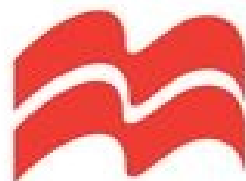


FLOWERS IN
THE RAIN &
OTHER STORIES

ROSAMUNDE PILCHER



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Critical Praise for Rosamunde Pilcher and *Flowers in the Rain!*

Copyright

INTRODUCTION

When I wrote the preface for Rosamunde Pilcher's first collection of stories, *The Blue Bedroom and Other Stories*, I knew *she* would be getting letters from readers. But to my surprise, I did too—letters from English students researching Rosamunde Pilcher for class papers, from *Good Housekeeping* readers who wanted to share how much it had meant to them to discover her in the magazine's pages, from longtime Pilcher fans who'd read every book she'd ever written and now wanted a copy of every story of hers *Good Housekeeping* had ever published.

I even got a letter from my Aunt Margaret, in Michigan, who wrote, "I bought a new book by my favorite writer today. When I saw that you wrote the preface, I almost swooned! I never realized your work connected you to the author who gave us Penelope Keeling. *The Shell Seekers* is one of the best novels I've ever read."

My aunt continued praising Rosamunde Pilcher's writing and naming other characters from other novels. "I feel like I know them all," she wrote.

With that she echoed the sentiment expressed by each correspondent. Countless readers, around the world and across generations, are struck by the recognizability, the believability of the people Rosamunde Pilcher creates, by the impeccably conveyed emotion in situations from tragedy to triumph.

It is rewarding to be "connected" to such an author, a privilege I share with a network of publishing colleagues, all of whom, from the beginning, believed in Rosamunde Pilcher's talent and helping her work reach the public.

Shortly after the phenomenal success of *The Shell Seekers*, Rosamunde Pilcher and I marvelled together at the overwhelming acceptance that the novel was receiving. "It seems a lot of people like to read about the same kind of details in everyday lives that you and I do," she said.

Exactly so. And many of the stories that we liked so much in the early years of her career are contained in this marvelous collection. All readers, old and new, will find here the genesis of Rosamunde Pilcher's fictional world, the inviting surroundings richly described, the intelligent, likeable characters, and the ordinary events that become extraordinary in the hands of this master storyteller.

—LEE QUARFOO

FICTION EDITOR

GOOD HOUSEKEEPING MAGAZINE

THE DOLL'S HOUSE

Opening his eyes, William recognized the feel of Saturday morning. A lightness in the atmosphere, an ambience of freedom. From downstairs came the smell of frying bacon, and outside in the garden Loden, the dog, began to bark. He heard his mother go to open the door and call him indoors. William stirred and reached for his wrist-watch. Eight o'clock.

Because there was no urgency to be up and about, he lay for a little, considering the day ahead. It was April, and a lozenge of sunlight lay across his carpet. The sky beyond the window was a pale pellucid blue traversed by random, slow-moving clouds. A day to be spent out of doors; the sort of day when his father would have collected the family together with a shout and an exciting, impetuous plan, piling them all into the car and driving them to the seaside, or up onto the moors for a long hike.

Most of the time William tried not to think too much about his father, but every now and then memories would come surging back, like pictures, clean-cut, and with very sharp edges. Then he would see his father striding up a brackeney slope, with Miranda on his shoulders because the climb was too steep for her short fat legs. Or hear his deep voice, reading to them on winter evenings. Or see his clever hands, mending a bicycle, or doing intricate things with electric plugs and fuse-boxes.

He bit his lip and turned his head on the pillow, as though to turn from some unimaginable pain, but that was even worse, because now he was confronted by the object that stood, accusing, on his work-table at the other side of the room. Last night, when he had finished his homework, he had laboured over this thing for an hour or more, and had finally climbed into bed knowing that it had defeated him.

Now, it seemed to his imagination, it openly sneered at him.

You haven't a hope of enjoying yourself today. You're going to spend this Saturday wrestling with me. And you'll probably lose.

It was enough to make a strong man despair. Twenty pounds it had cost him, and all he had to show for it was something that looked more like an orange box than anything else.

After a bit, he got out of bed and went across the room to examine it more closely, hoping that it would look better than he remembered. It didn't. A floor, a back, two sides; a pile of small bits of wood about the size of nail-files, and a page of baffling, incomprehensible instructions.

Glue to scotia angle to the top front edge of the front panel.

Glue window jambs to inner head cills.

A doll's house. It was meant to be a doll's house. For Miranda's seventh birthday, two weeks away. It was a secret, even from his mother. And he couldn't finish it because he was too clumsy or too stupid or possibly both.

Miranda had always wanted a doll's house, had been asking for one for the past year. Their father had promised that she would get it for her birthday, and the fact that he was no longer there had made no difference to Miranda, who was too young to understand, too young to be told that she must leave

to go without.

“I’m going to get a doll’s house for my birthday,” she boasted to her friends while they dressed up in tattered party clothes and old ostrich feathers and totter-heeled shoes sizes too big for them. “They promised.”

William, worried by this, had a conference with his mother. This took place when they were alone together, eating supper. Before his father died, he used to have high tea with Miranda and then watch television for a bit, but now, at twelve years old, he had been promoted. So, over the chops and broccoli and mashed potatoes, William said, “She thinks she’s getting that doll’s house.”

“Oh, darling.”

“We must give her one.”

“They’re dreadfully expensive.”

“Daddy promised.”

“I know. And he’d have bought her a beauty, no expense spared. But now, we don’t have that sort of money to spend on presents.”

“What about a second-hand one?”

“Well ... I’ll look...”

