



The Sweetness at the Bottom of the Pie

Alan Bradley

The Sweetness at the Bottom of the Pie

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The Sweetness
at the Bottom
of the Pie



ALAN BRADLEY

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UNLESS SOME SWEETNESS AT THE BOTTOM LIE, WHO CARES FOR ALL THE CRINKLING OF THE PIE?

William King, *The Art of Cookery* (1709)

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Reader's Guide

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About the Author

IT WAS AS BLACK IN THE CLOSET AS OLD BLOOD. THEY had shoved me in and locked the door. I breathed heavily through my nose, fighting desperately to remain calm. I tried counting to ten on every intake of breath, and to eight as I released each one slowly into the darkness. Luckily for me, they had pulled the gag so tightly into my open mouth that my nostrils were left unobstructed, and I was able to draw in one slow lungful after another of the stale, musty air.

I tried hooking my fingernails under the silk scarf that bound my hands behind me, but since I always bit them to the quick, there was nothing to catch. Jolly good luck then that I remembered to put my fingertips together, using them as ten firm little bases to press my palms apart as they had pulled the knots tight.

Now I rotated my wrists, squeezing them together until I felt a bit of slack, using my thumbs to work the silk down until the knots were between my palms—then between my fingers. If they had been bright enough to think of tying my thumbs together, I should never have escaped. What utter morons they were.

With my hands free at last, I made short work of the gag.

Now for the door. But first, to be sure they were not lying in wait for me, I squatted and peered out through the keyhole at the attic. Thank heavens they had taken the key away with them. There was no one in sight; save for its perpetual tangle of shadows, junk, and sad bric-a-brac, the long attic was empty. The coast was clear.

Reaching above my head at the back of the closet, I unscrewed one of the wire coat hooks from its mounting board. By sticking its curved wing into the keyhole and levering the other end, I was able to form an L-shaped hook which I poked into the depths of the ancient lock. A bit of judicious fishing and fiddling yielded a gratifying click. It was almost too easy. The door swung open and I was free.

I SKIPPED DOWN THE BROAD stone staircase into the hall, pausing at the door of the dining room just long enough to toss my pigtails back over my shoulders and into their regulation position.

Father still insisted on dinner being served as the clock struck the hour and eaten at the massive oak refectory table, just as it had been when Mother was alive.

“Ophelia and Daphne not down yet, Flavia?” he asked peevishly, looking up from the latest issue of *The British Philatelist*, which lay open beside his meat and potatoes.

“I haven’t seen them in ages,” I said.

It was true. I hadn’t seen them—not since they had gagged and blindfolded me, then lugged me hog-tied up the attic stairs and locked me in the closet.

Father glared at me over his spectacles for the statutory four seconds before he went back to mumbling over his sticky treasures.

I shot him a broad smile, a smile wide enough to present him with a good view of the wire braces that caged my teeth. Although they gave me the look of a dirigible with the skin of a drum, Father always liked being reminded that he was getting his money’s worth. But this time he

was too preoccupied to notice.

I hoisted the lid off the Spode vegetable dish and, from the depths of its hand-painted butterflies and raspberries, spooned out a generous helping of peas. Using my knife as a ruler and my fork as a prod, I marshaled the peas so that they formed meticulous rows and columns across my plate: rank upon rank of little green spheres, spaced with a precision that would have delighted the heart of the most exacting Swiss watchmaker. Then, beginning at the bottom left, I speared the first pea with my fork and ate it.

It was all Ophelia's fault. She was, after all, seventeen, and therefore expected to possess at least a modicum of the maturity she should come into as an adult. That she should gang up with Daphne, who was thirteen, simply wasn't fair. Their combined ages totalled thirty years. Thirty years!—against my eleven. It was not only unsporting, it was downright rotten. And I simply screamed out for revenge.

NEXT MORNING I WAS BUSY among the flasks and flagons of my chemical laboratory on the top floor of the east wing when Ophelia barged in without so much as a la-di-dah.

“Where's my pearl necklace?”

I shrugged. “I'm not the keeper of your trinkets.”

“I know you took it. The Mint Imperials that were in my lingerie drawer are gone too, and I've observed that missing mints in this household seem always to wind up in the same grubby little mouth.”

I adjusted the flame on a spirit lamp that was heating a beaker of red liquid. “If you're insinuating that my personal hygiene is not up to the same high standard as yours you can go and suck my galoshes.”

“Flavia!”

“Well, you can. I'm sick and tired of being blamed for everything, Feely.”

But my righteous indignation was cut short as Ophelia peered shortsightedly into the rubber flask, which was just coming to the boil.

