

*Below are the top four entries from the 2019 Ellen J. Miller Memorial Short Story Competition, starting with the first-prize winner. Visit the Barbara Pym Society web site for information on how to enter the 2020 contest.*

## And All Shall Winners Be

by Harriett Diller

There are various ways of mending a broken heart, but perhaps going to an Aging Better Together conference is one of the more unusual. When my mother-in-law Sybil found the notice for the conference in her email inbox, she was certain it was just the thing we both needed.

Our lives had taken a tragic turn in April. First, Professor Root, Sybil's new husband, had over-exerted himself while digging a test pit at an archeological site in Hampshire and suffered a fatal heart attack. Then, my husband Rodney had broken out of his mold as a somewhat stuffy civil servant and gone off to Cornwall on something called a Warrior Weekend. There he was to reclaim his masculinity by fasting, running naked on the moor, and beating an African drum. The climax of the weekend was a cliffside ceremony where each blindfolded candidate would find his way to a bonfire and be inducted into warriorhood. But somehow Rodney, poor dear, became confused, perhaps from dehydration and hunger. Instead of reaching the bonfire, he walked off a cliff.

At least I had my faith to console me; Sybil, agnostic that she was, did not even have that. But Sybil had other strengths to draw on – her interest in archeology and her passion for taking classes, which had been ignited when the two of us joined the Portuguese class of Piers Longridge.

“Oh, let's do go to this conference,” Sybil said enthusiastically.

I remained doubtful. “But Sybil, aging has never been one of your particular interests.”

“I know, Wilmet, but I've done archeology and Portuguese. And I've sat on the board of the Settlement House for years. I've even taken up knitting, which is hitting rock bottom if I may say so.”

“You don't think this Aging Better Together conference will be terribly dreary then?”

“Not at all!” Sybil exclaimed. “Why, look at this schedule. We are to hear an inspirational talk on Cohousing and the Power of Purpose. The following morning there will be networking and then a boxed lunch.”

“Boxed lunch! I don't like the sound of that.” I tried to imagine the safest foods that might be included in a boxed lunch. Packaged crackers and energy bars, hermetically sealed stewed fruit? Starbucks coffee in a sterilized plastic flask?

“Wilmet, you simply must get over your squeamishness about food. I'm sure the boxed lunch will be nutritious and filling. Look, they are even offering vegetarian, vegan, and gluten-free options. Oh, and there will be a short video called “Home Modifications for Dummies” followed by a Breakout Session on aging gracefully. Whatever can a Breakout Session be?”

“I have no idea,” I said. My own somewhat sheltered life had never included any such experience.

“Oh, this will be fun, I know it,” said Sybil, clicking on the registration form.

With somewhat less enthusiasm than Sybil's, I accompanied her to the girls' boarding school in Derbyshire where the conference was to take place. The first scheduled event was dinner in the dining hall, where the participants in the conference took their places at three long tables of polished wood.

A tall woman with the air of a girls' school headmistress was ladling soup out of a large tureen. “Might as well get started,” she said in a loud voice.

“Excuse me, but is that vegan?” a mousy-looking woman asked from the far end of the table.

“Should I know that?” the woman with the ladle answered.

“I checked the vegan option,” said the other woman.

“Really!” the tall woman said and dropped the ladle back into the soup. “When did people start making such a business of eating?”

I myself had to agree that eating had become much more of a source of anguish and even resentment than it ever was in the days when everyone eagerly tucked into a shepherd's pie or gnawed on a joint of veal.

After our dinner, which was somewhat marred by a lecture from the mousy-looking vegan on the evils of eating both flesh and dairy, we filed into the conference hall for the opening presentation. When the conference moderator announced that the inspirational talk on “Cohousing and the Power of Purpose” was to be replaced, a general cry of disappointment passed over the crowd.