She looked. She found one in the local antique shop, but it cost more than a hundred pounds. A second-hand dealer produced another, but it was so tatty and shabby that the thought of actually giving it to Miranda for her birthday was somehow an insult to the child’s intelligence. Together, William and his mother cased the toy shops, but the doll’s houses there were horrible plastic things with pretend doors and windows that didn’t open.

“Perhaps we would wait another year,” his mother suggested. “It would give us more time to save up...”

But William knew that it had to be this year. If they let Miranda down now, he knew that she would probably never trust an adult again. Besides, they owed it to his father.

And then, the answer came. By chance he saw the advertisement on the back page of the Sunday newspaper.

Build your own traditional doll’s house from one of our kits. Full instructions, so simple a child could follow them. Special offer, open for only two weeks. £19.50, including post and packing.

He read this, and then, more carefully, read it again. There were snags. For one thing, woodwork was not his strong point. Top of his class in English and history, he nevertheless found it well-nigh impossible to drive a straight screw. For another, there was the question of money. His pocket money had been severely cut since the death of his father, and this he was saving to buy a calculator.

But needs must when the devil drives. The instructions were so simple, a child could follow them. And he could probably manage for a bit longer without the calculator. He made up his mind; wrote out the order form, withdrew his savings from the bank, bought a postal order and sent away for the doll’s-house kit.

He did not tell his mother what he had done. Each morning he got up early and went downstairs to intercept the postman before she should see the parcel. When at last it came, he carried it straight up to his bedroom and hid it under the wardrobe. That evening he shut himself away and ceremoniously unwrapped the package, to be faced with a confusion of oddly shaped pieces of board, a polythene bag filled with very small pieces of plywood, a tube of glue, some nails, and a closely typed instruction sheet. He took a deep breath, found a hammer, lighted his lamp and set to work.

To begin with it wasn't bad, and he got the main bits of the house together. But then the problems started. There was a diagram for fitting the windows into their apertures, but the instructions might have been written in double Dutch.

Glue jambs to inner head cills, making a complete L frame all around the window.

He made a sound of disgust. It was impossible. Before breakfast, it was even more impossible. William turned from the maddening object, got dressed, and went downstairs to find something to eat.

As he crossed the hall, the telephone rang, and as he happened to be alongside, he picked up the receiver.

"Hello."

"William."

"Yes." He made a private face. It was Arnold Ridgeway, and Arnold, he knew, rather fancied William's mother. Although William could understand this, he found Arnold's company fairly heavy weather. Arnold ran the big hotel on the far side of town, and he was a widower, and very cheerful and noisy in a hail-fellow-well-met sort of way. Lately, William had begun to suspect that Arnold had private plans to marry his mother, but he hoped very much that this would not happen. His mother did not love Arnold. There was a certain private look about her that only happened every now and then—a sort of secret radiance—and William had not seen this since his father had died. It was certainly never evident when she was in Arnold's company.

There was, however, always the possibility that Arnold might wear her down with the sheer force of his personality, and she would marry him for the comfort and security of his worldly goods. She would do such a thing for his sake and for Miranda's, he knew. For her children she would be prepared to make any sacrifice.

"Arnold here!" His voice fairly carolled over the phone. "How's your mother this morning?"

"I haven't seen her yet."

"Such a lovely day. Thought I might take you all out for lunch. Drive over to Cottescombe, have lunch in the Three Bells. We could go and look at the Game Park. How does that sound to you?"

"It sounds great, but I think I'd better get my mother." Then he remembered the doll's house. "But I don't think I can come. It's very kind of you, but I've got ... well, lots of homework to do, and things like that."

"That's a pity. Never mind. Another time. Fetch your mother, like a good boy."

He put down the receiver and went into the kitchen.

"That's Arnold on the phone..."

She was sitting at the table, drinking coffee and reading the morning paper. She wore her o turquoise wool dressing-gown and her beautiful red hair lay like silk down to her shoulders.

“Oh, thank you, darling.” She stood up, laying aside the paper, and brushed his head with her hair as she went out of the room.

Miranda, decked out as usual in beads and earrings, was eating her boiled egg.

“Hello, bootface,” William greeted her and went to the hot drawer to find his breakfast. It was bacon and sausage and egg.

“What does Arnold want?” Miranda asked.

“Asking us all out for lunch.”

She was immediately interested. “To a restaurant?” She was a social child, and loved eating out.

“That’s the idea.”

“Oh, good.” When their mother returned, she asked at once, “Are we going?”

“If you’d like to, Miranda. Arnold thought Cottescombe would be fun.”

William said shortly, “I can’t come.”

“Oh, darling, do. It’s such a lovely day.”

“I’ve got things I have to do. I’ll be all right.”

She did not argue. She knew, of course, that there was a secret up in his bedroom, but it was always carefully dust-sheeted when she went up to make his bed, and he knew that she was too high principled ever to peep.

She sighed. “All right. We’ll leave you behind. You can have a peaceful day on your own.” She picked up the paper again. “The Manor House has been sold.”

“How do you know?”

“It’s here, in the paper. It’s been bought by a man called Geoffrey Wray. He’s the new manager of that electronics factory in Tryford. See for yourself...”

She handed the newspaper over to him, and William read the item with some interest. The Manor House used to belong to Miss Pritchett, and this house, the one in which William and his mother and Miranda lived, had once been the gate-lodge of the Manor, so whoever bought the big house would be their nearest neighbour.

Old Miss Pritchett had been an excellent neighbor, allowing them to use her garden as a short cut to the common and the hills beyond, and letting the children pick apples and plums in her orchard. But old Miss Pritchett had died three months ago, and since then the house had stood empty and sad.

But now ... the manager of the electronics factory. William made a face.

His mother laughed. “What’s that for?”

“Sounds a bit boring. Bet he looks like an adding machine.”

“We’d better not go through the garden any longer. At least not until we’re invited to.”

