The Cambridge Plot

SUZETTE A. HILL

Allison & Busby Limited
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CHAPTER ONE

Rays of the early evening sun gave the usually sombre study a mellow hue, and to those seated around its gleaming mahogany table a spurious air of kindly warmth. The Plot and Monument Committee was gathered to discuss the final details of the college's bid to obtain from the municipal grasp a patch of land in which to honour one of its eminent and erstwhile members.

'So what are we going to call it,' enquired the bursar, 'the Bugger's Burial Ground?'

Dr Maycock, Senior Fellow, tittered. 'An inspired suggestion if I may say so – but a trifle too explicit, surely. What about Percy's Patch? A sort of ironic nod to Parker's Piece, and—'

'Huh,' interrupted John Smithers, 'from what I've heard, the old boy didn't appreciate irony. Besides, I

doubt if the daughter would sanction "Percy" – far too diminutive for the noble parent. She takes his title very seriously and don't we know it!' Adopting a braying falsetto, he cried: '"*May* distinguished father, you know, *Sir Pahcival* Biggs-Brookby."'

The bursar grinned. 'Got her in one, Smithers. I didn't know you were such a mimic.'

Sir Richard Dick the college's newly elected Master, sighed. 'Yes, all very risible, I am sure, but this is hardly the spirit in which to approach our project. Sir Percival may not have been to everyone's taste, but his contribution to the university, and to this college in particular, is undeniable. I need hardly remind you that the honour we bestow is in rightful recognition of his services. As to our present purpose, the choice of name for the site is immaterial; we are here to discuss the finances of the acquisition and how much the benefactors can be persuaded to donate. But when we *do* come to discuss the question of nomenclature, I trust you may give the matter a rather more sober appraisal.' He paused, looking round at the table, before adding grimly, 'And that goes for the issue of the daughter too. Do not underestimate.'

He was about to continue, but the bursar interrupted. 'What issue? What has Gloria B-B to do with things? Admittedly, she does loom rather *large*' – he smirked – 'but I can't see why she should cast a shadow in this particular matter. Presumably she is pleased that distinguished Daddy is being thus honoured. So what's the issue? After all, it is hardly her—'

'But that is just it,' the Master replied wearily, 'it is precisely because she is so pleased that I am not getting a moment's peace. She is determined to involve herself

personally with every aspect of the project, from the commissioning of the sculptor to the planting of the rhododendrons.'

'Rhododendrons?' Professor Turner exclaimed. 'Who's talking of rhododendrons? Odious plants, in my opinion, vulgar and overrated. Besides, they'll swamp the whole plot. We can't possibly have those.'

The Master closed his eyes. 'We may have to,' he said quietly. 'Apparently they were Sir Percival's favourite shrub and much beloved by the daughter too. I have already been bombarded by plant catalogues from Suttons and gather I am required to peruse them with her.'

'But you know nothing about horticulture,' Turner observed.

'I soon shall,' was the gloomy response.

'Well, whatever the damn plants, at least she can't dictate the choice of sculptor,' the bursar snorted.

'No, but she would like to,' the Master replied. 'She has a personal dislike of our man – something to do with his voice and gait apparently – and is convinced there are others just as suitable.'

'Absolute nonsense! We have already approached Winston Reid and he is more than willing: a sound fellow, reasonable rates and not too imaginative. Just the man for the job. He'll produce something solid and uncontroversial.' The bursar turned to his neighbour, a small man with pinched face and darting eyes. 'Wouldn't you agree, Aldous?'

There was a pause while Aldous Phipps, Emeritus Professor of Greek, reflected. He gave a dry cough. 'Oh yes, he would do that all right, but whether he will get the chance is another matter.'

'Oh, come now, it's in the bag,' the other protested. 'His terms are excellent and it's simply a matter of stamping the contract. A mere formality.'

Phipps sniffed. 'It may be in your bag, Bursar, but I rather suspect it may not be in Gloria Biggs-Brookby's.' He scrutinised the ceiling and then lowered his eyes to appraise his fingernails.

