the family dinner party and the distribution of the family among the three houses. Fiona seemed indifferent to Gamaliel's naïve disclosures and when, at the end of the meal, she thanked Dame Beatrice and stated that she had better return to Seawards to help Bluebell with the household chores, all the boy said was:

'Yes, you go. Tell them I will be back soon to study and learn. I am hoping that Dame Beatrice will show me over the hotel. I have never been inside it before and I have to learn about staying in hotels because of my future career.'

Dame Beatrice, amused and rather touched by his ingenuous approach, took him into the dimly-lit lounge, out through the picture-windowed bar (closed, so early in the day) on to the bar terrace. She also showed him the entrance to the sauna bath which had been built underneath the broad terrace which ran round two sides of the annexe. He saw the annexe entrance hall and the flight of stairs which led down to the passage between the annexe and the dining-room in the old part of the house and then she showed him her bedroom and bathroom before she returned with him to the courtyard and the car park.

'But, of course, you won't stay in a place like this when you are world champion,' she said. 'You will stay in cities which have hotels the size of palaces.'

'But they won't be better than this?'

'Oh, no, they won't be better than this.'

'It is strange, the way you became my friend.'

‘Why strange?’

‘Because you are the third lady who has been pushed in the back like that.’ He gave her details.

‘You are right to call it strange,’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘People seem to be very clumsy at times.’

‘Oh I think the other incidents were meant to end in death,’ said Gamaliel calmly. ‘There is a smell of death around these parts, don’t you think?’

‘No, only of decaying shellfish,’ said Dame Beatrice, cackling.

Chapter 7

Threats and Legacies

Dame Beatrice had several sets of friends who were within visiting distance of the hotel, so that what with these visits and her explorations by car to revive memories of long-loved places in Cornwall and Devon, she saw no more of her new acquaintances for some time. Bluebell had always packed up her painting things and gone back to Seawards before Dame Beatrice returned in the evening and whether Garnet and Gamaliel came each day to pick her up and carry her luggage home for her Dame Beatrice did not know or trouble to find out. In other words, although occasionally she remembered Gamaliel, it was only a fleeting recollection and she soon, although unconsciously, erased him from her mind.

Gamaliel, himself, back at school to sit his examinations, was fully occupied each evening revising for the next day’s test; Garnet was wrestling with the middle chapters of his half-finished light novel; Parsifal was busy composing verses for Christmas cards to meet the printers’ deadline and what with her painting and the household’s needs, Bluebell also was fully employed. Only Fiona was at a loose end.

She helped with bed-making, sweeping and dusting, but soon found that she was not needed in the kitchen because Bluebell preferred to reign there on her own. At Headlands she had never found herself without occupation. Apart from acting as Romula’s secretary and companion, there had been a car at her disposal, either with or without Lunn to drive it, horses to ride, glorious walks to take across the headland or a scramble down to one of the coves. There had been Maria to talk to in the afternoons while Romula took her afternoon nap and a gossip with Mattie who, as groom, did not count as one of the servants with whom it was not quite the thing to chat socially, and who was always at hand for an exchange of news and views.

In fact, what, when she had lived it, had sometimes seemed a somewhat dull existence, gradually began to take on the aspect of an El Dorado which she had abandoned for some now inexplicable reason and to which her return was barred by reason of her own hastiness and folly.

Bluebell, without spite or malice, had let fall the information that Rupert was paying for Fiona’s keep and this was humiliating in the extreme.

‘I wish I could get a job,’ she said to Bluebell one morning when they were standing on either side of the big double-bed in which Parsifal and Bluebell slept. ‘Pull the sheet over your way a bit, would you? I am a stickler for symmetry.’

‘I don’t see what job you could get,’ said Bluebell, doing as she was asked and tucking the sheet in with the clumsy movements she employed in everything except her painting and her pastry-making.

‘Nursery governesses are out of fashion and you’re not trained for anything in particular.’

‘It’s shocking to be a kept woman.’

‘Why look on it in that way? If you were not here, I suppose you would be living at Campions and that would never do.’

‘Of course I could never live there. It is not as though I were a member of your family.’

‘Well, you are not a blood relation, it is true, but we all look upon you as a member of the family, just as we look upon Gamaliel as our true son.’

‘It is not the same thing. Gamaliel is legally adopted and therefore is entitled to benefits which can never come my way.’

‘How do you mean?’

‘He has claims, legitimate claims, which I have not. Unless Romula Leyden leaves me something in her Will, which now seems most unlikely, I am destitute.’

‘Did your parents leave you nothing?’

‘There was nothing to leave. It was good of madre to take me in and care for me.’

‘At first, perhaps, but I have no doubt you repaid her. She grew so fond of you—’

‘Yes, until Ruby turned up and she transferred her thoughts to Ruby’s career rather than to my services.’

‘Will Ruby make a career, do you think?’

‘She is determined to do so and I will say for her that she is a quick learner. To meet her nowadays you would never suspect her rural origins.’

‘Beyond paying for her training, do you think my grandmother has any other benefits in mind for her?’

‘I wish I knew. One thing, while Ruby is still a student she is more often in London than at Headlands. She lives—or is said to live—in a hostel. She has made some attempts to get madre to buy her a flat, but so far the seed has fallen on stony ground.’

‘Perhaps,’ said Bluebell, smoothing the counterpane and pursuing the main subject of the conversation, ‘you could get a post as matron, or something of the sort, in a boarding-school and live in. That would solve most of your problems, wouldn’t it?’

‘I don’t like or understand children.’

‘Oh, well, it was only a suggestion. I am quite glad to have you here, as I have said several times, and I do not see why you should feel delicate about accepting Rupert’s help. After all, it is to us he pays the money, not to you. We ought to be ashamed, I suppose, to take it, but it is of very real assistance over and above what it costs to have you here. Food for five comes to little more than food for four, and we all eat more adequately since your arrival, so why not look at it in that light?’

Fiona’s hard face softened. ‘You’re a kind woman.’

‘So Gamaliel refuses to come and live here and Fiona has deserted me,’ said Romula.

‘Blue’s letter gave the best of reasons,’ said Maria. ‘The boy is sitting his O levels.’

‘He could do that equally well from here. Lunn could take him to school and pick him up again each day.’

‘A sudden change of home life would not be a good thing at this stage, mother. Soon the school will break up for the summer holiday. You can have Gamaliel to stay with you then.’

‘And what about Fiona?’

‘I don’t know. I miss her as much as you do — more than you do, perhaps.’

‘Do you think another dinner party would be a good thing?’

‘Not if it turns out to be the fiasco the last one was. You should not hold out hopes which are not going to be realised.’

‘I had expected to set everybody’s mind at rest, but I had not bargained for Gamaliel.’

‘Evidently not. Do you wish me to issue invitations?’

‘Not to Rupert and Diana and those two uncouth children.’

‘The children were nervous, not uncouth. As for Rupert, he is a direct descendant and cannot be left out if you have any family business to discuss, and if you invite him Diana must come, too.’

‘So I am no longer mistress in my own house and able to issue my own invitations!’

‘Oh, mother, please don’t be difficult. You know as well as I do that a wife accompanies her husband on social occasions.’

‘I don’t want those children here.’

‘Very well. In any case, at present they are away at boarding-school.’

‘So they were last time and still they came.’

‘Well, you told us to invite everybody, so Fiona thought you meant what you said. There is no need for the children to come a second time. Their school would not want to release them again so soon.’

‘Do you think Fiona will come?’

‘How can I tell? Do you want me to send to London for Ruby?’

‘She is in the same position as Gamaliel. Her studies should not be interrupted at this stage. We can let her know what I intend later on, if there is any reason for her to know anything.’

‘Mother, what are your plans for Ruby?’

‘I have none. I shall continue to pay for her training and shall make provision for that. Once she is launched I presume to imagine that she will fend for herself.’

‘She may need help to begin her career. I believe she ought to have an agent and perhaps a publicity manager if she is to succeed. It is not easy for a new singer to get recognition at first.’

‘Oh, well, we must see how things turn out. There is plenty of time yet before she is launched.’

‘It would be as well, since Ruby is not to come, to leave out Gamaliel. Anything he needs to be told can come from Blue or Garnet.’

‘Why should the boy not hear from my own lips that he will benefit when he is of age?’

‘You do mean to discuss your Will this time, then? Am I at liberty to mention that in the invitations?’

‘Oh, I suppose so.’

‘Then you had better have Monaker here.’

‘Why so?’

‘Well, I suppose he has the draft.’

‘That he has not.’

‘You mean you have not made a Will?’

‘Oh, all the provisions of it are in my head.’

‘That is hardly the same thing as having them down on paper, duly signed and witnessed.’

‘Oh, Monaker will have it all in hand. I am not going to die just yet.’

Maria went off to the small room in which Fiona had had her desk and typewriter. Both were still there. The desk was not Chippendale, but was of the period. It was in heavy mahogany and had a long drawer over the knee-hole and two smaller drawers, one on either side of it. To protect its polished top, the typewriter stood on four little padded hassocks which kept it away from the woodwork.

Maria lifted it with difficulty and staggered with it over to a small, unremarkable table. Then she rummaged in the middle drawer of the desk for writing paper and envelopes. The drawer contained nothing but a large jotter, so she tried one of the lesser drawers and met with success.

Her letters of invitation were brief and few. She wrote jointly to Bluebell and Parsifal, separately to Garnet and jointly to Rupert and Diana, to whose letter she added a postscript: Not the children this time. To Gamaliel she wrote that, although Romula looked forward to seeing him again, she herself wondered whether it would be better at this time for him not to break his concentration on his examinations and the revision required for them. She did not attempt to analyse her motive in making this suggestion, but, in the event, Bluebell, who knew Maria’s motive perfectly well, decided to ignore the hint and to bring Gamaliel with her as before.

Her task completed, Maria sealed and addressed the envelopes, and was about to rise and take them over to Lunn’s cottage and tell him to take the car and deliver them by hand, when curiosity caused her to lay them aside and take out Fiona’s jotter.

It seemed to consist mostly of transcriptions of household accounts, each weekly entry initialled by Romula in bold and flourishing style augmented by a ferocious-looking tick such as a teacher will put at the end of a child’s written work. Each entry was duly dated and Maria was slightly surprised at Fiona’s meticulous keeping of accounts. She turned the pages idly at first, but then she came to the page which bore a list of special items ordered for the last dinner party.

Here Fiona had left a loose sheet of paper which could hardly have been intended for any eyes but her own and which, apparently, she had forgotten to retrieve before her somewhat abrupt departure from the house. Reading it, Maria realised that Fiona might have been more in Romula’s confidence than she had supposed, for in spite of the fact that each item on the single sheet was followed by a question mark, the items themselves hardly looked like the figments of Fiona’s imagination.

House and contents to Maria? Ten per cent for upkeep? Ruby’s training to be paid for by sale of pictures?

Forty per cent Rupert? Fifty per cent Garnet? No divorce for Rupert or loses all?

Charge upon Garnet to look after Bluebell? Nothing for me or the black boy?

Fiona had scribbled over all this, but the words and queries were plain enough to read.

‘I wonder how much she really knows?’ thought Maria. ‘It can’t just be wishful thinking, or she would have cut herself in for a bit. No wonder she was so willing to leave the house. There’s nothing here to make her want to stay. Only ten per cent to me, indeed! However large a sum that may amount to, there is a slur cast upon the women compared with the men.’

‘So I am to be received back into the fold, even though only for one enchanted evening,’ said Fiona, tossing aside Maria’s letter. ‘I am not at all sure that I shall go.’

‘Then can you help me with my English Literature revision,’ said Gamaliel. ‘I am not strong on the poems of Wordsworth and Shelley and I don’t know anything about the set book.’

‘What is it?’

‘Wuthering Heights by a woman called Emily Brontë and it seems to me the silliest book ever written. The author must have been mad.’

‘Hush, child! You are speaking of a genius,’ said Fiona laughing.

‘Well, you could have fooled me! This man Heathcliff! I could lay him out with one hand tied behind my back. How I wish I had not to sit my exams! But for them I would be invited to the dinner party and get all those magnificent things to eat.’

‘You are a greedy boy and should be ashamed of yourself.’

Gamaliel caught her playfully by the waist and swung her off her feet. ‘All boys are greedy, only it is not greed, it is a necessary intake of calories. My mother says so and, as she has to feed me, she ought to know. Say you’re sorry, before I lay you on the sofa and tickle you,’ he said, holding her.

This mild flirtation which, in spite of the difference in their ages, both protagonists had been enjoying almost since the first day of Fiona’s entry into Seawards, was interrupted by Bluebell who, for no reason that she would have been willing to disclose, disapproved of it.

‘Stop teasing Fiona, go and wash and then come and have your tea,’ she said. ‘There are raspberries and Cornish clotted cream.’ Gamaliel gave a whoop, released Fiona and went off. Bluebell continued: ‘I rather wish you wouldn’t encourage Gamaliel in this sort of horseplay. He behaves like a young savage when he is with you.’

‘Well, I suppose he is a young savage,’ said Fiona, ‘Most boys of his age are savages. It marks a stage in their development. You don’t think I enjoy these rough and tumbles, do you? He is much too strong for me.’

‘That is what you enjoy,’ said Bluebell. ‘But I make the remark truthfully, not offensively. Shall you not accept the invitation to dinner?’

‘If the alternative is to stay here and help Gamaliel with his revision, I shall go to Headlands with the rest of you. Do you think madre will send the car?’

‘My mother will. The invitations are in her handwriting. Incidentally, I shall certainly take Gamaliel. He will do no work if he is left here.’

Romula and Maria did send the car and the five piled in, Garnet and Gamaliel squeezed in beside the driver and the other three wedged tightly together on the back seat.

‘You’re very quiet, Lunn,’ said Garnet, as the car descended through the village before making the steep ascent past the back of the Smugglers’ Inn.

‘I be broodin’ darkly,’ replied the chauffeur.

‘How come?’

‘Mattie, her’s getting the sack and a bag to put it in.’

‘Mattie? Then how about the horses?’

‘Mistress be puttin’ of ’em down. Says, what with that gal Ruby away to London most of the time, and Miss Fiona gone, there ent no use for ridin’ horses any more, so they’s to be sold and Mattie go.’

‘Oh, dear! I am sorry. What will Mattie do?’

‘Keep house for me, I reckon, and start her own riding stables. She counts on the old lady to start her off with a bit of capital to be paid back out of the profits later on.’

‘But where will she have her riding stables?’

‘Where they are now, the old lady being agreeable.’

‘But is that likely?’

‘Mattie reckons it is, but I have my doubts.’

‘By Jove, so have I! The holy peace of the downland shattered by little girls in jodhpurs and loud-voiced London trippers? Perish the thought! My grandmother will never wear it.’

‘Mattie won’t be livable with if her don’t.’

‘So that’s why you’re so down in the mouth! I don’t wonder. A disgruntled Mattie is not going to be the easiest of stable companions.’

They were met in the hall at Headlands by Maria, who said: ‘Watch your words this evening. We are more than a little put out.’

‘Why, what’s happened?’ asked her son, although, from his conversation with Lunn, he could guess.

‘We’ve had a stormy interview with Mattie which has left us rattled and uneasy.’

‘Uneasy? Why?’

‘No time to tell you now. Come along. The sherry is waiting and so is she.’

‘So you have not quite forsaken me, Fiona,’ said Romula, as the guests entered the room.

‘I was invited to come and it is churlish to refuse invitations unless one has good reason.’

‘Are you happy where you are?’

‘Not as happy as I was here and I miss you and Maria very much.’

‘I am glad to hear it. So you will come back, will you?’

‘I would rather be kept by you than by Rupert.’

‘So that is how matters have turned out!’

‘The destitute have little choice as to where their daily bread comes from. They are lucky that it comes at all.’

‘It is most unsuitable that Rupert should make himself responsible for your maintenance. What does Diana think of it?’

‘I have not canvassed her opinion. She may be rejoicing to see me sink so low.’

‘Mother,’ said Maria, ‘we are ready to drink your health.’

‘Some of you may have cause to do so, others not,’ said Romula. ‘You had better leave it until later.’

‘I don’t much like the sound of that,’ muttered Garnet to his sister.

Bluebell murmured in response, ‘We are out of it, anyway. She will never forgive us for taking Fiona into our home.’

‘Fiona had to be taken in by somebody. In any case, I think you may be wrong. By the look of them, I think mother has forgiven Fiona for her show of independence. She may even respect her for it. In that case, commendation rather than blame may be our lot.’

‘I wouldn’t put any money on it if I were you.’

The dinner places were arranged somewhat differently this time. Gamaliel, preening himself as usual, was accorded the place opposite Romula at the far end of the table.

‘Now I am chief man,’ he said.

‘Or the lowest of the low,’ said Bluebell.

‘It is better than to be mediocre. Besides, I get the best view of my dear old lady from here.’

‘Wouldn’t you rather be seated next to her as you were before?’ asked Diana.

‘No, because next to her I have to eat prettily and not make a noise with my soup. Down here I can enjoy my food in my own way.’

‘Pigs don’t have wings,’ said Diana nastily. ‘So you won’t fly.’

‘Oh, no, neither do cows jump over the moon,’ retorted Gamaliel, making his forefingers into two little horns and grinning ferociously at her.

Garnet, from his seat on Romula’s right, said: ‘That will do, Greg. Spoon up your soup and pipe down.’

‘Is Greg a way of shortening his name?’ asked Maria. ‘It sounds better than Gammy, I must say.’

‘It is not a shortening,’ said Gamaliel. ‘It is the name I shall use later on when I fight.’

‘I did not know that you proposed to join the Army.’

‘Not the Army or the Navy or the Air Force. My fighting will be done in the boxing ring.’

‘The first I’ve heard of it,’ said Bluebell. ‘Is that really your plan for the future?’

‘Oh, yes, I am to be world champion at my weight. I hope it will be heavyweight. People think more of a heavyweight than any other.’

‘You are a very silly boy,’ said Romula, smiling at him.

‘We have our own plans for you,’ said Parsifal.

Gamaliel scooped up the remainder of his soup and laid down his spoon. ‘Then you must forget them, these plans,’ he said.

‘And what about my plans for you?’ said Romula.

‘Old ladies cannot make plans for young men.’

‘You will find that you are mistaken.’

‘No,’ said Gamaliel. ‘You planned that I should come here and live with you, but it did not come off, did it? You have my affection, dear old lady. You cannot have my body as well. That is mine to train and use as I wish. When I am world champion you will be proud of me and you will buy me a dressing-gown of purple and gold with big letters on it to say Ubi, just that, Ubi. I will give you a ringside seat next to all the gentlemen in evening dress smoking their big cigars and betting their big money on me in the title fight. You will see my name next day in all the newspapers. You will be proud to know me.’

‘That is a long speech,’ said Romula, ‘from an embryo prize-fighter. Except that you talk like a child of ten, you might live to regret it if it makes me alter my plans.’

When dinner was over with no more contributions from Gamaliel, Romula patted the drawing-room sofa as an invitation to Fiona to sit with her. ‘Well,’ she said, ‘this time I intend to disclose what I have in mind.’

‘I want to come back to you, madre.’

‘To me, or to Maria?’

‘I miss you both.’

Gamaliel, who had left the men in the dining-room with their glasses of port, came over and seated himself on the floor at Romula’s feet. She gave him a push in the back with her knee and said: ‘Go away, boy. I am talking to Fiona.’

‘Don’t you love me, dear old lady?’

‘I do not love your dinner table monologues.’

‘Come over here, Gamaliel,’ said Bluebell. ‘When the others come in, you are not to join in what is said. Is that understood? You have spoken too much out of turn already.’

‘Where is Ruby?’ asked Gamaliel, seating himself obediently beside Bluebell.

‘At her studies. It might have been better had we left you at home to continue yours.’

‘Oh, we have no papers tomorrow and I have not passed in those we have already sat.’

‘You do not know that yet.’

‘My form master said so. He goes over the papers with us and is certain I cannot pass. I shall be leaving at the end of term.’

‘That is for me to decide.’

The men came in.

Romula said to her daughter, ‘Take this key and unlock the bureau in my bedroom. Bring me the long envelope with the blue markings. Settle down, all of you. You shall know something of what I intend.’

‘Is Gamaliel to remain, mother?’

‘Certainly. What I have to say may give him food for thought.’

‘The power of your purse is not as great as you think,’ said Gamaliel. Maria went out of the room and returned shortly with a large envelope scored across with blue to indicate that it had come by registered post.

‘This is a copy of my last Will and testament,’ said Romula, taking it from her daughter’s hand.

‘Is it the custom to disclose the contents of a Will before the testator is dead?’ asked Parsifal.

‘In my stories,’ said Garnet, ‘such a disclosure leads to the crime of murder. The plot of—’

‘Never mind your books, grandson,’ said Romula. ‘It is getting late and most of you have to get home. As for disclosing the contents of my Will, I have better reasons for doing so now than I had at our last family gathering. You were all disappointed then; some of you may be disappointed now. Our young protégé—’ she looked across the room at Gamaliel— ‘has referred to the power of the purse. I intend to use it for the good of you all, himself included.’ She unfolded the crackling document which she had taken out of its envelope. ‘I have called this my last Will, and so it is—up to the present. Fortunately I still have my health and strength and the ability to alter or cancel any of the provisions herein at no more than a moment’s notice.’ She looked round at the circle of faces. Most of them remained impassive. Parsifal looked anxious, Diana bored.

Romula looked down at the Will and smoothed out the creases in the parchment. Apart from the sound this made, there was silence in the room. It was broken by the opening of the door and the

parlourmaid's voice.

'Miss Ruby is here, madam, and asks whether she is to join the party.'

The query was redundant, for Ruby came past the maid into the room. 'My music-master has gone on holiday,' she said, 'so I thought I would pop down for a day or two, abuela.'

'Sit down, Ruby,' said her protector testily. 'I am about to read my Will. Well, not to read it word for word. It is full of lawyer's jargon. What it amounts to is this: that you are all to do as I please, not as you please, if you wish to enjoy the benefits I have assigned to you. I shall not mince my words.'

'So our simple understanding will not be clouded by false quantities and doubtful meanings,' said Fiona.

'I am not going to mention quantities,' said Romula, 'I must keep some surprises in store. I shall tell you who will benefit, but not by how much. I have become aware of some strange cross-currents in this family's relationships. They must cease. I will explain my meaning as I go along. This is a time to speak plainly.'

'But you say that is not what you are going to do,' said Gamaliel. Bluebell brought her hand down with a stinging smack on his thigh. Gamaliel took the hand and kissed it and then grinned cheekily at Romula. 'God bless you, dear old mysterious lady,' he said. 'Your God, of course, not mine.'

Chapter 8

Speculations and Near Certainties

'So now we know,' said Bluebell, when she was back in her own home. 'So much for Fiona. She has preferred the birthright to the mess of pottage.'

'She has no birthright, my dear,' said Parsifal, 'and you may have paid the penalty, I'm afraid, for having taken her to your bosom.'

'She is saying "ha ha among the trumpets,"' said Gamaliel. 'I am glad she is gone. Now we can be ourselves again.'

'You seemed fond enough of her when she was here,' said Garnet.

'Oh, yes, but absence does not make the heart grow fonder. It is better now she is not with us.'

'I wonder who tipped Ruby off that there was another dinner party with something in the wind?' said Parsifal.

'Oh, don't you think it was merely coincidence that she turned up when she did?' asked Garnet.

'No. I have a sixth sense about these things.'

'It would have been Mattie who told her,' said Bluebell. 'They went to school together.'

'I went to school with a boy named Bracknell,' said Parsifal, 'and if I met him again I'd murder him.'

'Would you know him if you met him again?'

'Possibly not.'

'Was he cruel to you?'

‘He used to twist my arm.’

‘You point him out if ever you see him,’ said Gamaliel, ‘and I will twist his neck.’

‘I don’t care for all this talk of murdering and twisting necks,’ said Bluebell. ‘Let us have done with it. Gamaliel, it is high time you were in bed. Who would like a cup of cocoa before we all turn in?’

‘The Will is only a draft, I think,’ said Parsifal to Bluebell, when they were in bed, ‘and, in any case, she did not tell us anything definite.’