“What's that sticky mass in the bottom?” Her long manicured fingernail tapped at the glass.

“It's an experiment. Careful, Feely, it's acid!”

Ophelia's face went white. “Those are my pearls! They belonged to Mummy!”

Ophelia was the only one of Harriet's daughters who referred to her as “Mummy”: the only one of us old enough to have any real memories of the flesh-and-blood woman who had carried us in her body, a fact of which Ophelia never tired of reminding us. Harriet had been killed in a mountaineering accident when I was just a year old, and she was not often spoken of at Buckshaw.

Was I jealous of Ophelia's memories? Did I resent them? I don't believe I did; it ran far deeper than that. In rather an odd way, I despised Ophelia's memories of our mother.

I looked up slowly from my work so that the round lenses of my spectacles would flash blank white semaphores of light at her. I knew that whenever I did this, Ophelia had the horrid impression that she was in the presence of some mad black-and-white German scientist.

in a film at the Gaumont.

“Beast!”

“Hag!” I retorted. But not until Ophelia had spun round on her heel—quite neatly, thought—and stormed out the door.

Retribution was not long in coming, but then with Ophelia, it never was. Ophelia was not as I was, a long-range planner who believed in letting the soup of revenge simmer to perfection.

Quite suddenly after dinner, with Father safely retired to his study to gloat over his collection of paper heads, Ophelia had too quietly put down the silver butter knife in which, like a budgerigar, she had been regarding her own reflection for the last quarter of an hour. Without preamble she said, “I’m not really your sister, you know ... nor is Daphne. That’s why we’re so unlike you. I don’t suppose it’s ever even occurred to you that you’re adopted.”

I dropped my spoon with a clatter. “That’s not true. I’m the spitting image of Harriet. Everybody says so.”

“She picked you out at the Home for Unwed Mothers because of the striking resemblance,” Ophelia said, making a distasteful face.

“How could there be a resemblance when she was an adult and I was a baby?” I was nothing if not quick on the uptake.

“Because you reminded her of her own baby pictures. Good Lord, she even dragged them along and held them up beside you for comparison.”

I appealed to Daphne, whose nose was firmly stuck in a leather-bound copy of *The Castle of Otranto*. “That’s not true, is it, Daffy?”

“’Fraid so,” Daphne said, idly turning an onionskin page. “Father always said it would come as a bit of a shock to you. He made both of us swear never to tell. Or at least until you were eleven. He made us take an oath.”

“A green Gladstone bag,” Ophelia said. “I saw it with my own eyes. I watched Mum stuffing her own baby pictures into a green Gladstone bag to drag off to the home. Although she was only six at the time—almost seven—I’ll never forget her white hands ... her fingers on the brass clasp.”

I leapt up from the table and fled the room in tears. I didn’t actually think of the poison until next morning at breakfast.

As with all great schemes, it was a simple one.

BUCKSHAW HAD BEEN THE HOME of our family, the de Luces, since time out of mind. The present Georgian house had been built to replace an Elizabethan original burnt to the ground by the villagers who suspected the de Luces of Orange sympathies. That we had been ardent Catholics for four hundred years, and remained so, meant nothing to the inflamed citizenry of Bishop’s Lacey. “Old House,” as it was called, had gone up in flames, and the new house which had replaced it was now well into its third century.

Two later de Luce ancestors, Antony and William de Luce, who had disagreed about the Crimean War, had spoiled the lines of the original structure. Each of them had subsequent

added a wing, William the east wing and Antony the west.

Each became a recluse in his own dominion, and each had forbidden the other ever to set foot across the black line which they caused to be painted dead center from the vestibule to the front, across the foyer, and straight through to the butler's W.C. behind the back stairs. Their two yellow brick annexes, pustulantly Victorian, folded back like the pinioned wings of a boneyard angel which, to my eyes, gave the tall windows and shutters of Buckshaw Hall a Georgian front the prim and surprised look of an old maid whose bun is too tight.

A later de Luce, Tarquin—or Tar, as he was called—in the wake of a sensational mental breakdown, made a shambles of what had promised to be a brilliant career in chemistry, and was sent down from Oxford in the summer of Queen Victoria's Silver Jubilee.

Tar's indulgent father, solicitous of the lad's uncertain health, had spared no expense in outfitting a laboratory on the top floor of Buckshaw's east wing: a laboratory replete with German glassware, German microscopes, a German spectroscope, brass chemical balances from Lucerne, and a complexly shaped mouth-blown German Geisler tube to which Tar could attach electrical coils to study the way in which various gases fluoresce.

