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A Southwold Mystery

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Allison & Busby Limited
12 Fitzroy Mews
London W1T 6DW
allisonandbusby.com

First published in Great Britain by Allison & Busby in 2015.

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

First Edition

ISBN 978-0-7490-1744-6

Typeset in 11/15.6 pt Sabon by
Allison & Busby Ltd.

The paper used for this Allison & Busby publication has been produced from trees that have been legally sourced from well-managed and credibly certified forests.

Printed and bound by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

CHAPTER ONE

‘But it will probably be an awful affair,’ Professor Cedric Dillworthy protested. ‘I mean does one really want to spend a whole fortnight being charming to florists and old ladies on the east coast? Not exactly my idea of fun. Besides I am rather busy preparing notes for my new book *Runes and Reminiscences*; the publishers are hounding me already.’

Felix Smythe, proprietor and creator of Smythe’s Bountiful Blooms in Knightsbridge, sniffed and replied tartly that while he fully realised that his friend had the utmost difficulty with florists he rather thought old ladies might be just up his street. ‘Such instinctive empathy,’ he beamed.

Cedric scowled but ignored the jibe. ‘So what do they want you to do exactly – talk to the plants?’

‘I have *told* you: judge the bouquets and displays, award prizes and give two talks entitled “My Days amid the Daisies”.’

‘But you hate daisies.’

‘That’s neither here nor there; it needn’t stop one

rambling on about them. The point is that now I have my royal warrant I must expect to be approached for this sort of event and where necessary pander to the public's foibles . . . It's the regal association: people like being addressed by one who has the ear of the Queen Mother.' Felix flashed a modest smile, and picking up his embroidery inserted a few neat stitches. 'Besides,' he added, 'their fee is quite decent. Such little emoluments are always welcome.'

'Even if it means going to Southend?'

Felix gave a pained sigh. 'I do not envisage myself in Southend. The invitation comes from *Southwold*, an understated but rather more distinguished resort if I may say so. Its Plant and Garden Fiesta is renowned throughout East Anglia; I am surprised you don't know that. In any case my time there will be a useful rehearsal for next year.'

'Really? What happens next year?'

Felix shrugged. 'Well Chelsea of course, they are bound to ask me before long.'

'Hmm. Perhaps. But in the meanwhile I take it we are to brave the bath chairs, the hard pebbles and that cutting east wind. I was stationed there temporarily in the war and remember it vividly – especially the barbed wire entanglement on the seafront.'

'Since we are now in 1955 it is *just* conceivable that the municipal authorities will have had both the time and wit to remove such impedimenta. As to the pebbles: it is customary to use a deck chair – or it is for those of a certain age, dear boy.' Felix gave a broad wink.

'Which leaves the wind.'

'Well naturally you will take that superb Crombie coat which I so generously produced for your birthday. High

time it had an outing, so now's your chance to slay 'em on the promenade!'

Cedric replied that he was beginning to feel a trifle slain himself and that unless he was offered a reviving dry martini the idea of accompanying his friend anywhere was out of the question.

Felix mixed a treble, with copious gin and a single olive but no ice; after which the professor seemed curiously malleable.

Elsewhere in London Lady Fawcett, widow of Sir Gregory, was also exerting pressure.

'You see, Rosy, it is all very tiresome. I was specifically relying on Amy to accompany me on my visit to Suffolk. After all, except for a brief sighting across a crowded room, I haven't seen Delia Dovedale for over thirty years. I may not like her any more – not that I ever did really – so should I suddenly feel the need to *escape* at least Amy could have given me moral support . . . well, in a roundabout way I suppose.'

