

A Quiet Country Life

by Rebecca Moden

Belinda Bede had long been aware that she was regarded by friends and acquaintances in her Oxfordshire village as a helpful and reliable individual: the kind of person who would readily take the minutes for a committee meeting, assist with the organisation of a Bring and Buy sale, or bring flowers to an invalid. Her English gentlewoman's good manners, coupled with her own sincere desire to be of use, had brought about this reputation, which, by and large, she appreciated. After all, she had plenty of time at her disposal, and enjoyed filling her days as an active participant in village life.

However, occasionally Belinda could not help wondering whether it was always desirable to be viewed as so available and so willing. The eager volunteer could all too easily become perceived as a doormat, and subsequently loaded with thankless tasks. Today, as she gloomily surveyed the untidy heap of parish magazines strewn over her dining room table, this thought was uppermost in her mind. "It's a simple enough job," Agatha Hoccleve had remarked in her loud, clear tone, waylaying Belinda outside the Post Office. "I can't understand why Mrs Beacon has let us down. Gout's no excuse; surely the exercise would do it good? Still, there it is. She's dropped out, and we need someone at short notice. So I thought of you at once, Belinda!" And Belinda, confronted by such energy and forcefulness, had found herself unable to refuse Agatha's demand, and had heard herself murmuring meekly that of course she would be very happy to deliver parish magazines on a monthly basis to all of her neighbours.

She picked up a magazine now, and surveyed its cover, which was adorned with a somewhat fanciful pen-and-ink sketch of the village duck-pond, drawn by a local artist. Belinda remembered that the selection of this image had caused heated debate at the last meeting of the village council. Mr Godfrey, the verger, a fervent advocate for a picture of the church, had almost walked out, and had had to be coaxed back to his seat by Belinda's sister Harriet, fortuitously appearing at that moment with a tray of tea and chocolate digestives. The duck-pond sketch had had its own staunch supporters, and had eventually won the vote by a narrow head. Belinda had been irresistibly, though somewhat irrelevantly, reminded of Frederick William Harvey's words: 'From troubles of the world I turn to ducks.'

She leafed abstractedly through the magazine, her attention momentarily caught by the Archdeacon's newsletter (in which parishioners were berated for their supposed lack of understanding of the true meaning of Lent), extensive details of the prize-winners at the last village fête, and a recipe for flapjacks ('Golden Glories') contributed by the owner of the village shop, Miss Maisie Draper. The highlight of the magazine was, she already knew, a short story penned by a romantic novelist who had recently moved into the village. Belinda had, several weeks previously, witnessed the arrival of the novelist at The Cedars, a cottage not far from

Belinda's own, set back from the road and surrounded by trees. Violetta Belleforte – this was surely a *nom de plume*? – had stepped majestically out of a chauffeur-driven Daimler, her bulky figure swathed in silver furs. She had been accompanied by a plethora of suitcases, a yapping Pekingese which had quite refused to be silenced by its owner's shrill commands, and a middle-aged woman sporting an elaborate piled-up hairstyle and large tortoiseshell spectacles, who had seemed to be a secretary, judging by the typewriter and numerous folders which she was carrying.

Agatha had made haste to invite Violetta Belleforte to contribute to the magazine, and had triumphantly informed Belinda of her success. Not much of a story though, Belinda thought scornfully, noting the rather melodramatic title, 'Forsaken Flame', scanning the pages casually and skipping to the end. So the shy retiring heroine was finally reunited thirty years later with her lost love? How clichéd, and not at all like Life, she told herself firmly. Though she could not suppress a momentary flicker of pleasure. The story's happy ending gave a middle-aged spinster hope, of a sort. Belinda had, since her youth, harboured an unrequited love for the Archdeacon. Her love had become a comfortable habit over the years, but it nevertheless made her a little more susceptible to romantic fiction than she cared to admit, even to herself.

Belinda glanced at the clock and saw that the morning was fast slipping away. "If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well it were done quickly", she muttered darkly, then smiled to herself at the incongruity of the lines. She gathered up the magazines, neatly pencilled the name of the recipient on each cover, and piled them into a canvas bag. Then she prepared herself to brave the raw October day, pulling on her warmest coat and hat, and a pair of stout brogues. She shouldered her load, and unlocked the front door. "Are you off now, Belinda?" Harriet's voice floated down from the bedroom, where she was engaged in letting out a favourite dress which had unaccountably become too small for her. "It'll be a good chance to find out a little more about our neighbours, especially that Violetta Belleforte... try to get a good look at what she's done to The Cedars! And don't be late for lunch." Belinda departed, smiling a little as she wondered exactly how she was supposed to achieve the first of these goals – gossip being dear to her sister's heart – and well-aware that Harriet would be still more put-out if she didn't achieve the second.

As the number of magazines in her bag dwindled, and the exercise began to warm Belinda up, she found herself enjoying her task. The air was crisp, the trees had burst into a myriad of vibrant autumn colours, and she was realising that the village, ostensibly so familiar to her after many years' residence, still held fresh surprises and pleasures. She was disappointed to see that the copse bordering Wilkins Farm had been demolished, and that three rather unattractive red-brick houses were rising up in its place. But she gazed admiringly at the splendid display of ornate tiered cakes in the window of the new bakery on the corner of the main street. And the

youngest village children racing out of the infant school, laughing and shouting to one another and kicking up dead leaves as they grabbed at conkers, caused her a sudden rush of joy. “Nor rural sights alone, but rural sounds exhilarate the spirit,” she murmured. Dear Cowper’s lines were very true, she felt. And then there was Dryden, of course: ‘How happy in his low degree, how rich in humble poverty, is he who leads a quiet country life.’ Belinda’s thoughts wandered happily among half-remembered fragments of her favourite poems as she trudged from door to door, dispatching a parish magazine through each letter-box, where it would soon be discovered with enthusiasm, indifference or irritation, depending on the personality of the recipient.