On a desk by the windows was a Leitz microscope, whose brass still shone with the same warm luxury as it had the day it was brought by pony cart from the train at Buckshaw Hall. Its reflecting mirror could be angled to catch the first pale rays of the morning sun, while for cloudy days or for use after dark, it was equipped with a paraffin microscope lamp by Davidson & Co. of London.

There was even an articulated human skeleton on a wheeled stand, given to Tar when he was only twelve by the great naturalist Frank Buckland, whose father had eaten the mummified heart of King Louis XIV.

Three walls of this room were lined from floor to ceiling with glass-fronted cabinets, two of them filled row upon row with chemicals in glass apothecary jars, each labeled in the meticulous copperplate handwriting of Tar de Luce, who in the end had thwarted Fate and outlived them all. He died in 1928 at the age of sixty in the midst of his chemical kingdom where he was found one morning by his housekeeper, one of his dead eyes still peering sightlessly through his beloved Leitz. It was rumored that he had been studying the first-order decomposition of nitrogen pentoxide. If that was true, it was the first recorded research into a reaction which was to lead eventually to the development of the A-bomb.

Uncle Tar's laboratory had been locked up and preserved in airless silence, down through the dusty years until what Father called my "strange talents" had begun to manifest themselves, and I had been able to claim it for my own.

I still shivered with joy whenever I thought of the rainy autumn day that Chemistry had fallen into my life.

I had been scaling the bookcases in the library, pretending I was a noted Alpinist, when my foot slipped and a heavy book was knocked to the floor. As I picked it up to straighten its creased pages, I saw that it was filled not just with words, but with dozens of drawings as well. In some of them, disembodied hands poured liquids into curiously made glass containers that looked as if they might have been musical instruments from another world.

The book's title was *An Elementary Study of Chemistry*, and within moments it had taught

me that the word *iodine* comes from a word meaning “violet,” and that the name *bromine* was derived from a Greek word meaning “a stench.” These were the sorts of things I needed to know! I slipped the fat red volume under my sweater and took it upstairs, and it wasn’t until later that I noticed the name *H. de Luce* written on the flyleaf. The book had belonged to Harriet.

Soon, I found myself poring over its pages in every spare moment. There were evenings when I could hardly wait for bedtime. Harriet’s book had become my secret friend.

In it were detailed all the alkali metals: metals with fabulous names like lithium and rubidium; the alkaline earths such as strontium, barium, and radium. I cheered aloud when I read that a woman, Madame Curie, had discovered radium.

And then there were the poisonous gases: phosphine, arsine (a single bubble of which had been known to prove fatal), nitrogen peroxide, hydrogen sulfide ... the lists went on and on. When I found that precise instructions were given for formulating these compounds, I was in seventh heaven.

Once I had taught myself to make sense of the chemical equations such as $K_4FeC_6N_6 + 24HCl = 6KCN + Fe$ (which describes what happens when the yellow prussiate of potash is heated with potassium to produce potassium cyanide), the universe was laid open before me: It was like having stumbled upon a recipe book that had once belonged to the witch in the wood.

What intrigued me more than anything was finding out the way in which everything, all of creation—all of it!—was held together by invisible chemical bonds, and I found a strangely inexplicable comfort in knowing that somewhere, even though we couldn’t see it in our own world, there was real stability.

I didn’t make the obvious connection at first, between the book and the abandoned laboratory I had discovered as a child. But when I did, my life came to life—if that makes any sense.

Here in Uncle Tar’s lab, row on row, were the chemistry books he had so lovingly assembled, and I soon discovered that with a little effort most of them were not too far beyond my understanding.

Simple experiments came next, and I tried to remember to follow instructions to the letter. Not to say that there weren’t a few stinks and explosions, but the less said about those the better.

As time went on, my notebooks grew fatter. My work was becoming ever more sophisticated as the mysteries of Organic Chemistry revealed themselves to me, and I rejoiced in my newfound knowledge of what could be extracted so easily from nature.

My particular passion was poison.

I SLASHED AWAY at the foliage with a bamboo walking stick pinched from an elephant-foot umbrella stand in the front hall. Back here in the kitchen garden, the high redbrick walls had not yet let in the warming sun; everything was still sodden from the rain that had fallen the night.

Making my way through the debris of last year’s uncut grass, I poked along the bottom

the wall until I found what I was looking for: a patch of bright leaves whose scarlet glo made their three-leaved clusters easy to spot among the other vines. Pulling on a pair of cotton gardening gloves that had been tucked into my belt, and launching into a loud whistled rendition of “Bibbidi-Bobbidi-Boo,” I went to work.