“However, we are most fortunate to have as our speaker tonight Dr. Aylwin Forbes of the Forbes Institute of Relationship, who will speak to us on the topic of...” Here the moderator frowned through her reading glasses as if she was sure she had misread the title, and then went on, “the topic is ‘Some Problems of a Certified Senior Adviser in the Era of #MeToo.’”

“That hardly seems appropriate,” said Sybil in a loud voice that rang out through the auditorium.

When Aylwin Forbes began to speak in a rather disjointed manner that reminded me of the current President of the United States, I began to silently agree with Sybil. Thankfully, we had not been subjected to his ramblings for long when a woman's voice rang out, “He's taken a nasty turn!”

Somewhere between the weekend's presentations by the Center for Conscious Eldering, Sybil's private session with a life coach from Purpose Incorporated, and the Breakout Session on Aging Gracefully, she came away from the conference with a firm plan for our future.

“Intergenerational cohousing,” she announced as soon as we arrived back at Sybil's solid London house.

I prayed a silent prayer that Sybil would not announce she was going to invite defrocked priests or even indigent archeologists to live with us. I knew all too well that Sybil was a keen social worker.

“I thought about it on the train ride from Derbyshire. My house is much too big for just the two of us. And my

life coach convinced me that aging better together is essential.”

“Couldn’t you just join a Facebook group?” I asked.

“Nonsense!” said Sybil.

“But you have me – and Rhoda!” Rhoda had been Sybil’s cook since Rodney was a child.

“Rhoda’s given her notice, didn’t I mention it? She’s going to share a council house with her sister.”

“But who will do the cooking?” I wailed, looking at my hands, still as soft and smooth as they had been before my marriage.

“I have saved the best part for last,” said Sybil. “While you were napping on the train I sent a text and have already received a response.”

It never ceased to amaze me how devoted Sybil was to her smart phone, though I knew that she had primarily gotten it so she could use the Archeology Britain app as a quick way to identify pottery fragments. Her Amazon one-click ordering had also come in handy for buying obscure archeology textbooks and the occasional skein of wool.

“Who do you think our new cook is to be?” said Sybil. “Mr. Bason!”

“Mr. Bason!” I cried.

“My dear, you said yourself he was an excellent cook for the clergy house.”

“Indeed he was. But have you forgotten the incident with the Fabergé egg? And the reason he was let go from the Ministry?”

“There is nothing here among my things that he would want to pocket,” Sybil said, “unless he has taken to stealing pottery fragments.” It was true that Sybil was hardly the type to collect the kind of objects Mr. Bason coveted.

“Though you may need to keep your bedroom locked, Wilmet. Mr. Bason may take a fancy to your Victorian mourning brooch or that little heart-shaped enamel box you were so secretive about one Christmas.”

Once I was past the first shock of Sybil’s announcement, I began to look forward to Mr. Bason’s excellent cooking and his bottomless font of gossip.

“Oh, and I have also contacted Piers and his friend, Keith,” Sybil said. “Keith answered immediately, but of course Piers hasn’t yet responded.”

“Piers!” I cried. “He will leave his galley proofs littering the house from top to bottom.”

“Although these days the galley proofs are more likely to be on his computer,” Sybil said. “Besides, who knows if Piers will even want to move here.”

“Now that Piers and Keith are in a ‘committed relationship,’ as they say these days, Piers will be certain to come here if Keith has agreed to,” I told Sybil.

“Just think,” said Sybil enthusiastically, “Piers will always be available to engage in Portuguese conversation with us.”

“And Keith will keep the house immaculate,” I said. “He will scrub the woodwork with soda and water and soak the curtains in Tide.”

“And between us, we shall keep poor Piers from the pubs,” added Sybil.

For a brief moment I imagined throwing myself across the front door like a human barricade, keeping Piers from going to the pubs. But then I remembered I would not likely be called upon to take such extreme measures. Keith’s influence on Piers had been such that Piers now drank tea like a proper Englishman and showed up on time for his work at the press more often than not.