‘It seems that Garnet and I may hope to benefit, but I thought she made more threats than promises. Of course Gamaliel will not adhere to this ridiculous idea of becoming a professional boxer, so there is no fear of his losing any small share she may have allotted to him.’

‘If he loses it, then you may also lose yours, which seems to me very unfair. She expects us to nullify his plans.’

‘You don’t think he will really go his own way, do you? He is headstrong and very sure of himself, you know.’

‘He envisages glittering prizes and I have a feeling that he may prove obstinate. He told us boastfully that your grandmother’s fortune, whatever it may turn out to be, is chickenfeed (his word) to what he will make in the ring.’

‘Yes, I know he did. He said it to the whole company. He added, I am sure sincerely, that we shall want for nothing once he is fully launched, but I must confess, as I did to him, that I would rather rely upon my share of what grandmother will leave me.’

‘Then we must exert all our influence to make certain that you get it. What of Diana and Rupert? A divorce would be Rupert’s undoing.’

‘Where could grandmother have heard such a rumour?’

‘Oh, from Ruby of course. What Ruby does not know she invents and in this case I am not so sure that invention comes into it. I don’t know how much Garnet makes from his books, but no doubt it is sufficient for him to be able to provide for a wife and the liaison with Diana has gone on for a good long time.’

‘I suppose if he married he would want this house for himself and his wife.’

‘And turn us out? But that is unthinkable! Besides, he would never part from Gamaliel, and where our adopted son is, there must we be also.’

‘A biblical sentiment! Gamaliel is turned sixteen. In two years’ time he will be of age.’

‘Oh, well, she will hardly die before that.’

‘It might be better, from everybody’s point of view, if she did, of course, but one baulks at that kind of wishful thinking.’

‘Yes, indeed. It may do for one of Garnet’s plots, but it will hardly do for people of our moral stature.’

‘So now you realise what the consequences would be if you divorced me or I you,’ said Rupert, handing Diana a weak mixture of whisky and water. ‘I am surprised that I am mentioned in the Will at all, considering what she thought about my father.’

‘Oh, blood is thicker than water. Does her money mean more to you than happiness?’

‘How can I be sure I would be happy with Fiona?—or make her happy, come to that? Besides, she is under the same ban as I. If she married me she would be cut off automatically from her share of my

grandmother's fortune. Without that, at grandmother's death she would be destitute.'

'No, she would not. She would be married to you.'

'What are you trying to say?'

'Nothing. We must be content to rub along together, I suppose. Even if I were prepared to deprive you of your inheritance by divorcing you or allowing you to divorce me, I could not be the means of depriving Garnet of his. A fine start to a new-married life that would be!'

'Do you love him?'

'I suppose I do. Do you love Fiona?'

'Not enough to lose everything, hers and mine, for the sake of connubial bliss.'

'Of course, nothing really definite came out, did it? Could I have another dollop of whisky in this penitential drink?'

'Yes, of course. You know, Diana, it's a pity we can't make a go of things. We were all right until you were carrying the twins.'

'I didn't want children. I didn't want to go about looking like a captive balloon. I didn't want nappies and losing sleep at nights and babies' caterwauling and bringing up wind and having to be taken to the post-natal clinic and having measles and whooping-cough and all the other childish ailments to deal with and not being able to have exciting holidays and having to spend all that money on school fees and clothes for the brats. And then to have two! As though one baby at a time is not one too many! I lost seven years out of my life bringing them up! Seven years that can never come again.'

'You're tired and her oblique hints about her Will have upset you,' said Rupert in a gentler, more considerate tone than he had used, when he spoke to her at all, for some years. 'Why don't you drink up and go to bed? My grandmother isn't dead yet.'

'If wishes were horses—'

'Pigs might fly and you told that black boy they don't. Would it benefit anybody if they did? Even the pigs themselves might not like it.'

'It seems that Maria and I are the only ones with an assured future,' said Ruby, meeting Fiona in the hall at Headlands on the following morning. 'My training is to be paid for, chance what, and Maria is to have this house.'

'With not enough money to keep it up, I fancy, unless the others sacrifice their shares for the reasons given.'

'If she has any sense she'll sell the house and live on the proceeds.'

'Who would buy a great place like this, stuck down in the wilds of nowhere?'

'Would you rather live at Seawards?'

'No, I am glad to be back here with madre.'

'Campions would be a better proposition for you, perhaps, if it didn't knock out Rupert's chances.'

'I'll thank you not to be impudent.'

'No offence. I suppose you know that all the threats and prohibitions are not in the Will.'

'How do you mean?'

'She was ad-libbing as she read out the provisions.'

‘How do you know?’

‘Oh, she can’t keep her secrets from me.’

‘You are in her confidence to that extent?’

‘No. I am into her bureau to that extent, of course. I’ve seen the rough draft she sent to Monaker. There was nothing in it about divorces and where people were to live.’

‘Really, Ruby, you are incorrigible!’

‘In other words,’ said Ruby, as they stepped out of doors to walk over to the stables, ‘if she died tonight a lot of people would be happy. I suppose you know that Mattie has got her come-uppance?’

‘What has that to do with it?’

‘Until the abuela alters the Will or unless she does, Mattie gets the three horses.’

‘She didn’t mention that last night.’

‘She didn’t mention any of the bequests to the servants, but they are all down on paper.’

Mattie came out of the Lunn’s cottage and greeted them. ‘I’ve been turned out to grass,’ she said.

‘How do you mean?’ asked Fiona, although she knew perfectly well what Mattie intended to convey.

‘What I say. But she won’t get the better of me, I can promise you that. Redruth to look after the horses? He haven’t a clue. Cares for nowt but his old motor-car. And as for her sellin’ of ’em, I’ve talked her out of that.’

‘Do you mean you’re going to look after the horses without being paid?’ asked Ruby. ‘Dashed if I would!’

‘You aren’t me, Ruby.’

‘Miss Ruby, if you please.’

‘Oh, yes, Miss Ruby. You takes after your ma in that as in other matters, I reckon. She was never more than Miss, neither, as my understanding of it goes.’

Ruby stepped forward and smacked Mattie hard across the face. It caught the bridge of her nose as well, and blood appeared.

‘—you, you bloody little jumped-up snotty little—!’ said Mattie. With the edge of a man-hard hand she caught Ruby across the throat. Ruby gave a strangled yelp and fell sobbing upon the downland turf.

‘Oh, Mattie!’ said Fiona, stooping over the choking, sobbing girl. ‘Her throat! You shouldn’t have done that! You might ruin her voice.’

‘Take away her living, same as that old woman have tooken away mine?’ muttered Mattie, going towards the stables. By the time she returned, leading Brutus, Ruby was heading towards the house. Mattie, without a word, saw Fiona mounted and then went into her brother’s cottage. Fiona loosed Brutus into a canter towards where the formidable headland, brown and grey and purple-shadowed, reared up its menacing tip like the blunt-headed crest of some prehistoric monster about to fall upon and devour the tiny rocky island just beyond it.

Fiona dismounted, leaving the quiet gelding to graze. From the ledges below, a climbing figure in an impeding tweed skirt came up slowly by way of a track more suitable for goats than for human beings, reached the short grass at the top, heaved itself over and sat down to pant and rest.

‘Well, madre, you’re out early,’ said Fiona. ‘Ought you really to scramble about on the cliffs like that?’

It can't be good for you, and you might easily tumble again.'

'I didn't tumble, and of course it's good for me,' said Romula, 'and it's perfectly safe so near the house. Besides, I don't feel old while I can still do it. A grand view from here, I always think.'

'Yes, better than the view from Smugglers.'

'Didn't Ruby go riding with you this morning?'

'No. She and Mattie fell out.'

'Oh? Why?'

'I don't really know. I think Ruby thought Mattie wasn't respectful enough to her.'

'Why should she be? They were at school together.'

'Perhaps you have given Ruby an inflated idea of her own importance.'

'She wants a flat in town. I've told her it's out of the question. If a student's hostel isn't good enough for her she had better come home and study locally. What happened between the two of them?'

'Nothing really. It was just a girlish set-to.'

'Physical violence, you mean?'

'Oh, nothing to signify. Unfortunately Ruby began it and Mattie retaliated. Ruby will give you her version when you get back, I expect.'

'I'm leaving Mattie the horses if I don't outlive them.'

'I hope you will, madre.'

'Give her the horses, or outlive them?'

'Come, now, you know perfectly well what I meant.'

'You walked yourself out of my house.'

'And now I've walked myself in again.'

'You will be dependent upon Maria for a home when I go.'

'Have you left her anything with which to maintain me?'

' "Twere good she do so much for charity" ' said Romula, with a sardonic chuckle.

'I don't want charity. I want my rights.'

'And what do you suppose those are?'

'You took me in and have cared for me. If Maria had not been widowed and so had not come back to you, would your provision for her have been different?'

'You mean to ask whether, in such a case, Headlands would have been left to you?'

'I have served you well.'

'A paid employee would have been less expensive.'

'I need to know where I stand. Are you really going to leave me nothing?'

'Is that what you gathered at last night's meeting?'

'I was left with little alternative.'

‘Were you not? If you left me once, you may leave me again. Why should I continue to provide for you after my death?’

‘Because you have given me no chance to train for any kind of profession which would allow me to provide for myself.’

‘I needed your companionship. I shall no longer need it when I am in my grave.’

‘Would it have made any difference if I had not gone to live at Seawards?’

‘I shall not answer that. You may draw your own conclusions. I am not a vindictive woman.’

Fiona walked back to where her horse was cropping the grasses. Scrambling she mounted and turned the animal’s head towards home. At the stables she changed her mind. She turned from the headland and followed the narrow track away from the house and towards the village. At the turning she took the steep road which led to the National Trust property on which the rent-free Campions was enclosed in trees. To the frenzied yapping of Diana’s dachshunds she hitched the horse’s reins to the gatepost and shouted.

A maid came out from the back door and yelled at the dogs, who subsided.

‘Is Mrs Bosse-Leyden at home?’ asked Fiona.

‘No. Taken the car into Truro, miss.’

‘Mr Bosse-Leyden?’

‘Working. But you come in, Miss Bute, while I see if he’ll disturb himself to see you.’ She ushered the dogs into their wired enclosures and returned to the house. Fiona opened the gate and walked into the untidy garden. Rupert came out by the french windows which overlooked it. The pen with which he had been writing was still in his hand. He clipped it into his top pocket and took Fiona in his arms.

‘Is Fiona coming back here to live?’ said Gamaliel.

‘Only until Rupert and Diana have settled their affairs, if she comes at all,’ said Garnet, ‘and that will not be until after my grandmother’s death.’

‘Why will they wait until then?’

‘Because she won’t let them settle their affairs in the way they would like.’

‘It’s to do with the money, I suppose. She did not tell us very much that evening, did she? Will she leave you anything?’

‘Yes, a good deal, I think. Some would say that I should have it all.’

‘Rather than my mother and Rupert?’

‘Well, I’m the nearest male heir.’

‘Would you like to have it all?’

‘I should like to have enough to give some to Blue.’

‘Wouldn’t she rather have it left to her by my great grandmother?’

‘It would make no difference, so long as she got it.’

‘It would make a difference to me.’

‘You are a man, Greg. Women think differently.’

‘Fiona doesn’t. That’s why she won’t come back here to live. It is because she feels sure she will not be

left anything if she does. Is Rupert still fond of her?’

‘Yes. Rupert will marry her as soon as my grandmother dies.’

‘You mean he will get a divorce from Diana?’

‘Yes, I mean that.’

‘Won’t Diana mind?’

‘Oh, dear me, no. She will welcome it, and so shall I.’

‘But my great grandmother has to die first?’

‘Yes, that is so.’

‘And then everybody will be happy?’

‘I hope so, yes.’

‘There are three who will not be happy.’

‘How do you make that out?’

‘Will Diana come to live here with us?’

‘Oh, now, there’s no need for you to jump to any conclusions.’

‘My mother will never share a house with Diana.’

‘How do you know?’

‘She told my father she wouldn’t. If Diana comes, will Quentin and Millament come to live here too?’

‘Oh, do stop anticipating what is going to happen!’

‘I hope my great grandmother goes on living for years and years, that’s all,’ said Gamaliel, ‘because, if she dies under the present circumstances, it will mean that someone has murdered her.’

‘Where do you get these ideas?’

‘I have studied the situation. Garnie, do you want to marry Diana as much as she wants to marry you? I think not.’

‘I can’t discuss it, Greg.’

Chapter 9

Death of a Matriarch

In the middle of the second week of her holiday at the Smugglers’ Inn, Dame Beatrice received an invitation from an unexpected source. The reason for it was that she bought the second picture which Bluebell had painted.

It was a distinct improvement on the first one, a charming impression of the cove and the old entrance to the hotel. The white walls, the flattish weathered roof-slates, the fuchsias, the small rockery were there, and so were the ancient gateposts and the flagged path up to the door. Newly-painted fishing-boats were drawn up on the grey, uninviting sand and beyond them, under the green hill from which the short cut to Campions had been taken by Parsifal, the fishermen’s little stone jetty thrust out into the

cove.

Beyond the jetty the waters broke in foam against the spurs of the two headlands and beyond their flurry, spume and spray lay the open sea as blue, in Bluebell's picture, as the cloudless sky above it.

'Your artist wields a persuasive brush,' Dame Beatrice had said to Trev when the picture was almost finished. 'Would she take it amiss if I entered into a financial transaction with her? I should like to take home with me so pleasant a reminder of my stay here.'

'She'd be more than pleased to sell it to you,' Trev had replied, so, when the picture was completed, Dame Beatrice had entered into negotiations and the painting became her own. The invitation had followed.

'I suppose, Dame Beatrice, you would not care to come and take tea with us one afternoon? I have other pictures—oh, not for sale—the family's collection, merely, and one gets a different view of the cove and the hills and rocks from our balconies. It is only a short walk, whether by smugglers' path and steps or by road. Or you could use your car if you do not care to walk up the hill through the village. We have plenty of parking-space outside the front of our house. You can't miss the house. It is at the bottom of a little spur of road which leads to the Methodist chapel and has a sign which reads: Seawards. Built 1677 Rebuilt 1952.'

'I shall be delighted to come. Would five o'clock tomorrow be convenient?'

Tea was served on the lower of the two balconies. Bluebell, whose artistry included a flair for baking, had excelled herself, as the uninhibited Gamaliel, sloshing Cornish cream on top of raspberry jam and scones, exultantly proclaimed.

When tea was over and Garnet and Gamaliel were left to entertain the guest while Parsifal assisted his wife to clear away and wash up, the black boy said: 'You must see the view from the top balcony. It used to be very rickety, but Garnie and I shored it up last year, so it is perfectly safe now. I do all my early morning exercises out there. The way to it is through my bedroom. I will show you my picture of Muhammad Ali. Do you admire him? He is my great hero.'

'He is the greatest. We have his own word for that,' Dame Beatrice solemnly responded. She duly admired the enormous poster which took up almost the whole of one wall in the little room.

'When I can save up enough money,' went on Gamaliel, 'I shall buy myself a pair of proper boxing boots like his. At school I box in plimsolls, but the proper boots would make me more mobile and would increase my self-confidence, don't you think?'

Dame Beatrice could not imagine, from her impression of him, how any addition to his self-confidence could be necessary, but she assented gravely to his remark and asked where such boots could be bought.

'I expect I would have to go to Exeter, or even up to London. I shall leave school as soon as my examinations are over and get work to do. Then I shall have money. There is a boys' club in Truro which I shall join. An old pro is the instructor. I shall soon be beyond him, but no doubt he will teach me enough to be going on with. Tricks, you know, and how to step out of a clinch the best way. These old pros are up to all the dodges, and you have to know them, in case your opponent does. I shall represent England amateurs at the Albert Hall one day; then the Olympics and then my professional career.'

Dame Beatrice, who found the brash and innocent youth refreshing and amusing, made a promise which she was never to regret, since it had the effect of removing three possible suspects from what turned out to be a complicated and difficult case. She glanced at Bluebell, who had accompanied them,

and raised questioning eyebrows. Bluebell made a despairing little gesture of assent. Dame Beatrice thereupon spoke briskly.

‘It ought to be London, I think,’ she said, ‘for the boots and perhaps two pairs of boxing shorts, two or three singlets and a boxer’s dressing-gown. My chauffeur, George, a knowledgeable man, will know where to go. Ask for me at the Smugglers’ Inn when you have finished your examinations and you shall be set on the road to fame and fortune.’

She spent the whole of the next week in touring the countryside, for her round of visits had been concluded. She went to Polperro, its narrow thoroughfares crowded even at the beginning of the holiday season, and rode up the long hill back to the car park in the horse-drawn bus which was the only form of transport allowed to the holiday public. She visited the ruins of the near-perfect thirteenth-century circular keep of Restormel, perched on its hill above the River Fowey.

She went to the elvan-built great house which belonged originally to the Arundell family, the Elizabethan mansion called Trerice, with its scrolled gables, its oriel and lattice windows, its decorative plaster ceilings with their pendants and its splendid fireplaces of 1572 and 1573 in hall and drawing-room.

She also went to look at the even more interesting and important Cotehele, another Tudor house, but of earlier date than Trerice, some of its walls dating from the middle of the fourteenth century, the rest added by the Edgumbes during the reigns of Henry VII and his son.

She walked the cliff path from the Dodman and, although she did not know it at the time, passed almost under the walls of Romula Leyden’s house before she reached Nare Head, that other vast expanse of turf and sea-views, before going on to Portholland where her chauffeur George was waiting with the car.

She went to Tregony, Grampond, St Austell, Veryan with its five round houses, St Mawes and Truro and she paid a nostalgic visit to the church of St Just-in-Roseland, pausing at the lychgate near which she had left the car and taking in the luxuriantly flowering hillside with its June roses, its rhododendrons, its varied trees and its wealth of plants both cultivated and wild. Below her, at the very foot of the slope, was the church on its little creek and she made her way slowly, by narrow, steep paths, down the hill to where, as the tide was almost out, a red and white cabin cruiser was marooned on the shore. It was perfectly reflected in the shining gleam of shoal water which also reflected the church and the pines until the making tide would float the boat again and break up the still and perfect images in the restlessness of the oncoming sea.

The days passed, Laura and her companions returned to The Smugglers’ Inn, spent a couple of nights there and then, finding Dame Beatrice well and happy, Kitty and Alice returned to their homes and Laura went to London to spend a week with her husband who was on leave from New Scotland Yard.

His examinations over and his refusal to consider returning to school apparently irrevocable, Gamaliel went with Bluebell and her brother to London in Dame Beatrice’s car and, at Dame Beatrice’s expense, as she had promised, equipped himself with the gear his soul desired.

He turned up at the hotel on his return home and said, ‘Could I change in your bedroom?’ He received permission and, Dame Beatrice having been bidden to wait outside the door, he opened it when he was ready and invited her in.

When she had sufficiently admired the result of his purchases he said: ‘I must not stay long. We have had strange news, bad news. My great grandmother, my mother’s grandmother, has died and there is going to be a lot of trouble. She ate something she should not have eaten and the doctor thinks she has been poisoned. There is to be all sorts of fuss. We did not know about it until after we got back from

London. We spent the night at Exeter, as you said we should, and it happened at Sunday lunchtime. There are police asking questions and there is to be an inquest. It is all very sad and very alarming.'

'Oh, dear!' said Dame Beatrice. 'It is indeed.'

'I will change back again now, if you will kindly go away. I am needed at home. Everybody is very much upset and bewildered. My aunt and uncle, Diana and Rupert, are there and Ruby has been sent for from London. Nobody is allowed to leave my great grandmother's house until the police give permission. She was very rich. Do you think one of us poisoned her to get a share of the money more quickly?'

'I don't think I would mention that, if I were you,' said Dame Beatrice.

'Oh, well, nobody can blame my mother and Garnie and me.'

The news was soon all over the hotel. George, calling, as usual, for the orders of the day next morning, reported that it was all over the village, too, and that it had been the previous evening's only topic of conversation at the pub where he was staying.

'A very wealthy old lady, it appears, madam,' said George. 'Owned a big house right out between the two headlands. Had a host of relatives by the sound of it, so no doubt some of them will come in for something pretty substantial.'

'How did it happen?' asked Dame Beatrice, hoping for a check on Gamaliel's story.

'Beyond she took poison, nobody seems to know, madam. The county police are there and there's talk of handing the case over to New Scotland Yard as having more experience than the Cornwall men.'

'That sounds as though a case of accident has been ruled out, otherwise the local doctor and the county police could manage. She took poison, you say. Are there any details?'

'Nothing except that the inquest is fixed for tomorrow morning at ten, madam, and is to be held at the house itself, the village having no available accommodation otherwise.'

'I should like to attend it. I am acquainted with certain members of the family.'

'I will come in good time to take you to the house, madam. Where would you wish to go this morning?'

Dame Beatrice was about to reply when Trev came out from his office which was just inside the entrance. 'A telephone call for you, Dame Beatrice.'

She went with him into his office and found that the call was from the house she and George had been discussing.

'Speaking from Headlands,' said the voice from the other end. 'This is Bluebell Leek, Dame Beatrice. I am here with my mother. You will have heard, I expect, that we are in terrible trouble. Could you—would you—come here and advise us? Fiona has told us of your great reputation. It would be so good of you. The police have just left, but I am sure they will be back again with more questions about my grandmother's death. Everything is so horrible and there is to be an inquest here tomorrow. I expect you will hate me for asking, but please, please come.'

Dame Beatrice promised, put down the telephone and went out to her car. 'Can you find your way to that house, George?' she asked.

'Yes, madam. I made full enquiries before I started out this morning, just in case.'

Bluebell was awaiting the visitor at the end of the trackway which led up to the big, solitary house.

'This is so awfully good of you,' said she, her plain, good-tempered face flushing and tears coming into

her eyes. 'I shall not ask you to stay to lunch. You would probably suspect poison in every mouthful.'

'Is the poison—has it been identified?'

'Oh, yes. There doesn't seem to be any doubt. Cook, our temperamental Mrs Plack, has given in her notice, but of course she can't leave until the police are satisfied.'

'Your relative died of food poisoning, I gather. No wonder your cook is upset.'

'It was the horseradish sauce, you see, or so the analyst says. The whole thing is a complete mystery. Mrs Plack has been making it for years and there has never been anything wrong with it before.'

'Did nobody else experience any ill-effects?'

'That is what has made the police and the doctors so suspicious.' Bluebell led the way into the house and they took chairs in a small sitting-room from which a very young woman edged out as soon as they had entered. 'That was Ruby Pabbay, an orphan who was my grandmother's protégée,' Bluebell explained. 'She was in London studying to become a singer when grandmother died, but, of course, we sent for her.'

'You were about to tell me what makes the police and the doctors—one of them is the police surgeon and the other the family's medical adviser, I imagine—so suspicious.'

'Yes. It puts a very bad complexion on things. You see, grandmother was the only person who liked horseradish sauce. Nobody else ever touched it. This was known to the whole household.'

'Did the servants not partake of it either?'

'No. It was Mrs Plack's contention that the recipe she used was much too good for the servants' hall. It was more than a servant's life was worth to touch grandmother's jar. Either they took mustard with their beef or they paid for a manufactured pot of horseradish out of their own money.'

'I wonder whether I might have a word with Mrs Plack?'

'She is rather hysterical, I'm afraid.'

'That is hardly a cause for wonderment. Have the doctors named the poison?'

'Oh, yes. It was aconitine. They asked about liniment ABC, but there was none in the house. My mother told them that the household had never had any use for it.'

'I believe you keep horses.'

'There are three. The groom, Mattie Lunn, could tell you about them.'

'Aconitine is a deadly poison for which there is no specific antidote. The only treatment is gastric lavage and that should be done without delay.'

'Unfortunately there was delay, fatal delay. There is no doctor in the village and my grandmother's own man lives in St Austell. By the time Lunn came back with him grandmother was dead. According to what my mother has told me, grandmother's symptoms came on during the meal.'

'Yes, aconitine is a poison which acts quickly.'