Belinda rounded the duck-pond, where a few forlorn ducks and moorhens were dolefully poking about amongst the reeds in search of sustenance. They bore little resemblance to the bevy of plump, preening ducks, gliding on sparkling water amid lush vegetation, in the idyllic illustration on the magazine cover. She arrived at Myrtle Cottage, a small, neat house nestling cosily behind the church, and dropped a magazine through the letter-box in the porch. She recalled the magazine’s list of prize-winners, which had been headed by Myrtle Cottage’s owner. ‘First prize for organic produce: Mr Oscar Manders.’ Old Mr Manders, a village resident of longstanding and a pillar of the congregation, had triumphantly borne off the gold cup for his rainbow chard, and had steadfastly refused to share the secret of his success. That was fair enough, Belinda had thought at the time. But now, noticing the bulky parcel which the magazine had landed on, she wasn’t so certain. For wasn’t that parcel stamped with the name and address of a firm specialising in weed-killer? She was shocked to think that Mr Manders, who had always seemed such an upright character, might be capable of so blatantly deceiving his fellow villagers. Did his frail, eminently respectable exterior mask a ruthless desire to win at any cost? “There must be a perfectly reasonable explanation,” she told herself, and departed, almost scuttling down the lane alongside the churchyard in her wish to get away. Sometimes it was surely better not to know too much about one’s neighbours.

Just one magazine left now. She trudged up the winding path to the front door of The Cedars. Voices were audible, wafting through the open window of the drawing-room as she approached the front door, but she did not knock, not wanting to disturb anyone on such a trivial errand. She was about to push the magazine through the letter-box when she caught a few words, and froze on the doorstep. An English gentlewoman would never eavesdrop, of course. But this was rather curious...

“Thank heavens you’re here,” was uttered in a high-pitched, agitated tone which Belinda took to be that of Violetta Belleforte. “I’m at my wits’ end. I just can’t think how to get beyond chapter three! How can this be happening to me? My Muse has deserted me once again!”

“And this is where I come in,” another female voice responded smoothly. “You know you can leave it with me, Vi.

It wouldn’t be the first time, would it? I’ll get the first draft to you by this time next month. You’ll just need to read it through so that you sound convincing when you’re discussing your latest masterpiece with your publisher.”

“It used to be so easy,” Violetta Belleforte sighed. “I was the darling of all the reviewers. But now... Here, take it. I can’t look at it anymore.” Her words faded into a stifled sob.

A rustling ensued, as of papers being collected together. Then, the chinking of a bottle against glasses as drinks were rather unsteadily poured. “Not for me, thank you, Vi,” the second voice spoke curtly. Heels clacked towards the front door, and Belinda retreated rapidly. She ducked behind a bushy ceanothus just as the door opened, and the middle-aged woman in tortoiseshell spectacles emerged, a bundle of papers under her arm, and strode purposefully down the path and away from view.

This is extraordinary, thought Belinda, her mind racing. So Violetta Belleforte’s celebrated romances hadn’t been written by Violetta Belleforte at all! That nondescript, frumpy secretary was the brain behind her employer’s success.

As she made her way home, Belinda felt almost unsteady with the burden of secret knowledge she now possessed. Not only Mr Manders’ spurious claim to first prize at the fête, but Violetta Belleforte’s ghost-writer. It was too much.

“I want to hear all about it,” her sister Harriet clamoured, descending the stairs as Belinda opened the front door. “It’s been such a dull morning here. You seem to have been gone for hours, Belinda! Lunch is on the table; you can tell me while we eat.”

Belinda imagined how excited Harriet would be if such gems of gossip were imparted to her, then thought again. She remembered the catch in Violetta Belleforte’s voice, and the tell-tale sounds of bottle and glass. Then she pictured Mr Manders as she often saw him in the high street, smiling genially and raising his hat to her with infinite courtesy, as he enquired about her health. Maybe their deceptions were relatively harmless. After all, she herself could hardly be said to have a clear conscience, she reminded herself, considering her long-concealed feelings for the Archdeacon.

She seated herself at the table opposite Harriet, and shook out her napkin. “It was a lovely morning, and I enjoyed the walk. The autumn colours are glorious, Harriet. But did you know that Wilkins Copse has been cut down to make way for new houses? A sign of the times, such a depressing one,” she mused, helping herself to potatoes.

“Is that it? You don’t seem to have found out much about our neighbours,” grumbled Harriet indistinctly through a mouthful of roast beef. “Maybe I should be delivering the parish magazines! I’d do it too, if it wasn’t for the distance. You know I’m not a walker,” she said ruefully, patting her ample waistline. “Well, you could always tell Agatha you’re not going to do it anymore. She’s lucky you turned out once!”

“Oh no, Harriet, I think I’ll carry on,” said Belinda quickly. “It certainly was an interesting experience. You

know, this village isn't quite as quiet and peaceful as I thought it was. But what does the poet Horace say? You'd remember, Harriet, with your classical education. Something about concealing any secret entrusted to you, though pressed by wine and anger to reveal it. No wine or anger in this case, of course, but really, Harriet, I think I'd better say no more."

"Horace!" snorted Harriet. "Well, if you're determined to be an oyster, that's that, I suppose. You could at least pass the carrots. I'm ravenous!" Belinda smiled, and cheerfully complied.