The Master frowned. 'It would be helpful if you could enlarge on that statement, Aldous. I am not sure if we entirely grasp the point.' He sighed, and added, 'Or at least I don't.'

With a gleam of relish the elderly Fellow leant forward and scanned their faces, then assured of the table's attention, said: 'I happen to have some information . . .'

When doesn't he? John Smithers wondered, and checked his watch. It was nearing the violet hour and she would protest if he were late again. 'What information?' he asked brusquely.

'To do with Monty Finglestone, the young sculptor that London is currently lionising. He has great appeal, or so I hear, and great talent. Quite à la mode, one gathers.'

'Doubtless there are many such *modish* artisans in London, but I can't see how he affects our project here in Cambridge,' the Master said dismissively.

'Ah, but that's just it,' Aldous Phipps retorted, 'at the moment he is not in London but – if I am not very much mistaken – here in Cambridge. I saw them together in a corner of The Eagle when I was there sipping my usual pear and brandy bitters – such a refreshing melange, I always find. You should try it.' (The Master winced.) 'Yes,' Phipps continued, 'Finglestone and Gloria Biggs-Brookby. She was playing her usual grande dame role and he was being all

charm and oily attention. Naturally, I couldn't hear what was being said: it's this wretched contraption, never works when you want it to.' He tapped the device in his ear. 'But I can assure you they were talking very earnestly – very earnestly; and I *did* manage to catch one word. Oh yes, it resonated clear as a bell.' He paused. 'It was . . . *rhododendrons*.' Phipps shot a triumphant look at Professor Turner, beamed happily and leant back in his chair.

There was a bemused silence. And then the bursar groaned. 'Oh Lord, you don't think she's trying to nobble him re the statue, do you? The cost will be extortionate!'

Aldous Phipps beamed again, pleased with his little grenade. 'Exactly,' he murmured.

'It will *not* be extortionate because it is not going to happen,' the Master declared. 'I can assure you the college's choice of artist does not depend on the diktats of Sir Percival's daughter. We have selected our man and that's an end of it. And if you don't mind my saying, Aldous, you are spreading unnecessary alarm and despondency . . . that capricious deaf aid may have been playing you false. And in any case, how do you know it was this Finkelstein fellow?'

'Finglestone, actually. His photograph was in *The Times* only the other day. The young man's features bear a pleasing resemblance to Michelangelo's David; most engaging, really, virile yet seemly. Thus I cut it out to use as a bookmark for that nice volume of Euripides your wife so kindly presented me with.' Phipps smiled benignly.

'Sir Richard is right,' interjected Smithers. 'Are you sure the word was "rhododendrons"? Perhaps it was some other plant – like pansy, for instance.'

The benign smile vanished, and Phipps fixed him with

one of his blanker stares. He disliked John Smithers. 'I may be approaching decrepitude, Smithers, but I am still able to distinguish a rhododendron – both the plant and the word – from a pansy. You, of course, may not.' He sniffed and resumed inspection of his fingernails.

The Master cleared his throat, 'Yes, yes, gentlemen. That is quite enough about plants, or indeed other speculations. Let us return to the subject in hand: whether, as a means of hastening their turgid deliberations, we should revise our already substantial offer to the City Council; and if so, can we rely on the donors' additional generosity? Some mightn't be overly willing. But one or two, like Dame Margery and Cedric Dillworthy, are most keen and I suspect can be relied upon to comply – especially if it were hinted their names should occupy pole position on the plaque.' He smirked.

'Good idea. Nothing like a little subtle bribery to ease the purse strings,' observed Dr Maycock.

'Huh! Hardly subtle' – the bursar laughed – 'but if the benefactors will fund a higher bid to induce the City fathers to push the purchase, I'm all for it. Why the delay, anyway? We've been kept waiting far too long as it is.'