'Yes. In a few minutes after eating her plate of beef with a very liberal helping of the horseradish sauce, she complained of tingling and numbness in her mouth and a constricted throat. They thought and said that Mrs Plack must have over-stressed the mustard in the mixture, but the other and more dreadful symptoms, stomach pains, vomiting and a sort of horrible frothy dribbling followed rapidly. Her breathing became difficult and she found she could not move her limbs and, as I said, she died, before her doctor could get here, in a state of total collapse.'

‘Yes. Will you take me to see the cook?’

Mrs Plack was in her kitchen superintending the kitchenmaid’s preparations for lunch.

‘For touch another bit of food in this house except what I gets for myself and my own eating, I will not,’ she said, rising from her chair as the visitors came in.

‘Very reasonable,’ said Dame Beatrice in her beautiful voice. ‘We must get this whole matter cleared up as soon as we can, so that the household may resume normal working. I expect you are tired of talking to the police—’

‘Sick and silly of ’em.’

‘So I wonder whether you would do me a favour? I am attached to the Home Office. I am also a medical practitioner. This story about the horseradish is a strange one and will probably become a classic case of aconitine poisoning. It interests me very much and I should like to write it up for publication. This I cannot do without your expert help.’

From the cook’s red-rimmed eyes and blotched countenance and the reserved air of the kitchenmaid, Dame Beatrice deduced that the latest fit of hysterics was just over.

Mrs Plack, who had resumed her seat at the kitchen table, sniffed in a suspicious manner and said: ‘I’ve talked till I’m sick and silly of talking. Police, doctors, Mrs Porthcawl, Mr and Mrs Bosse-Leyden, and now you and Mrs Leek. I’m sick and silly of it all, I tell you.’

‘You realise, I suppose,’ said Dame Beatrice, changing her tone and speaking sternly, ‘that for your own sake—no, no more tantrums, I beg of you—that for your own sake you had better give the authorities every scrap of assistance in clearing up this dreadful business. I shall not harass you or keep you for more than a few minutes, but you must co-operate with me.’

Mrs Plack pushed back a lock of hair which, escaping from her cap, had been adding to the disoriented and raffish nature of her appearance and, cowed by the sharp black eyes and even sharper tones of the masterful invader, said weakly that she would be glad to do what she could.

‘Although I’m telling you, madam,’ she began.

‘That you’re sick and silly of the whole business,’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘I know and I sympathise. Let us take all that for granted. Now, Mrs Plack, all I want from you at present is exact information on two points. How do you prepare your horseradish sauce and when was this particular consignment put into your stock-cupboard? I believe that a properly-constituted horseradish sauce will keep for some days.’

‘That’s right. It’s the vinegar in it, I suppose,’ said Mrs Plack. ‘Well, I don’t mind giving you my recipe. It’s in the cook book, anyway, so it isn’t no secret.’

‘Splendid. I will write it down. We shall soon have you cleared of suspicion.’

‘Suspicion? But I never—’

‘Of course you didn’t, but we have to prove it. Come, your recipe.’

Cowed by her visitor’s uncompromising attitude, the cook said:

Grated horseradish, four tablespoons

Sugar, one teaspoon and salt ditto

Pepper, half-teaspoon

Mustard, ready made up, two teaspoons

Vinegar, that’s guesswork for quantity

Double cream, not whipped, three tablespoons.

‘Thank you,’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘Where does the horseradish come from?’

‘I orders it where I orders my garlic when I uses garlic. It’s the village greengrocer brings it, but it depends whether he’s got any or not. If he hadn’t got none, the mistress had to have mustard with her beef like everybody else, or the ready-made horseradish from the shop.’

‘Did you often cook joints of beef?’

‘It were the usual Sunday dinner unless we had chicken for a change, but most Sundays it was beef.’

‘And when did you make the last lot of horseradish sauce?’

‘Also, as usual, on the Friday, soon as the greengrocer called, mine being, like I say, a regular weekly order most weeks.’

‘Who usually grated the horseradish root?’

‘That be kitchenmaid’s work.’

The kitchenmaid, who was now busying herself at the sink, looked round. ‘That’s right,’ she said.

‘Are you familiar with the appearance and texture of horseradish?’

‘Never seen it until I come here. Only ever seen it in a jar in the supermarket.’

‘And how long have you been here?’

‘Three weeks.’

‘My last kitchenmaid,’ said Mrs Plack, ‘had words with Ruby and had to go.’

‘Miss Ruby would sound more in keeping, cook,’ said Bluebell in a tone of gentle remonstrance. Mrs Plack glared at her.

‘Forgetting my place for the moment, Mrs Leek,’ she said with ponderous dignity, ‘but call that jumped-up bit of preciousness Miss I cannot bring myself to do. She was only give the name Pabbay because the orphanage lady had just come back from a holiday in Scotland when Ruby was admitted. Ah, and there’s things I could tell you about that, if I’d a mind. I could put a name on her—’

‘Well, I beg that you won’t,’ said Bluebell hastily. ‘Ruby is beside the point.’

‘Not if she was the reason for the last kitchenmaid’s having left her employment here,’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘What is your name child?’ she added to the girl at the sink.

‘Sonia, madam.’

‘Well, Sonia, tell me a little more about the horseradish. Where was it put when the greengrocer left it on the Friday?’

‘In the vegetable rack with the turnips and carrots and taters and such.’

‘And you took it out and grated it?’

‘I took it out and give it her to grate,’ said Mrs Plack. ‘I ain’t going to have the girl blamed, not if it was ever so.’

‘That is a very handsome observation, cook. So you handed Sonia the roots, she grated them for you and then—’

‘Then I made the sauce same according to the recipe I just give you.’

‘There’s one thing you haven’t said, cook,’ said the kitchenmaid deferentially.

‘Oh, and what’s that, then?’ demanded Mrs Plack.

‘You haven’t said as when the sauce was all finished and ready you tried it yourself to see was it what you called “up to sample,” cook.’

‘How much of it did you eat?’ asked Dame Beatrice,

‘Does it matter? A cook’s entitled—’

‘Yes, of course she is. This is important in quite a different way. How much?’

‘Oh, well—’

‘It was a heaping great tablespoonful on a piece of bread,’ said the kitchenmaid, ‘cook being partial to the cream, like what we all might be, given the chance.’

‘Hold your tongue, girl! None of your business,’ said Mrs Plack sharply.

‘It is the business of all of us,’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘Surely you have wit enough, as this intelligent child obviously has, to realise that if you ate a heaped tablespoonful of your horseradish sauce and took no harm, it was not your horseradish sauce which caused Mrs Leyden’s death.’

The cook stared at her uncomprehendingly for a moment; then she flung her apron over her head and rocked herself to and fro to the accompaniment and almost (Dame Beatrice thought) to the rhythm of hysterical sobbing.

Encouraged, apparently, by Dame Beatrice’s approbation, the kitchenmaid, having regarded the cook with something which looked like an air of resignation, said calmly, ‘I don’t know if I should mention it, madam, but it’s quite a wonder as it wasn’t cook herself as was poisoned, instead of the missus, ain’t it?’

At this, Mrs Plack lowered her apron and stared round-eyed at her fellow servant.

‘Why,’ she said, ‘that’s right, too an’ all. It could have been me, if I’d a-taken a taste of it when I usually do.’

‘You tasted your mixture as soon as you had made it, did you not?’

‘For the very first time, your ladyship, it being my custom, as Sonia knows, for all she’s been here for only three roast beef dinners, not to try the horseradish until I ladles it into a dish to go to table. I only tastes it then to make sure as the cream has kept.’

‘Why did you not do the same last Sunday?’

‘Well, we’d run out of honey on the Friday, me preferring it to the jam as does very well for the gals, so I puts the horseradish on a bit of bread as a relish for myself, Sonia and the housemaids and the parlourmaid making do with jam for their elevenses, as usual. On the Sunday we was a bit late with lunch, so missus rung down very, very peremptory, so while I dishes up I says to Sonia to spoon out the horseradish all quick, as there seems to be a tiger in missus, and to hurry up about it so as the lunch could be taken in and missus pacified.’

‘So, if Mrs Leyden had not been so peremptory, I suppose you would have tasted the condiment again?’

‘To see if it was still all right, the day being unusual hot, yes, I’m sure I would have.’ She looked at Dame Beatrice and then buried her head in her apron once more.

‘Well,’ said Bluebell, as she and Dame Beatrice left the kitchen, ‘Mrs Plack undoubtedly had a lucky

escape, but I'm very glad that a release from tension does not take me like that. But why on earth didn't she tell the police that she had sampled the horseradish sauce?'

'On her own confession, the home-made variety was taboo to the servants. I am surprised, but very glad, that she allowed the kitchenmaid to see her helping herself to it so lavishly.'

'Of course, it doesn't help in one way,' said Bluebell. 'If it wasn't Mrs Plack's horseradish sauce which killed grandmother, it was somebody else's, and that's going to look very bad indeed for the rest of us. We all knew that she was the only one who liked it.'

Chapter 10

Unexpected Ending to an Inquest

As she and her escort reached the door which led from the servants' quarters to the rest of the house, Dame Beatrice stopped. 'I must return to the kitchen for a moment,' she said, 'and I will go alone.'

'You mean that now we know that a substitution for the horseradish must have been made, I can no longer be in your confidence?'

'Let us not think of it quite like that. I may be able to explain later and there may not be anything to explain at all. There is a small matter which I overlooked just now.' She returned to the kitchen to find Mrs Plack wiping her eyes and Sonia peeling potatoes. 'Mrs Plack,' she said, 'you took the roots of horseradish out of the vegetable rack so that Sonia could grate them. Was the whole consignment grated, or were one or two roots left over?'

'Oh, no, nothing was left, ma'am. Sonia grated all that there was.'

'I wonder whether you would be good enough to make quite sure?'

'I be quite sure,' said the kitchenmaid, turning round, 'because I says to cook as there didn't seem hardly enough to make the four tablespoons cook wanted, so us both had another look in the rack and there wasn't no more, not mixed up with the other veg nor nothing.'

'I wonder, all the same, whether you would look again?'

The two servants looked at one another and then went over to the rack.

'Nothing in the nature of horseradish here, my lady, Dame Beatrice,' said Mrs Plack, when she and Sonia had emptied the rack and then replaced the vegetables. 'Can't be too careful, though, can you?'

'Indeed not. If the poisonous root which formed the foundation of the last condiment of which your mistress partook could be mistaken once for horseradish, the same mistake might be made again.'

'Oh, my lady, what a dreadful thought!'

'What are the chances of anybody else entering this kitchen without being detected?' asked Dame Beatrice.

'Oh, anybody could pop in here either from inside the house or outside it,' said Mrs Plack. 'I have my afternoon rest when lunch is cleared away and Sonia, she closes the door between kitchen and scullery while her does the dishes, on account she likes a fag while she's a-washing up and I can't have my kitchen stinking of cigarette smoke in case missus or Mrs Porthcawl come in, so kitchen's empty about twenty minutes to a half-hour. Then Sonia makes a nice cuppa tea and brings it upstairs.'

‘What about outsiders?’

‘Mattie Lunn and Redruth Lunn, they’d use the side door by the pantry if they wanted anything, but they wouldn’t, knowing as I was having my afternoon rest.’

‘Did they often come into the kitchen?’

‘On and off in the morning, specially if it was my baking day. Jam tarts and such and my home-made biscuits, or perhaps a scone or two, was what they’d fancy. Wasn’t ever missed because Missus, God rest her, not being one as checked on the left-overs. Quite liberal she was, I will say that for her, and never one to ask where the rest of the pudden or the last couple of bits of cake had got to. Sonia’s put on nigh a stone since she came here, haven’t you, gal?’

‘So, not only the Lunnns, but anybody else could have used the side door to come into the kitchen while you were upstairs and Sonia was in the scullery? Neither of you would have been aware of the fact?’

‘Not with me clattering the dishes and perhaps singing when I hadn’t got me fag on,’ said Sonia. ‘But who ud want to come in all secret-like?’

‘Whoever changed Mrs Plack’s horseradish condiment for a jar containing the poison.’

‘Oh, yes, of course, mum.’

‘Sonia,’ said Mrs Plack, ‘before you’re a day older, my gal, you throws out all them veg on to the bumby heap and you scrubs out that veg rack like as you have never scrubbed out nothing else in your life!’

‘The poison roots were never in your vegetable rack,’ said Dame Beatrice. She left them to it and re-joined Bluebell, who was waiting for her.

‘You’ll come and meet the others, won’t you?’ said Bluebell. ‘They will be together in the drawing-room. We rather tend to cluster at present.’

‘It would have to be like that, unless you were so suspicious of one another that you deemed it advisable to remain apart.’

‘Did you get what you wanted from Mrs Plack and Sonia?’

‘Yes, more than I expected. I will not meet the rest of your family today. The time to do that will be after we get the Coroner’s verdict.’

‘Is there any chance that the jury will decide upon—will decide that the death was accidental?’

‘But it was not accidental, was it?’

‘There is only one of us who is capable of wilful murder and that person is the only one of us who could be certain that she had nothing to gain—in fact, who might have everything to lose by my grandmother’s death.’

‘Do I assume that you refer to Miss Ruby Pabbay, whose name I heard mentioned in the kitchen? Tell me more of her.’

‘Ruby was the last kitchenmaid but one. Grandmother heard her singing one day, decided that her voice was something out of the ordinary and sent her to have it trained. Ruby, of course, now puts on airs and graces and is very much disliked by the servants. She has every reason to expect that she has been left enough money to complete her training. Should this prove not to be the case and that the legatees disown her, the thing she wants most will be denied her. This, to my mind, clears her completely. In any case, she was in London.’

‘So the contents of Mrs Leyden’s Will are not known?’

‘There have been hints, even threats, of course, and Ruby, so I hear from another member of the family, claims to have seen a draft of the provisions, but Ruby is such a liar that this claim can be discounted.’

‘Yet you seemed confident that, either in a positive or a negative sense, Ruby’s future is assured and you claim that—’

‘She is the very last person to wish my grandmother dead. Yes, that is so and for the reasons I have given. Shall you attend the inquest?’

‘Certainly. I assume that, although it is to be held in this house, the public will be admitted.’

‘I suppose so. We shall all be present, of course. I must say that I am dreading it.’

‘Oh, the proceedings will be formal, I imagine.’

‘What does that mean? I am quite unversed in these matters.’

‘Evidence of identification will be taken, the medical evidence will follow and the business will be adjourned, no doubt, while the police make further enquiries.’

‘But if the death was accidental?’

‘So much the better for you all.’

The inquest, held on the following morning in the great dining-room at Headlands, attracted a very small audience. For one thing, the house was a long way from the village and, for another, the fact that the proceedings were held in a private house deterred the more timid and respectful from attending. The coroner sat at a desk which had been imported from what had been Fiona’s little office, the police, in the person of a detective-superintendent and a sergeant, sat on hard chairs at the side of the room and, for good measure, a police constable stood in the doorway. The witnesses were in armchairs and the public, including Dame Beatrice, in the row behind them.

Next to the kitchenmaid at the end of the row of witnesses which included a grey-haired woman whom Dame Beatrice supposed was Bluebell’s mother, sat another servant who was subsequently revealed as the parlourmaid who had waited at table on the occasion under review and another young woman whom Dame Beatrice could not identify.

A man whom she took to be the family lawyer was seated in the front row next to Maria Porthcawl. The jury, looking wooden to disguise their sense of their own importance, were on chairs of varying heights and were at the side of the room opposite the superintendent and his sergeant.

The proceedings were informal and seemed unreal. It was both fitting and incongruous that they should be held in the very room in which Romula Leyden had died. The family shifted a little in their chairs as the coroner opened the inquest. He made the usual little speech and, after Maria had given evidence of the identity of the deceased, the medical evidence was taken and those who did not know it already were informed that the cause of death was poisoning by aconitine.

‘Have you formed any opinion as to how the poison came to be administered?’

‘I find that the deceased partook of a condiment made from the grated root of aconitum napellus, the monkshood or wolfsbane.’

‘And such a condiment would be poisonous?’

‘Highly poisonous. It is fair to add that such a root has been mistaken for horseradish.’

‘Thank you, doctor.’ The doctor, who had been standing beside the coroner to give his evidence,

returned to his chair, picked up the hat and case he had left there and hurried away to get back to his morning surgery.

The next witness was the superintendent. 'I was called in by Dr Mace to this house to investigate a case of sudden and unexpected death. The doctor suspected the deceased had taken poison. I sent specimens such as I need not name to be analysed. The poison was diagnosed as aconitine, known to be deadly. I set about finding out where the pot of pickle had come from and learned it had been prepared in this very kitchen.'

He was interrupted by a stricken cry of 'I never! I swear and declare I never done it!' from Mrs Plack, who was rebuked by the coroner, comforted by the kitchenmaid and spent the next few minutes quietly sobbing.

The superintendent was invited to resume his story. 'Upon further enquiry I elicited that the pickle or sauce or condiment in question had been prepared last Friday ready for the Sunday dinner of roast beef, it keeping that long, in spite of cream being one of the ingredients, because of the vinegar. I ascertained that a vegetable substance reputed to be horseradish had been grated up ready for use by the kitchenmaid, Sonia Hills—'

'Oo-er! I never knew what it were! I swear I never!'

'Quiet, please, Miss Hills. You will have an opportunity to state your case later on. Go on, please, Superintendent.'

'Having been apprised of the nature of the poison which had resulted in death of the deceased, I set about finding out where it could have come from, it seeming to me unlikely as it had come from a greengrocer or grower.'

'Will you explain that to the jury?'

'No need,' growled a jurymen. 'Anybody as would dig up the wolfsbane, thinking it were horseradish, must ha' been mad. Nobody hereabouts ud make a mistake like that. Monkshood be another name for the wolfsbane and everybody know them purple flowers. In flower that is already. Got some in my garden I have.'

'Thank you, Isaac Trewethy. You have made your point. Superintendent?'

'Trewethy has said what was in my mind, sir. Monkshood is a common enough garden plant in these parts.'

'Is there not a wild variety, though?'

'Ah, there is, but there again you couldn't mistake it for horseradish, sir, not if you saw the actual plant growing. Horseradish—' he consulted his notebook—'otherwise *armoracia rusticana*, natural order cruciferae, does not resembl aconitum anglicum, the wild species of aconitum napellus, as mentioned by Dr. Mace—'

'Yes, yes, Superintendent!'

'Natural order ranunculaceae,' continued the Superintendent, unmoved by the coroner's testy tone, 'in any respect as would cause it to be mistaken—'

'We take your point. You mean that the poisonous root of the monkshood could not have got into Mrs Plack's kitchen by accident. Call Sonia Hills. Now, Miss Hills, there is nothing to be alarmed about. Last Friday you grated up a root of what you supposed to be horseradish. Come right up to my table. Now here, as you see, I have two vegetable substances. Look at them very carefully. You may handle them if you wish.'

‘Not me!’ said Sonia, backing away as though she feared the roots would explode.

‘I understand your cautiousness. Will you point out which of these two roots resembles that which you grated up last Friday?’

The girl stared at the objects for several seconds, then hesitantly she pointed out one of the specimens in front of her.

‘Reckon that’s the one,’ she said, ‘but I couldn’t be sure.’

‘Thank you, Miss Hills. Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, these two roots are identical in substance. Both are genuinely attested horseradish roots dug up yesterday morning under the personal supervision of the police. It is clear, therefore, that the witness is unable to distinguish between the root of the horseradish and the root of the monkshood or wolfsbane. That is all, Miss Hills. You will appreciate, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, that, once the fatal root was grated up, no cook on earth would have known that it was not horseradish, so there is no point in my calling upon Mrs Plack to testify to that fact.’

‘And why?’ demanded Mrs Pack. ‘I can tell you one thing and it’s this: that nasty stuff as poisoned poor Mrs Leyden wasn’t never made in my kitchen. Tried mine, myself, I did, a whole dollopin’ tablespoon of it, and never took no harm, as Sonia here will testify. Changed over, them jars was, and so I’m telling you.’

‘I see,’ said the coroner. ‘Thank you, Mrs Plack.’ He glanced at the Superintendent and then called the parlourmaid. ‘Now,’ the coroner went on, ‘Miss Buskin, you waited at table last Sunday. Will you tell the jury exactly what happened at lunchtime?’

‘Mrs Porthcawl carved, there being no gentlemen present,’ said the girl, ‘and I carried round the plates as usual. There was mustard on the table and madam’s horseradish, nobody else liking it, and she helped herself very liberal, being partial to it.’

‘Nobody else took horseradish sauce?’

‘Nobody else, which on this occasion it was only Mrs Leyden that cared for it, like I said.’

‘Please continue.’

‘I don’t hardly like to. It was horrible. Madam took to clutching at her throat and all the rest of it, like we told the doctor when he came, and it was awful soon, thank God, before it was all over. Of course, Mrs Porthcawl sent me out quick to call the doctor as soon as she see how bad madam was—sick and all that, I mean—but by the time the doctor got here, all the way from St Austell it was, everything was over and madam gone to her last rest.’

‘What did you think had caused the fatal seizure?’

‘I didn’t know at the time. I know now, of course, as it was the horseradish. I never did like the stuff, but—’

‘Thank you, Miss Buskin. Call Margaret Denham. Now, Miss Denham, you were at one time the kitchenmaid here, were you not?’

The girl who had been seated at the end of the row stood up. ‘That’s right,’ she said. ‘Though I don’t see why they had to lug me into this.’

‘How long ago were you in service here?’

‘I left third week in May.’

‘How long were you—what amount of notice did you give?’

'None. I were give my month's wages and told to get out. Sue her for wrongful dismissal I could, if I'd a mind to it. I hadn't done nothing for to get myself chucked out at a minute's notice without no previous warning.'

'There must have been some reason for it, must there not? Will you tell the jury what it was?'

'I had words with that there Ruby Pabbay.'

'Mrs Leyden's protégée?'

'Call her what you like. I called her a jumped-up little cow, for heifer she was not, to my certain knowledge.'

'Miss Denham, you really must not bring these farmyard metaphors into my court.'

'Sorry, I'm sure, but I know very well what sort of capers her got up to when she was kitchenmaid before me.'

'That is a matter we need not discuss. I suppose Mrs Leyden gave you a reference when she dismissed you?'

'Of a sort. She said I was willing, honest and outspoken.'

'You found no difficulty in securing other employment?'

'I been living on my savings with my sister. Ain't many as can afford a kitchenmaid nowadays. Even cook-generals can't always get work. It's mostly the daily help and the missus mucking in, as you might say, or else an au pair from foreign parts which some of 'em are slavies and the other sort is madams and not worth their board and keep.'

'We are wandering from the point. You resented losing your position in this household, it seems.'

'It were wrongful dismissal, like I said, and I wish now as I'd gone to court about it.'

'But you came frequently to visit your former friends here?'

'I come here now and again to have a bit of a natter with Mattie Lunn over to the stables. Plenty of time to pay visits, being out of a job. I never come into the house, though.'

'You could have got a post at one of the hotels, could you not?'

'Happen I could, but I don't care for the hotel work.'

'You preferred to stay idle in your sister's house and brood over your wrongs. When was the last time you visited this house before today?'

'Last Friday morning about nine o'clock, and talked to Mattie for p'raps half an hour.'

'The day on which Mrs Plack made the horseradish sauce for Sunday lunch?'

'I suppose so. Anyways, her wouldn't have made it while I was there. Too early.'

'No, presumably she made it after you had gone. Now, Miss Denham, I would like you to listen to the rest of the evidence. I recall Superintendent Chown. Now, Superintendent, as soon as you knew that poison had been taken by the deceased and as soon as you knew what that poison was, what did you do?'

'Well, sir, I said to myself as the stuff must have come from somewhere and being something of a student of botany, I told myself and my sergeant as it had most probably come from a plant as had a root very similar to the horseradish from which the condiment did ought by rights to have been made.'

'And your botanical knowledge told you that the monkshood plant had such a root?'

‘To be honest and truthful, no, sir. It was the doctor as directed my attention to aconitum napellus. “This is a very nasty affair,” doctor he says to me. “If you want a tip, Chown, I should make it your business to find somebody who has monkshood in the garden and what connection, if any, such a person has with the house of Headlands. If the garden variety doesn’t help, you could chase up the wild kind. It grows around these south-west parts and in Wales” he says, which, of course, from my knowledge of botany I was aware, sir.’