Lady Fawcett frowned, while Rosy Gilchrist considered Amy's qualities as a potential aide-de-camp. Roundabout or direct, she suspected that the girl's supportive role in her mother's problem would be minimal – hearty zeal being no substitute for usefulness. Rosy had been drawn into the older woman's orbit two years previously, when, burdened by the scandal of her aunt's murder, she had found the Fawcett family's blend of worldly nous and airy indifference perversely reassuring.¹ The Fawcetts had been a mild diversion from darker matters. However, did she now really want to be Lady Fawcett's companion on

1. See *A Little Murder*

her jaunt to visit the questionable Delia in her rambling Edwardian villa on the outskirts of a sedate seaside town? No, not especially.

Playing for time she cleared her throat and asked if her hostess was sure that Amy couldn't be persuaded.

'Oh I've tried incessantly but she is hell-bent on this *camping* nonsense. Admittedly the campsite is near Deauville, but even so I hardly think that bivouacking in the corner of some foreign field is going to improve her marriage chances. She ought to be *here* in London going to concerts and summer parties – or at least be with me at Delia Dovedale's.'

'But would East Anglia provide such entertainment?'

'Probably not; but there's bound to be something going on however modest. And besides, there's a son: not much brain I suspect but plenty of money. An ideal match for Amy I should say.'

'But perhaps she will marry one of her camping chums.'

'Not if I can help it,' Lady Fawcett replied grimly.

With a little more cajoling, appeals to Rosy's nobler nature, delicate bribes and flattery – 'my dear you are so good at dealing with people!' – Rosy finally succumbed to the Fawcett charm and found herself accepting the proposal.

'Wonderful,' the arm-twister cried. 'You won't regret it – we'll have so much fun!'

Rosy gave an uncertain smile.

The principal problem was Dr Stanley, Rosy's boss at the British Museum. After her recent mission in Venice to procure the coveted Horace volume she was unsure whether he would be prepared to grant her long leave to

go gadding off to Suffolk with Angela Fawcett. It rather depended on his current mood. Buoyed up with plaudits for his latest lecture and still mildly grateful for the Horace acquisition, he might prove magnanimously agreeable; but enraged by criticism from a rival academic he would swear she was indispensable and refuse point blank. The betting was even-stevens.

Thus picking Friday evening as a good time and with diffident calculation, Rosy made her approach. She caught him under the portico en route to the Museum Tavern opposite. What would he be: benign at the prospect of a beer and a whisky chaser, or irritable to be waylaid? She would find out.

‘You don’t mean you will be staying with that Dovedale woman do you?’ he had exclaimed.

‘Er, well yes so I gather. Do you know her?’

Dr Stanley’s features contorted into a grimace of startling intensity. ‘Once was enough,’ was the acid response.

There was a silence as Rosy waited for him to enlarge, and as he didn’t she asked curiously whether the acquaintance had been a long time ago.

‘Not long enough,’ he said curtly. ‘We had a little walkout just before the war. She behaved abominably.’ He fixed Rosy with a baleful eye: ‘Do you know, among other things she had the nerve to call me a desiccated museum piece. *Me* for God’s sake. Scourge of the Bloomsbury maidens I was in those days, and then some! Huh! I can tell you she was quite frightful.’ He scowled into the distance.

‘Must have been,’ Rosy earnestly agreed. ‘But, uhm, does that mean that you don’t want me to go?’

‘What? Oh yes, you can go all right. We’ve nothing lined up immediately – or at least nothing that I can’t off-load

onto young Rawlings.’ He paused and then leered. ‘Besides you can act as my emissary – tell her what a superlative boss you have: a model of manly charm, sharp intellect and fine sensibility. Lay it on thick and stress how lucky you are to be working for such a decent fellow. Make sure you do that, now.’ He seemed about to sweep on resolute for the Tavern; but then checked his stride and said sternly, ‘But there is one condition, Rosy, a condition which I insist you respect: I shall require my full quota of Southwold Rock; at least two sticks. Do not return without it.’

En route to her flat off Baker Street and thinking further of the coming trip, Rosy was not sure whether she had triumphed or blundered. Some victories were decidedly pyrrhic.