“He probably won’t ever invite us.”

“You mustn’t have preconceived ideas. He might have a wife and a lot of jolly children for you to make friends with.”

But William only said, "I doubt it," and put down the newspaper and went on with his breakfast.

* * *

He worked all morning on the doll's house. At twelve o'clock, his mother tapped at his door, and he went out onto the landing, carefully closing the door behind him.

"We're just off, William." She wore her cord trousers and a big blanket coat and smelt of her besom scent.

"Have a good time."

"There's a shepherd's pie in the oven for your lunch. And take Loden for a walk if you've time."

"I will."

"But don't go through the Manor House garden."

"I won't."

* * *

The front door closed and he was alone. Reluctantly he went back to his task. He had made the staircase, gluing each little tread carefully into place, but for some reason it was a fraction too wide for the space allotted to it and impossible to fit into place.

Perhaps he had done something wrong. He went back, for the thousandth time, to the instruction sheet.

Glue stair treads to base. Glue second mid-wall to base ...

He had done all that. And still the stairs would not fit. If only he had someone to ask, but the only person he could think of was his woodwork teacher, whom he didn't much like anyway.

Suddenly, he longed for his father. His father would have known exactly what to do, would have taken over, reassured, explained, eased the little staircase into place with his clever fingers.

His father had always made everything so simple, so right. His father ...

Horrified, unable to do anything about it, he felt the lump grow in his throat and the half-finished doll's house and all its attendant bits and pieces were dissolved, lost, in a flood of tears. He had not cried for years; could not remember when he had last cried, and was appalled at his own childishness. Thank goodness there was no person but himself in the house; no person to see or hear or come to his comfort. He found a handkerchief and blew his nose, wiped away the shameful tears. Beyond the open window he saw the warm spring day beckoning to him. He stuffed the handkerchief into the pocket of his jeans, thought, oh, to hell with the doll's house, and was out of the room and down the stairs before he had even thought about it, whistling for Loden, bursting out of the front door, running as though his legs were competing in a vital race, with the cool air blowing into his face, and the black sheep-dog bounding delightedly at his heels.

After a bit, when he could run no farther, and was panting and gasping, and had a stitch, it was better. He felt released, refreshed. He bent double to relieve the stitch, to embrace Loden, and bury his face in the dog's thick, dark coat.

When he had got his breath back, he straightened up, and it was only then that he realized he had forgotten his mother's stricture, and that his feet, in their headlong escape, had carried him quite naturally through the gates of the Manor House and half-way up the drive. For a moment he hesitated but the prospect of retracing his steps and going around by the road was too tedious for words. Besides, the house had only just been sold. There would be nobody there. Not yet.

He was wrong. As he came around the last curve of the lane, he saw the car parked in front of the house. The front door was open and a tall man was on the point of emerging, with a dog at his side. Immediately, all was lost. Miss Pritchett had not owned a dog, and Loden considered this his garden. He now let out a furious *woof* and all his hackles went up. The other dog sprang to instant attention and William grabbed, just in time, for Loden's collar.

Dark mutterings sounded in Loden's throat. "For heaven's sake, Loden, behave yourself," William whispered desperately, but the other dog was already bounding towards them, a friendly-looking Labrador bitch, ready and waiting for a game.

Loden growled again. "Loden!" William jerked his collar. The growl changed to a whine. The Labrador approached and the dogs tentatively sniffed at each other. Loden's hackles subsided, his tail began to wag. Cautiously, William released him, and the two dogs began to romp. So that was all right. Now he had to deal with the Labrador's owner. He looked up. The man was coming towards him. A tall man, with a pleasantly weather-beaten look, as though he spent much time out of doors. The wind ruffled his greying hair, and he wore spectacles and a blue sweater. He carried a clipboard and a yardstick. He looked a bit like an architect. William hoped that he was.

He said, "Good morning."

The man looked at his wrist-watch. "Actually, it's good afternoon. Half past one."

"I didn't know it was so late."

"What are you doing?"

"I'm taking my dog for a walk. Going over the common and up onto the hill. I always used to come this way when Miss Pritchett was alive." He enlarged on this. "I live in the house at the bottom of the road."

"The lodge?"

"That's right."

"What's your name?"

"William Radlett. I saw in the paper this morning that this house has been sold, but I didn't think there'd be anybody here."

"Just looking around," said the man. "Taking a few measurements."

"Are you an architect?"

"No. My name's Geoffrey Wray."

"Oh, so *you*...? He felt himself grow red in the face. "But you..." He had almost said, *You don't look like an adding machine*. "I ... I'm afraid I'm trespassing," he finished at last, sounding feeble.

"No matter," said Mr. Wray. "I'm not living here yet. Like I said, just taking a few

measurements.” He turned to look back at the worn fabric face of the house. As though seeing it for the first time, William noticed the rotting trellis that supported the upper balcony, the blistered paintwork and broken guttering.

He said, “I suppose it will need a lot done to it. It’s a bit old-fashioned.”

“Yes, but charming. And most of it I can do myself. It’ll take time, but that’s half the fun.” The two dogs were by now quite at ease with each other, chasing around the rhododendron bushes and searching for rabbits. “They’ve made friends,” observed Mr. Wray.

“Yes.”

“How about you? I was just going to have something to eat. Brought a picnic with me. Like share it?”

William remembered the shepherd’s pie, uneaten, and realized that he was ravenously hungry.

“Have you got enough?”

“I imagine so. Let’s go and look.”

He took a basket from the back seat of his car and carried this to the wrought-iron garden seat that stood by the front door. In the sun and out of the wind, it was quite warm. William accepted a ham sandwich.

“I’ve only got lager to drink,” said Mr. Wray. “Are you old enough to drink lager?”

“I’m twelve.”