‘Quite so. Your quest was successful, I believe.’

‘That is so, sir. I run the pernicious plant to earth in several gardens near hereabouts, but the garden as interested me most after I had questioned Mrs Porthcawl about possible persons who might have a grudge against Mrs Leyden was the garden of a Mrs Antrobus.’

At this name the girl Denham half-rose from her seat and was pulled back into it by the parlourmaid, Buskin.

‘Hush up!’ hissed this supporter. ‘You ain’t dead yet! Don’t give ’em no back answers. Got you in trouble before.’

‘And this Mrs Antrobus?’ asked the coroner.

‘Happens to be the sister as Denham has been living along of since she was turned away from this house,’ said the superintendent, trying to keep self-satisfaction out of his voice.

‘And thank God as neither of them is Cornish born,’ added one of the jurymen devoutly.

Chapter 11

Last Will and Testament

‘You know,’ said Bluebell, accepting a lift in Dame Beatrice’s car and sitting between her husband and Dame Beatrice on the back seat while Garnet sat in front with George, ‘I know it means plain sailing for the rest of us—the family and Fiona and Ruby, I mean—but I can’t help feeling that the police are barking up the wrong tree.’

‘The coroner was wise enough to repress that outspoken juryman and insist upon a verdict of murder by person or persons unknown,’ Dame Beatrice pointed out.

‘All the same, I am sure they mean to arrest that honest, ignorant girl.’

‘Yes, but even if they arrested her as she left the house, there is still a hearing before the magistrates to come.’

‘There’s a prima facie case, I think,’ said Garnet, turning his head. ‘The girl fits the classic formula.’

‘How do you mean?’ asked his sister. ‘And how do you know what the classic formula is?’

‘I sometimes have a crime in one of my novels, so I need to know such things. Three points arise before a criminal can be convicted. The person concerned must be shown to have had the means, the opportunity and (to a much lesser extent) a motive for committing the crime.’

‘Why “to a lesser extent”? I should have thought the motive was of supreme importance.’

‘Well, no, because what would be a valid motive to one person would offer no temptation, or very little, to another. Let us take a very simple example: let us suppose that you and Gamaliel are equally hungry;

really hungry, I mean. You come to a baker's shop in which you happen to know that the proprietor is also the only counter-hand. As you are both approaching the shop you see him chasing a small boy down the street. The shop door is open. You—both of you—are almost starving. What happens? You tell me, honestly, what happens.'

'Well,' said Bluebell, 'I think you have picked a heavily loaded and very unfair example, but—well, yes, I suppose you are right. Gamaliel would step inside the shop and grab all the bread and buns that he could get hold of: I should not.'

'Yet my premise is that you are just as hungry as he is.'

'Gamaliel needs food far more than I do, so I still don't think it's a fair example. What does Dame Beatrice think?'

'I think that if Gamaliel were starving and you had no food to give him, you would steal it. Your motive, in such a case, would be strong enough for that. But one can argue about motive indefinitely. What we have to consider in the far from hypothetical case which has come under our notice, is to what extent we can agree that there is a *prima facie* case in the matter of Margaret Denham.'

'She had the means,' said Parsifal. 'Do not misunderstand me. I do not believe the girl is guilty. All the same, the kind of plant which appears to have wrought the mischief is known to have been growing in the garden of the house where she was living.'

'You would have to prove that the root or roots of that particular plant had been dug up at the requisite time,' said Bluebell, 'and, moreover, that Margaret was the person who did the excavating.'

'So "opportunity" comes under two separate headings,' said Garnet. 'One: when had she the opportunity to do the digging? That raises another question, you know. The majority of householders, and that includes these cottagers, are very proud of their gardens, I'm sure Mrs Antrobus or her husband (if she has one) would have noticed at once that the plants of monkshood had been tampered with and one or more of them removed.'

'An excellent point,' said Dame Beatrice, 'and one which must be investigated further.'

'Further? Oh, but the police must have gone into the matter. My second point,' Garnet went on, 'is that, granted she had the poisonous root at hand and, for the sake of argument, granted that she had murder in mind, it would have to be established that she had the opportunity to substitute a lethal jar of condiment for an innocuous one.'

'I thought the cook's evidence covered that point,' said Parsifal. 'The murderer had only to pop into the kitchen while the cook was upstairs resting after lunch and the kitchenmaid was in the scullery washing the dishes and with a closed door between her and the kitchen, for the exchange of jars to be effected in only a few seconds and in perfect safety.'

'But the murderer need not have been this girl,' Bluebell protested. 'Anybody living or staying in the house, or even Mattie or Redruth Lunn from outside it, could have had the same opportunity.'

'The means would have been simple enough to come by,' Parsifal conceded. 'Mrs Antrobus is far from being the only person hereabouts to have monkshood in her garden. Come to think of it, we've got several plants of that genus in our own front garden.'

'But we don't—I mean, we didn't until this morning know that the cook and the kitchenmaid would be out of the kitchen at a definite and well-established time,' said Garnet.

'We might find that hard to prove,' said Bluebell. 'Fiona most certainly would have known, and there is no way of proving that she had not told us.'

‘Even if she herself denied telling us?’ said Parsifal.

‘The law would argue that she was lying in order to protect the people who had taken her in when she had nowhere else to go,’ said Garnet.

‘But what motive could any of us have for murdering our grandmother? The very question sounds like a music hall joke,’ protested Bluebell.

‘We may have sufficient motive attached to us when the Will is read,’ said Garnet, with a short laugh in which there was no hilarity.

‘Oh, gracious me! I never thought of that,’ said Bluebell.

Her husband said, in his weak and gentle voice, ‘It was the first thought which came into my head. Of course, it depends upon how the money has been left which will determine on which of us the most suspicion falls, for it would be useless for us to claim that we had no idea of what was in the Will, although that would be the truth.’

‘But the girl had a motive, too, remember,’ said Garnet.

‘Revenge for wrongful dismissal? Revenge is not usually sought except by the criminal classes, the gangsters and those terrible people in Ireland. Besides, however unjustly the girl herself feels she has been treated, it was not really wrongful dismissal. Ruby Pabbay has been given the status of a member of the family and that entitles her to at least a semblance of respect from the servants of that family. Suppose she had used the same opprobrious terms to insult our mother or Fiona?’ argued his sister.

‘Ah, but she wouldn’t, don’t you see,’ said Garnet eagerly. ‘Class distinctions may be undemocratic, but they still exist, particularly in remote districts such as this. Margaret Denham would no more have spoken to mother or Fiona in such terms than she would have used them to a duchess.’

‘Talking of means,’ said Dame Beatrice, who had been listening with interest to the debate, ‘I wonder how many people knew Mrs Plack’s recipe for making the mixture?’

‘Well, as Margaret had been kitchenmaid until she was dismissed for insolence, she certainly must have known it,’ said Bluebell. ‘But here we are at the hotel. I beg you to put us down here, Dame Beatrice. We have a very short walk home.’

Dame Beatrice perceived that the three wanted to carry on the conversation among themselves. ‘You will at least allow me to offer you a glass of sherry at the hotel bar,’ she said.

‘A pint would be preferable,’ said Garnet, ‘but the other two don’t drink, so I will wait until I get home where Gamaliel, good boy, will have anchored a can or a bottle in the stream to cool it the way I like.’

The funeral of Romula Leyden had been attended by few outside her family and almost the same collection of people was seated, once again in the dining-room, to hear the family solicitor read aloud her last Will and testament.

‘I ought to tell you,’ he said, as a preliminary, ‘that the Will differs in some respects from the one made a year ago, the contents of which may or may not be known to you.’ He looked around at the faces of the company. He was a student of human nature, had a large and lucrative practice, a slight streak of sadistic humour and, above all things, he enjoyed reading aloud the testamentary dispositions of the sometimes unpredictable and occasionally eccentric wealthy. ‘I will add, in fairness to you all before I begin to read, that, owing to the very difficult position in which we all find ourselves, my partners and I are not prepared to submit this Will to probate until Mrs Leyden’s murderer is apprehended and his or her guilt proved.’

‘But that is absolute nonsense!’ exclaimed Maria. ‘I know a guilty party is not permitted to benefit by

the death of a testator, but you surely cannot imagine that one of us is my mother's murderer!'

'Although I was not present, owing to an attack of migraine, I thought it was clear enough at the inquest who the guilty party is,' said Fiona quietly, 'and that person can never have expected to benefit under madre's Will.'

'I shall now read the provisions,' said the solicitor in the dry tones which are believed to be the histrionic hall-mark of his profession. He allowed himself another glance around the table before he began to read. His voice was professionally toneless. Garnet caught Fiona's eye and grinned. Maria looked affronted, Parsifal, his wide mouth half-open, expectant. Ruby looked smug, Diana bored. The rest of the countenances, except for Garnet's satirical grin, were impassive, polite, resigned. The solicitor cleared his throat and began upon the preliminaries.

'Excuse me,' said Bluebell, interrupting him, 'but are the servants mentioned?'

'Yes, Mrs Leek, later on, at the end.'

'Then shouldn't they be present?'

'There is no need for them to be here,' said Garnet. 'Carry on, please, Mr Monaker.'

'I think all beneficiaries are entitled to be present, Garnet,' argued Maria, looking belligerently at her son.

'It is not for servants to learn all their employer's business, mother. We don't want the entire contents of my grandmother's Will tattled all around the neighbourhood.'

'The contents will be open to public inspection when once the Will is proved,' said Bluebell.

'That is not the same thing at all.'

The solicitor said mildly: 'Perhaps the simplest thing would be to admit the servants and then dismiss them when they have heard those passages which concern only themselves.'

'Do they all benefit?' asked Rupert. 'It would be embarrassing if some were mentioned and others not.'

'Good heavens!' said Diana. 'Don't tell me that you have a kind heart after all. When did you care about servants' feelings?'

'I meant embarrassing for us, not for them,' said Rupert, his large, sallow face flushing with anger and his mobile, rather thick lips closing grimly as soon as the words were out. Diana laughed spitefully and stated that she was relieved to hear that the Ethiopian had not changed his skin.

'Dear and beautiful Diana,' said Gamaliel, 'you must not talk about Ethiopians in a light manner when a black boy is in the room.'

'May we send for the servants?'' said the solicitor. Fiona went out and returned with the cook, the parlourmaid, the two housemaids, and the middle-aged woman named Maybury, Ruby's mother, who had been Mrs Leyden's personal maid.

'Sonia and Mattie and Redruth Lunn will be here anon, madam,' said Mrs Plack, addressing Maria. 'Sonia having been sent by Miss Bute for to fetch 'em over.'

'We will wait for them,' said Maria. 'The rest of you had better go back to the servants' hall and bring chairs for yourselves and them.'

At last there was a full muster. The servants had placed the chairs with backs to the long wall opposite the windows. They all sat straight up, feet together on the carpet and their hands folded in their laps, except for the Lunn. Mattie's great hands, seemingly so rough yet none more gentle with horses'

mouths, hung at her sides and demonstrated the unusual length of her arms. Her brother, small, lean and furtive-looking, held his chauffeur's peaked cap on his knee.

'I shall not need to keep you long,' said the solicitor, looking at them benignly over the top of his spectacles, 'but you will like to be told of your expectations, however small, under the late Mrs Leyden's last Will. You must not expect your little gifts immediately, but I shall release them to you as soon as I can. In the Will, the sum of one thousand two hundred and forty pounds has been set aside for you by the testator in the following proportions: to Mrs Plack three hundred pounds; to Miss Maybury two hundred and fifty pounds; to Mr Lunn two hundred pounds; to Miss Buskin one hundred and fifty pounds; to the two Miss Trewethens one hundred and twenty pounds each; to Miss Hills one hundred pounds. Miss Matilda Lunn receives no lump sum, but is told that the three horses in the late Mrs Leyden's stable are hers.'

Mattie's heavy face was transfigured. She beamed. Her eyes shone. She got up from her chair, crossed the intervening stretch of carpet and shook the astonished solicitor warmly by the hand.

The servants could hardly have reached the green baize door before their excited chattering began. Apart from Mattie, the most astonished and delighted person was the kitchenmaid.

'I never expected to get nothing, being only with her a matter of three weeks,' she said.

'Ah, my gal, I reckon you got me to thank for your hundred pounds,' said the cook. 'So you just mind as you don't go and blue it all on useless frippery. Missus asked me, when you'd been here a fortnight, how you was shaping, so I said none better, a good, willing, hardworking gal, I told her, and biddable in all respects.'

Mattie said to her brother as they walked across the downland turf, 'I reckon it's coals of fire when I think of all the names I called her in private when she turned me off. What do you think to your two hundred? Satisfied, like, be you?'

'Ah, specially if Mrs Porthcawl gets the house and keeps me on.'

'Wonder if she'd rent me the stables for a bit till I gets my riding-school going?'

In the dining room there was a nervous, anticipatory silence. The solicitor cleared his throat.

'Shall we resume?' he said. The family and dependants hitched their chairs a little nearer the table. Parsifal licked his long lips. Garnet scratched his nose. Ruby smiled brightly around with the air of one who knew that for her there were no surprises in store. She was mistaken.

'This is the last Will of me, Romula Grace Leyden of Headlands, Gorsecliff, Veryan Bay, in the Duchy of Cornwall. I hereby revoke all previous Wills and testamentary dispositions hertofore made by me,' read out Mr Monaker. The Will continued by appointing him and his partners the executors and then what to the hearers was the important part was reached. '... in the following proportions,' went on the level, emotionless voice: 'to my daughter and sole surviving child Maria Charlotte Porthcawl, I leave the house and estate known as Headlands and forty per cent of my fortune for her use and its upkeep, with the proviso that if I die before Ruby Pabbay has concluded her musical education, the said Maria Charlotte Porthcawl shall maintain her in the style to which I have accustomed her, neither better nor worse, until such education be concluded and Ruby Pabbay be launched upon her career.'

There was a cry of protest from Ruby. 'That's not right!' she shouted. 'I was to have been left enough money to keep myself and pay for the rest of my training! It was to have been my business, not somebody else's! When was that Will dated?'

'A fortnight ago,' said the solicitor, 'and, if you please, Miss Pabbay, I shall be obliged if you will reserve your questions until I have finished.'

Ruby pushed back her chair so clumsily that it fell over. She rushed out of the room and banged the door behind her so that the windows rattled.

‘Please go on,’ said Maria quietly.

‘Very well. To my grandson Garnet Wolseley Porthcawl I leave twenty per cent of my fortune, the same to his sister, Bluebell Wendy Mildred Leek, my granddaughter. Of the remaining twenty per cent: five per cent to my friend and erstwhile companion, Fiona Griselda Bute, and five per cent each to Gamaliel Leek, adopted son of Parsifal and Bluebell Leek, Quentin and Millament Bosse-Leyden, the children of Rupert and Diana Bosse-Leyden, to be held in trust for all three children until they shall attain the age of eighteen years, and provided that the said Rupert and Diana remain man and wife.’

There was a lengthy peroration at the end which referred, after the servants’ little legacies had been repeated, to the rights and duties of the executors, but nobody listened. As soon as the non-committal voice ceased, Garnet put the question which everybody wanted to ask.

‘Have you any idea,’ he said, ‘of the cash value of my grandmother’s fortune? — the actual money, I mean?’

‘In round figures,’ replied the solicitor, ‘it amounts to about four hundred thousand pounds.’

‘Well, your grandmother has sewn us up in a nice parcel!’ said Diana, as she and Rupert drove back to Campions. ‘What are we to do about it?’

‘Stay married and enjoy our other relationships as we do at present, I suppose. We can hardly bounce Quentin and Millament out of their inheritance. The ten per cent between them will amount to a considerable sum if wisely invested.’

‘Six years’ accumulated interest, yes. Ten per cent of four hundred thousand is forty thousand. Their future is secure.’

‘If we don’t botch it up. What do you say?’

‘The same as you, of course. Who wants to chuck away forty thousand pounds? Money talks much louder than illicit love affairs.’

‘I will give up Fiona if you will give up Garnet. We could have another go at our marriage, perhaps.’

“‘Money is the true fuller’s earth for reputations, there is not a spot or a stain but what it can take out,’” quoted Diana gaily.

‘We loved one another before the children were born.’

‘We thought we did. It comes to much the same thing, I suppose. All right. Let’s have another bash.’

‘So now I know why I was taught simple arithmetic,’ said Gamaliel. ‘Five per cent of four hundred thousand pounds is twenty thousand pounds. I have worked it out. I will celebrate by telling you something which will please you. I will go back to school in September and work hard at my O levels and take them again in March, for I am sure I have not passed this time. But A levels are beyond the scope of my intelligence. You must accept that and let me leave when I am seventeen and have been head boy for a year.’

‘I take it that you will settle down with me here at Headlands,’ said Maria to Fiona, ‘and help me cope with Ruby.’

‘I shall be glad to do so. There is no chance now that Rupert will divorce Diana and marry me. He will not sacrifice his children for my sake and I would not want it.’

‘Diana has just as much cause to divorce him as vice versa,’ said Maria, ‘but you are right. Neither of

them will deprive their children. It would be scandalous if they did. So my mother's money does more good now she is dead than it did during her lifetime, and that's a sad thought.'

Chapter 12

Arrested and Charged

'I want to change my name,' said Miss Pabbay to Maria, whose ward she now was. 'No prima donna can be saddled with a name like Pabbay, as though one were an island in the Hebrides. Will you pay for me to change it by deed poll, so that it is legal?'

'I believe it is legal to call oneself by any name one chooses, so long as one is popularly known by it. What name have you chosen?'

'I shall call myself Antonia Aysgarth. Dame Antonia Aysgarth will sound well, later on, don't you think?'

'People will know that it is an assumed name, of course.'

'I shall not be the first great artiste to assume a name. Anyway, Pabbay is not my real name either, if it comes to that. Will you practise calling me Antonia? And will you ask Fiona and your family and the servants to do the same? It isn't really much to ask, is it?'

'No,' said Maria kindly, 'it is not, so Antonia it is, from this day forth, so far as the family is concerned, and you will be Miss Aysgarth to the servants.'

'I shall be changing my name again one day, I suppose.'

'You mean you intend to marry?'

'Yes, but not until I have made a career for myself.'

'But that may take years.'

'Possibly. I have told Barnaby my plans. We are both young and can afford to wait.'

'Well, I am glad that the money spent on your training will not be wasted.'

'Do you grudge me my training?'

'Certainly not,' said Maria sincerely. 'It would be a thousand pities to allow a talent like yours to go to waste. But are you not neglecting your studies by hanging about here instead of returning to London?'

'I must have time to get over the abuela's death. You think I am conceited and hard-hearted, but that is not true, I am ambitious and perhaps a little cold-blooded, but not the other things. Besides, I want to know what is to happen to that other poor girl. Do you realise that, if the abuela had not taken me out of the kitchen and given me my chance, I might be in Margaret's shoes?'

'Oh, no, you would only be in Sonia's shoes and no suspicion attaches to her. Margaret had a grievance against my mother. You had none. Besides, there was that business of the monkshood which was dug up.'

'If it were not for my complaint about her, Margaret might still be kitchenmaid here, and not be in all this trouble, Maria. I feel very sorry for her.'

'My mother was right to dismiss her. Your position in this house had changed and by my mother's own

wish. Margaret had no right whatever to be insolent to you. It was no business of hers to criticise the actions of her employer and, by being impudent to you, that, in effect, is what she did.'

'All the same, I'm sorry now that I complained to the abuela. It would have been more in keeping to have suffered the insults with dignity.'

'Nonsense! Why should anybody suffer insults when they have the means to reply to them?'

'Do you think the magistrates will find her guilty?'

'That is not exactly their province. They merely have to decide whether to send her for trial.'

'It seems the same thing to me.'

'How long,' asked Maria, another thought striking her, 'have you entertained this idea of changing your name?'

'Oh, for long enough. I don't know how long. Do you know my real surname, Maria?'

'No,' said Maria, after a significant pause, 'neither my mother nor myself had any interest in attempting to find it out. Why should we? You came with a good character and that was all that concerned us. Does it worry you not to know who you are? I suppose that nowadays you could find out if you wanted to, but I doubt whether you would be any happier for the knowledge. Why not let sleeping dogs lie?'

'I believe you think, as I do, that I am really a member of your own family.'

'Good heavens! I don't think anything of the kind! Whatever put such a fantastic idea into your silly young head? I suppose all girls in your position get illusions of grandeur, but yours is simply ridiculous,' said Maria.

'The idea came when the abuela promoted me to what I feel is my rightful position. I don't think she took me out of the kitchen merely because I have a voice which can be trained. I think I am her husband's child by Maybury, the abuela's personal maid, whom you have now dismissed,' said the girl boldly, meeting Maria's astonished and angry eyes with a challenging glance.

'How dare you suggest such a thing? Please drop the subject at once. I find it both ludicrous and offensive. As for Maybury, I have no use for a personal maid. That is the only reason I got rid of her and I have taken a considerable amount of trouble to find her suitable employment.'

'I have often felt I resembled Maybury in appearance.'

'I have never noticed it.'

'And, of course,' went on the newly-named Antonia, 'Mr Rupert Bosse-Leyden is as illegitimate as I am. These things run in families. So do twins. You are a twin and Rupert and Diana have twin children, haven't they? and Blue and Garnet are twins also.'

'There is one thing I can tell you,' said Maria, regaining control over her voice and her facial expression. 'To begin with, how old are you?'

'I think you know that I am twenty.'

'Quite so. Well, Maybury has been employed here for the past eleven years. My father has been dead for twenty-four.'

'I'm sorry for my thoughts and hopes, Maria.'

'Accept what you have been given and are to go on being given, and abstain from wild speculation. It does no good and may create a great deal of mischief.'

'I'll remember that, Maria. When you come to London to hear me sing in public, you will notice what a

good stage-presence I have. Other things run in families besides twins and illegitimacy.'

Her listener walked out of the room.

'I shall buy Antonia the flat she wants,' said Maria to Fiona.

'Really? But I thought the terms of madre's Will—'

'I don't want Antonia in this house.'

'You must have a reason for saying so, I suppose.'

'Certainly I have, but I shall not disclose it, even to you. Sufficient to say that I do not want her here now my mother has gone. You and I are sufficient company for one another.'

'It will be nice to have the house to ourselves; not that she comes all that often.'

'No, but she comes when she thinks she will and without giving previous notice. My mother put up with it, but I shall not. Fiona, I think I will tell you the truth, after all. I can trust you not to pass it on.'

'Don't say something you may regret later on, Maria.'

'It is better that someone else should know. I shrank at first from telling you because I suppose I have old-fashioned ideas about these things, but nobody thinks anything of them nowadays. In fact, I sometimes wonder whether it isn't rather a mark of distinction to be the result of an illicit love-affair.'

'If it is a love-affair.'

'Oh, well, an outsider can hardly know about that. Antonia began by pretending that she thought herself to be my father's child. That notion I disposed of very easily, but it did not represent her true thoughts.'

'I suppose it's terribly frustrating to be brought up in an orphanage and not know anything about your origins,' said Fiona, envisaging what she would feel in such a case.

'I make all allowance for that. What I don't understand is how Antonia knows she is my husband's daughter. In fact, she cannot know. It was just a wild shot in the dark.'

'But is she?—how can you be sure that she is right?'

'I am not sure, but it is possible.'

'Well, anything is possible; not so many things are likely. I would put this one clean out of your mind, if I were you, but I think you are right to close your doors to her if she has made that kind of allegation.'

'My late husband was on the stage, you know, and, as the wretched girl says, some things do run in families.'

'I see that poor Margaret Denham is to be sent for trial,' said Fiona, thinking it best to change the subject.

'Do you think they will find her guilty?'

'Well, anything would be better than having the crime brought home to one of your family.'

'Whatever can you mean?'

'I am naming no names.' The women eyed one another. Fiona was the first to drop her eyes. 'I am sorry,' she said. 'I thought perhaps your mind marched with mine. There are cuckoos in the nest, more than one of them.'

'Oh!' said Maria, her face clearing. 'So that is what you think! It is more than likely, but, for the sake of

all of us, the name must not be breathed.'