Later, in the safety of my sanctum sanctorum, my Holy of Holies—I had come across the delightful phrase in a biography of Thomas Jefferson and adopted it as my own—I stuffed the colorful leaves into a glass retort, taking care not to remove my gloves until their shimmering foliage was safely tamped down. Now came the part I loved.

Stoppering the retort, I connected it on one side to a flask in which water was already boiling, and on the other to a coiled glass condensing tube whose open end hung suspended over an empty beaker. With the water bubbling furiously, I watched as the steam found its way through the tubing and escaped into the flask among the leaves. Already they were beginning to curl and soften as the hot vapor opened the tiny pockets between their cells, releasing the oils that were the essence of the living plant.

This was the way the ancient alchemists had practiced their art: fire and steam, steam and fire. Distillation.

How I loved this work.

Distillation. I said it aloud. “Dis-till-ation!”

I looked on in awe as the steam cooled and condensed in the coil, and wrung my hands in ecstasy as the first limpid drop of liquid hung suspended, then dropped with an audible *pllop* into the waiting receptacle.

When the water had boiled away and the operation was complete, I turned off the flame and cupped my chin in my palms to watch with fascination as the fluid in the beaker settled out into two distinct layers: the clear distilled water on the bottom, a liquid of a light yellow hue floating on top. This was the essential oil of the leaves. It was called urushiol and had been used, among other things, in the manufacture of lacquer.

Digging into the pocket of my sweater, I pulled out a shiny gold tube. I removed its cap and couldn’t help smiling as a red tip was revealed. Ophelia’s lipstick, purloined from the drawer of her dressing table, along with the pearls and the Mint Imperials. And Feely—Miss Snotrag—hadn’t even noticed it was gone.

Remembering the mints, I popped one into my mouth, crushing the sweet noisily between my molars.

The core of lipstick came out easily enough, and I relit the spirit lamp. Only a gentle heat was required to reduce the waxy stuff to a sticky mass. If Feely only knew that lipstick was made of fish scales, I thought, she might be a little less eager to slather the stuff all over her mouth. I must remember to tell her. I grinned. Later.

With a pipette I drew off a few millimeters of the distilled oil that floated in the beaker and then, drop by drop, dripped it gently into the ooze of the melted lipstick, giving the mixture a vigorous stir with a wooden tongue depressor.

Too thin, I thought. I fetched down a jar and added a dollop of beeswax to restore it to its former consistency.

Time for the gloves again—and for the iron bullet mold I had pinched from Buckshaw really quite decent firearm museum.

Odd, isn't it, that a charge of lipstick is precisely the size of a .45 caliber slug. A useful bit of information, really. I'd have to remember to think of its wider ramifications tonight when I was tucked safely into my bed. Right now, I was far too busy.

Teased from its mold and cooled under running water, the reformulated red core fitted neatly back inside its golden dispenser.

I screwed it up and down several times to make sure that it was working. Then I replaced the cap. Feely was a late sleeper and would still be dawdling over breakfast.

"WHERE'S MY LIPSTICK, you little swine? What have you done with it?"

"It's in your drawer," I said. "I noticed it when I purloined your pearls."

In my short life, bracketed by two sisters, I had of necessity become master of the forked tongue.

"It's not in my drawer. I've just looked, and it isn't there."

"Did you put on your specs?" I asked with a smirk.

Although Father had had all of us fitted with spectacles, Feely refused to wear hers and mine contained little more than window glass. I wore them only in the laboratory to protect my eyes, or to solicit sympathy.

Feely slammed down the heels of her hands on the table and stormed from the room.

I went back to plumbing the depths of my second bowl of Weetabix.

Later, I wrote in my notebook:

Friday, 2nd of June 1950, 9:42 A.M. Subject's appearance normal but grumpy.

(Isn't she always?) Onset may vary from 12 to 72 hours.

I could wait.

MRS. MULLET, WHO WAS short and gray and round as a millstone and who, I'm quite sure, thought of herself as a character in a poem by A. A. Milne, was in the kitchen formulating one of her pus-like custard pies. As usual, she was struggling with the large Aga cooker that dominated the small, cramped kitchen.

"Oh, Miss Flavia! Here, help me with the oven, dear."

But before I could think of a suitable response, Father was behind me.

"Flavia, a word." His voice was as heavy as the lead weights on a deep-sea diver's boots.

I glanced at Mrs. Mullet to see how she was taking it. She always fled at the slightest whiff of unpleasantness, and once when Father raised his voice, she had rolled herself up in the carpet and refused to come out until her husband was sent for.

