

Mattie always carried a club in her handbag – just a small one, of polished ash. That was the most infuriating aspect of the whole episode: she'd actually been *armed* when it happened.

The New Year's Day fair had been audible from the moment she'd left the house – a formless roar that receded as soon as she turned off the track and took the path through the woods. The quickest route to the Underground station was along the narrow lane to Hampstead, but there was (as she'd pointed out to The Flea only this morning, apropos of their neighbour's new motor-car) very little point in living with the Heath absolutely on one's doorstep if one didn't take every opportunity to tramp across it. Besides the exercise, it was a rare walk that didn't provide one with at least a nugget or two of brain-food, as evinced by Mattie's December column in the *Hampstead & Highgate Express* in which she'd compared a dead duck, frozen into the pond, with the Prime Minister's current position. She'd been bucked by the news that the paper had already received thirteen letters in reply, several of them furious.

Last year's beech-mast crunched pleasingly underfoot. It was a day of splendour, the air still, the sky cloudless

between bare branches, every vista possessing the hard-edged brilliance of cut glass: all was ruled lines, crisp sounds, sunbeams like polished stair-rods – a marvellously true, sharp world.

Lately, Mattie's view of it had been becoming increasingly impressionistic. 'I find I am living in a perpetual Pissarro,' she had remarked to the optician. 'Aesthetically pleasing, perhaps, but I miss the *detail*.'

'I'm afraid that a deterioration in eyesight is inevitable as we get older, Mrs Simpkin.'

'Miss Simpkin. And I am not yet sixty; I'd really rather you didn't speak as if I were creaking along in a bath-chair.'

Her new eye-glasses had restored clarity; she might now be walking through one of the landscapes of that tiresome moralist Holman Hunt.

In a tree above her there was a vicious chuckle, and she looked up to see a magpie sidling along a branch, the crown of its head marked with an anomalous white patch, like a tonsure.

'Afternoon, Abbot, not seen you in the garden for a day or two. Busy dismembering blue tits, no doubt.'

It cocked its head, its wicked gaze fixed upon her. Had she been responsible for naming the species, she would have chosen *vigilans* rather than *pica* as its suffix; thieves, they might be, but their watchfulness was paramount. The Abbot glanced over Mattie's shoulder and she turned, automatically, to check behind her.

She had not lost her own habit of vigilance; in the past, it had been imperative; in the past, she had written articles on the subject.

OLD BAGGAGE

For those of us in constant danger of re-arrest, there is no other option. Are you certain that the fellow coming up the path is the usual postman, or might he be a plain-clothed police officer? That ordinary cove standing eyeing the goods in a shop window – is it possible that he’s eyeing your reflection instead? Be like Janus – look before and behind; be like Argos, possessor of a hundred eyes.

For now, though, there was only the empty path, barred with shadow. Leaving the shelter of the trees, squinting in the sudden sunlight, she crossed the sandy heath towards Hampstead ponds. The fair was immediately louder, the chaos of noise separating as she drew nearer to wild screaming and the yelp of barkers, the crash and clack of flung missiles, the laboured jollity of a steam organ playing pre-war melodies, ‘Daisy, Daisy’ succeeding ‘That Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze’. A helter-skelter was visible, and a spinning ride, chairs on long chains whirling around a central spindle, the occupants twisting like marionettes.

Just ahead of her, a rabbit shot across the path. Ten yards behind it, a spherical Jack Russell laboured in pursuit, slowly followed by a gasping Labrador. Their owner was stationary a short distance away, paused in the act of lighting his pipe.

‘Did you receive the canine diet sheet I passed to your housekeeper?’ asked Mattie.

‘And a Happy New Year to you, too, Miss Simpkin,’ said Major Lumb, his voice carrying well in the still air. ‘Fine weather. Shall we avoid snow this year, do you think?’

‘They would live far longer and be much happier were they to lose several pounds.’

‘And I would live far longer and be much happier were my next-door neighbour to stop issuing unasked-for advice. Please pass on my greetings to Miss Lee and wish her a thoroughly sanitary 1928.’ He tipped his hat and turned to follow the pair of animate barrels through the grass.

‘One meal a day and no tidbits,’ called Mattie at his retreating back. The only reply was a puff of yellowish smoke.

She snapped open her handbag and took out a small notebook and pencil, thumbing through to a section entitled ‘COLUMN IDEAS’.

Speaking out, she wrote. Public silence breeds private misery. Dare to be a Daniel.

She was closing the notebook again when the steam organ changed its tune: ‘Daisy, Daisy’ gave way to a jaunty march and the melody looped out of the past and caught her like a snare, so that she stood with the book in her hand, her bag open, her feet nailed to the path.

*As I walk along the Bois de Boulogne
With an independent air
You can hear the girls declare
He must be a millionaire.*

And instead of the tapering tower of the helter-skelter, she was seeing her younger brother, Angus, his dear, handsome face lop-sided, his indented forehead like a battered tin mug, his lips struggling to supply the words. ‘Just try the nouns this time,’ she’d suggested, rewinding the

OLD BAGGAGE

gramophone, and he'd managed a ghostly vowel for each, while she'd sung the rest with desperate vigour.