'So what can be done?' asked Bluebell. 'Of course, Margaret Denham may be guilty, but I think the police have gone too far in arresting her so soon. As it's a charge of murder, the poor thing can't even get bail.'

She was speaking to Dame Beatrice, having walked down to the hotel immediately after breakfast to seek an interview. She was accompanied by Gamaliel, who had his own views and expressed them freely.

'They have arrested this girl because she is poor and obscure and frightened. The person to arrest is this girl we have to call Antonia. It was easy to see that she was more upset than anybody over my great grandmother's Will. The one most upset is the guilty party. That is my opinion.'

'Don't be silly, Gammy,' said Bluebell. 'You are putting the cart before the horse and talking from hindsight. Antonia did not know the contents of the Will before your great grandmother died. Nobody did. Somebody may have thought she did, but even if she had been right (and we know now that she was not right) she had nothing to gain by the death. She would get her training whether she was to be left the money for it or whether one of us legatees was to pay for it, as has turned out to be the case. You must not talk so wildly and unfairly.'

'He is right about one thing,' said Dame Beatrice, gazing with benign admiration at the beautiful youth. 'If Margaret Denham is to be exonerated, another culprit must be found, for of one other thing we can be sure; Mrs Leyden undoubtedly was poisoned and, on the face of it, by somebody's wilful act. The charge, however, may turn out to be one of manslaughter.'

'Not murder?' asked Gamaliel, not at all put out of countenance by Bluebell's censure. 'But that is not so interesting, is it?'

'No, it is not,' Dame Beatrice agreed. 'Nevertheless, the accused person may well prefer it.'

'Would it help this girl if I went to the police and confessed to a practical joke?'

Bluebell gazed at him with horror and told him, with some abruptness, not to show off. Dame Beatrice surveyed him with kindly interest.

'I hardly think it would help matters at all,' she said. 'You base your suggestion, no doubt, on the theory that, at your age, not only could you plead that a practical joke went wrong and was followed by circumstances which you did not intend, but also that you would get off far more lightly if you were convicted than this unfortunate girl may find is the case.'

'You are talking sense, my dear old lady,' said Gamaliel cordially. 'That is the way I see it.'

'If you followed out your idiotic suggestion,' said Bluebell, recovering herself, 'you would fail to qualify for election as head boy next term. The school would hardly choose one who was a candidate for a reformatory. I think you had better return home and leave me to consult Dame Beatrice in private.'

'Is that your opinion, too, dear old lady?' asked Gamaliel, favouring Dame Beatrice with his wide smile.

'Yes, dear young man, I rather think it is,' she replied, 'so off you go.'

Gamaliel took himself off quite cheerfully and Dame Beatrice led the way through the empty bar to its narrow balcony, where she and Bluebell seated themselves. For some moments they gazed out over the beautiful little cove in silence.

Then Bluebell said: 'If this girl didn't do it, then one of us did, and although I rebuked Gamaliel for

suggesting it, Antonia is as good a candidate as any other except that, as I pointed out, even if she did think she had seen a draft which left her money, it made no essential difference to her future. Even five thousand pounds would not be too much to pay for another few years' training, keep her in rent, food and clothes and maintain her until she could get a sufficient number of engagements to allow her to fend for herself. The path of the artist is hard and stony.'

'Is there any chance whatever that the police would take your son's suggestion seriously, were he rash enough to go to them with it?'

'I suppose they would consider it. Gamaliel, like all the rest of us, is perfectly capable of murder if the motive were strong enough. However, he would not have committed this particular murder. It would have been much more effective, from his point of view, to have followed my grandmother on one of her cliff walks and pushed her over the edge, and that is what he would have done.'

'There is much in what you say. You feel sure that this particular murder was committed by a woman, I think.'

'I cannot be sure, but it seems likely because of the means employed.'

'It could be a crime committed by a man astute enough to make it look like the action of a woman, don't you think?'

'I had not thought of that. But, you know, Dame Beatrice, if Margaret Denham is not the guilty party, then, as I said, one of us must be, and that is a thought I find hard to face.'

'There are the Lunnns, of course.'

'Mattie and Redruth? Oh, but they have been in my grandmother's service for years and years.'

'That is hardly a valid defence. Circumstances change. Grievances arise, and so on.'

'I suppose so. Now that I come to remember, I was told that Mattie's employment as groom had been terminated,' said Bluebell thoughtfully, 'and she did not know that she was to be given the horses. But, is summary dismissal an adequate motive for so serious a crime as murder?'

'As I always contend, who can say what is or is not an adequate motive?'

'You have seen Margaret Denham and heard her speak. Do you think she is guilty? As a psychiatrist you must have formed an opinion.'

'The only opinion I have formed is too trite to be worth repeating. However, here it is, and it coincides with your own, so we are going round in circles. If Margaret Denham did not do it, somebody else did, but to take the matter a little further, as the police have arrested the girl they will not look for that somebody until or unless the magistrates dismiss the charge.'

'They are not likely to do that, unless something more comes to light than is known at present. Failing a more obvious suspect, there is a prima facie case against Margaret, as any unbiased person is bound to admit.'

'But you are not unbiased,' said Garnet, when Bluebell reported the conversation to him.

'No. I am prejudiced in the girl's favour. I don't believe she has the intelligence to think of such a method of murder, let alone the wickedness to carry it out.'

'Is there anything in Gamaliel's suggestion that a malicious practical joke misfired? Not his own practical joke, I hasten to add.'

'Not the sort of joke which would be played in these parts. Country people have a wide knowledge of poisonous plants and the monkshood is notorious. If it were not, it would hardly be known also as the

wolfsbane.’

‘I suppose the roots did come from a plant of the cultivated variety? I believe it is also found growing wild in south-western districts, and this part of England is the most south-western of all.’

‘I believe there is a wild species. You would need to ask Rupert. I believe he is writing a book on Cornish flora. Of course, the most damaging evidence against the girl is that the plant in question seems to have been dug up in her sister’s garden while she was staying in the cottage.’

‘To be fair, the police ought to inspect all the gardens in the neighbourhood. Perhaps a murderer clever enough to have thought of this way of killing would also be far-sighted enough to attempt to throw suspicion on this girl, knowing her to have a grievance about her dismissal from the Headlands kitchen and also knowing that, because of her service there, she would have known exactly how the cook prepared the horseradish sauce and exactly what kind of jar she put it in. That is the trouble unless the cook herself did it, or the present kitchenmaid.’

‘Oh, I am sure we can exonerate the present girl, Sonia. What reason could she have had? She knew nothing of the tiny legacy which she is to receive and there is no story of her having fallen foul of her mistress. As for Mrs Plack, I would as soon suspect myself!’

‘That is no proof of her innocence, but, however illogically, I agree with you.’

‘There is one other person who could have known all about the preparation of the horseradish sauce,’ said Bluebell.

‘I am at a loss to think of anybody, unless you mean Fiona,’ said her brother.

‘Or my mother, come to that. It is just as unlikely. No, I had not, for one moment, thought of either.’

‘Oh!’ said Garnet, as her meaning dawned on him. ‘But I would have thought that particular person had a perfect alibi. Wouldn’t she have been in London? In any case, what had she to gain?’

‘Absolutely nothing. So far as we know, she also had no grievance against my grandmother, far from it. She has received nothing but kindness in that house. In any case, it is not in her nature to think of such a method of killing. I can envisage Antonia picking up a dagger and doing the thing in grand style and with a histrionic flourish, but I don’t believe she would kill in this cowardly hole-and-corner manner. She is going to be a success on the concert platform, you know. She would never mortgage her chances by committing this loathsome crime, even were she capable of committing it, and I repeat that I am perfectly convinced she is not. Gamaliel put forth the suggestion and I repudiated it.’

‘Well, I did not commit it and neither did you,’ said Garnet. ‘Is Dame Beatrice interested?’

Chapter 13

Monkshood

‘But why are you bothering?’ asked Laura on her first evening back at The Smugglers’ Inn. ‘I mean, from what you tell me, the girl had a genuine grievance, she knew all about this horseradish stuff, how it was prepared, what kind of jar was used and all the rest of it, and she had gone to live in a cottage where this poison plant was not only growing in the garden but a root or two of it, easily mistaken for horseradish, had been dug up.’

‘I know,’ said Dame Beatrice mildly.

‘Well, then, why are you bothering? Don’t you think the girl is guilty?’

‘I have no idea whether she is guilty or not, but I find the case interesting. The people concerned are fascinating in their own way, and (what perhaps is more to the point), some of them had far more to gain from the death than Margaret Denham had, for, in her case, the motive could only have been to avenge herself on one who had dismissed her from her position as kitchenmaid for what the girl may have thought to be an insufficient reason.’

‘But insolence in a servant is not an insufficient reason. The only reason I ever belted a kid in school was for beastly back-answering. You know—“I can connive at immorality, but I can’t stand impudence”.’

‘What you say is very just.’

‘Anyway, what had others to gain that she had not? Money?’

‘A great deal of it. The deceased left a valuable property, four hundred thousand pounds, and a number of more or less indigent relations.’

‘Oh, I see. But you are always arguing that the strength of a motive for murder is so variable that you can’t really go by it. Have you changed your ground?’

‘By no means, so let us go back to the beginning and say that I find the case interesting.’

‘Shall you go and see the girl?’

‘Later on. My commitments to the Home Office will provide ample opportunity for that.’

‘But you’re going to do a bit of ferreting round first.’

‘As often, I deplore the metaphors you use, but this one covers the facts.’

‘Do I come with you?’

‘I shall value, as always, your company.’

‘Where do we start? Do we sniff out all the gardens where the monkshood might have been dug up, but wasn’t?’

‘We also survey the shadows and windy places which have lisp of leaves and rustle of rain.’

‘You’re thinking of the wild variety. Does it grow in these parts?’

‘We shall enjoy some pleasant rambles to find that out, but the cultivated variety must come first. We shall begin by paying a visit to that Mrs Antrobus with whom Margaret Denham was staying when, apparently, the murder was conceived and carried out.’

Mrs Antrobus was doubtful and suspicious of the visitors. ‘You’re not the police,’ she said.

‘Perhaps we are ancillary to them,’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘Nevertheless, we have our part to play. I represent the Home Office.’ She produced her official card.

Mrs Antrobus wiped her fingers on her apron and accepted it gingerly. ‘Well, I’d sooner my husband was at home,’ she said, as she handed it back, ‘but I suppose you’d better come in, ma’am.’

‘I would prefer to look at your bed of monkshood plants.’

‘The police have done that. Nothing to see there, except their great boots trampling all over the place. Photographed it and everything, they have, though what it proves except nasty vandals, I can’t see.’

‘So you think the digging up of your flowers was just an act of hooliganism, do you?’

‘What else could it be? My young sister never did it, and that I’ll swear, and did so to that detective fellow, not that he believed me, else why is Mags in prison and her good name blackened for all time?’

‘When did you discover that your garden had been desecrated?’ asked Dame Beatrice, surveying the trampled flowerbeds.

‘On the Saturday morning as the old lady died at the Sunday dinner table. I reckon the damage was done any time after Wednesday. That was the last time, till the Saturday, as I had occasion to throw out any rubbish. We grows the tall things, sunflowers, hollyhocks, monkshood and a little pergola of rambling roses to screen the bumby-hole, you see, and as it’s right at the bottom of the garden, I don’t traipse down there more often than I need. Trouble is, it’s easy enough to get at it from outside. You’d only have to step over the wall, and that’s no more than four foot high. Any boy or man could do it. Only thing is, nobody in the village wouldn’t.’

‘But somebody did. Have you any suspicions of who that somebody could be?’

‘It’s not for me to name names, not having names to name, but the poor old lady wasn’t one of Mag’s relations, was she?’

‘If we’re going to inspect every local garden and ask questions,’ said Laura, as they left the cottage, ‘we’ve got a long, long trail ahead of us.’

‘Are you weakening so soon?’

‘No, but nothing we’ve just heard convinces me that M. Denham did not dig up those roots.’

‘True. On the other hand, I cannot see that there is anything to show that she did.’

‘You know,’ said Laura, struck by a sudden thought, ‘that looked a very small cottage.’

‘Very small. What of it?’

‘I wondered whether it might not be germane to the issue to ask what the sleeping arrangements were while Margaret D. was there.’

Dame Beatrice, who had been about to enter the car which they had left a short distance away where it was possible to park it, straightened up and said in a tone of teasing wonderment, ‘Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings—’!

‘I call that an extremely offensive remark to make to the mother of two grown-up children,’ said Laura. ‘Do you want me to expound?’

‘I always hang upon your every word, but this time I can guess what you are going to say.’

‘All the same, I bet you’d never have thought of it for yourself.’

‘I confess and admit as much.’

‘You see,’ said Laura, ‘it seems to me that those plants could hardly have been dug up by daylight. Not even Margaret Denham could have been sure of when Mrs Antrobus would or would not decide to chuck away the rubbish.’

‘Margaret herself might have opted to carry out that particular chore, in which case your objection can be overruled.’

‘What! Are you acting as Devil’s Advocate?’

‘It is as well, as you yourself have often said, to explore all avenues and leave no stone unturned.’

‘Well, I’ll stand by that. Still, now that you know what’s in my mind—’

‘I suggest that you go back alone to the cottage and put the question which I had overlooked.’

Laura returned to the car after a considerable interval. Her beaming smile indicated that, as usual, she was feeling pleased with herself.

‘First pop out of the box,’ she announced with pride. ‘I apologised for the fact that you, with your exalted rank, were not up to the problems of the proletariat, and asked her point-blank the moot question. It appears that while Margaret was there, she and Mrs Antrobus shared the one double bed, and husband was relegated to a shakedown in the kitchen. Mrs A., who is expecting her first child in December, stated that she was not sorry to get shut of him for a week or two, but that it had not been for as long as she would have liked. Margaret had had a job to go to “somewhere over St Austell way” when the kitchenmaid at a big house left to get married, which rather disposes of Margaret’s motive for murdering Mrs Leyden, I feel. The fact remains that if those roots were dug up after bedtime, which I guess is earlier rather than later in these parts, that digging up was not done by Sister Mag unless she and Mrs Antrobus were in collusion.’

‘It is a pointer, but not proof. Let us inspect the other gardens round and about, particularly those belonging to the members of the late Mrs Leyden’s family.’

A number of cottages and also Bluebell’s house had the monkshood, with its sinister, purple, secretive flowers in bloom in some part of the garden, but there was nowhere, in any of the gardens, which showed that the ground had been disturbed. Only one actual call was made by Dame Beatrice and at this one, since it was at Seawards, Bluebell answered the door.

‘I am beginning a series of enquiries,’ said Dame Beatrice, knowing that it would not be necessary to state the purpose and nature of these. ‘I have visited Mrs Antrobus. I wonder whether you can think of anybody else who could help?’

‘Oh, do come in and sit down.’

‘I will not stay. I have left my secretary in the car and we have had a fatiguing round looking for poison plants.’

‘You noticed that we have monkshood growing in the garden here?’

‘Yes, but the ground, I feel certain, has not been disturbed.’

‘No. We are not keen gardeners and, in any case, one takes care not to disturb plants which are in flower.’

‘Unless for some nefarious purpose.’

‘Did you reach any conclusions at the Antrobus cottage?’

‘No. I retain an open mind. Have you any idea whether the wolfsbane grows wild in these parts?’

‘My cousin, Rupert Bosse-Leyden, could tell you. Of course, if the wild variety was used, then the plants dug up in the Antrobus garden could just have been a blind, which is what I think they were. But do go and ask Rupert. Tell him I sent you. I’m sure he will be pleased to see you and answer any questions. I don’t think any of us are very happy about the arrest of that poor girl.’

‘You will pardon me, I hope, for expressing this so bluntly, but, apart from the members of Mrs Leyden’s family, can you possibly think of anybody who could have had an interest, financial or otherwise, in her death?’

‘She had no enemies, if that is what you mean. She lived very quietly and seldom went further from home than Truro or Falmouth. Most of her friends were either dead or had dropped out and I know of nobody who bore her a grudge.’

‘Except, possibly, this girl Margaret Denham.’

‘There was Mattie Lunn, perhaps, but she is so delighted with the gift of the horses that—’

‘Yes,’ said Dame Beatrice, as Bluebell paused. ‘Yes, but she did not know of the gift of the horses until after Mrs Leyden’s death, did she?—and she had exactly the same reason for feeling disgruntled as Margaret Denham had—that is, before Mrs Leyden died.’

‘How do you know about this? I don’t believe I have ever mentioned it to you.’

‘My chauffeur resides at the public house halfway up the road towards Veryan. Gossip there is rife and as both the Lunnns appear to patronise the place nightly, the gossip, although probably biased, is also well-informed.’

‘I see. Well, that is the road you need if you go to see Rupert. Turn seawards at the second cross-roads and, if you see anybody, ask for the house called Champions. If you don’t see anybody, look out for a National Trust notice. There is sure to be one somewhere along the way.’

‘What do you expect to get from this Rupert?’ asked Laura, as their car skirted The Smugglers’ Inn and George changed gear for the hill.

‘I go in hope, rather than in expectation. At least we can ascertain whether he grows monkshood in his garden.’

George pulled up in the lane (not more than a track) which led past Champions and out to the coast and the cliff path. The dachshunds surrounded the gate and yelled madly until Diana came out to see who was there. She called off the crazy, welcoming chorus, shut it away and silenced it and then came back to the gate.

‘You can take your car through the woods,’ she said, ‘but after that it’s a case of walking if you want the cliff-top.’

‘We have reached journey’s end, I think,’ said Dame Beatrice, ‘if this is the house referred to by Mrs Leek as Champions.’

‘Oh, if Blue sent you, you had better come in,’ said Diana, ‘but if it’s Rupert you want to see—he is Blue’s relative, not me—I’m afraid he’s at his little office. He’s got to a part of his present book where research is necessary and there’s nothing in the house here to help him.’

‘I gathered from Mrs Leek that he is an authority on the wild flowers of the district.’

‘I wouldn’t call him an authority, but that’s what the book is about.’ She opened the gate. ‘But if you’ve come on a nature ramble, I’m afraid I can’t help you. I don’t know a bee-orchid from a cuckoo-pint.’

‘As members, respectively of the orders orchidaceae and araceae they could hardly be confused with one another. Moreover, orchids, even the wild variety, have something demoniac about them, I always think, whereas the cuckoo-pint sometimes known as Lords and Ladies, is the uncultivated form of the arum lily, which has another and a higher kind of supernatural significance,’ said Dame Beatrice.

‘Oh, for God’s sake, don’t mention funerals!’ said Diana, on a high note which she followed with apologetic laughter. ‘Sorry, but we’ve just had one in the family. Come in and have a drink or something.’

Laura, who had been prowling round the outside of the garden fence, came back to the open gate. Dame Beatrice turned to her. ‘How long can you give me?’ she asked.

Laura picked up her cue. ‘Well, we’re due for that other visit,’ she said, ‘so I suppose we had better be off.’

Dame Beatrice made her apologies to Diana, thanked her for the offer of hospitality, and asked whether she might call again when her husband was at home.

‘I am particularly interested in the wild form of *aconitum anglicum*,’ she said. ‘I believe it grows in shady places near streams around this part of the country, but I have never seen a specimen.’

‘You’d better write it down,’ said Diana, ‘so that I can brief him. Look, if you tell me where you are staying, I expect he’ll phone you and tell you what you want to know. He doesn’t encourage visitors to his office and, anyway, ten to one, he wouldn’t be there. He rambles all over the place identifying the plants he wants to put in his book.’

Dame Beatrice took out a small notebook and wrote the Latin name of the monkshood, the telephone number of The Smugglers’ Inn, tore out the page and handed it over. Then, as though it was an afterthought, she said, ‘I understand that the cultivated variety of the plant—its roots, at least—can be mistaken for horseradish.’

‘Well, they were,’ said Diana calmly. ‘Only nobody thinks it was a mistake. If you’ve come from Blue I expect she’s told you all about it.’

‘Yes, I suppose I have all the information she can give me. I am looking into the case as psychiatric adviser to the Home Office.’ She handed over her card.

‘Oh, yes?’ said Diana indifferently. ‘I’m afraid all this psychology stuff is beyond me. What’s your special interest in the thing?’

‘We are anxious to assist the defence in any way we can, on behalf of the girl who has been arrested. One of the points against her seems to be that, as a former kitchenmaid at Headlands, she knew exactly how the horseradish condiment was prepared there.’

‘Oh, we all knew that,’ said Diana, one of whose virtues seemed to be a blunt frankness. ‘We had roast beef at the second of the family dinner parties Mrs Leyden gave when we thought we’d been gathered together to hear what our expectations were—not that my husband and I expected anything. She expiated on the virtues of the stuff and told us exactly how Mrs Plack made it. I don’t think anybody tried it except the black boy, and that was only to please her. The beastly kid was ogling her and playing up to her all the time.’

‘So all of you heard Mrs Leyden’s eulogies?’

‘Oh, yes, but that doesn’t prove one of us is a murderer. Anyway, we all heard it. When you’re dining with a woman as rich as she was, you listen to what she has to say.’

‘Yes, I suppose so. Did you like her?’

‘Are you asking whether I hated her?’

‘No. I meant what I said. I am not asking you whether you killed her.’

‘I like you,’ said Diana unexpectedly. ‘It’s a relief to talk to somebody who’s prepared to call a spade by its right name. Well, look, I’ll tell you. I had reason to like her, in a way, I suppose. It began a couple of years back when our kid’s boarding-school had to put up the fees. My husband doesn’t do too badly with his books but, as I expect you know, school fees are a big drain on parents nowadays and we didn’t want to back down and take Quentin and Millament away, so I sank my pride, such as it is, and went to the grande dame to ask whether she would help out.’

‘Well, she did, and that’s one of the things about her that I’ve never understood. She was ever so much more generous, it always seemed to me, to us outsiders than she was to the actual family. She subbed up for me (although I’m sure she disapproved of me in most ways) and I always thought she was more

generous to Fiona than ever she was to Maria, her closest relative. Then there was that objectionable child Pabbay. Look what she did for her! Antonia Aysgarth indeed! Then I know for a fact that, when the big bills came in, Parsifal used to go cap in hand to her and, in the end, it looked to me as though she was taking up Gamaliel in quite a big way. None of us are members of the family really, you see, just connections, as it were. It's a kind of quirk she had, I suppose. Perhaps she thought she could buy from us what she couldn't get voluntarily from the actual blood-relations, real genuine gratitude.'

'No monkshood in the Campions garden,' said Laura when they were back in the car. 'I'm sure it was the Antrobus roots which were used. Shall you pursue this Rupert? Shall you ring him up?'

'Not at present. You say you satisfied yourself that there was no monkshood growing in that very untidy garden.'

'Well, I did a host of Midian act and had a pretty good prow! I'll swear there's no monkshood there. I'll tell you what, though. If somebody pinched the plants from the Antrobus garden and used the roots, the police ought to have found out what happened to the leaves, stems and flowers. I mean, these plants grow to a height of four feet and more. It's not like getting rid of a daisy, is it?'

'I take your point.'

'And you know the answer?'

'No. I merely assume that anybody who would procure poisonous plants from an innocent source and commit murder with them would take care to get rid of the evidence in a way which would not cast suspicion on him or her.'

'Isn't it time we got on to the police and found out what they're up to?'

'Our intrusion would hardly be welcomed. The police believe that they have apprehended the murderer. I think that for the present we must continue to play a lone hand.'

'Suits me. But if you're not going to contact this Bosse-Leyden—where does the Bosse come in?'

'It must have been his mother's name, don't you think? According to the gossip George has heard at the public house, Rupert Bosse-Leyden is the son of unmarried parents.'

'So he isn't a Leyden at all.'

'Yes, he is. It seems that, although his father and mother never married, they lived together until the woman died. The father insisted upon his son's being known by the family name of Leyden, so, in that sense, if in no other, Rupert is fully entitled to use it.'

'Anyway, why aren't you going to chase him up? I thought the idea was to get him to show us where the monkshood grows wild, if there is anywhere around these parts where it does.'

'That can be done later if it needs to be done at all. Meanwhile I think I will pay another visit to the late Mrs Leyden's own house, and seek an interview with Mrs Porthcawl and Miss Bute.'