She eased the oven door shut as if it were made of Waterford crystal.

"I must be off," she said. "Lunch is in the warming oven."

“Thank you, Mrs. Mullet,” Father said. “We’ll manage.” We were always managing.

She opened the kitchen door—and let out a sudden shriek like a cornered badger. “O good Lord! Beggin’ your pardon, Colonel de Luce, but, oh, good Lord!”

Father and I had to push a bit to see round her.

It was a bird, a jack snipe—and it was dead. It lay on its back on the doorstep, its stiff wings extended like a little pterodactyl, its eyes rather unpleasantly filmed over, the long black needle of its bill pointing straight up into the air. Something impaled upon it shifted in the morning breeze—a tiny scrap of paper.

No, not a scrap of paper, a postage stamp.

Father bent down for a closer look, then gave a little gasp. And suddenly he was clutching at his throat, his hands shaking like aspen leaves in autumn, his face the color of sodden ashes.

MY SPINE, AS THEY SAY, TURNED TO ICE. FOR A MOMENT I thought he was having a heart attack, as sedentary fathers often do. One minute they are crowing at you to chew every mouthful twenty-nine times and the next you are reading about them in *The Daily Telegraph*:

Calderwood, Jabez, of The Parsonage, Frinton. Suddenly at his residence on Saturday, the 14th inst. In his fifty-second year. Eldest son of et cetera ... et cetera ... et cetera ... survived by daughters, Anna, Diana, and Trianna ...

CALDERWOOD, JABEZ, AND HIS ILK had the habit of popping off to heaven like jacks-in-the-box, leaving behind, to fend for themselves, an assortment of dismal-sounding daughters.

Hadn't I already lost one parent? Surely Father wouldn't pull such a rotten trick.

Or would he?

No. He was now sucking air noisily up through his nose like a cart horse as he reached out towards the thing on the doorstep. His fingers, like long, unsteady white tweezers, deskewered the stamp delicately from the dead bird's bill, and then shoved the punctured scrap hastily into one of his waistcoat pockets. He pointed a trembling forefinger at the little carcass.

"Dispose of that thing, Mrs. Mullet," he said in a strangled voice that sounded like someone else's: the voice of a stranger.

"Oh my, Colonel de Luce," Mrs. Mullet said. "Oh my, Colonel, I don't ... I think ... I mean to say ..."

But he was already gone, to his study, stumping off, huffing and puffing like a freight engine.

As Mrs. M went, hand over mouth, for the dustpan, I escaped to my bedroom.

THE BEDROOMS AT BUCKSHAW WERE VAST, dim Zeppelin hangars, and mine, in the south—or Tar—wing, as we called it, was the largest of the lot. Its early-Victorian wallpaper (mustard yellow, with a spattering of things that looked like bloodred clots of string) made it seem even larger: cold, boundless, drafty waste. Even in summer the trek across the room to the distant washstand near the window was an experience that might have daunted Scott of the Antarctic; just one of the reasons I skipped it and climbed straight up into my four-poster bed where, wrapped in a woolen blanket, I could sit cross-legged until the cows came home, pondering my life.

I thought, for instance, of the time I used a butter knife to scrape off samples of my jaundiced wall covering. I remembered Daffy's wide-eyed recounting of one of A. J. Cronin's books in which some poor sod sickened and died after sleeping in a room in which one of the wallpaper's prime coloring ingredients was arsenic. Filled with hope, I carried my scraping up to the laboratory for analysis.

No stodgy old Marsh's test for me, thank you very much! I favored the method by which the arsenic was first converted to its trioxidic, then heated with sodium acetate to produce cacodyl oxide: not only one of the most poisonous substances ever known to exist on the planet Earth, but one with the added advantage of giving off a most unbelievably offensive odor: like the stink of rotten garlic, but a million times worse. Its discoverer, Bunsen (of burner fame), noted that just one whiff of the stuff would not only make your hands and feet tingle, but also your tongue would develop a vile black coating. Oh, Lord, how manifold are thy works!

You can imagine my disappointment when I saw that my sample contained no arsenic: it had been colored by a simple organic tincture, most likely one made from the common goat willow (*Salix caprea*) or some other harmless and supremely boring vegetable dye.

Somehow that caused my thoughts to go flying back to Father.

What had frightened him so at the kitchen door? And *was* it really fear I had seen in his face?

Yes, there seemed little doubt of that. There was nothing else it could have been. I was already far too familiar with his anger, his impatience, his fatigue, his sudden bleak mood—all of them states which drifted now and then across his face like the shadows of the clouds that moved across our English hills.