*As I walk along the Bois de Boulogne
With an independent __
You can hear the __ declare
He must be a __.*

The handbag was whisked from her grasp before she'd even registered the footsteps behind her, and she was left standing open-mouthed as a young man ran down the slope towards the fair, stuffing her bag under his plum-coloured jacket as he went, glancing back at her and then slowing – actually *slowing* – to a casual stroll as he neared the striped shooting-booth at the perimeter.

'Thief!' she shouted, starting forward. '*Thief!*' Her foot touched an object that rolled, and she looked down to see the miniature of whisky that had fallen from the bag as he'd tugged it away. She snatched it up – it was full, a decent weight, heavy enough to startle, too light to maim – and then she straightened, took aim and flung it side-arm, as if skimming a stone. The slope was in her favour; the missile maintained its height, kept its trajectory, and she was able to feel a split second of wondering pride in an unlost skill before a red-headed girl ran, laughing, from behind the booth, dodged round the thief and received the bottle full in the mouth.

'I am really most dreadfully, dreadfully sorry,' called Mattie, hurrying down the path. The redhead had been joined by a boy and the pair of them were kneeling,

staring up at her in round-eyed disbelief, the boy pressing a handkerchief to his companion's mouth.

'You're a bloody lunatic,' said the boy.

'Ooh fooh a oll a ee,' said the girl.

'That was accidental. I was aiming at a man who had stolen my bag and I would awfully like to—' She stepped to one side and looked round the booth at the shifting crowd. 'I really must try and catch him. As I say, I am enormously sorry. May I see?' She reached towards the handkerchief and the girl jerked away.

'Don't touch her,' ordered the boy.

'I have myself been the recipient of a large number of superficial injuries, many of them deliberately inflicted. In the case of a blow to the mouth, the only worry is whether the teeth are broken or the outline of the lips transected.'

Momentarily, the girl lifted the cloth and Mattie glimpsed an upper lip the size of a frankfurter and a row of undamaged teeth.

'Cold compress,' she said, exiting round the tent. 'No other treatment needed. Awfully sorry.'

For half an hour she hunted the fairground. It appeared that plum-coloured jackets were commonplace this season. She accosted four or five self-declared innocents before accepting that the thief was certainly long gone; there really was nothing further she could do.



The Flea was in the drawing room, taking down the Christmas cards, re-reading each one to ensure that she'd

OLD BAGGAGE

not missed a change of address, or an item of news that might require a note in the diary.

‘Come to the Grafton Gallery,’ Mattie had suggested. ‘I’ve had a sudden urge to look at the Monet *Haystacks*, first *with* lenses and then without, and we could take tea at Brown’s afterwards.’ But The Flea had wanted an afternoon to herself, a chance both to restore order after the seasonal anarchy of the past few days, and also to conduct a rather difficult interview with the daily; in any case, she always preferred the Tate, where every painting seemed to tell a satisfying story and a chair looked like a chair and not a collapsible music stand. In particular, she enjoyed the John Martins – vast, apocalyptic canvases showing the wicked sliding into the filthy abyss while the good sat placidly in spotless linen on the sunlit plains of heaven. Sunlight was, of course, not only the best bleaching agent but also the best disinfectant and, moreover, absolutely free! It was something that she always told her mothers.

*To my dear Mattie and Florrie,
Wishing you a splendid Yule-Tide and a peaceful New
Year and also a splendid Yule-Tide.
With kind regards from Aileen*

The handwriting on the card careered downhill amidst a shower of blots; poor Aileen, clearly back on the bottle. Last time they’d seen her she’d been bright-eyed and wearing a correctly buttoned coat – her people, she’d said, had paid for a spell in a strictly run convalescent home, ‘very like Holloway, only with smaller rooms’, and she’d emerged

not only dry but full of plans: she was, she'd told them, going to write and illustrate a novel. She'd apparently forgotten that during her last spell of abstinence she'd claimed to be 'going in for' photography and in the one previous to that she'd been very close to opening a tea-room on the South Downs with accommodation for lady walkers.

The front of the card showed a view of the harbour at Polperro, with snow on the quayside and a sticky brownish stain obscuring most of the fishing fleet. Poor Aileen, unmoored and drifting.

Christmas greetings to dearest Mattie and Florrie

Writing this from Northumberland, where I have been attending my daughter Kate during her confinement. I am delighted to say that I am now grandmamma to a bonny boy who looks the spitting image of his grandfather. Are you coming to my 'Forward Thinking' lecture in January? (The 14th, at Conway Hall.) I have chosen 'Wages for Mothers' as my theme.

Your loving comrade

Dorothy

The picture on the front of Dorothy's card was of a serenely smiling Virgin and child, but Dorothy had drawn a speech balloon from the Virgin's mouth, so that she appeared to be saying 'I should be receiving an allowance for this!' Mattie had laughed out loud at the picture but the graffitied image had made The Flea uncomfortable. She'd seen enough dismal rooms where a cheap illustration of the Holy Family was the sole non-utilitarian possession – the one pleasant view on

OLD BAGGAGE

which a weary woman could rest her gaze. 'Not everything should be shaped into a joke,' she'd said, a little sharply; she herself had grown up in a household where unchecked laughter had been seen as a bodily failing, rather like breaking wind.