“Old enough,” decided Mr. Wray, and handed over a can. “And there’s a fruit-cake. My mother makes excellent fruit-cake.”

“Did she make the sandwiches, too?”

“Yes.”

“Do you live with her?”

“Just for the moment. Until I come to live here.”

“Are you going to live here alone?”

“I haven’t got a wife, if that’s what you mean.”

“My mother thought you might have a wife and a lot of jolly children for us to play with.”

He smiled. “Who’s us?”

“Miranda and me. She’s nearly seven.”

“And where is she today?”

“She and my mother have gone out for lunch.”

“Have you always lived in the lodge?”

“Yes, always.”

“Does your father work in the town?”

“I haven’t got a father. He died about ten months ago.”

“I am sorry.” He looked and sounded both distressed and genuinely sympathetic, but, blessedly not in the least embarrassed by William’s revelation. “I lost my father when I was about your age. Nothing’s ever quite the same again, is it?”

“No. No, it’s not the same.”

“How about a chocolate biscuit?” He held one out. William took it and looked up, straight into Mr Wray’s eyes, and suddenly smiled, for no particular reason except that he felt comforted and at ease and ... last, but not least ... not hungry any longer.

* * *

When they had finished the picnic they went indoors and all through the house, room by room. Without furniture, smelling chill and slightly damp, it could have been depressing, but it wasn’t. On the contrary, it was rather exciting, and flattering to be discussing plans as though he were a grown-up man.

“I thought I’d take this wall down, make a big open-plan kitchen. Fit an Aga in here, and build plenty of fittings around that corner.”

His enthusiasm dispelled the gloom even of the old kitchen, which smelt of stone floors and mice.

“And this old scullery I’ll turn into a workshop, with the work-bench here, under the window, and plenty of space for hanging tools and storing stuff.”

“My father had a workshop, but it was in a shed in the garden.”

“I expect you use it now.”

“No. I’m useless with my hands.”

“It’s amazing what you can do if you have to.”

“That’s what I thought,” said William impulsively, and then stopped.

“What did you think?” Mr. Wray prompted gently.

“I thought I could do something because I had to. But I can’t. It’s too difficult.”

“What would you be trying to do?”

“Build a doll’s house. From a kit. For my sister’s birthday.”

“What’s gone wrong?”

“Everything. I’m stuck. I can’t get the staircase to fit, and I can’t work out how to put the window frames together. And the instructions are so *complicated*.”

“I hope you don’t mind my asking,” said Mr. Wray politely, “but if you aren’t a particularly handy chap, why did you embark on this in the first place?”

“Miranda was promised a doll’s house, by my father. And they’re too expensive to buy. I really thought I could do it.” He added, making a clean breast of his own stupidity, “And it cost twenty pounds. I’ve wasted twenty pounds.”

“Couldn’t your mother help you?”

“I want it to be a surprise.”

“Isn’t there anyone you could ask?”

“Not really.”

Mr. Wray turned and leaned against the old sink, his arms folded. “How about me?” he asked.

William looked up at him, frowning. “You?”

“Why not?”

“You’d help me?”

“If you want.”

“This afternoon? Now?”

“Good a time as any.”

He was flooded with gratitude. “Would you really? Just explain it to me. Show me what to do. It won’t take long. No more than half an hour...”

* * *

But it took a good deal longer than half an hour. The instructions had to be carefully studied, the little pieces of wood sandpapered down and fitted into place. (It looked splendid; really real.) Then, on a clean sheet of newspaper, Mr. Wray placed all the little bits of wood in order, arranged into five small window surrounds, ready to be glued.

“You fit the glass in first, and then the frames fit round it, and keep it in place. Just like an ordinary window.”

“Oh, I see.”

Like all things, once explained, it became marvellously simple.

“You’d better paint them first and let them dry before you fix them permanently. And then the rosette goes like this; and the scotia angle gets glued along the top of the front panel, so...”

“I can do that.”

“The hinges might be tricky. It’s a question of getting them quite straight so that the front panel swings straight. You don’t want any sag.”

They worked on, companionably, and all became as clear as light. So preoccupied was William, so involved, that he did not hear the car coming up the road and stopping at the gate, and the first inkling that he had of his mother’s return was the sound of the front door opening and her voice calling to him.

“William!”

She was back already. He looked at his watch and was astonished to see that it was nearly five o’clock. The hours had flown past like moments.

He sprang to his feet. “That’s my mother.”

Mr. Wray smiled. “So I guessed.”

“We’d better go down. And, Mr. Wray, don’t say anything.”

“I won’t.”

“And thank you so much for helping me. I can’t thank you enough.”

He went from the room and hung over the landing banister. Mother and sister stood below him in the hall, their faces turned up towards him. His mother carried an enormous bunch of daffodils wrapped in pale-blue tissue paper, and Miranda clutched a new and particularly hideous doll.

“Did you have a good time?” he asked.

“Lovely. William, there’s a car outside with a dog in it.”

“It’s Mr. Wray’s. He’s here.” He turned as Mr. Wray emerged from the bedroom, closing the door behind him, and came to stand beside William. “You know,” William went on. “He’s bought the Manor House.”

His mother’s smile became a little fixed, as she gazed in some astonishment at the tall stranger who had so unexpectedly appeared. William hastily filled in the ensuing silence with explanation. “We met this afternoon, and he came home with me to give me a hand with ... well, with something...”

“Oh...” With a visible effort, she collected herself. “Mr. Wray ... but how very kind...”

“Not at all, it’s been a pleasure,” he told her in his deep voice, and went down the stairs to meet her. “After all, we’re going to be neighbours.”

His hand was outstretched. “Yes. Yes, of course.” Confused still, she juggled the daffodils into her left arm and took the proffered hand.