'Another visit?'

'The inquest was held there and I attended as a member of the public.'

'Oh, so you've already seen Rupert?'

'Yes, but not his wife until today. She did not attend the inquest.'

'Oh, I see. Well, look, if you don't need me to escort you, how would it be if I took time out to do a little snooping around in search of this wild variety of monk-shood?'

'I was hoping that you would suggest it. It prefers moisture and shade, if that information will help

you.'

'When shall you go to see Mrs Porthcawl?'

'Tomorrow morning, and without giving her notice of my visit.'

'She might be out somewhere. Anyway, I'll get the hotel to put me up some sandwiches and I'll make a day of it, if you don't mind.'

'On second thoughts,' said Dame Beatrice, 'I shall go to Headlands immediately after lunch today. Your point that Mrs Porthcawl may be out if I call tomorrow morning is a valid one. If she is out this afternoon I may be able to obtain information as to her probable plans for tomorrow.'

Lunch over, she and Laura went their separate ways. Laura had her own car and, with the help of an Ordnance Survey map, proposed to cover a wide area. Dame Beatrice, conveyed by the stolid, reliable George, who was also her ears and eyes at the gossip-ridden public house, took the road to Carne and branched off it for the track which led to Headlands.

George pulled up near the stables and came round to open the car door. 'The guard dogs are loose, madam,' he said.

'So are the horses, I see,' said his employer, 'and there appears to be a young woman in their vicinity. Let us hope that she has a restraining influence over the animals, should they resent our appearance upon this striking and beautiful scene.'

Mattie came lumbering up to the car, slightly impeded by the dogs which lolloped along beside her. She greeted George matily.

'Well, cock,' she said. 'How's tricks?'

'Good afternoon, Miss Lunn,' said George formally. 'Dame Beatrice Lestrangle Bradley, to see Mrs Porthcawl.'

'Better come along of me, then, seeing the dogs be loose. Not as they'd hurt a fly once they're off the chain. It's being kept tied up makes 'em savage. In Mrs Leyden's time I was under orders and they was only let loose at night, and then, of course, they'd go for anybody, but Mrs Porthcawl have more liberal ideas, so I lets 'em loose most of the time. They likes a bit of rabbiting and it lets off their surplus to have a bit of a chase round. Dogs is all right if they'm treated right. None of God's creatures was intended to be kept on a chain.'

'Nor to be poisoned with aconite,' said Dame Beatrice.

Mattie, cuffing one of the dogs which was attempting to climb into the car, stared at her distrustfully. 'Come about that, have you?' she said. 'Best leave well alone, I reckon. Nobody don't want all that raked up again.'

'But it has never died down,' said Dame Beatrice, 'and it is not likely to do so until after the trial.' She stepped out of the car and gave the dogs her fingers to sniff. 'Will you remain here with your companions? I prefer to reach the house unannounced.'

Mattie stared again. One of the dogs licked Dame Beatrice's skinny yellow claw. She caressed the creature under its massive jowl. The other dog put a paw on her shoe and dripped saliva on to her skirt.

'Seemingly you have a way with animals,' said Mattie. 'Different if these were on the chain. Right. Come to heel, you!' she added, addressing the dogs and walking towards the stables. Dame Beatrice stepped out briskly for the house.

It was strangely and romantically situated, she thought. Not for the first time she wondered who had

built it and whether the first owner had been a Leyden or not a relative of the present owner at all. Surely at some time the demesne must have been fenced in, or did the property comprise all the land literally as far as the eye could imagine? Seen on a glorious summer afternoon, the views from its seaward side were among the finest she could remember. Seen on a glorious summer afternoon, the house bore no hint of secrecy or of the cruel death which had taken place in it.

Maria and Fiona were both at home and appeared to have been engaged in heated argument, for Maria's eyes were angry and Fiona's cheeks were flushed and there had been the sound of voices pitched high as Dame Beatrice, led by the parlourmaid, approached the drawing-room door. Coffee cups were on a small table. The parlourmaid announced Dame Beatrice and removed them. Maria, her eyes still smouldering with battle, came forward to greet the visitor. Fiona made for the door.

'Please don't go,' said Dame Beatrice, 'unless you are needed elsewhere. I should prefer you both to be present to hear what I have come to say. May I ask whether any other member of the family is in the house?'

'Dear me!' said Maria, attempting a smile. 'You sound magisterial, Dame Beatrice. Since you ask, yes, I believe my ward is somewhere about.' She rang the bell. 'Find Miss Aysgarth,' she said, when the parlourmaid appeared, 'and ask her to come here.'

'Miss Aysgarth?' queried Dame Beatrice, as though the name was new to her.

'Miss Pabbay as was,' said Fiona in a flippant tone. 'We have assumed the name we shall use when we make our debut.'

'Oh, I see. Has she visited the famous Aysgarth Falls?'

'Her mother fell, as they used to put it in Victorian times,' said Fiona, in the same brittle tone. 'That is all Antonia knows about falls, I daresay. Maria, won't you ask Dame Beatrice to sit down?'

'Oh, dear! I'm afraid my wits are wool-gathering today. There is so much to think about and Dame Beatrice's peremptory tone startled me. Have you come on a serious errand, Dame Beatrice?' said Maria.

Dame Beatrice seated herself in the proffered armchair. It was half-turned to the window and from it she had a view of Scar Head with its innocent, pastoral, downland crown and its dangerous rocks and currents below. She was speculating upon this resemblance to what had happened in the house, when the newly-named Antonia Aysgarth made a calculated entrance into the room and turned with a graceful, fluid movement, also the result of practise, to close the door behind her. She then stood with her back against it and gave the older women a rueful little smile.

'Am I to stand in the corner?' she asked. 'Yes, I am meeting Barnaby when I go to London tomorrow, Maria. I was going to tell you at lunch that I was going back, but with you and Fiona looking daggers at one another and an uneasy silence brooding over the meal, it seemed neither the time nor the place, alas!'

'Oh, sit down, Antonia, and stop play-acting,' said Maria shortly. 'Dame Beatrice is here on serious business.'

'There is only one serious business connected with this house—the abuela's death. Has she come about that?' She looked challengingly at the visitor.

'Not about the death; about the manner of it,' said Dame Beatrice. 'There is no need to ask whether monkshood grows on this estate.'

'No, but it gets washed up on the sands below this estate,' said Maria.

Fiona said sharply: 'There can be no connection. Besides, we don't even know that what you saw was monkshood. It had been in the sea. It could be anything. Even if it is monkshood, it could have come from anywhere. There is nothing to connect it with that house or your mother's death.'

'So that's what the silence and gloom at lunchtime were about!' said Antonia. She looked from one to the other of the protagonists and then fixed her somewhat protuberant eyes on Dame Beatrice. 'I wonder whether Maria's plants had roots attached to them?'

'No, they had not,' said Maria, 'and that is the whole point and that is why, whether Fiona liked it or not, I telephoned the police. The plants may be a clue. I don't know how the tides run in these parts, but the police ought to find out. Unfortunately, having made their arrest, they do not seem interested in any evidence which may turn up.'

'Did you leave the plants where you found them?' asked

Dame Beatrice.

'No, I did not. The next high tide might have carried them away.'

'Probably the best thing which could have happened,' said Fiona. 'You should leave well alone, not turn it to evil.'

'I happen to regard it as a crime to destroy evidence,' said Maria. 'If the police refuse to examine it, that is their business. One of Diana's puppies got drowned and was washed up here, I remember.'

Fiona made a gesture as though she could have struck her.

'Rupert didn't poison madre,' she said chokingly. Maria raised her eyebrows and turned away.

Chapter 14

Family Matters

'Do you attach any importance to this flotsam?' asked Laura.

'And jetsam, of course,' said Dame Beatrice. 'As it could have been thrown into the sea anywhere between Nare Head and Dodman Point, I think its value as evidence is negligible.'

'Yet Maria Porthcawl was angry with Fiona Bute for objecting to her telling the police about it. Why was that, do you suppose?'

'I think both believe that the murder was committed by one of the family and I would not be surprised if they think they know which one. In fact, I think they all, including Miss Aysgarth, have their suspicions, and these are not fastened upon the girl who is now in custody. Whether they have all hit upon the same person I cannot say. Their diverse characters and interests render it unlikely.'

'So that's not much help, although I think they ought to speak out and say what they suspect.'

'How did you enjoy your afternoon?' asked Dame Beatrice, ignoring this comment.

'Hugely, but I've nothing to show for it.'

'No wild monkshood?'

'Devil an inflorescence, so where do we go from here?'

'It came out, during the course of conversation, that not only is Miss Aysgarth meeting her young man

tomorrow, but she is meeting him in London and proposes to remain in the metropolis to continue her study of voice production. A word with Miss Bute, who walked with me over to the car, elicited the address of the hostel at which Miss Aysgarth is staying until a suitable flat can be found for her. I left a message with Miss Bute to the effect that George would be prepared to drive Miss Aysgarth to London if she would care to present herself at nine o'clock at the public house where he is staying. I did not add that I should be making one of the party. It is a very long way from here to London and, as I intend to make a straight run through, there should be plenty of time on the journey for me to find out from Miss Aysgarth all that I want to know.'

'And that, roughly speaking?'

'Is her own and the family history, so far as she knows both. What we lack in this case is background knowledge. I am hoping that Miss Aysgarth can supply it.'

'Can?—or will?'

Dame Beatrice, grinning like an alligator, replied that Time would show. She rose at eight on the following morning, breakfasted while Laura was swimming in the cove, and rang up the public house for George to bring round the car. Antonia was already waiting to be picked up when it got back to the public house and they set off for Exeter as the clock in the bar moved round to nine.

'Luxury!' said Antonia, settling herself against the upholstery. 'Even the Headlands car is not as good as this one, although I don't often use ours. I go on horseback when I pay visits. I was beginning to think I'd have to sit in front with your driver if I'd had to travel alone. It's beneath my dignity as an up and coming prima donna to sit with the hired help, as the Americans call it—a much pleasanter term than "servant", don't you think—but I can't bear not talking to somebody when I'm travelling. Have you really got to go to London, or do you want to pump me?'

'Your perspicacity is only exceeded by your musical talent.'

'What do you know about my musical talent?'

'You have just made allusion to it and in the highest terms.'

'Well, yes, I intend to get to the top. So you want some information, do you? Well, if it's about the abuela's death, I don't have any. I may have my ideas, but there's no proof.'

'Is it one of your ideas that the police have arrested the right person?'

'That fool? Don't make me laugh. Mags Denham couldn't have thought out how to kill the abuela if she'd worked at it for ten years. She followed me into that kitchenmaid's job, you know, and I had to show her the ropes (under Mrs Plack's eye, of course) before I was dusted off and admitted to the drawing-room, so I know what a moron Mags is. We never got on, not at school and not while I was overseeing her work. Then, of course, she blotted her copybook by giving me lip and had to go.'

'You informed upon her?'

'Well, I wasn't going to stand for cheek from the likes of her. Why should I?'

'Did you feel remorse when she lost her employment?'

'I was as sick as mud. I only wanted her to get a good telling-off. I never dreamed of her getting the sack. We working girls don't go doing that sort of thing to each other.'

Dame Beatrice regarded this as too general a statement to be wholly admissible, but she did not challenge it and for some time nothing more was said as the car went on to Exeter, where the party had lunch.

‘Does he sit down with us?’ whispered Antonia, as George, who had carried a small suitcase into the hotel, appeared in the bar wearing a neat suit and a quiet tie.

‘You will probably find his table-manners superior to our own,’ Dame Beatrice murmured in response, as George came towards them. In the car once more and moving nicely along the A30, Antonia, fortified by the lunchtime drinks from which George had abstained, became loquacious.

‘I suppose you might call mine a success story,’ she said complacently.

‘No doubt,’ Dame Beatrice agreed. ‘Did you find any of Mrs Leyden’s relatives critical when she took you out of the kitchen?’

‘Well, Fiona didn’t take to the idea. Never has. Always finding me little jobs to do to keep me in my place. You know the sort of thing. Trips up and downstairs for little, unnecessary things and errands that Mattie or Redruth Lunn could have done. Anything to remind me of my origins and, of course, I had to muck in. The abuela favoured me quite a bit, but she doted on Fiona and would never side with me against her, although she didn’t like the friendship between her and Maria. Thought they were putting their heads together and trying to steal her power.’

‘I suppose,’ said Dame Beatrice, breaking in, ‘it was her money which was the basis of her power.’

‘Nothing else but. She’d have been a nicer old lady without it, not so autocratic and demanding, if you know what I mean.’

‘I do indeed. I suppose, when the Will is proved, somebody else will be in a position to be authoritative and demanding.’

‘Well, not as much as you might think. We all know what’s in the Will, of course, and I expect they’re all looking forward to the day when the lawyer tells them everything’s O.K. and they can have their money.’

‘So the fortune has been shared out.’

‘Oh, yes, but not equally. On the face of it you would think that Maria is sitting the prettiest. She is to get the house and land and forty per cent of the cash. Against that, she’s buying me a flat so that I can get out of that stinking hostel (really, of course, to get me out of the house so that she and Fiona can have it to themselves now it’s not going to be possible for Fiona to marry Rupert) and there’s also my keep money and my tuition fees.’

‘Oh? And was no provision made for Miss Bute, if Mrs Leyden was so fond of her?’

‘Fiona played her cards wrong and walked out on Mrs Leyden on account they had a tiff. All the same, the abuela relented. Fiona is to get twenty thousand, but she’ll give some of it to Rupert, I expect, to pay him back for keeping her when she walked herself out of the house and went to stay at Seawards.’

‘Why was there any idea that they would marry, then, she and Mr Bosse-Leyden?’

‘Oh, of course, you’re a stranger in these parts, aren’t you? Well, it’s an open secret so no harm in telling you. Diana and Rupert don’t get on. Rupert’s sweet on Fiona and Diana is sweet on Garnet Porthcawl, over at Seawards, but there can’t be a divorce now because, if there is, Quentin and Millament, (Rupert’s kids), lose what’s left to them when they grow up.’

‘So the parents—’

‘Are prepared to make a go of it.’

‘Admirable.’

‘I think it’s bloody silly. I wouldn’t sacrifice my happiness for a couple of brats. Let them stand on their

own feet when they grow up. I've got to stand on mine and I've had far fewer advantages. They're getting a good education and, although I don't suppose Rupert is more than just comfortably off, he makes a reasonable living. Those educational books he writes sell in their thousands, I'll bet, and I believe Diana makes a bit of pin-money with her dogs. I think they're fools not to grab a bit of what they want while they can get it.'

'That is a point of view, certainly. I wonder what Mr Porthcawl thinks about it.'

'Well, actually, although he wants Diana, I don't suppose he wants the kids landed on him as well, and I gathered, before all this business about the terms of the Will came up, that Diana would have had to take them because Fiona certainly would not let herself be saddled with them.'

'I see. Were the terms of the Will known to the family before Mrs Leyden died?'

'No. I once managed to see a draft which I thought was the real thing, but it turned out not to be.'

'Did it differ very much from the present Will?'

'Oh, well, yes. For one thing, it cut me in for five thousand pounds of my own instead of making me dependent on Maria.'

'Are you disappointed?'

'Yes and no. It would have been nice to have the money, but I might have squandered it. Now at least I know I will be able to finish my training, and that's what I really want.'

'Did the others know what was in the draft you saw?'

'I dropped a hint or two, but, of course, there was also the second dinner party, when she dropped her own hints, and pretty broad ones. We thought she was going to tell us something at the first one, and I believe she did intend to do that.'

'What prevented it?'

'Her sudden fancy for the boy whom Blue and Parsifal adopted. It was the first time she had met him and he made a big hit with her. I think that's when she decided to wait a bit before disclosing what was in her Will. It turns out that she's left him twenty thousand, to be given him when he comes of age. Bluebell is going to do pretty well too—twenty per cent, the same as her brother. It seems that nothing is to go direct to Parsifal—not that he'll mind—but Garnet is really sitting prettiest of the lot, because there are no strings, such as me and the upkeep of that barracks of a house, tied to his share, which will come to eighty thousand pounds, no less.'

'But nobody knew beforehand what the provisions of the Will were, in spite of Mrs Leyden's broad hints?'

'I'm sure nobody really knew. Fiona must have done a bit of speculating, because she had left some crossed-out scribblings, but all of them with big query marks. I'm pretty sure she'd forgotten about them when she took herself off to stay at Seawards, and I fancy that Maria, as well as me, had seen them because when next I went into the little room Fiona used as a study, the scribble was gone.'

'I see. Do you think Mr Bosse-Leyden had any expectation that he would benefit personally from the Will?'

'I doubt it. She hated the sight of him because he was a fly-by-night. She thought poor Rupert blotted the family copybook.'

'That was his father, surely?'

'Yes, but Rupert was the living proof of his father's goings-on, I suppose. No, poor old Rupert

wouldn't have had any hopes. I expect he's surprised that his kids are on the list of winners.'

'I see.'

'On Fiona's scribbled list Rupert was to get a considerable packet, but I expect that was a bit of wishful thinking on her part, because she was quite expecting that he would divorce Diana and marry her, so I suppose she hoped there would be a nice lump in the kitty that he would share with her when the divorce was fixed and they could marry.'

'So Miss Bute's calculations and the draft you saw of the Will which must have been altered before Mrs Leyden died, did not tally?'

'Not so's you'd notice. I'll tell you one thing, though. In a way, the abuela's death was her own fault. If only she'd done what we all expected her to do—come clean about the Will and let us know what to expect—there wouldn't have been any murder.'

'Why do you say that?'

'Simply because it would have been too obvious who'd done it. It would have been the principal beneficiary, of course.'

'I think that is a most doubtful inference for us to make.'

'Oh, I don't know. Most murders are committed for money, aren't they? Isn't it the root of all evil?—or do you think horseradish is that?'

'Love of money is the root of all evil, Miss Aysgarth.'

'Would you have any objection,' asked Dame Beatrice, calling at Headlands three days later, 'to my having another short talk with your cook?'

'In your official capacity, do you mean?' asked Maria. 'I know what that is, of course, from your card.'

'In fairness to the accused girl, the Home Office may call for a psychiatric opinion.'

'Oh, Margaret Denham isn't out of her mind.'

'All murderers are out of their minds, although not necessarily in the legal sense, and it is in the legal sense that I am interested.'

'Oh, of course. If your findings are positive, I suppose a second opinion would be called for?'

'By "positive" I take it that you mean if I find that the girl is unfit to plead. I visited her in prison yesterday and I feel that you are right and that a defence of insanity is unlikely to be put forward.'

'Oh, well, one wants to be fair to the girl, of course. Will you see Mrs Plack in here?'

'She will feel more relaxed in her own surroundings, I think.'

'Very well.' Maria rang the bell. 'Ask Mrs Plack to postpone what she is doing, and then come back and escort Dame Beatrice to the kitchen.'

'Very good, madam.' The parlourmaid returned very shortly and Dame Beatrice was soon confronting Mrs Plack, who appeared to be flustered.

'Honoured, I'm sure, my lady,' she said. 'Would your ladyship take a seat? Sonia, you go over and take them bits out to the dogs and don't come back till you see me come to the side door. Now, my lady, what can I do for you?'

'Perhaps you will sit down, too, Mrs. Plack. I promise not to keep you long. I have come to ask you one or two more questions about this unfortunate girl Margaret Denham.'

‘As good a kitchenmaid as ever I had. Miles above that stuck-up Miss as the old mistress took up and spoilt and, of course, though Sonia’s a good girl, she hasn’t had the experience yet, though I must say she’s a willing learner and quite quick at picking up my ways.’

‘You were quite satisfied with Margaret’s work, then?’

‘Well, there’s always room for improvement in all of us, my lady, and where Margaret made her mistake was in bandying words.’

‘Perhaps she had provocation.’

‘My lady, she wasn’t the only one. You should have seen the airs and graces that jumped-up young madam tried to put on with me! But, of course, I kept my dignity, knowing my place and her being took up with by the missus. Margaret, as had been to school with her and not being an orphan as had to accept charity, she flared up and spoke out of turn.’

‘Was she a quick-tempered girl as a general rule?’

‘Not by no means. Sweet-natured and biddable I would have called her. And as to thinking she poisoned the missus, well, that you’ll never get me to believe.’

‘I have visited Margaret in prison and I was favourably impressed by her. Was this diatribe against Miss Aysgarth her only outburst of the kind?’

‘So far as I’m aware, and I’m aware of most things as goes on in my kitchen.’

‘I am sure you are, and rightly so.’

‘And if anybody says as Margaret changed over my jar for one that was full of nasty poison, well, that her didn’t, and I’ll take my oath on it.’

‘Did you make only enough to fill one jar?’

‘That’s right, a biggish jar as you could get a good-sized spoon into. Missus liked it made fresh each week, but that depended on whether I could get the horseradish. Sometimes you can’t, though I had a regular order, like I told you before. If it didn’t turn up any Friday, well, I always sent Lunn off to pick up a jar from the shop, and I used to spoon out a dollop from it and then mix in some cream. I had to buy from the shop sometimes, like I say, but when I’d jiggered it up a bit the old missus never seemed to spot the difference. That’s the beauty of something as comes a bit sharp on the tongue.’

‘So anybody could have got hold of the kind of jar you used. Did you always make your horseradish sauce on Fridays?’

‘That’s right. You has to have routine in a kitchen, else you’d be up the pole in no time.’

‘I can well believe it. Would this particular routine of the Sunday joint of beef have been generally known?’

‘That the mistress always had it? Oh, yes, anybody could have known. They all use the same butcher round here—Drago of Porthcullis it is. I don’t say everybody did know as we had beef most Sundays, but they could have knowed. That’s my meaning.’

‘And the horseradish roots?’

‘Come from Chown in the village when he got any. Anybody could have knowed that, too.’

‘And your recipe, was that a well-kept secret?’

‘Not so far as the ingreeds went, but what I always say, your ladyship, is as the secret lays in the hand which does the mixing. Same with cakes and Christmas puddens. It’s the mixing which does it.’

‘I expect you are right. I always think the making of a pot of tea is open to similar comment. Two persons using identical blends, an equal quantity of boiling water, a warmed teapot and allowing exactly the same length of time for infusion, will produce results widely dissimilar, often to the extent that one is drinkable, the other not.’

‘Well, that would be the way of it with my horseradish sauce, your ladyship.’

‘I have enjoyed our little chat, Mrs Plack,’ said Dame Beatrice, observing that the cook was about to become loquacious, ‘and I am grateful for your co-operation.’ She wondered whether to suggest that ‘Dame Beatrice’ was, in the present instance, a preferable nominative of address to ‘Your ladyship’, but felt that this correction would damage Mrs Plack’s amour propre without serving any useful purpose, so she took graceful leave of the cook, went back to the mistress of the house to thank her and then returned to her car and so to The Smugglers’ Inn.

‘Any luck?’ enquired Laura.

‘I forgot to tell you that while I was in London I checked Miss Aysgarth’s alibi. The cook at Headlands, although she is not aware of the fact, confirmed it.’

‘How come?’

‘Only one pot of horseradish sauce was made at a time, so a person who has an alibi for the Friday to the Sunday morning of the murder cannot be a suspect, since the switching of the jars would have had to be done between those times and, in Miss Aysgarth’s case, those times are accounted for by a number of unbiased London witnesses.’

‘Oh, well, I suppose it’s a help to get even one person removed from the list. It still leaves far too many on it, though, wouldn’t you say? I mean, if you take this music student out, you’re still left with Mrs Porthcawl, Miss Bute, the Lunn and the cook and the present kitchenmaid, apart from the families at Seawards and Champions. We’ve got to find a way of narrowing it down, it seems to me. You know, heretical though this may sound, I reckon the police may have got the right pig by the ear, after all.’

‘Stranger things have happened than that the police should have acted with acumen,’ said Dame Beatrice, ‘but we have to remember the cross-currents in this affair. Neither Champions nor Seawards seem to have visited Headlands without a definite invitation, but our researches have established that there was a liaison between Miss Bute and Mr Bosse-Leyden, and another between Mr Garnet Porthcawl and Mrs Bosse-Leyden. As for Miss Aysgarth, I have no doubt that she was in the habit of visiting both houses. She had a horse at her disposal whenever she was at home. Gossip and an exchange of news and views are inevitable under such circumstances and little would go on at any of the three houses of which the inhabitants of the other two had no knowledge.’