'It's Alderman Cuff – hates the whole idea,' Maycock explained. 'He is the one man holding out and feels the area should be retained as an exclusive spot for children – a sort of toddlers' Tiergarten, I gather. Anyway, he is dead against it and hence the delay.'

'Well, we can't allow the fanciful pieties of Alderman Cuff to obstruct us,' the Master snapped. 'He is pure redbrick, you know. Besides, there's obviously a hidden agenda: he has at least five offspring of his own and is doubtless looking for a handy dumping ground. No, it

won't do. We must increase our offer and get them to complete the deal post-haste.'

The others nodded and began to talk animatedly about the figure for the new bid and whether the sponsors could be persuaded to cooperate . . . All except for John Smithers, who, having checked his watch again, saw that it was well past the appointed trysting hour and that the husband would soon be returned. Piqued by Aldous Phipps' earlier put-down he lapsed into gloomy silence brooding on his present position.

As the youngest Fellow in the college he did not always feel at one with his greying peers, impatient of what he saw as their complacent suavity, ostensible camaraderie and their collective penchant for port (Death by Vodka being his own preference). Neither did he share their settled domesticity. With the exception of one or two confirmed bachelors, such as Aldous Phipps, most were married and with children. While Smithers could not envisage himself becoming an ageing bachelor of the Phipps variety, neither was he currently seeking marital bliss . . . nor blight for that matter, agreeing with Cyril Connolly[1] that the pram in the hallway too often led to punctured dreams and muddled aspiration.

Smithers' aspirations were far from muddled. Clever and self-absorbed, he was also exceedingly ambitious and fully intended to scale the heights of scholarly distinction. But he also knew that such scaling was helped, or at least accelerated, by public involvement and integration with one's colleagues. Beavering obsessively over manuscripts in dark corners was all very well, but something else was needed: the stamp of social approval.

[1] See Cyril Connolly, *Enemies of Promise* (1938).

In this belief he had been supported by the Senior Fellow, noted not just for his academic triumphs but for his sure grasp of matters practical and worldly. After dinner one evening and in a mood of kindly altruism, Maycock had offered the younger man advice. 'It would help your career,' he had urged, 'to present an image of sobriety: dedication to the interests not just of your own research, but to those of the college. It would persuade the Master and those of influence that you are *sound*.' He must have seen Smithers' look of nervous recoil, for he went on, 'You see soundness isn't always such a bad thing; it can be, of course, and some never get beyond it, but more often than not it is *handy* – especially when you are trying to establish yourself quickly. You must be seen to be of use, to be contributing value beyond the solely academic.'

'Oh yes?' Smithers had asked warily. 'And so how can I be useful?'

'Oh, easily enough,' Maycock had replied airily, 'committee work. Committees count, Smithers. Take my advice: join one.'

And so, sulkily, cynically, Smithers had consented; and with a bit of squirming and a word from the Senior Tutor, he had found himself a member of the Plot and Monument Committee and apparently supportive of its commemorative aim. In fact, he had little interest in Sir Percival Biggs-Brookby (dead long before he had come up to Cambridge), and even less for the man chosen to sculpt his monument. Sir Richard had called Winston Reid's work 'solid' . . . yes, solidly dull in Smithers' view, and the chap himself puffed up with egotism and a contrived eccentricity. Still, this hardly mattered. If being on the committee would be to his own professional advantage, then so be it.

* * *

The shadows lengthened and the room grew stuffy; a desultory fly attempted hara-kiri on the windowpane. The bursar thumped the table to make some point or other, Sir Richard firmly asserted, Maycock meandered, Turner doodled daggers in his otherwise pristine notebook and Phipps twittered while others grew bored . . . and John Smithers lapsed into further melancholy. He brooded upon his mistress, the rather luscious wife of Trinity's assistant librarian – and in Smithers' view far too luscious for that whey-faced little adjutant who was surely born to be upstaged. He gave a mirthless grin. And then he scowled, recalling that the adjutant's wife had assured him that were he to postpone one more rendezvous he could go jump in the Cam and not in her bed.