“And this must be Miranda?”

“Arnold bought me a new doll,” Miranda told him. “She’s called Priscilla.”

“But...” William’s mother had still not quite got the hang of the situation. “... how did you meet William?”

Before Mr. Wray had time to answer this, William began to explain. “I forgot about not going through the garden, and Mr. Wray was there. We ate his picnic lunch together.”

“What happened to the shepherd’s pie?”

“I forgot that too.”

For some reason, this broke the ice, and suddenly they were all smiling.

“Well, have you had tea?” his mother asked. “No? Neither have we, and I’m longing for a cup. Come into the sitting-room, Mr. Wray, and I’ll go and put the kettle on.”

“But I’ll do it,” said William, running down the stairs. “I’ll get the tea.”

* * *

In the kitchen, he laid a tray, found some biscuits in a tin, filled the kettle. Waiting for this to boil, he went, with some satisfaction, over the events of the day. The problem of the doll’s house was not solved, he knew what he had to do, and he would finish it in good time for Miranda’s birthday. And Mr. Wray was coming to live at the Manor House, and he was not the walking adding machine that he had feared, but the nicest person William had met in years. As well, he was willing to bet, they would be allowed to walk through the garden, just as they had done in Miss Pritchett’s day, and perhaps when the autumn came and the leaves turned gold, to pick the fruit in the old orchard.

And so, with one thing and another, he felt better about life than he had for a long time. The kettle boiled and he filled the teapot and set it on the tray and carried it through to the sitting-room. From the playroom came the sound of the television, which Miranda was watching, and from the sitting-room a pleasant murmur of voices.

“When will you move in?”

“As soon as possible.”

“You’ll have a lot to do.”

“There’s a lot of time. All the time in the world.”

He pushed the door open with his foot. The room was filled with evening sunlight and there was something in the air, so tangible it almost could be touched. Companionship, maybe. Ease. Boredom. Excitement, too.

All the time in the world.

They stood by the fireplace, half turned towards the newly kindled flames, but he could see his mother’s face reflected in the mirror that hung over the mantel-piece. Suddenly she laughed, though he didn’t know what he could not guess, and tossed back her lovely red hair, and there was that look about her ... the old glowing look that he had not seen since his father died.

His imagination bolted ahead, like a runaway horse, only to be reined firmly in and brought to a halt. It wasn’t any good making plans. Things had to happen at their own speed, in their own time.

“Tea’s ready,” he told them and set down the tray. As he straightened up he caught sight of the daffodils, lying on the window-seat where his mother had tossed them down. The tissue paper was crushed and the delicate petals beginning to wilt, and William thought of Arnold, and had it in his heart to be very sorry for him.

Tom said, without much hope, "You could come with me."

Elaine gave a derisory laugh, which sounded like a snort from her pretty nose. "Darling, can you see my freezing in a castle in Northumberland?"

"Not really," he admitted with honesty.

"Besides, I haven't been invited."

"That wouldn't matter. Aunt Mabel would love a new face around the place. Particularly one as attractive as yours."

Elaine tried hard not to look pleased. She adored compliments and soaked them up as blotting paper absorbs ink. "Flattery will get you nowhere," she told him. "And I'm cross. You were meant to be coming down to the Stainforths with me this weekend. What am I going to tell them?"

"Tell them the truth. That I've got to go north for my Aunt Mabel's seventy-fifth birthday ball."

"But *why* do you have to go?"

He explained again, patiently. "Because somebody's got to put in an appearance, and my parents are in Majorca, and my sister's living in Hong Kong with her husband. I've already told you that three times."

"I still don't see why you have to leave me in the lurch like this. I don't like being left in the lurch." She gave him one of her most persuasive smiles. "I'm not used to it."

"I wouldn't leave you in the lurch," he swore to her, "for anyone in the world but Aunt Mabel. But she's a very special old girl, and she doesn't have any children of her own, and she was always so marvelous to us when we were young. And she must have had to go to a lot of effort to organize another sort of a shindig. I think it's very plucky of her. It would be churlish if I made no sort of effort to turn up. Besides," he finished in truth, "I want to be there." He said again, "You could come with me."

"I shouldn't know anybody."

"You would, after you'd been there for five minutes."

"Anyway, I hate being cold."

He stopped trying to persuade her. It was always fun taking Elaine to places and introducing her around to his awe-struck acquaintances, because she was so sensational to look at that Tom's own self-esteem took a welcome boost. On the other hand, if she was not having a good time, she would make no effort to hide the fact. Staying with Aunt Mabel was always a bit dicey. One's well-being and comfort depended heavily on the state of the weather, and if the coming weekend turned chilly or damp, then Elaine, hothouse London flower that she was, might turn out to be the worst possible companion.

They had dined together in their favorite restaurant, just around the corner from Elaine's little flat in the King's Road. Now Tom reached across the table, around the coffee-cups, and put his hand over hers.

“All right,” he said. “You don’t have to come. I’ll ring you when I get back and tell you all about it. And you’ll just have to say I’m sorry to the Stainforths. Say I’ll take a rain-check on the invitation.”

* * *

The next day was Friday. Tom, who had already squared things with his boss, left the office at lunchtime and drove north, up the Motorway. It was April and showery weather, but the roads were clear and he was able to allow his thoughts a free rein. Inevitably, they chose to chew over the problem of Elaine.