“Wilmet, you are in favor of my plan?” Sybil asked with a touch more doubt than she usually showed in her schemes.

“It’s such a surprise,” I said. I had felt much the same way when Sybil announced that she and Professor Root were to be married and when I first learned that Keith was the one who had brought about the positive changes in Piers.

“A few days ago I didn’t even know what intergenerational cohousing was,” I said. “And now I shall be living it.”

“But Wilmet, you of all people should be familiar with the concept. Haven’t you always been fascinated with the clergy house, and what is it if not intergenerational?”

Now that Sybil mentioned it, I saw that she was right. “I never thought of it that way,” I said, and we both laughed.

Sybil poured two glasses of sherry. “To intergenerational cohousing,” she said, raising her glass.

I raised my glass, but I did not speak. I was already lost in thought imagining the richness of my new life. Keith chatting away about Tide and breakfast cereals and the best methods for cleaning spots from the carpet. Piers muttering over his galley proofs in an almost husbandly manner. Mr. Bason filling the house with the tantalizing aroma of *coq au vin* or shrimp scampi. He might even make the occasional visit to the clergy house, where he could listen in at doors and report back to me everything he had heard.

I smiled at Sybil. “To intergenerational cohousing.” Perhaps that had always been the answer without my even realizing it.

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## 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 organization 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 neighbors.

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 Pekinese 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, harbored 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 penciled 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 favorite dress which had unaccountably become too small for her. "It'll be a good chance to find out a little more about our neighbors, 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 colors, and she was realizing 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 favorite 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 cozily behind the church, and dropped a magazine through the letterbox 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 long standing 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 specializing 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 neighbors.

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 clamored, 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 colors are glorious, Harriet. But did you know that Wilkins Cope 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 neighbors," 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.

## 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."

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## A Spring in Her Step

by Joy Douglass

Margaret settled back in her seat on the train. She had left a note for Francis, saying she was off to think things over. She couldn't face a discussion about her marriage right now.

It was the letter that started the whole business. She recognized the handwriting immediately – it was unmistakably from Reggie. She was hesitant to open it, and instead heated the kettle for tea. What on earth prompted Reggie to get in touch with her? So many years had passed, and she had heard nothing of him. Once there was a brief mention in the *Times* about a play he was producing, but that was all – until now.

Finally, she gathered courage, and opened the letter.

*My dearest Meggie,*

*Where shall I start? Do you remember the night we harmonized to the song "Always"? We must have sung it one hundred times till we got it right. Every time I think of you, that song pops up in my mind.*

*Oh, Meggie. I can see you now, breezing into the library, always smiling, and giving me a big hug. I'd give anything for one of those hugs.*

*I wanted to tell you that Father died last month. It has left me at loose ends. I would so much like to talk with someone who knew him. Can we get together? I long to*

*laugh with you again. Do you ever think of me? I can't believe you don't.*

*You aren't far from London are you – North Oxford, is that right? Could you come into town for tea? I'll meet you at Paddington whenever you say.*

*Always,  
Reggie*

She understood now. Losing Sir Reginald would be devastating to Reggie, on many levels. Strangely she was stirred by being called “Meggie” again, and it brought memories of long walks back to her college after rehearsals and of Reggie entertaining her with his wild sense of humor and infectious laugh. She recalled moments of hilarity that would overcome them as they chattered aimlessly.

And now, here she was – settled in a train compartment on her way to London to meet the first love of her life. She had made the decision hastily and given little thought to what she would wear. As she stared down at her comfortable but worn coat, and her comfortable but worn shoes, she knew it had been a mistake to neglect how she looked.

About that time, Miss Gurney and Miss Kingley, tutors at the women's college, also boarded the train, and chose seats in the second car. They were to represent their respective academic departments at a conference in London, and after reviewing the meeting's agenda, resorted to gossip – mainly about a fellow instructor, Francis Cleveland, and their prize student, Barbara Bird.