Pondering this, it occurred to Smithers that the Luscious One was getting too big for her high boots; perhaps he should start looking elsewhere. He glanced across the table and caught sight of his face in the long mirror behind the Master's chair, and wondered whether he should grow a beard. Some women liked that, apparently . . .

On the whole, Dr Maycock reflected as he walked home to his house in Grange Road, things had not gone badly. The new Master had conducted the meeting with a decent competence, Phipps had been quelled (moderately), there continued a consensus in favour of Winston Reid and – even more satisfactory – annoyance had been voiced at the interference of Gloria Biggs-Brookby. In his view, such annoyance was entirely right and proper: the woman was a veritable pest and at all costs should be prevented from inserting her fat oar into college concerns. Just because she was the daughter of the man to be honoured did not make

her eligible for consultation, or at least only in the most cursory way. After all, she didn't even hold a degree, let alone a Cambridge one; yet from the way she behaved you would think she was Erasmus himself!

Born three years before the death of William Gladstone, Dr Maycock took pride in having been an infant contemporary of the Grand Old Man; and as recognition of that fact, in adulthood he had espoused the liberal cause. However, although a liberal in politics, Maycock's instincts were innately conservative. With him old habits died hard. Maycock liked old habits – which was why he deemed it so necessary to preserve the college's autonomy and not let it yield to the outlandish dictates of interlopers like Gloria Biggs-Brookby. What mattered was not so much the choice of sculptor per se, but rather the confounding of Gloria's will. That was the essential issue.

The Senior Tutor scowled at a passing cat, who, taking not a blind bit of notice, sauntered across his path mewing blithely. Its passage almost caused him to trip; but resuming both balance and then good temper, he too sauntered on. After all, he mused, other than the Gloria issue, matters were progressing as they should and Richard Dick was coping quite adequately in his new position. He had no quarrel there.

His mind went back to the Magisterial Election held a few months previously. His own candidature had been defeated, but only just. Did he mind? No, not really. In fact, the more he thought about things it was probably just as well. It meant he had more time to devote to what would become his magnum opus: *The Unsheathed Dagger: Balkan Tribulations and the Ottoman Empire*. Most certainly the conduct and progress of the college was vital, but even more

vital was the integrity of academic research. The status of Master might have been gratifying (and deserved) but even more gratifying would be the applause of colleagues and the universal recognition of his years of scholarly contribution. Another laurel to be worn with modest pride!

And then, of course, there was his wife, dear Sally. From the outset she had been opposed to his getting the Mastership. 'I dread the very day,' she had said. 'Just think of all those extra wretched dinners and functions one would have to attend: being on show all the time and you being called hither and yon at a moment's notice! You're busy enough as it is, and with all those extra duties our lives simply wouldn't be our own. Besides,' she had added slyly, 'you are so much better as a covert wire-puller, calling the shots while lying doggo. That's your forte, my boy.'

Maycock smiled into the gathering dusk. It was true. He liked playing the *éminence grise*, the trusty second fiddle whose genial deference belied his actual power. As a youngster he had fought on the Somme, and in the last war served rather more safely as an acting major in a clerical capacity at a large desk. Perhaps it was there that he had won his spurs as the consummate wire-puller. He recalled once overhearing the words of a young subaltern whose leave he had managed to wangle against all odds: 'Oh yes, old Cockers will help. He's the best fixer in the business!'

The now even older Cockers stopped to light his pipe and brooded upon Sir Richard Dick: well intentioned, he reflected, but essentially weak. Yes, he would have to fix that all right. Dick couldn't be allowed to slacken. Currently the Master was totally against Gloria, but could that stand be sustained? Uncertain. Yes, it was surely his own bounden duty to see that the man didn't flag; to keep

him fired up and not worn down by her insidious wiles. At all costs the woman must be thwarted. The college's honour was at stake!

Resolutely, he marched up the steps to his front door, poised for whisky and the emollient arms of his wife.