He had known her now for three months, and despite the fact that she frequently exasperated him she was nevertheless the most engaging person he had met in years. Her very unpredictability had found delightfully stimulating, and she never failed to make him laugh. Because of this, he had taken her home once or twice for long weekends, not anticipating that his mother would find Elaine just as attractive as he did. “She’s perfectly charming,” she kept saying, but she was a model mother and managed, with obvious effort, not to say more. Tom, however, knew very well what she was thinking. He was, after all, nearly thirty. It was time that he settled down, got himself married, provided his mother with the grandchildren that she craved. But did he want to marry Elaine? It was a dilemma that had been tearing him for some time. Perhaps getting away from it—and her—for a little while would be the best thing that could happen. He could view the problem at a distance, as though he were studying some complicated painting; get the details of their relationship into a true proportion. The best way to start doing this was to stop thinking about her, so he put visions of Elaine firmly out of his mind and concentrated instead on the weekend that lay ahead.

* * *

Northumberland. Kinton. Aunt Mabel’s party. Who would be there? Tom was the sole representative of his particular family, but what about all the other cousins? All Ned’s young relations, who had formed the larger part of that gang of children who had run wild at Kinton when they were young. He ran a mental finger down an imaginary list. Roger was a soldier. Anne married and with a family. Young Ned was in Australia. Kitty ...

Putting on speed to pull out into the fast lane and pass a thundering lorry, Tom found himself smiling. Kitty. By some confusion of generations, Kitty was Ned’s great-niece. Kitty had been the rebel, the one who led the way. Kitty who fell out of the tree-house. Kitty who organized the skating party the night the lake was frozen. Kitty who slept out on the battlements because one of the other had dared her, and because she thought that she might see a ghost.

The rest of them, over the years, had, more or less, conformed. Taken typing courses and become secretaries. Been articled to chartered accountants or lawyers and finally qualified. Joined the services. Kitty had conformed to nothing. In desperation her parents had sent her to a French family in Paris as an au-pair girl, but after Madame had found her in the passionate embrace of Monsieur, she

was given—unfairly, everybody agreed—the sack.

“Come home,” her frantic mother had cabled her, but Kitty hadn’t. She had hitched a lift to the south of France, where she met up with a most unsuitable—everybody agreed again—man.

He was called Terence, a wild Irishman from County Cork, and he ran a yacht-charter service out of Saint-Tropez. For a bit Kitty chartered yachts with him, and then brought him back to England to meet her parents. The opposition to him had been so deadly and so absolute that the inevitable happened and Kitty married him.

“But why?” Tom asked his mother when he heard this incredible news. “He’s a gruesome character. He’ll make a rotten husband. Why did she marry him?”

“I’ve no idea,” said his mother. “You know Kitty better than I do.”

“She was the sort of person,” Tom told her, “that you could lead with a carrot, but you could never push with a goad.”

“What a pity her parents never found that out,” said his mother.

Once, on the way back to London after a weekend in Sussex, he had gone to see Kitty and her husband; they had a boat on the Hamble River and Kitty was pregnant. The boat, and Kitty, were both in such a state of shambles, that Tom, without having meant to, asked Kitty and her husband out for dinner. It was a disastrous evening. Terence had got drunk; Kitty had talked nonstop, as though she had been wound up; and Tom had said scarcely anything at all. He had simply listened, paid the bill, helped Kitty get Terence back on board, and flat on his back on his bunk. Then he had left her, got into his car, and driven back to London. Later he heard that the baby was a boy. He did not see her again. He did not see either of them. Mainly he did not want to become involved.

Once, when he was a young man, Mabel told Tom that he should marry Kitty. He had bucked from the very idea, partly because she was like a sister to him, and partly because he was embarrassed, at nineteen, even to be talking about such things as lasting love and matrimony.

“Why do you say that?” he had asked Mabel, nonplussed as to why she had boxed him into this uncomfortable corner.

“You’re the only person she’s ever taken any notice of. If you told her to do something, or not to do it, then she’d behave herself. Of course those parents of hers have never known how to deal with her. There’s a lot going for Kitty, if only they’d let her do her own thing.”

“She’s so bouncy, she’d wear me out,” Tom had said. He was just going to Cambridge and bounciness in sixteen-year-olds had no place in his plans. He was into the older woman, the skinnier and sexier, the better.

“She won’t always be bouncy,” Aunt Mabel pointed out. “One day she’ll be beautiful.”

“I’ll wait for that.”

* * *

The road unrolled like a great grey ribbon behind him. He was through Newcastle and now deep into Northumberland. He left the Motorway and headed into the country, through hilly moorland and sma

stone villages, and down steep avenues of beech. By now it was late afternoon. The sun was setting a blaze of pink, casting rosy shadows on the undersides of large, wet-looking clouds, and tinting the blue bits of sky that showed between them to an extraordinary, translucent aquamarine.

He came at last to Kinton, rounded the squat, square-towered church, and the main street of the village stretched before him. It was an unremarkable street. Two rows of small houses, little shops, pub. It could have been anywhere. Except that, at the far end of this street, a cobbled ramp climbed a grassy slope and passed beneath the arch of a magnificent gatehouse. Beyond the gatehouse was a high-walled courtyard as big as a rugger pitch, and on the far side of this stood the castle. Four stories high, square and turreted with the pepper-pot towers; romantic, unexpected, incongruous.

This was the home of Tom's redoubtable Aunt Mabel.

The older sister of Tom's father, horse-mad, leathery, and down-to-earth, Mabel had never been expected to find a husband. But when she was approaching thirty, love—or something very much like it—had struck. At a horse show near Basingstoke, she had met Ned Kinnerton, allowed him to buy her a half-pint in the beer tent, and was married to him within the month.

Her family had been, by all accounts, torn between delight and horror. Telephones all over Hampshire had buzzed with speculation.

Isn't it marvellous that she's found a husband at last.

He's twice her age.

She's going to have to go and live in an enormous unheated castle in Northumberland.

It's his family home. It's belonged to the Kinnertons for generations.

Imagine the winters! Let's hope I'm never invited to stay.