Margaret, in the front car, reflected on the events of the past few weeks. *What in the world had gotten into Francis?* She had always understood that he enjoyed being adored by young women students, who practically swooned when he read Romantic poetry. *But what was he thinking – a respected lecturer on seventeenth century poetry, an Oxford don, attempting to run off with one of those smitten students?* After her initial annoyance, Margaret was relieved and not surprised to know he had been unsuccessful.

The worst part was the embarrassment she faced, such as the day that old Mrs. Killigrew, in her ridiculous hat with a stuffed bird perched on top, came to warn her about the *seriousness* of the entanglement. Then, for several weeks she endured stares and pitying looks when she went shopping or out for lunch. Finally, things settled down, and life returned to a more normal routine. That is... until the letter arrived.

She fumbled in her pocketbook to re-read the letter. Was this a mistake, going to meet Reggie? What if she didn't recognize him after thirty years? As they pulled slowly into Paddington, she saw, on the platform, a dapperly dressed gentleman, and when he turned toward her train, his eyes danced with excitement. Of course, she would know Reggie, anytime, anywhere, and at any age. She ran to him, put her hand on his face, looked into his eyes for a moment, and threw her arms around him.

“Oh Reggie! It's so good to see you.”

“Darling... Meggie.”

Miss Gurney and Miss Kingley stepped onto the platform just in time to witness this obvious reunion.

“Look,” whispered Miss Gurney, “It's Margaret Cleveland!”

Miss Kingley nodded and said quietly, “I think we had better just move along.”

“Oh, no, Miss Kingley! Something is highly improper here. We have a duty to our colleague, Francis Cleveland, to investigate this. We are going to follow them.”

Margaret and Reggie stood looking at each other for a moment, and then started chattering as if they had seen each other just yesterday. It was as though no time had passed between them. Reggie began, “We'll take the Underground to Piccadilly, then have tea at The Cavendish – it's just a short walk down Jermyn Street. Oh, Meggie – you can't know how I've longed to see you.”

The ladies were also going to Piccadilly, so followed close behind, listening as best they could. It was easy enough to hear Reggie – he had a big theatrical voice that resonated for quite a distance. Miss Gurney had a plan. “I have it – this is what we'll do. You attend the meeting and I will keep my eye on this situation. We'll meet back here at 4:00.”

Miss Kingley appeared doubtful, and walked away, muttering, *Duty? To Francis Cleveland? What's good for the goose is good for the gander, if you ask me.*

Margaret and Reggie proceeded down Jermyn Street, arm in arm, hardly stopping to take a breath from talking. They walked by the fancy shops, and finally came to the entrance of The Cavendish. Miss Gurney lurked in the background, not far behind.

Reggie was clearly a charming chap and Margaret laughed freely at his stories and impressions of people from their past. They were shown to a table discreetly in the corner of the lounge. Miss Gurney was seated at a smaller table near them. She was struck by how cheerful Margaret Cleveland appeared – very unlike her usual demeanor in North Oxford. It was as if she were thirty years younger.

“Oh, Meggie,” she overheard Reggie say. “You know I still love you, after all these years.”

“I love you too, Reggie – *Always.*”

And then they began to SING!

*Oh, no!* thought Miss Gurney. *They are not singing in The Cavendish!* But they were.

“We've still got it, Meggie. We're a good team.”

Then, in a louder voice, Reggie said, “Oh, my darling, let's run away together”

“Yes... yes... where will we go?”

With that, Miss Gurney had heard enough. She finished her tea, paid the bill, and marched out of the hotel. Miss Kingley, already waiting at Piccadilly, was anxious to hear every detail of the afternoon.

In the meantime, Reggie and Margaret talked seriously. “I'm so sorry about your father,” she began. “I was very fond of him.”

“And he, of you, my dear.”

She reached out and tenderly touched his arm.

