

## Well Done

by Diane Alimena

Agatha Hoccleve rarely was animated. Belinda and Harriet Bede were used to her being confident, authoritarian and often condescending, but today she was beaming and almost ran to catch up with them as they approached their front door.

“Wonderful news! What a pleasant treat for us all. My dear cousin Felix will be visiting.”

A crisp September air had put color in all of their cheeks and the gusts of wind pushed them closer towards the Bede sisters’ cozy home. Belinda was distracted by the leaves being blown from the trees. Some seemed to be waving just before they made their final leap to the ground so it was Harriet who said, “Why Agatha, didn’t you just get back from a funeral? You had better come in for some coffee and tell us about it.” Fortunately Emily had finished tidying the drawing room and Harriet took her own coat and Agatha’s, hung them on the coat pegs in the hall and put the bars of the fire on full as Belinda went into the kitchen to organize the impromptu coffee party.

As Belinda placed the tin of biscuits next to Agatha and handed her a cup of coffee, Harriet began her interrogation. “Now what is all this about? I don’t remember you ever mentioning a cousin Felix.”

“Well,” Agatha began, “it was at the funeral. Aunt Florence’s funeral. I was so surprised to see him. Felix Mainwaring. I hadn’t seen him since I was a young girl. He is a very distinguished anthropologist.” Agatha pronounced the word stretching out all the syllables as if she expected Harriet and Belinda to be unfamiliar with it. “The last time I saw him was probably thirty years ago at Aunt Florence’s home. He was just a young man heading out to the remotest fringes of the empire. Fieldwork. He was going to do fieldwork.” Agatha stretched out the two syllables of fieldwork again indicating her superior knowledge of the professional jargon. “I admired him so much.”

It was unusual for Agatha to have twisted thoughts and tangled words. Belinda’s and Harriet’s eyes briefly met and for once their thoughts were as one. This was a morning rich with topics for gossip later and promise of wonders to come.

Agatha took a large sip of coffee which seemed to calm her and she reverted to her more usual self. “Perhaps some more sugar and milk will make this a bit less bitter.” She reached for the tray with the milk jug and sugar bowl.

“It was your Aunt Florence who died?” Belinda queried in a gentle, sympathetic voice.

“Yes. Aunt Florence. She was my mother’s youngest sister and the last of that whole generation.” Agatha seemed to quiet a moment and become reflective. “I hadn’t seen her in decades. She lived so far away. She had a hard life and I remember my mother saying to her ‘Just do your best’ and oddly the vicar said that about her. ‘A woman who did her best.’” Taking another sip of coffee, Agatha brightened. “How wonderful that my decision to pay my last respects has been so rewarded by seeing Felix.”

“So we can expect to meet this cousin Felix?” Harriet asked.

“Most definitely. He is coming next weekend and I will want him to meet some of Henry’s flock. So, do please keep Sunday afternoon open for a special tea at the vicarage.” Agatha stood and as she rose to she seemed to inflate and become her usual formidable self. She thanked Harriet and Belinda for the coffee, took her coat and left.

“Flock! Flock! How dare she treat us like a herd of sheep.” Harriet was finally able to express some of the indignation Agatha always triggered in her. “She is lucky to live in a village with such interesting and exceptional people. People who do know what anthropology means!”

“Yes,” agreed Belinda. “Agatha can be trying. I was surprised to hear her talk as if she were fond of her Aunt Florence. I never heard her mention her before. But what a sad phrase it is, ‘she did her best’.”

“It is quite the usual thing to say, Belinda. Why would you think it sad?” Harriet looked puzzled.

“Well, what does it mean to do one’s best? Isn’t it like what Pope wrote, ‘damn with faint praise’. Doesn’t it really mean that a person hasn’t done very well at all? Doesn’t it really imply that she had limited abilities and was actually fairly unsuccessful in meeting the challenges of life?” Belinda warmed to her subject with a sad shake of the head.

“Really Belinda,” countered Harriet impatiently, “I do think you are reading too much into a trivial, common phrase that is polite.”

“Perhaps you are right, Harriet, but I would much prefer that someone say ‘Well Done!’ at my funeral. That sounds much more as though I would be remembered as a person who had accomplished something and had added to the general good of the world.” Belinda finished with an uncharacteristic huff.

“Well, I am more interested in meeting this Felix than reflecting on Agatha’s Aunt Florence’s life accomplishments. I wonder what he thought of his young cousin. She was obviously enamored of him,” Harriet remarked as she picked up the coffee tray and went to the kitchen.