‘Including that Margaret Denham had been sacked for insolence?’

‘Including that, yes.’

Chapter 15

A List of Suspects

‘Yes,’ Dame Beatrice went on, ‘neither Miss Aysgarth nor Miss Bute needed to ask for the use of Mrs Leyden’s car and chauffeur when either of them wanted to visit the other members of Mrs Leyden’s family. I think it is possible, as there is a third horse, that Mattie Lunn may have accompanied Miss

Aysgarth occasionally, but I do not imagine that Miss Bute ever welcomed an escort of that kind.'

'Class distinctions rearing their ugly head?'

'Not altogether.'

'Oh, of course Fiona Bute would have ridden over to see Rupert Bosse-Leyden when his wife wasn't likely to be at home.'

'Far more likely that she rode over to his office, I think, or met him by previous arrangement on his walks.'

'What happened in bad weather, then? She'd have needed the car when it was wet.'

'Or else she did not go.'

'Don't you think she ever went to visit the Porthcawl man and the Leeks, then?'

'Oh, I am sure she would do that, too. The fact that Bluebell Leek was willing to take her in when she quarrelled with Mrs Leyden is proof that she was well in touch with the people at Seawards, I think.'

'If I'm not out of line in putting the question, if the girl Denham isn't guilty, which of them did it, I wonder?'

'Poisoned Mrs Leyden? I have a list of possible candidates, and if it were not for Antonia Aysgarth's unbreakable alibi—and it is unbreakable, for I made certain of that when I accompanied her to London—and for the fact that she had nothing to gain by Mrs Leyden's death—'

'Except a possible legacy and her independence.'

'The legacy, as you point out, was problematical and she has gained her independence without it, since she has so contrived matters that she is to have a flat which certainly she could not have afforded on the money she thought might be her portion.'

'All the same, she would have been your pick except for her alibi.'

'Psychologically I think she would qualify. She is ambitious and, I would say, ruthless in gaining her ends. On the other hand, I sum her up as being intelligent enough to realise that, with her knowledge of Mrs Plack's routine, she would be bound to come under suspicion, and I do not see her as a person who would take unnecessary risks.'

'So who are your suspects?'

'Those who had the most to gain and, of course, I do not lose sight of a fact we have mentioned before.'

'That Margaret Denham may be guilty after all?'

'Exactly. We cannot leave her out of our reckoning.'

'What about Parsifal Leek and young Gamaliel? Both may have hoped for a cut. It seems to me that you can't eliminate anybody except the Bosse-Leydens. It seems, from what we've found out, that Rupert wouldn't have had any expectations. That goes for Diana, too, and their kids are much too young to have carried out this kind of murder, apart from being away at school at the time. Then there's Fiona Bute. Surely she must have had expectations under the old lady's Will.'

'Expectations which have been realised, although perhaps not to the extent for which she may have hoped. Five per cent of Mrs Leyden's fortune is not so very generous a share. However, I do not propose to eliminate the Bosse-Leydens. There is one thing of which I can make certain, although I am sure I know the answer. George will be here with the car shortly to get his orders for the day. He shall

be our witness.'

'To what?'

'To where Gamaliel, Mrs Leek and Mr Porthcawl spent the fateful Friday and Saturday.'

'Of course! You sent them to London and they spent a night in Exeter on the way back. George took them in the car.'

Confirmation of this was readily obtained as soon as George appeared. 'Oh, yes, madam,' he said at once. 'Following your instructions I drove the party under advisement to London on the Thursday and we put up at the Kensington hotel you had booked for us and, of course, the car keys were never out of my possession. On the Friday I took the party shopping on behalf of the young West Indian gentleman and we spent the night at the same hotel. On the Saturday, again according to your instructions, I took the party to Exeter and on the Sunday, which was the day when Mrs Leyden had her fatal seizure, we left Exeter at ten in the morning and I set the party down at their home in time for lunch.'

'So Gamaliel, Mrs Leek and Mr Porthcawl are definitely out of it,' said Laura.

'And so is Miss Aysgarth, as we have said. She also was in London. It is useful to be able to remove four people from our list of possible suspects. Let us give our attention to those who remain.'

'I still don't see why we can't eliminate the two Bosse-Leydens as they had no expectations under Mrs Leyden's Will.'

'Their children are to benefit, although, from what Mrs Leek has told me, I gather that this came as a surprise to the parents.'

'Well, then?'

'The motive assigned by the police to the girl Denham could apply equally well to Mr and Mrs Bosse-Leyden.'

'Revenge?'

'Exactly. It cannot have been pleasant for either of them to know that Mrs Leyden despised Mr Bosse-Leyden for his illegitimate birth, a thing which he was utterly unable to help.'

'You do seem to be in Mrs Leek's confidence! I suppose it is from her that you get all your information.'

'Some of it, although she is discreet. I get more, in fact, from George, whom I have asked for reports of gossip at his public house.'

'Oh, yes, of course.'

'Besides, I can assign another motive to the Bosse-Leydens. It seems to be common knowledge that Rupert Bosse-Leyden has been deeply attracted to Miss Fiona Bute for some years and also that if a divorce between the Bosse-Leyden couple had ever been arranged, Diana Bosse-Leyden and Garnet Porthcawl would have married.'

'But while the strait-laced old lady was alive, I suppose a divorce was out of the question unless Garnet was prepared to be cut out of the Will.'

'I gather from Mrs Leek that it is still out of the question unless the couple wish to deprive their children of that portion which is to come to them when they are of age.'

'So their only plan is to patch up their differences and make the best of matters.'

'Which is what they seem to have done.'

‘So the old lady has had the last word after all. What about Fiona Bute?’

‘Well, she had quarrelled with Mrs Leyden and she went to live for a time with the Leeks and Mr Porthcawl, so she must be on our list. Mrs Porthcawl also quarrelled with her mother, but she remained at Headlands where she and Miss Bute have now joined forces to the extent that Miss Aysgarth has been finally banished.’

‘You don’t suspect Mrs Porthcawl, though, do you? The quarrel doesn’t seem to have been serious enough for that, if Mrs Porthcawl could still stay on in the house. Besides, matricide has always seemed to me the most horrible of crimes.’

‘Nevertheless, it has been known, and we must not lose sight of the fact that, of all the suspects, Mrs Porthcawl had perhaps the best opportunity of anybody for the commission of this particular crime. She was on her own ground, she had unquestionably the right to visit the kitchen and she had a great deal to gain, in the material sense, by her mother’s death.’

‘But could she have been sure of that?’

‘You have touched upon the weak spot in my argument.

I do not know what she knew. At any rate, we may take it, I think, that she expected to be left the house and the estate. How much of the actual money she hoped to get is problematic. I shall go and ask her to grant me another interview. I am still bearing in mind that the police may have made no mistake in fixing upon Margaret Denham as the guilty party, but nobody wants her condemned if she is innocent.’

‘Except the murderer, perhaps.’

‘As ever, there is reason in what you point out.’

‘You might tell me—strictly off the record, of course—who did it. You’ve fixed on someone, haven’t you? I can’t decide upon any particular party, but I’ve a hunch that you’ve got one of these people very much in your mind.’

‘Well, one of them seems to have been more favourably situated than the others for the commission of this particular crime and, psychologically, is the likeliest, except for Miss Aysgarth, to have committed it. It would be most improper of me to name names, however, when, so far, I have nothing in the way of proof.’

‘Do you want me to come with you when you go to see Mrs Porthcawl? Do you want notes to be taken?’

‘I think not. What you can do, if you will, is to talk to Mattie Lunn. She has three horses in her care, and you like horses.’

‘You think she might let me ride one of them if I did a bit of palmistry?’

‘I think it not unlikely. At any rate, the negotiations might provide a talking-point.’

‘What is it that you particularly want to know?’

‘Whether she saw anybody arrive at Headlands on the Friday or Saturday morning, anybody whom she was somewhat surprised to see.’

‘You are leaving the Sunday out of it?’

‘Yes. Mrs Leyden died at the luncheon table on Sunday. Both Mrs Plack and her kitchenmaid would have been in the kitchen until well after Sunday lunch was served. Nobody from outside would have dared to attempt to change over the jars of horseradish sauce in the presence of both of them.’

‘Oh, no, of course not. Right. I’ll get over there right away, shall I?’

‘George can take us both and drop you at the stables.’

‘Of course there are the Lunns to be considered, aren’t there? Both had easy access to the kitchen and knew how to choose their time to sneak into it, if necessary, without being spotted.’

‘Yes, and Mattie, we have to remember, was smarting under a sense of grievance owing to her somewhat summary dismissal from her employment as groom.’

‘Wonder whether I can get her to talk about that? In some ways, you know, she could be suspect Number One, don’t you think?’

‘As a possible candidate for that undesirable position, certainly she qualifies.’

Redruth and Mattie Lunn were cleaning the Headlands car. Dame Beatrice left Laura with them while she herself walked up to the house. Maria and Fiona were sitting in a room whose bay window looked out over the sea. They were sorting out skeins of embroidery silk. Maria looked sullen, Fiona bored. Both brightened up when Dame Beatrice was announced. They pushed their work aside and Maria came forward to greet her. Maria was in black and her grey hair was severely strained back from her face; Fiona wore black trousers, a white silk shirt and a flowing black tie and looked extremely attractive.

Maria seated the visitor and rang for refreshment. She then sat down and said: ‘Life at the moment is inexpressibly tiresome. Until this hateful trial is over and a verdict given, we’re stuck here literally like birds in the wilderness.’

‘But surely,’ said Dame Beatrice, glancing out of the window at grass and rocks and headlands, at sunlight, sea and sky, ‘the wilderness is paradise now?’

‘We want to go away,’ said Fiona, ‘to somewhere where the grass, metaphorically, is greener, although, in prosaic and actual terms, it may be scorched and brown. We are for sunny Spain and on to Sicily and Greece as soon as it’s possible to leave.’

‘Surely the police would not prevent your going?’

‘Oh, no. It’s just that, well—’ she glanced at Maria, who nodded and looked sombre again—‘well, naturally we’ve talked and talked about madre’s death, and we simply can’t believe that that poor wretched girl is guilty.’

‘You see,’ said Maria, ‘we argue that, if Margaret wanted to be revenged on anybody, it would have been on young Pabbay—I mean young Aysgarth. She was the one who complained and got the girl dismissed.’

‘Besides,’ said Fiona, ‘it all seems so elaborate and, well, really, rather deviously clever. The method chosen, I mean. Perhaps you don’t know this, Dame Beatrice, but madre used to take chances on cliff-paths and the sort of scrambling about that wasn’t at all the kind of thing one would advise a woman of seventy-five to do. What is more, she claimed that, not so long ago, somebody gave her a push over the edge of the cliff.’

‘I don’t believe it,’ said Maria. ‘Anybody who really meant business would have pushed a lot harder. I don’t think she really believed it herself, because she didn’t give up the walks. Still, even if she only stumbled and lost her footing, it proved that the walks weren’t suitable for her.’

‘The point is,’ said Fiona, ‘that, to our way of thinking, the vile plan which was used to kill madre was too subtle and elaborate for the girl to have thought up. It was also a plan no kitchenmaid would have dared to carry out.’

‘Because of your cook?’

‘Exactly. Mrs Plack can be quite kindhearted, but she can also be a dragon to her kitchenmaids, and if she thought one of them had monkeyed about with her sacred horseradish sauce the girl’s life wouldn’t have been worth living.’

‘Of course, the girl was not actually under Mrs Plack’s domination at the time, but it is a point which ought to be considered,’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘By the way, I notice that you, Miss Bute, always refer to Mrs Leyden as madre. She wasn’t a Spaniard, was she?’

‘Oh, no. You see, I was very fond of her because she had always been so good to me, but I didn’t feel I could call her mother, as Maria, of course, was entitled to do, so I chose the Spanish equivalent. She was so pleased with it that when Antonia was given what one might call family status, Mrs Leyden liked to be called the abuela, the grandmother. Her Christian name actually was Romula. Her father had wanted a boy to be called Romulus, after the founder of Rome, so when a daughter turned up he altered the name as little as he could.’

‘That is most interesting,’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘So many of your family’s names are both interesting and picturesque.’ She tried them over, as though to herself. ‘Romula, Maria, Fiona, Diana, Rupert, Bluebell, Parsifal, Antonia, Gamaliel and, last but also charming, Quentin and Millament.’

‘You have them all off pat,’ said Fiona, laughing.

‘Yes, indeed. I have heard them at various times from Mrs Leek.’

‘There is one you left out,’ said Maria.

‘Ah, yes, your son Garnet.’

‘Do you not like the name? Neither do I. It was his father’s choice, not mine, but Garnet and Bluebell are twins, as are Quentin and Millament, and it was agreed that my husband, who had adopted the name of Vannion in place of his own, which was Enoch, should name the boy and I the girl. He chose Garnet Wolseley for my son; I decided upon Bluebell Wendy for my daughter. My husband was on the stage, by the way, this to my mother’s disapproval.’

‘I think I agree that Vannion Porthcawl has a better ring to it than Enoch Porthcawl. Miss Aysgarth, I believe, had a similar notion to adopt a name she deemed more suitable for her public appearances.’

‘Well, it is not surprising,’ said Maria bitterly. ‘Like father like daughter, I suppose, although I do not believe they ever met.’

‘You say you find it hard to believe that Margaret Denham is a criminal,’ said Dame Beatrice after what she felt was a suitable pause, ‘but, if not Margaret, what are the alternatives?’

‘Well, we’re loth to suspect the Lunns,’ said Maria, ‘although Mattie had a grievance. Mrs Plack, of course, is out of the question. She would never—how shall I put it?’

‘Prostitute one of her own condiments by poisoning it,’ said Fiona. ‘She would regard that as a most immoral and sacrilegious act.’

‘The other possibility which I think ought to be considered,’ said Maria, who did not think the situation called for humour, ‘is a genuine mistake on the part of the greengrocer or a wicked practical joke on the part of his assistant.’

‘Neither seems very likely,’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘Did you, by any chance, have callers, especially unexpected callers, on the Friday or Saturday?’

‘You think a complete outsider could have done that terrible thing?’ asked Maria. ‘I don’t see how that

would be possible. It certainly would be most unlikely. I know of nobody who would have disliked or feared my mother to that extent. She had very little contact with the outside world. She went for her lonely walks and she went out for drives in the car, but that was all. As a matter of fact, she and I were out all the Friday afternoon, so, if anybody came to the house then, we would not have been aware of it and the maids said nothing about callers when we got home at teatime.'

'I was out, too,' said Fiona, 'so the same thing applies to me.'

Dame Beatrice concluded that Fiona had gone out to meet Rupert so she did not trouble to ask any questions. She rose to take her leave, having learnt one tiny fact which had turned her suspicions into near certainty.

Mattie and her brother were still at their task, but there was no sign of Laura.

'No need for you to hang about,' said Mattie. 'Her went off on Emperor like a queen. I'll have her ride him to the Smugglers' and I'll ride with her and bring both horses back. Arranged it all with her, I have, so nothing for you to worry about.'

'I am infinitely obliged to you,' said Dame Beatrice. She was about to get into her car when she heard hoof-beats, strong and rhythmic, and Laura came trotting up, dismounted, exchanged a few words with Mattie and then came over to the car.

'Great ride!' she said. 'How did you get on? Did you manage to knock anybody else off your list of suspects?'

'So far, no. Mrs Porthcawl and Miss Bute claim to have been out on what may have been the important Friday afternoon. I did not enquire where they went, either on the Friday or the Saturday. They volunteered the information about Friday and I have no doubt that the police will have checked their story of how they spent both afternoons.'

'The trouble about them—Mrs Porthcawl anyway—is that the change-over of the jars of horseradish could have been done at night when everybody else was asleep. Seems to me she had the best opportunity of anybody to make the switch.'

'That isn't really important.'

'What did you talk about?'

'Their family names. I mean their first names. I forgot to include, in my recital of these, the bachelor brother Garnet.'

'Forgot, or didn't intend to mention it?'

'You are much too intelligent.'

'So what was your object?'

'To find out whether one of them would supply the missing item.'

'And did it work?'

'Yes. It showed me that whatever suspicions they entertain, these do not include Mr Garnet Porthcawl.'

'But they couldn't. He was either in London or Exeter at the time.'

'There are such things as private hire cars, and Garnet, I daresay, earns enough to pay for one.'

Chapter 16

What's in a Name?

When Dame Beatrice gave voice to what appeared to be a controversial remark, Laura knew that somewhere behind it there was something to be puzzled over and sorted out. It was of no use to ask for an explanation, so she put her mind to work but could not believe that Dame Beatrice thought Garnet guilty.

She was so silent at breakfast on the following morning that Dame Beatrice asked her how she had slept. Laura replied that she supposed she had enjoyed her usual four hours, which, indeed, was her average period of sleep and all that she appeared to need, and then said plaintively: 'Won't you at least give me a clue?'

'To what, dear child?'

'To the identity of our murderer, of course.'

'But I am not able to prove anything. I know who the murderer must be, but that, as you know, is not enough. Of course I can tell you what is in my mind, but I don't know whether it will convey anything to yours. I learnt, when I visited Mrs Porthcawl and Miss Bute yesterday, that Mrs Leyden's first name was Romula.'

'How does that help?'

'I think it may account for the method which was used to murder her. It appears that her father would have preferred a son and would have named him Romulus. Earlier I had learned from Mrs Bosse-Leyden that Mrs Leyden was less generous in helping her blood-relations than in giving financial aid and sometimes her affection to what one may call the co-opted members of her family.'

'So that looks as though one of the real family was the murderer.'

'Except that sometimes people are less grateful for benefits received than the donors think they should be.'

'In other words, it is more satisfying to give than to receive, leaving blessedness out of it for the moment.'

'But wouldn't a divorce have cut him straight out of the whatever?'

'I have thought all along that the method used to kill Mrs Leyden was unnecessarily elaborate. Why, I asked myself, go to all the trouble and take all the risk of preparing a poisoned condiment, digging up, for the purpose, roots from somebody else's garden, invading Mrs Plack's kitchen in order to substitute a jar of poison for a similar but innocuous jar—all this when a simple, determined push in the back when she was on one of her cliff walks would have settled the outcome in a matter of seconds?'

'But somebody did try that, I thought, and it didn't work.'

'It didn't work because it was not, in my opinion, a murderous attempt, but I shall know more about that when I have questioned the person concerned.'

'And the person concerned was not the person who provided the jar of poison?'

'I think not, for the simple reason that a similar slight but not really dangerous push seems to have been given to Mrs Bosse-Leyden when she was out with her dogs.'

'The same person could have it in for both of them.'

‘True. You refer, no doubt, to—’

‘Rupert Bosse-Leyden. According to the gossip we’ve heard, and what with one thing and another, he would have been glad to get rid of Diana and marry Fiona Bute, and he can’t have loved the old lady very much if she threw his illegitimate birth in his face.’

‘He had only to divorce Diana. There was no need to kill her.’

‘But wouldn’t a divorce have cut him straight out of the old lady’s Will?’

‘He had no expectations there, and (mark this, for it is very important) neither had his wife.’

‘But his children were included.’

‘It seems that nobody in the family had ever thought they would be. That may have been the one big surprise contained in the Will.’

‘What about the inclusion of young Gamaliel?’

‘That seems to have surprised nobody. It appears that the old lady had taken a great fancy to the lad. Besides, he is on my list of those who had been co-opted into the family. Included are Fiona Bute, Antonia Aysgarth, Parsifal Leek and Diana Bosse-Leyden. Each of them, in one way or another, seems to have received generous treatment, apart from what was left to any of them in the Will.’

‘Yes, they didn’t come off too well in that, did they? Do you mean that one of them murdered her out of pique?’

‘Not altogether, and certainly not because he or she was not mentioned in the Will. We have it from reliable sources that nobody really knew what the terms of the Will would be, although there seems to have been a considerable amount of guesswork. All the same, pique (or, as I would put it, bitter resentment) did come into the matter.’

‘How are you going to get the proof you need?’

‘Ultimately by the murderer’s own confession, but to extort that confession there are one or two facts we need to know, and here your acquaintanceship with Mattie Lunn may be of help. I would like you to get her to confirm that her brother took Mrs Leyden and Mrs Porthcawl out in the car on the Friday, ask her what he did on the Saturday and whether, on either afternoon, she saw any visitors come to the house, and particularly anybody who slipped in by the side door.’

‘Can do. Maybe she’ll hire me out another horse. That was a fine animal I rode yesterday and down here you don’t need to dress the part, so jeans and a sweater will fill the bill.’

‘One more thing: I want you to find out from Mattie Lunn the name of the person who supplies dairy produce, including the fresh cream for the horseradish sauce, to Headlands and whether he also supplies Campions and Seawards.’

‘Ah!’ said Laura, looking thoughtful. ‘Clotted cream not suitable for Mrs Plack’s recipe, eh? So the murderer had to get—’

‘Exactly.’

‘I had never thought about the murder from that angle. Of course there had to be fresh, unwhipped cream for the killer to use and, unless Mrs Plack or the kitchenmaid Sonia or Mrs Porthcawl or Miss Bute is the guilty party, the fresh cream which was used for the poisoned horseradish sauce was never delivered at Headlands.’

‘I have written off the four people you mention, so give some attention to the delivery of fresh cream to the other two houses.’

‘I suppose,’ said Rupert to his wife, ‘you know it was I who pushed you over the cliff?’

‘I could hardly help knowing. Nobody else had any reason to do a thing like that. I don’t hold it against you. It was not a very vicious attack and it was done only because I happened to be there on the spot while you were doing the field-work for your book. I think it was done on impulse, wasn’t it? Besides, I had just given your grandmother a similar push. I did not intend to kill her, any more than I believe you intended to kill me.’

‘I don’t think I did intend it. I had a sudden fit of exasperation, I suppose. Did you really give Grandma Romula a shove?’

‘She has always exasperated me, the same way you and I always seem to exasperate one another. Why should you be blamed for your illegitimate birth? It has happened to the best of people, and you told me about it before we married.’

‘All the same, Diana, I did not kill her, and I didn’t intend to kill you.’

‘We both know who did kill her, don’t we?’

‘That’s only speculation, isn’t it?’

‘What can we do but speculate? I wish they had not arrested that wretched girl. She didn’t do it.’

‘It is not up to us to say anything of our suspicions. We haven’t a shred of proof.’

‘I know, but that terrifying old lady who is staying at The Smugglers’ Inn knows something, I think. I shall speak to her.’

‘Look, the family is the family, isn’t it? Do you want a convicted murderer as a member of it? Think of our children!’

‘I have thought of them. They are the only reason that we are remaining together.’

‘So we say nothing of our suspicions—for they are nothing more than that. Agreed?’

‘I suppose so.’

‘Well, ask yourself what proof anybody can have. Unless the guilty party chooses to confess, nobody is ever going to know the truth.’

‘Don’t be too sure of that. The truth has a diabolical way of coming to the surface. Drowned bodies do, sooner or later, and the truth has the same disconcerting habit.’

‘Well, let us help it by confessing our misdeeds, if you think fit. If we confess to pushing people over cliffs it may save us from the major charge of murder by poison.’

‘I don’t see why. How do you make that out?’

‘Well, people who would do the one would not be likely to do the other. Dame Beatrice is a psychiatrist. She will understand that.’

‘Confession is supposed to be good for the soul, so let us clear our consciences, then, if you think fit.’

When Laura reached the Lunn’s cottage, Mattie was hanging out the washing on a line rigged up behind the stables so that it could not be seen from the windows of the big house. She greeted Laura warmly and in her own fashion.

‘My, my! Look who’s here!’ she said. ‘Come for a gallop, have we? You can have what you fancy this morning, so long as it’s Emperor.’

‘You can have any colour you like, so long as it’s black,’ countered Laura in happy quotation. ‘Later

on, Mattie, if I may, but first to business of another kind. I am on an errand for Dame Beatrice. She wants to know whether you spotted any visitors who came to the house, particularly to the side door, on either the Friday or the Saturday before Mrs Leyden died on the Sunday.'