Reggie then recalled the early days, when the handsome Francis Cleveland first came into their lives. “We all thought he was gorgeous – but you, Meggie, you saw

something else in him. I remember the day you came into the library, wearing a plaid coat, with a bright yellow scarf. You looked so happy. You said you were meeting Francis at the greenhouse, and going for a walk along the river. I walked part of the way with you and you practically skipped down the path when you saw him. I knew I had lost you at that moment.

"But Reggie, you do know that I loved you then. It's just... that there was always..."

"I know," he interrupted. "I know."

On their way back, they passed a women's dress shop. Reggie pointed to a mannequin in the window wearing a plaid coat, "just like the one you wore the day you rushed off to meet Francis."

Margaret quickly said, "I could use a new coat."

They entered the shop. She slipped it on, and there was no question. It was perfect. For the first time, in a long time, she liked the way she looked. "I'll take it," she said, without hesitation.

Reggie eyed something in another aisle, went off, and came back holding a small bag. "Don't you think this coat needs something around the collar?" With that, he draped a beautiful yellow scarf around her neck, adding, "This is my gift."

They continued toward Piccadilly, Margaret looking very fashionable and Reggie enthusiastically saying she looked years younger. Her plan was to spend the evening with her sister in London, and return to North Oxford next morning. As they waited for her train, Margaret said, almost as an afterthought, "By the way... how's Tom?"

"Tom's great. He's opening in a new play this weekend."

"Oh, look, here's my train! Bye, Reggie"

"Bye, my love! Let's do this again." He blew her a kiss.

Meanwhile, back in North Oxford, Francis Cleveland was unprepared for what he was about to hear. When he entered Fuller's Restaurant that evening, he was approached by Miss Gurney, who stood taller than she had a right to – almost eye to eye with Francis.

"Mr. Cleveland, I must report to you that I have seen Mrs. Cleveland this afternoon."

"You saw Margaret? But where?"

She proceeded to tell him everything – everything and every word she had witnessed. Francis' face grew grimmer by the minute. When she had finished, he said, "Reggie? Are you certain she was with a man named Reggie?"

"Precisely! And they declared their love for each other, and even talked of going away together."

Francis spent the remainder of the evening pacing the floor, muttering, "What a fool I have been, thinking I could run away with Barbara Byrd. Why I have Margaret. And now I may have lost her."

Next morning, Margaret boarded the train from Paddington to North Oxford. She had slept well and was full of the excitement from yesterday's meeting with Reggie. She wore her new plaid coat, and yellow scarf. This time, as she settled into her seat, she was not thinking negative

thoughts. For one thing, upon reflection, she was glad she had resisted the temptation to grab that stuffed bird off old Mrs. Killigrew's hat and throw it into the fire. The story would have amused the gossip exchange, however.

Today she thought only of thirty years ago, when she first met Francis. He was tall and impossibly handsome, and when she heard him recite poetry in class, with that beautiful voice – admittedly with some affectation – she fell in love. And the day that Reggie recalled, when she wore the plaid coat and yellow scarf and skipped down the path to meet Francis, was the day Francis first read to her alone, sitting by a tree along the river.

There was a spring in her step as she walked from the station, and as she neared the house, almost skipped toward the door. "Hello, I'm home!" she called.

"Margaret!" Francis took a minute and gasped. "You look so beautiful. So very beautiful."

"Hello, Francis!" There was a sweet smile on her face.

"Margaret – I've been so foolish. What have I done? And now I've been told that you have met with Reggie."

"What? How have you heard that?"

"Never mind – but is it true? Is it true that you still love Reggie?"

"Yes – of course, I love Reggie. But Reggie is in love with Tom."

"Tom?"

"Yes!"

"Reggie... and Tom?"

"Yes, Francis. Reggie and Tom!"

"Well, I never! You *knew* that?"

"Of course! I always knew."

"Then you've come home. Oh, Margaret, I regret I have behaved so badly. I don't know how to make it up to you. What can I DO?"

Margaret thought for a moment, then said quietly, "Read to me, Francis."