Sunday came slowly. Harriet and Belinda were constantly glancing toward the vicarage to see if there was any sign of a distinguished anthropologist, but they ended up having to wait for their first glimpse of Felix Mainwaring at the Sunday morning service.

Felix Mainwaring was seated in the pew with Agatha. Harriet and Belinda’s regular pew gave them an oblique view and they were able to see a finely trimmed goatee which did give him an exotic look. His head slowly turned as if he were observing everything and everyone in a detached manner. He was even able to appear detached as Henry Hoccleve used the recent death of his wife’s aunt as an excuse to preach a sermon largely based on the most melancholy bits of *Night Thoughts* by Young.

If Harriet and Belinda had hoped for an early introduction to Felix, they were disappointed. Agatha took his arm firmly and spirited him back to the vicarage through a side

door, while the flock faintly bleated their disappointment at having to wait until four o'clock to meet this distinguished guest.

At four on the dot the favored of the flock arrived and the sun decided to join the festivities. Clouds dispersed and the blue skies and mild weather allowed the French doors to be opened. Thus, the gathering would be allowed to graze outside a bit. Belinda and Harriet approached Agatha and were finally introduced to Felix.

"Felix, here are the Bede sisters. Old acquaintances," Agatha said.

"Delighted to meet you," Felix politely murmured and gave a warm smile as he looked each of them in the eye. But, before Harriet or Belinda could engage in conversation, Agatha dismissed them by pointing to the table of tea sandwiches. "And do try my special lemon vol-au-vents," she said. "Old family recipe." Then she turned to other guests to continue introductions.

"Well, let's take a plate of food and look at the garden," suggested Harriet. "Agatha is certainly possessive of him. I think he seems rather interesting but I am not sure we will get a chance to talk with him enough to find out."

They were not the first to have visited the tea table. There were cucumber, tomato, egg and prawn sandwiches carefully displayed and rapidly disappearing, but the plate of special vol-au-vents was surprisingly full. Harriet tried one and coughed, skillfully ejecting the small pastry into her hand.

"Inedible! It is really awful. So much for a special old, family recipe. Don't Belinda!" she warned as Belinda reached for one also. But Belinda continued and bit into it. Her eyes widened but she actually swallowed and reached for another.

"What are you doing!" exclaimed Harriet in a quiet voice.

"Oh Harriet, something has gone wrong with this recipe, but it is edible. How upsetting and humiliating for Agatha. I don't want her feelings to be hurt. I can manage some. Then the plate will be emptier and she might not realize," Belinda said. And as Belinda ate half a dozen, Harriet shook her head and went out to greet Ricardo Bianco, who was inspecting the perennial border.

Belinda kept her back to Agatha, trying to be discreet, so she did not see that Agatha and Felix were observing her appearing to devour the special pastries.

"Look at that!" said Agatha to Felix. "Belinda is wolfing them down as if no one else might want some too. If she's not careful she'll become as stout as Harriet!" And then, a crash of shattering china came from the kitchen and Agatha hurried off to see what crisis had befallen her.

Felix Mainwaring was finally released to mingle on his own. He seemed to seek out Belinda, who had decided a bit of fresh air would do her good.

"Miss Bede," he bowed. "What a pleasure to be here and see my cousin's habitat shall I say?"

"Oh, well, we are all so pleased to meet you. Agatha certainly seems to have fond memories of you. It is a silver lining when a funeral brings old family members together." Belinda felt that this was a safe, if trite, response.

"Yes, I haven't seen Agatha for years and of course, as an anthropologist, observing one's own tribe . . . as it were . . . can be more difficult than observing a foreign people as an outsider. She was a charming young girl, intelligent and not a bit shy. I encouraged her to consider my own field. But perhaps she lacks the detachment that the work requires. In any event, she seems content enough here. And, might I add, I am glad she has some kind friends."

Belinda looked very puzzled. She knew the compliment was intended for her, but it did not make sense that someone with whom she had spoken for thirty seconds would call her kind. And, she reflected, it was very unlikely that Agatha or Henry had spent any time discussing her with their guest.

"You don't know what I mean, I see," said Felix with a smile. "I observed your behavior at the tea table. And Agatha had forced me to eat one of her special vol-au-vents earlier. Now I am used to having to appear to relish food that I would not even want to describe to you. But, your action was only one of pure kindness. Well done, Miss Bede. You are a good friend to my cousin." Felix looked around and continued to observe the gathering. "Yes, I suppose she is happy enough being 'shepherdess' of Henry's flock. I wonder if she might have done more." His thoughts seemed to pause his words. Then he brightened. "Well, I guess she has done her best."