But Mabel loved Kinton as much as Ned did. Their union was not blessed with children, which was sad because they would have made perfect parents, but, as though to make up for this slip of nature, a selection of nephews and nieces, as often as possible, descended from all quarters of the country upon Mabel and Ned for their school holidays, and more or less took the place over. Mabel never minded what anybody did, provided no one was ever unkind to an animal. So, unchecked, they climbed battlements, slept out in a makeshift tent beneath the cedar tree, poured make-believe boiling oil from the slit window over the massive front door, swam in the reedy lake that lay at the back of the castle, contrived bows and arrows, fell out of trees.

After Ned died, everyone imagined that Mabel would move out of Kinton. But the only male relation who might have been capable of shouldering the massive responsibility of the castle had already taken off for Australia and was making a good life for himself there, and so Mabel remained. *Don't need to heat all the rooms*, she pointed out and shut off the attics by means of draping over blankets across the tops of the circular stairs. *Nice to have a bit of space for friends to come and stay*. She moved the kitchen from the dungeonlike basement to the first floor and had installed a service lift that never worked, but apart from that, life carried on as before. Still housefuls of children—now their teens and fast growing up. Still immense meals at the long mahogany dining-table. Still dogs everywhere, smouldering log fires, snapshots stuck into the frames of mirrors and left there forever,

grow dusty and curl at the corners.

Kinton. He had arrived. He eased the car gently up the cobbled ramp, passed beneath the shadowed arch of the gatehouse. There was a notice posted which read:

THIS IS A PRIVATE, OCCUPIED HOUSE. YOU ARE WELCOME TO LOOK AT IT, BUT PLEASE DON'T DRIVE CARS IN AND FRIGHTEN THE DOGS.

On the far side of the gatehouse was an immense ragged lawn. The road separated and ran around this on both sides, to meet again in front of the massive front door. The encircling walls were part of the most ancient remains of the castle, and the crevices between their stones sprouted with wild valerian and wallflowers that had seeded themselves and flowered every year.

There did not seem to be anybody about. Tom parked the car at the foot of the steps, turned off the engine and got out. The evening air smelt sweet and fresh—cold after London. He went up the steps and grappled with the huge wrought-iron latch of the front door and it swung slowly inwards, creaking slightly, like a door in a horror film. Inside, the high, unheated hallway struck with a damp chill. The floors were stone, an immense fireplace stood flanked by dusty armour and crowned with a ring of ancient swords. He crossed this hallway and went through another set of doors, and now it was as though he had left the Middle Ages behind and was stepping into a set for some film taking place in the Italian Renaissance.

When he had first come to Kinton as a small boy, expecting only spiral staircases and secret passages, and small, darkly panelled rooms, he had been flummoxed by all this opulence. He had looked forward to living in a medieval castle, and felt slightly cheated. But when questioned, Ned had explained to him that a Victorian forbear had taken as his wife a lady of great wealth, and one of her conditions for marrying him was that she should be allowed a free hand with the interior of the castle. So besotted was he with this lady that he agreed to her terms, and she had subsequently spent fifty years and a great deal of money in transforming Kinton to a show-piece of pseudo-Renaissance splendour.

Interior walls, as much as possible, were ripped away. Architects devised the enormous curving stairway, the wide panelled passageways, the delicately arched and pillared windows. Craftsmen were rounded up to work in wrought iron and marble, to carve mantel-pieces, and construct immense and beautiful double doors to all the main rooms.

An Italian was imported from Florence to design and paint the highly decorated ceilings and to transform the walls of the heiress's boudoir, by means of a trompe-l'oeil mural, into a Mediterranean terrace, complete with plaster troughs of scarlet geraniums and views of an azure sea.

After all this structural work had been completed, it was still another six months before the young couple were able to take up residence. Wallpapers were chosen, curtains hung, new carpets laid in all the rooms. Furniture, some old and some new, was carefully disposed. The Kinnerton portraits were hung on the dining-room walls. Family mementoes were displayed in glass-fronted cabinets. Sofas and chairs were upholstered, and scattered with cushions of embroidered Chinese silk.

But since those palmy days of mad extravagance, nothing very much had been done to Kinton

Nothing had been changed or renewed, although from time to time various articles might be glued, nailed together, mended, repainted, or patched. The same curtains, however, still hung, in tatters of faded red brocade. The same carpets lay threadbare down the long passages. The sofas wore sagging slip-covers of some indeterminate print, and were usually covered in dog hairs. Fires smouldered on the grates of sitting-rooms, but passages and bedrooms, dark and sunless, were apt to be piercingly cold. There was a monster boiler down in the basement, and sometimes, in midwinter, if Mabel was feeling extravagant, she would get this going, whereupon a thin warmth would emanate from the huge bulky radiators. But most of the time they stood, jeering, cold as stone.

There was a smell; musty, familiar, dear. Tom ran up the curve of the staircase, taking the steps two at a time, his hand brushing lightly against the mahogany rail that had been polished to a sheen by generations of hands doing just this thing. At the top, he paused on the wide landing. He listened. There was no definite sound, but the old walls stirred and whispered about him, and he knew that Mabel would be somewhere around.

He called her name.

“Tom! I’m here!”

He found her in the library, wearing an apron and a hat, surrounded by the usual selection of ornaments and faithful dogs, as well as a litter of newspaper and flower stalks. She was constructing, in a priceless Chinese bowl, an arrangement of white cherry, yellow forsythia, and enormous yellow trumpet daffodils.

“Oh, my dear.”

She laid down her secateurs and enfolded him in her embrace, which was something of an experience, as she was as tall as Tom, and twice as wide. Then she stood back, holding him at arm’s length, the better to savour the sight of him.