He was not afraid of dead birds, that much I knew. I had seen him tuck into many a festive Christmas goose, brandishing his knife and fork like an Oriental assassin. Surely it couldn't be the presence of feathers? Or the bird's dead eye?

And it couldn't have been the stamp. Father loved stamps more dearly than he loved his offspring. The only thing he had ever loved more than his pretty bits of paper was Harriette. And she, as I have said, was dead.

Like that snipe.

Could that be the reason for his reaction?

"No! No! Get away!" The harsh voice came in at my open window, derailing and wrecking my train of thought.

I threw off the blanket, leaped from my bed, ran across the room, and looked down into the kitchen garden.

It was Dogger. He was flattened against the garden wall, his dark, weathered fingers splayed out across the faded red bricks.

"Don't come near me! Get away!"

Dogger was Father's man: his factotum. And he was alone in the garden.

It was whispered—by Mrs. Mullet, I might as well admit—that Dogger had survived two years in a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp, followed by thirteen more months of torture, starvation, malnutrition, and forced labor on the Death Railway between Thailand and Burma, where, it was thought, he had been forced to eat rats.

"Go gently, dear," she told me. "His nerves are something shocking."

I looked down at him there in the cucumber patch, his thatch of prematurely white hair

standing on end; his eyes upturned, seemingly sightless, to the sun.

“It’s all right, Dogger!” I shouted. “I’ve got them covered from up here.”

For a moment, I thought he hadn’t heard me, but then his face turned slowly, like a sunflower, towards the sound of my voice. I held my breath. You never know what someone might do in such a state.

“Steady on, Dogger,” I called out. “It’s all right. They’ve gone.”

Suddenly he went limp, like a man who has been holding a live electrical wire in which the current has just been switched off.

“Miss Flavia?” His voice quavered. “Is that you, Miss Flavia?”

“I’m coming down,” I said. “I’ll be there in a jiff.”

Down the back stairs I ran, pell-mell, and into the kitchen. Mrs. Mullet had gone home, but her custard pie sat cooling at the open window.

No, I thought: What Dogger needed was something to drink. Father kept his Scotch locked tightly in a bookcase in his study, and I could not intrude.

Luckily, I found a pitcher of cool milk in the pantry. I poured out a tall glass of it, and dashed into the garden.

“Here, drink this,” I said, holding it out to him.

Dogger took the drink in both hands, stared at it for a long moment as if he didn’t know what to do with it, and then raised it unsteadily to his mouth. He drank deeply until the milk was gone. He handed me the empty glass.

For a moment, he looked vaguely beatific, like an angel by Raphael, but that impression quickly passed.

“You have a white mustache,” I told him. I bent down to the cucumbers and, tearing off a large, dark green leaf from the vine, used it to wipe his upper lip.

The light was coming back into his empty eyes.

“Milk and cucumbers ...” he said. “Cucumbers and milk ...”

“Poison!” I shouted, jumping up and down and flapping my arms like a chicken, to show him that everything was under control. “Deadly poison!” And we both laughed a little.

He blinked.

“My!” he said, looking round the garden as if he were a princess coming awake from the deepest dream, “isn’t it turning out to be a lovely day!”

FATHER DID NOT APPEAR AT LUNCH. To reassure myself, I put an ear to his study door and listened for a few minutes to the flipping of philatelic pages and an occasional clearing of the paternal throat. Nerves, I decided.

At the table, Daphne sat with her nose in Walpole (Horace), her cucumber sandwich beside her, soggy and forgotten on a plate. Ophelia, sighing endlessly, crossing, uncrossing, and recrossing her legs, stared blankly off into space, and I could only assume she was trifling with her mind with Ned Cropper, the jack-of-all-trades at the Thirteen Drakes. She was to

absorbed in her haughty reverie to notice when I leaned in for a closer look at her lips as she reached absently for a cube of cane sugar, popped it into her mouth, and began sucking.

“Ah,” I remarked, to no one in particular, “the pimples will be blooming in the morning.”

She made a lunge for me, but my legs were faster than her flippers.

Back upstairs in my laboratory, I wrote:

Friday, 2nd of June 1950, 1:07 p.m. No visible reaction as yet. “Patience is a necessary ingredient of genius.”

—(Disraeli)

TEN O’CLOCK HAD COME and gone, and still I couldn’t sleep. Mostly, when the light’s out I’m a lump of lead, but tonight was different. I lay on my back, hands clasped behind my head, reviewing the day.

First there had been Father. Well, no, that’s not quite true. First there had been the dead bird on the doorstep—and then there had been Father. What I thought I had seen on his face was fear, but still there was some little corner of my brain that didn’t seem to believe it.