'I been asked that, time and again.'

'So what's the answer?'

Mattie delivered a forceful unladylike expectoration into a small gorse bush.

'Search me,' she said. 'So far as I'm concerned, there ent one. I could do you Thursday, but not Friday or Saturday, the reason being that I wasn't here neither of them days. The Friday I was in the pub from twelve till closing time and stopped on until four to give a hand with the chores, that being my way of a Friday while the landlord's wife be carrying their first, and on the Saturday, being as I was no longer in Mrs Leyden's service, her having sacked me because she said as Redruth could do all that needed to be done in the stables, which, of course, he can't and never will, I took myself off to the races at Brighton. Me and my darts mates hired a couple of cars and off us went and had a good day of it out on Brighton Downs. Great it was, and I come back with a profit of six pounds fifty in me kick.'

'Well done! Look, Mattie, would it be of any use for me to call again when your brother is at home? I know he was out with the car on one of the afternoons in question, but—'

'Even if he hadn't a-been, it would be a waste of time to expect that one to notice anything. When he ent out with the car he's got his head stuck inside the bonnet saying his prayers to the engine. He wouldn't notice the Archangel Gabriel unless the Archangel Gabriel stuck a flaming sword into his petrol tank. It's no good depending on him to tell you anything.'

'Come and introduce me to the kitchen staff,' said Laura. 'I want to talk to the cook.'

In the kitchen the elevenses were over and the bread and jam for the maids and Mrs Plack's private pot of honey had been cleared away and the plates and cups washed up. Laura, introduced by Mattie as 'the lady who goes with Dame Beatrice', was received with cautious respect and offered a chair. Mattie, at a nod from Laura, retired, and Laura stated her errand.

'Who delivers the cream for my horseradish?' said Mrs Plack, her air of dignity increasing. 'If you mean what I think you mean, madam, there's no reason to suppose as there was anything wrong with the cream. It comes along with the milk of a Friday morning and comes from Trewiddick in Polyarn, as has been passed down from father to son in three generations, to my certain knowledge.'

'I'm sure there was nothing wrong with the cream. I just wondered where it came from, that's all.'

'Likewise the milk', went on Mrs Plack, determined to make her point clear. 'All the years I been here, never a complaint against Trewiddick's never a one. Every afternoon Sonia makes a nice cup of tea and brings it up to my room and we has it together, me being democratic and my kitchenmaids being more like my daughters, if you follow me, and then Sonia reads me off to sleep with a nice book without it's her afternoon off, which is a Thursday.'

'A Thursday?'

'That's right, a Thursday. As for the others, the parlourmaid, as ranks next to me, she retires to her own room likewise. The housemaids, being sisters, shares a room and either goes along to it to put their feet up, as they are entitled to do, having worked hard and faithful all morning, or else they takes the air and has a bit of a walk. Drawing-room tea is at half-past four, taken in by the parlourmaid if it ent her afternoon off, and our own tea is at five, ready to clear the table in the drawing-room at half-past five, and never no complaints about the milk.'

'So if somebody slipped into your kitchen on a Thursday, it would be just as easy to do so undetected

as it seems to have been on the Friday, when your freshly-made horseradish sauce was exchanged for the poisoned jar.'

'I don't see what Thursday has to do with it, madam.'

'Neither do I, except that Mattie Lunn mentioned it.'

She returned to Mattie.

'What about that Thursday?' she demanded. 'You said you could tell me nothing about the Friday and Saturday, and you gave your reasons. What made you think of the Thursday?'

'Because somebody, though not exactly a stranger, come over that day, as I remember telling the police. Not but what he'd a perfect right to visit here, being family.'

'Did he sneak in by the side door?'

'Course not. A gentleman wouldn't do that. He goed up bold to the front door, Mr Leek did, as was usual with him now and again.'

'Mr Leek? Was he alone?'

'Being as his wife and her brother and the young blackamoor was off to London in your old lady's car (or so my mates at the pub told me) of course he was alone. He come up to me and asks if anybody was at home, as he was on his own and at a loose end. I telled him I think as Mrs Leyden and Mrs Porthcawl are in, to the best of my knowledge, so up he goes to the front door and in he's taken and must have had tea with 'em, I reckon, because it was near enough half-past five when he come out. Looked very pleased with himself, too, I thought, for all that he'd got a seven-mile tramp to get back to Seawards and spend the night on his own. But there! He's always odd man out over to Seawards.'

'Looked pleased with himself, did he?'

'As usual, when he come away with some of the old lady's money, which I reckon he did, because young Pabbay once told me that was the way of it.'

'This wasn't his first visit on his own, then?'

'Oh, he didn't come very often. Missus wouldn't have stood for that. But servants hear a good bit, one way and another, and Redruth hears things in the car, there not being any screen between him and the passengers, and the old mistress not always guarded in her words when she talked to Mrs Porthcawl or Miss Fiona. The parlourmaid used to hear bits, too. Seemed that Mr Leek used to come cap in hand when the rates or the electricity or sommat expensive was due, and the old lady—she liked to play bountiful at times—she'd give him enough to foot the bill, whatever it was, and tell him it was to keep the wolf from Mrs Leek's door and not for any love of him.'

'So Mr Leek had reason to be grateful to Mrs Leyden?'

'If anybody's really grateful for charity,' said Mattie. 'It wouldn't be my way, I can tell you, but, then, I wouldn't ask for charity in the first place. Cap in hand never did fit in with my ideas.'

'And he always came alone on these errands?'

'Oh, yes. Mrs Leek would be far too proud to have any truck with such goings-on.'

'She must have known he came here, though.'

'I don't reckon she did. Always at her painting and kind of innocent, if you know what I mean. I don't reckon she either knew or cared what Mr Leek got up to, most of the time. He was the dreamy, wandering, helpless sort, you know. A real rabbit of a fellow he is. You'd hardly call him a man.'

‘So there’s one person who certainly did not have a grudge against Mrs Leyden,’ said Laura. ‘Anyway, for what it’s worth, the name of the dairyman who supplied milk and cream to Headlands is Trewiddick of Polyarn.’

‘You might look up his telephone number for me. We can readily establish whether he also delivers to the other two houses.’

‘Isn’t it simpler to—oh, no, of course not. But what happens if he says that Campions and Seawards both place a regular order for fresh cream?’

‘We must hope that such is not the case.’

Laura looked up the number and Dame Beatrice made the enquiry. The result was not helpful. Neither house had a regular order for fresh cream, although both had their bottles of milk daily from Trewiddick’s and to neither house had any fresh cream been delivered on a special order.

‘I hardly thought we should obtain a different reply,’ said Dame Beatrice, ‘but it was worth making sure. The murderer must have been a personal shopper for the cream and it is possible that he or she did not buy it from the regular milkman at all. A person with murder in mind would exercise every possible precaution, one supposes.’

‘So what’s the next move?’

‘You mentioned Parsifal Leek and pointed out that he, at least, bore Mrs Leyden no grudge, so perhaps I had better have a word with him and this is as good a time as any. Mrs Leek is out on the hillside with brush and easel, Gamaliel and Mr Porthcawl have just entered the water and Mr Leek, I perceive through my field-glasses, is seated on the terrace and appears to be preparing vegetables for lunch. Will you take me to Seawards in your car? I have just sent George back in mine to his public house to have his own lunch.’

‘But you believe there is something that Parsifal Leek can tell you?’

‘I know there is.’ They soon reached the gate of Seawards. ‘Will you object to waiting for me? I have no idea how long my interview with Mr Leek will take,’ said Dame Beatrice.

‘All right if I take a stroll down the garden and watch Gamaliel and Garnet frolicking in the water? Incidentally, I’d be interested to know what you think this Leek can tell you.’

‘He can tell me how he occupied himself while his wife, his son and his brother-in-law were buying Gamaliel’s boxing gear in London.’

They left the car and descended the two flights of steps to the front door, but, instead of knocking, Dame Beatrice led the way round the side of the house to the back.

‘I notice that the clump of monkshood which used to occupy the angle of the garden wall has been dug up and got rid of,’ she remarked.

‘I’m not surprised,’ said Laura. ‘I suppose it became too painful a reminder of the way the old lady died.’

‘Yes, of course.’ At the back of the house Laura strolled down to the sea beside the tumbling little stream, fast-running from its tiny waterfall, while Dame Beatrice called in her melodious voice to the man on the terrace above her. Parsifal, in a thin tenor, called back that his wife was not at home.

‘I know,’ she said. ‘Do you want me to shout my business from here?’

‘No, no. The steps up from the garden are at your service.’ When she had stepped on to the terrace, Parsifal went on: ‘Is your business with me, then?’

‘Well, I expect so. Perhaps there is a typewriter in the house.’

‘Yes,’ said Parsifal, looking astonished, as well (she thought) he might. ‘Garnet has one in his room. I borrow it to type my verses.’

‘I would like you to borrow it again, unless you would prefer to take dictation in your own handwriting.’

‘What dictation? Are you—I mean, the sun has been unusually hot today—’

‘I am not suffering from sunstroke, neither am I mentally afflicted. It is that I have a passion for the truth,’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘Will you borrow the typewriter?’

‘I would like to oblige you, Dame Beatrice, but, as you see, I am busy preparing the vegetables for lunch. If you will take a seat in a basket chair while I complete my task, I shall be at your service, strange though your request seems to be.’ He made a grab at the sharp little knife which was lying among the peelings.

‘I really shouldn’t advise violence,’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘I could break your wrist, you know. Nature did not frame you for physical combat. Who destroyed the wolfsbane which used to be in your garden? It was not used for the murder, so in what way had it fastened itself upon somebody’s conscience?’

Chapter 17

Gamaliel’s Law

‘Why do you call it wolfsbane?’ asked Parsifal, avoiding an answer.

‘Because Mrs Leyden’s name was Romula.’

‘Ah, yes, you saw the significance of that.’ His attempt at belligerence had faded away completely. ‘But you can’t prove anything, can you?’

‘My arguments and the conclusions I have drawn from them are on their way by post to the police.’

‘But it’s all theory.’

‘Not quite all. Let us apply the rules. First comes the rule of Means.’

‘Anybody round here could have found the means of poisoning that poisonous old woman.’

‘Opportunity?’

‘The same applies. On a Friday anybody could have sneaked into that kitchen and changed over the jars.’

‘But only one person could be pretty sure that his antics would not be known. It seems to me significant that the poison was prepared at a time when the rest of your household were absent. That stuck me right at the beginning.’

‘Somebody else could have realised that and thought it might implicate me, don’t you think?’

‘Perhaps we have not explored sufficiently the question of means.’

‘But there isn’t any question about those. Whoever did it used the roots of monkshood from the garden where that girl was living.’

‘I was not thinking of the wolfsbane. I refer to the cream.’

‘But that wasn’t poisonous!’

‘No, but it had to be purchased. Enquiries have been made of the dairyman who supplied milk to Headlands, Campions and Seawards. Headlands put in a regular order for fresh cream. The other two houses did not. The cream, on the Friday before Mrs Leyden died on the Sunday, was delivered to Headlands as usual and was added to the innocent condiment fabricated by Mrs Plack, who tasted the result and passed it as being up to standard. That accounts for the cream which was delivered by the milkman. But the murderer also needed cream. He had sufficient perspicacity not to order it direct from the milkman, but he had to get hold of it somehow. I am sure he took a long walk on the Thursday before he called at Headlands to ask Mrs Leyden for money to meet some outstanding bills, went over to Polyarn—not a particularly daunting objective for a practised walker such as yourself—and bought the cream over the counter. He counted upon not being recognised, as the counter hand would not have been familiar with his appearance, whereas the milkman might have been.’

‘I never heard anything so specious in my life!’

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘When a description of you reaches the shop and is recognised, will it not require some explanation?’

‘Forewarned is forearmed. One would plead a sudden desire for fresh cream, I suppose. People do have sudden desires for things, don’t they?’

‘You had a desire—although I do not think it was a sudden one—for a share of Mrs Leyden’s fortune.’

‘But surely you were told I stood no chance of that?—and now it is known to everyone that I did not.’

‘No, but after the first of the two dinner parties you knew that Mrs Leyden had become interested in Gamaliel, and after the second that, although the actual amount had not been mentioned, your wife would benefit. I think it was after the second dinner that you began to formulate your plans. What I think perhaps you do not know is how nearly you came to killing the wrong person.’

‘Nobody else liked horseradish.’

‘The cook was fond of it. It was her habit, in any case, to taste her condiment before it went to table to make certain that the cream had not turned sour. Owing to two factors which could not have been foreseen, she ate a quantity of her innocent mixture as soon as she had made it on the Friday and was prevented from tasting your lethal mixture on the Sunday because lunch was late and was rushed to the table at a peremptory summons from Mrs Leyden.’

‘If you’re only relying on a purchase of fresh cream to prove your otherwise unfounded allegations, I don’t think you’ll get away with them,’ said Parsifal, with a slight smile on his long, camel-like lips. ‘It was clever of you to spot the Romula-Romulus angle, though. Poetic justice I thought it. Those suckled by the she-wolf deserve to die of the wolfsbane. That thought gave me a great deal of satisfaction.’

‘I am sure it did.’

‘You see, it would have been so much simpler to have pushed her over the cliff, as Diana tried to do.’

‘You know that Mrs Bosse-Leyden did that?’

‘Oh, yes, the same as I know that Rupert did the same to Diana. But their attempts were half-hearted. It took me, the poet, to carry my plans to their logical conclusion. All my life, you know, Dame Beatrice, I have been an underdog, despised, neglected, overlooked and poor, but little did that arrogant old woman know that I held her life in my hands.’

‘And elected to destroy it. Yes, I see. Oh, well, I will take my leave, Mr Leek.’ She rose from the basket

chair.

‘Thank you for calling,’ said Parsifal politely. Neither of them realised that the swimmers had left the water, although Dame Beatrice had seen Laura, some few minutes earlier, walk up the garden and disappear round the side of the house, presumably to return to the car. As Dame Beatrice descended the wooden steps which led down from the balcony, however, she was slightly startled to meet Gamaliel who, still in his bathing-trunks, was standing just in shadow outside the back door. He opened it and drew her into the house.

‘So it would have been simpler to have pushed my other dear old lady over the cliff, would it?’ he said. ‘What shall we do, my present dear old lady?’

‘Leave everything to the police, my dear young man. How much did you hear?’

‘Enough. I guessed the truth a long time ago, but he is my mother’s husband. He cannot go to prison.’

‘The girl must not suffer for something she did not do. The law must take its course. You see that, don’t you?’

‘There is more than one law.’

‘We must not take the law into our own hands.’

‘So my mother and I and my best friend Garnie are to live our lives under the shadow of this murderer serving a life sentence? That seems to me unfair.’

‘Of course it is unfair.’

‘As unfair as that Margaret Denham should go to prison for something she did not do?’

‘Quite as unfair.’

‘Ah!’ said Gamaliel in a tone of satisfaction. ‘I am pleased to hear you admit that.’ He glanced down at his naked limbs. ‘I am cold. I must get dressed. Do you think the discovery of the truth is an end in itself, even if it benefits nobody and damages three innocent people?’

‘Yes, I believe it is, but, in this case, it will benefit Margaret Denham.’ She walked with him through the basement of the house and he let her out by the front door.

‘Do you remember, in a story of King Solomon’s Mines, a terrible old person called Gagool?’ he asked as he opened it.

‘Dimly but sufficiently. Why?’

‘She smelt people out. I think you smell people out, dear old lady.’

‘I have been reading my mother’s diary,’ said Maria to Fiona. ‘It seems that she was in the habit of disbursing sums of money to Parsifal Leek. She told me about it once, I remember.’

‘I knew,’ said Fiona. ‘As her secretary, there were very few, if any, secrets that she kept from me.’

‘You never mentioned anything of her giving money to Parsifal. I should have known nothing of it had she not mentioned it on that one solitary occasion.’

‘It was nobody’s business but her own.’

‘It was the business of us all if it diminished our patrimony.’

‘I suppose one ought to say matrimony, except that that means something quite different.’

‘Are you still thinking of marriage?’

‘No. My only hope would be Garnet, your son, and I would rather be your friend than your daughter-in-law. I have never seen that as my relationship to you. Besides, Blue would not want me as a sister, even if Garnet wanted me for his wife.’

‘It is a pity she married Parsifal. He is not worthy of her. No wonder she wanted to adopt a son.’

‘He is more like Garnet’s son than Parsifal’s.’

‘He has always despised Parsifal, I think, and little wonder.’

‘No, I think he has always had a protective feeling towards him, as I feel Blue has. She must often regret her marriage. In fact, she confessed as much when I was staying with them after I had quarrelled with madre.’

‘What are we to do about that poor girl Denham? She is continually on my mind. I am sure—more sure than ever, as time passes—that she is not the guilty party.’

‘I had hoped that Dame Beatrice, who has such a reputation for finding out the truth of these matters, would have come up with something by now. As she has not, I think we must conclude that Denham is guilty.’

‘I wish I could come to that conclusion. The trouble is, as we’ve said before, if it wasn’t Denham it must have been one of us, and that’s unthinkable.’

‘But is it so unthinkable? The charge against the girl rests only on two things: she had been dismissed from this house and the poison plant was dug up in her sister’s garden. I could make out an equally viable case against Diana, Rupert, Gamaliel and Parsifal.’

‘Gamaliel?’ said Maria, surprised.

‘He knew he had found favour with madre and he must have heard a great deal of speculation about the terms of her Will. He may have thought he would be mentioned in it and decided to benefit himself sooner rather than later.’

‘He would not have hit upon the method used. He would simply have set about her and killed her.’

‘What about the other three, then?’

‘Neither Diana nor Rupert had any expectations from her. Rupert’s only motive would have been revenge for her unkindness with regard to his parentage, and I simply do not believe that would have carried him as far as murder. Rupert is not a man of strong passions. If he were, he would have divorced Diana long ago and married you.’

‘Well, that leaves Diana and Parsifal.’

‘Oh, my dear Fiona, if that is the choice, there can be no doubt which of them it would be. Diana had nothing to gain. Parsifal had every expectation, now realised, that both Blue and Gamaliel—oh, and, of course, Garnet— would come in for something. He had everything to gain from my mother’s death. He was like the woman in Tagore’s story. He had his coffer and his store in all of their houses.’

‘Well, I suppose there is nothing we can do about it.’

‘No, it must be left as it is. We have nothing but suspicion to go on and there is the family to consider.’

Bluebell was packing up her painting things when Dame Beatrice and Laura got back to the hotel. They were chatting with her—Dame Beatrice meanwhile turning over in her mind the various ways in which the impulsive Gamaliel would break the news of Parsifal’s confessed guilt to his mother—when the youth himself, damp-haired but now wearing a track-suit, came cantering across the courtyard.

‘Ah’ he said to Bluebell, ‘you must come home at once. There is to be a great contest of gladiators, two against one. I am the one. This great spectacle is to be staged on our small beach while the tide is going out. I am taking on Parsifal and Garnie. You shall see how well I have learned to defend myself. It will be two men against a sixteen-year-old youth. I shall be giving away many stones in weight, not to speak of fighting against four arms and two bodies.’

‘I don’t like the idea of it,’ said Bluebell, ‘but if the men have agreed I suppose there is nothing I can do. Incidentally, it is not respectful to refer to your father as Parsifal.’

‘It is not respectful, no. The question is whether I respect him. I search my heart and I find that I do not.’

‘Why not?’ demanded Bluebell, with an edge to her voice which was the result of anxiety and not indignation.

Gamaliel shrugged his wide shoulders. ‘You do not respect him, either,’ he said. He turned to Dame Beatrice. ‘And you, dear old lady, must come along, too, and help to judge the contest.’

‘No,’ said Dame Beatrice decidedly. ‘On this occasion the four of you at Seawards must form your own jury, but I am prepared to come and watch.’

Gamaliel looked thoughtful. ‘You are right,’ he said. ‘The four of us must be our own jury. It is a trial, of course; a trial of strength. The others are waiting. Shall we go?’

The three of them took the smugglers’ old trackway along the back of the hotel. Laura, who had given Dame Beatrice a questioning look and had received an emphatic shake of the head in answer to it, had gone into the hotel. At the top of the smugglers’ steps Gamaliel leapt ahead and by the time Dame Beatrice and Bluebell reached the stepping-stones they saw that the three contestants were already on the scrap of beach left by the retreating tide.

Gamaliel was in his track-suit trousers, Parsifal was wearing the khaki shorts he kept for his exploration of the countryside and Garnet had on a pair of grey flannel trousers. All three were bare-chested and bare-foot and Gamaliel was dancing back and forth around the other two in imitation of his hero’s tactics in the ring.

Bluebell crossed the stream on the stepping stones and turned to offer a hand to Dame Beatrice, but it was not needed, so she led the way along the side of the garden to the steps which led up to the lower of the two terraces.

‘I suppose Gamaliel knows,’ she said abruptly, as they seated themselves. Dame Beatrice liked and respected her too much to hedge by asking what it was that Gamaliel was supposed to know.

‘Yes,’ she replied. ‘He knows now. I take it that you yourself have known for some time.’

‘Guessed, at any rate. If that poor girl is convicted, I shall have to speak out. They cannot compel me in court to testify against my husband, but if I speak to the police they will find some evidence they can use.’

‘He has confessed; my evidence is in the post.’

‘It will be hard for the rest of us to sustain the agony of having Parsifal in prison, and hard for him, too. He was not intended to be shut away.’

‘I doubt whether anybody is.’

‘It is not as though he would ever do such a thing again. He hated her, you know, because she was so wealthy and we are poor. She never was reconciled to his marrying me and he resented that, too. I cannot forgive him though, for the manner of her death. It would have been better—even kinder,

perhaps—to have pushed her over the cliff, as Diana rather half-heartedly tried to do.’

‘Oh, you knew about that, did you?’

‘The kind of life I lead gives me plenty of time to think. Besides, families as close-knit as we are know, without being told, what goes on.’

‘The three-sided contest has begun,’ said Dame Beatrice, indicating the strip of grey beach with its outcroppings of rock.

‘It is hardly three-sided,’ said Bluebell, following her gaze. ‘The two men have taken sides against Gamaliel. I don’t care for the spot they have hit upon to stage the contest. If one of them were to fall, he might injure himself quite seriously on a sharp rock.’

The two men were standing back to back while Gamaliel skirmished around them, jabbing at their faces and bodies with his bare hands as he danced and circled. Suddenly he gripped Garnet, of whom he was both taller and heavier, and wrestled with him, urging him nearer and nearer the water.

Soon they were ankle-deep and then knee-deep in the sea. The combat lasted less than a minute. Gamaliel, with a throw, a beautifully executed ‘flying mare’, catapulted Garnet into the deep water beyond the shelving fringe of the beach. Garnet, falling spread-eagled, was completely submerged. He came up, spluttering and spitting out sea-water and the retreating tide carried him a little further out to sea before he could recover his breath and begin to swim ashore.

As he stood at the brink and began to wring the water out of his trousers, Gamaliel, who had been sparring, apparently playfully, with Parsifal, suddenly shouted, ‘Now!’ On the word he hit him with all his force over the heart, leapt forward, clutched him as Parsifal staggered back, and flung him down on to an outcrop of rock.

‘Oh, yes,’ said Dame Beatrice, in answer to a query from Laura. ‘It will be brought in as accidental death. There were three witnesses, if you count Mr Porthcawl, who was certainly on the spot, although I doubt very much whether he saw exactly what happened.’

‘And Gamaliel intended to kill Parsifal?’

‘Oh, I am sure he did. It was a mercy killing according to Gamaliel’s logic. The magistrates, at their last remand interview with Margaret Denham, have declared that she has no case to answer. Parsifal Leek could never have endured life imprisonment. Bluebell will now move house, accompanied by Gamaliel and their well-beloved Garnet, and the incident and Mrs Leyden’s death will soon be forgotten except, perhaps, in this small village.’

‘And that young thug will go on and prosper?’

‘Why not? He has proved that he possesses the ruthlessness which, in this life, is said to be the hallmark of success.’

‘I’d rather be a failure!’

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ said Dame Beatrice mildly. ‘I can be ruthless myself on occasion.’