Her face, he had always thought, was a man’s face; strong-featured, large-nosed, square-chinned. This masculinity was emphasized by her uncompromising coiffure, her grey hair drawn tightly back and screwed into a straggling bun, but belied by the generosity of her considerable bosom.

She said, “You’re looking marvellous. Did you have a good journey? How splendid of you to come. Look at me, trying to make the place look presentable for tomorrow night. Can’t describe to you what it’s been like. Eustace—you remember my old gardener—he’s been in, shoving furniture around, and his wife’s polished everything in sight, including the dogs’ bowls, and the kitchen’s full of caterers. Hardly know my own house. How’s your mother and father?”

She picked up her secateurs and went on with her task while Tom, leaning up against a table with his hands in his pockets, told her.

“Wretched creatures,” she remarked, “going off to Majorca at a time like this. I really wanted them to be here. There!” She inserted the last daffodil and stood back to admire the finished result.

“Where’s that going?” Tom asked her.

“I thought on the grand piano.”

“Aunt Mabel, isn’t all this a frightful lot of work for you?”

“No, not really. I just tell people to do things, and they do them. It’s called delegating. And we’re not having a proper orchestra. Not the kind I would have liked. But nobody knows how to waltz these days, so I’ve ordered something called a disco. Heaven knows what’s going to happen.”

“Rock music and strobe lights,” Tom told her. “Where’s the disco going to be?”

“In the old nursery. We emptied it of all the old toys and the doll’s house and the books, and Kitty’s decorating it to look like a jungle.”

After a bit, Tom said, “Kitty?”

“Yes. Kitty. Ned’s niece. Our Kitty.”

“She’s here?”

“Of course she’s here. She couldn’t be decorating the disco if she wasn’t here.”

“But ... the last time I heard of her—the last time I saw her ... she was living in a boat on the Hamble River.”

“Oh, dear, you’re very out of date. That marriage broke up. She got a divorce. I’m amazed you didn’t know.”

“I’ve been out of touch with Kitty. What happened to the dreaded Terence?”

“I think he went back to the south of France.”

“And the little boy?”

“He’s with Kitty.”

“Is she staying here?”

“No. She lives in Caxford.” Caxford was a village out on the moor a few miles from Kinton. “She came to stay with me after the divorce, and then she bought this derelict cottage. Heaven knows what with, she doesn’t appear to have two brass farthings to rub together. Anyway, she bought it and told us all that she was going to do it up and live there. With that, the council slapped a preservation order on it. I thought that would be the end of it, but she managed to get quite a good grant, and she’s been there ever since, living in a caravan with Crispin and working with the builders.”

“Crispin?”

“The boy. He’s four. Nice little chap.”

Tom privately decided that only Kitty would have a son called Crispin.

“But what is she going to do with herself?”

“Oh, goodness knows. You remember what Kitty was like. Once she’d got the bit between her teeth, you could never get a word of sense out of her. Do you want a cup of tea?”

“No, I’m fine.”

“I’ll give you a drink later on.” She began to clear up the litter of her flower arrangement, but as she did this, a knock came at the door, and an unknown head appeared around the edge of it.

“Mrs. Kinnerton, that’s the man with the tumblers. Where do you want them to go?”

“Oh, dear life, if it isn’t one thing, it’s another. Tidy this up for me, would you, Tom, and put a log on the fire...” And she took herself off to deal with the problem of the tumblers, the dogs at her heels and the rubber soles of her sturdy shoes squeaking on the newly polished parquet.

Tom was left in the empty room. He dutifully threw a few dead flower stalks into the fire, added some logs, and then went off to find Kitty.

The old nursery at Kinton was situated at some distance from the main rooms, and shut off from them by a swinging, studded in red baize door. It was contained within the walls of one of the main towers, and so was round, with two low, arched windows, and this in itself had made it fascinatingly attractive to small children. Normally it contained a litter of old toys and some antique, broken, sprung chairs, but now, when he opened the door he saw that it stood empty. The ceiling and the walls, however, had been draped with garden netting, suspended from a central fixture in the roof, and this netting was woven with long strands of trailing ivy and sprays of evergreen.

As well, there was a tall pair of steps, and on the top of these, with pliers gripped between her teeth and a ball of green string in her hands, was a tall and slender girl, her blonde hair scraped back into a pony-tail and a look of agonized concentration on her face as she struggled with a recalcitrant branch of spruce.

As he came into the room, she took the pliers from her mouth and, without looking at him, said, "Somebody would just get this bit of ivy out of my face..."

"Hello, Kitty," said Tom.

She turned, at some peril to her own safety, and looked down at him. The spruce branch fell to the floor and the ivy wound itself around her neck like some pagan wreath. After a bit, she said, "Tom."

"You seem to be having a good time."

"I'm having a miserable time. I can't get anything to stay in place, and I've got cramp in my fingers from tying knots."

"It looks fine to me."

Cautiously, she disentangled herself from the ivy, tucked it away in the folds of the netting, and then turned cautiously around and sat on the top step, facing him.

She said, "I knew you were coming. Mabel told me."

"I didn't know you were here."

"Nice surprise for you."

"You're thin."

"Last time you saw me, I was large with child."

"I don't mean that sort of thin. You're really thin. It suits you."

"That's all my hard work. Have you heard about my house?"

"Mabel just told me. She told me about the divorce too. I'm sorry."

"I'm not. The whole thing was a ghastly mistake, and one that I should never have made." She shrugged. "But you know me, Tom. If ever there was a stupid thing to do, then I did it."

"Where's your little boy?"

"Around the place somewhere. Probably eating sandwich crusts in the kitchen."

She was wearing a dirty old pair of jeans and blue canvas sneakers. Her sweater was so old as to be ragged. There was a hole in one sleeve, and Kitty's bony elbow protruded from this. Looking up at her

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