To me—to all of us—Father was fearless. He had seen things during the War: horrid things that must never be put into words. He had somehow survived the years of Harriet’s vanishing and presumed death. And through it all he had been stalwart, staunch, dogged, and unshakeable. Unbelievably British. Unbearably stiff upper lip. But now ...

And then there was Dogger: Arthur Wellesley Dogger, to give him his “full patronymic” (as he called it on his better days). Dogger had come to us first as Father’s valet, but then, as “the full vicissitudes of that position” (his words, not mine) bore down upon his shoulders, he found it “more copacetic” to become butler, then chauffeur, then Buckshaw’s general handyman, then chauffeur again for a while. In recent months, he had rocked gently down like a falling autumn leaf, before coming to rest in his present post of gardener, and Father had donated our Hillman estate wagon to St. Tancred’s as a raffle prize.

Poor Dogger! That’s what I thought, even though Daphne told me I should never say that about anyone: “It’s not only condescending, it fails to take into account the future,” she said.

Still, who could forget the sight of Dogger in the garden? A great simple hulk of a helpless man just standing there, hair and tools in disarray, wheelbarrow overturned, and a look on his face as if ... as if ...

A rustle of sound caught my ear. I turned my head and listened.

Nothing.

It is a simple fact of Nature that I happen to possess acute hearing: the kind of hearing Father once told me, that allows its owner to hear spiderwebs clanging like horseshoes against the walls. Harriet had possessed it too, and sometimes I like to imagine I am, in any way, a rather odd remnant of her: a pair of disembodied ears drifting round the haunted halls of Buckshaw, hearing things that are sometimes better left unheard.

But, listen! There it was again! A voice reflected; hard and hollow, like a whisper in an empty biscuit tin.

I slipped out of bed and went on tiptoes to the window. Taking care not to jiggle the curtains, I peeked out into the kitchen garden just as the moon obligingly came out from behind a cloud to illuminate the scene, much as it would in a first-rate production of *Midsummer Night's Dream*.

But there was nothing more to see than its silvery light dancing among the cucumbers and the roses.

And then I heard a voice: an angry voice, like the buzzing of a bee in late summer trying to fly through a closed windowpane.

I threw on one of Harriet's Japanese silk housecoats (one of the two I had rescued from the Great Purge), shoved my feet into the beaded Indian moccasins that served as slippers, and crept to the head of the stairs. The voice was coming from somewhere inside the house.

Buckshaw possessed two Grand Staircases, each one winding down in a sinuous mirror image of the other, from the first floor, coming to earth just short of the black painted lintel that divided the checker-tiled foyer. My staircase, from the "Tar," or east wing, terminated in that great echoing painted hall beyond which, over against the west wing, was the firearm museum, and behind it, Father's study. It was from this direction that the voice was emanating. I crept towards it.

I put an ear to the door.

"Besides, Jacko," a caddish voice was saying on the other side of the paneled wood, "how could you live in the light of discovery? How could you ever go on?"

For a queasy instant I thought George Sanders had come to Buckshaw, and was lecturing Father behind closed doors.

"Get out," Father said, his voice not angry, but in that level, controlled tone that told me he was furious. In my mind I could see his furrowed brow, his clenched fists, and his jaw muscles taut as bowstrings.

"Oh, come off it, old boy," said the oily voice. "We're in this together—always have been, always will be. You know it as well as I."

"Twining was right," Father said. "You're a loathsome, despicable excuse for a human being."

"Twining? Old Cuppa? Cuppa's been dead these thirty years, Jacko—like Jacob Marley. But, like said Marley, his ghost lingers on. As perhaps you've noticed."

"And we killed him," Father said, in a flat, dead voice.

Had I heard what I'd heard? How could he—

By taking my ear from the door and bending to peer through the keyhole I missed Father's next words. He was standing beside his desk, facing the door. The stranger's back was to me. He was excessively tall, six foot four, I guessed. With his red hair and rusty gray suit, he reminded me of the Sandhill Crane that stood stuffed in a dim corner of the firearm museum.

I reapplied my ear to the paneled door.

"... no statute of limitations on shame," the voice was saying. "What's a couple of thousand to you, Jacko? You must have come into a fair bit when Harriet died. Why, the insurance

alone—”

“Shut your filthy mouth!” Father shouted. “Get out before I—”

Suddenly I was seized from behind and a rough hand was clapped across my mouth. My heart almost leaped out of my chest.

I was being held so tightly I couldn't manage a struggle.

“Go back to bed, Miss Flavia,” a voice hissed into my ear.

It was Dogger.

“This is none of your business,” he whispered. “Go back to bed.”

He loosened his grip on me and I struggled free. I shot him a poisonous look.

In the near-darkness, I saw his eyes soften a little.

“Buzz off,” he whispered.

I buzzed off.

Back in my room I paced up and down for a while, as I often do when I'm thwarted.

I thought about what I'd overheard. Father a murderer? That was impossible. There was probably some quite simple explanation. If only I'd heard the rest of the conversation between Father and the stranger ... if only Dogger hadn't ambushed me in the dark. Who did he think he was?

I'll show him, I thought.

“With no further ado!” I said aloud.

I slipped José Iturbi from his green paper sleeve, gave my portable gramophone a good winding-up, and slapped the second side of Chopin's Polonaise in A flat Major onto the turntable. I threw myself across the bed and sang along:

“DAH-dah-dah-dah, DAH-dah-dah-dah, DAH-dah-dah-dah, DAH-dah-dah-dah ...”

The music sounded as if it had been composed for a film in which someone was cranking an old Bentley that kept sputtering out: hardly a selection to float you off to dreamland ...

WHEN I OPENED MY EYES, an oyster-colored dawn was peeping in at the windows. The hands of my brass alarm clock stood at 3:44. On Summer Time, daylight came early, and in less than a quarter of an hour, the sun should be up.

I stretched, yawned, and climbed out of bed. The gramophone had run down, frozen in mid-Polonaise, its needle lying dead in the grooves. For a fleeting moment I thought of winding it up again to give the household a Polish reveille. And then I remembered what had happened just a few hours before.

I went to the window and looked down into the garden. There was the potting shed, its glass panes clouded with the dew, and over there, an angular darkness that was Dogger's overturned wheelbarrow, forgotten in the events of yesterday.

Determined to put it right, to make up to him somehow, for something of which I was not even certain, I dressed and went quietly down the back stairs and into the kitchen.

As I passed the window, I noticed that a slice had been cut from Mrs. Mullet's custard pi

How odd, I thought; it was certainly none of the de Luces who had taken it. If there was one thing upon which we all agreed—one thing that united us as a family—it was our collective loathing of Mrs. Mullet's custard pies. Whenever she strayed from our favorite rhubarb or gooseberry to the dreaded custard, we generally begged off, feigning group illness, and sent her packing off home with the pie, and solicitous instructions to serve it up, with our compliments, to her good husband, Alf.

As I stepped outside, I saw that the silver light of dawn had transformed the garden into a magic glade, its shadows darkened by the thin band of day beyond the walls. Sparkling dew lay upon everything, and I should not have been at all surprised if a unicorn had stepped from behind a rosebush and tried to put its head in my lap.

I was walking towards the wheelbarrow when I tripped suddenly and fell forward onto my hands and knees.

"Bugger!" I said, already looking round to make sure that no one had heard me. I was not plastered with wet black loam.

"Bugger," I said again, a little less loudly.

Twisting round to see what had tripped me up, I spotted it at once: something white protruding from the cucumbers. For a teetering moment there was a part of me that fought desperately to believe it was a little rake, a cunning little cultivator with white curled tines.

But reason returned, and my mind admitted that it was a hand. A hand attached to an arm, an arm that snaked off into the cucumber patch.

And there, at the end of it, tinted an awful dewy cucumber green by the dark foliage, was a face. A face that looked for all the world like the Green Man of forest legend.

Driven by a will stronger than my own, I found myself dropping further to my hands and knees beside this apparition, partly in reverence and partly for a closer look.

When I was almost nose to nose with the thing its eyes began to open.

I was too shocked to move a muscle.

The body in the cucumbers sucked in a shuddering breath ... and then, bubbling at the nose, exhaled it in a single word, slowly and a little sadly, directly into my face.

"*Vale,*" it said.

My nostrils pinched reflexively as I got a whiff of a peculiar odor—an odor whose name I was, for an instant, on the very tip of my tongue.

The eyes, as blue as the birds in the Willow pattern, looked up into mine as if staring out from some dim and smoky past, as if there were some recognition in their depths.

And then they died.

I wish I could say my heart was stricken, but it wasn't. I wish I could say my instinct was to run away, but that would not be true. Instead, I watched in awe, savoring every detail: the fluttering fingers, the almost imperceptible bronze metallic cloudiness that appeared on the skin, as if, before my very eyes, it were being breathed upon by death.

And then the utter stillness.

I wish I could say I was afraid, but I wasn't. Quite the contrary. This was by far the most

interesting thing that had ever happened to me in my entire life.

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