She placed the more colourful cards in a pile ready for taking to New End Infants School and, after wrapping herself in a shawl, started to cut up the others for spills. The house was, as usual, freezing. Mattie never seemed to feel the cold, but then she was built along solid lines, whereas The Flea (as a friend had once remarked) looked rather as if she'd been constructed out of toothpicks. There was a fireplace in every room, of course, but the heat never permeated much beyond the grates and the corridors were a lattice of draughts.

It suited Mattie, though, who required space and air and who would undoubtedly have preferred to live in a tent. 'Doors should generally be open and the sky visible at all times,' was one of her maxims, usually uttered while flinging open a casement.

She had bought the house in 1922, after coming into a legacy. 'I was walking across Hampstead Heath,' she'd announced at the end of a Women's Freedom League fundraising concert, 'and I stumbled across our dear old Mousehole *festooned* with "For Sale" signs. Been empty since the war, apparently. Plenty of room for anyone who wants to hunker down there.'

Dorothy had nudged The Flea. 'Didn't you say you were hoping to move?'

And The Flea, whose bedsit in Tufnell Park had a dark

line of mould creeping across the ceiling and a shared kitchen lambent with silverfish, had negotiated a short stay. 'Thank you, but just while I'm searching for something else.'

Mattie had refused payment. 'I am not a landlord.'

'And I am not a charity case. I shall donate a sum to the WFL.'

After a week, it had become clear that Mattie lived on porridge, apples and baked potatoes. The Flea had made a steak-and-kidney pudding.

'If you stayed for longer,' said Mattie, scraping her plate like a schoolboy, 'you could cook in lieu of paying rent.'

'I'm fully capable of doing both,' replied The Flea, rather tartly.

That had been six years ago.

'We're good companions,' said Mattie. 'The arrangement works well.'

From the passage came the clank of a mop bucket being set down, and The Flea felt a flutter of unpleasant anticipation. She put down her scissors, walked over to the door, bracing herself for the interview, and opened it to find Mrs Bowling just inches away, hand poised to knock. Both women flinched.

'Did you want to speak to me?' asked The Flea, recovering first.

'I did, yes, Miss Lee. I'm sorry, but I've got some bad news for you.'

'Oh dear.'

'Yes, I'm afraid so.' Mrs Bowling paused, portentously. 'You see, Miss Lee, I have to hand in my notice.'

‘Oh.’ The Flea tried to rearrange her features into an expression of regret. ‘I do hope there’s nothing wrong.’

‘I wouldn’t say there’s anything *wrong*, exactly, Miss Lee.’

‘You’ve been offered another job, perhaps?’

‘In a manner of speaking, yes I have.’ Mrs Bowling paused again, her expression enigmatic. (‘The Kentish Town Sphinx,’ Mattie called her. ‘You cannot ask that woman whether she’s seen the bathroom plunger without her reacting as if she holds the Secret of the Ages.’) ‘You see, what happened is that my daughter-in-law Enid went into labour on Boxing Day.’

‘And is the ba—’

‘*Twins.*’

‘Oh my goodness.’

‘A little boy and a little girl. My son said he’s going to name the girl after me. He said, “I hope she turns out just like you, Mum, because you’re the best one there ever was.”’

‘And are they—’

‘The midwife said she’d never seen a healthier pair, *never*. But Enid’s just a scrap of a thing and my son’s told me he wants me to come in every day and help with the babies. “Mum,” he said, “you shouldn’t be out slaving for strangers when there’s work at home to do,” and my husband agrees, he said to me, “I’m sure Miss Lee and Miss Simpkin will understand that *family* needs to come first.” And, anyway, my youngest has just had a promotion at the Post Office so we can manage now without my little bit of pin money.’

The Flea actually had to bite the inside of her lip to keep her composure.

The tremendous cheek of the woman! Mrs Bowling's tenure as a more than adequately paid daily help had been marked by a gradual diminution of labour: all shipshape for the first month or two, and then a slow shrinkage of the areas subjected to scrubbing, a lowering of the height dusted, a neglect of less-frequented corners, all accompanied by a stream of chatter about the comforts of family life. No one, she implied, who had never had children or a husband could possibly understand true joy or sorrow – and it had begun to seem to The Flea that these two aspects were linked, and that a type of contempt for her spinster employers, living their barren lives, had led to a carelessness about how they were served. Mattie, of course, had noticed nothing – had swished past like a Daimler – but the idea had gnawed at The Flea until at last she'd determined to speak out, at least about the cleanliness part. And now this cup had been taken from her.

'I suppose I could stay another fortnight,' said Mrs Bowling.

'No, that's quite all right,' said The Flea. 'I'm sure we can manage without you.'

She had just sat down again – feeling more at ease than she had for days – when the doorbell jangled.



'The most infuriating thing has happened, Florrie,' called Mattie, opening the back door and racing up the scullery passage. 'I was crossing the Heath towards the—'

'Mattie, we have a visitor.' There was a warning note in

The Flea's voice. The kitchen door was ajar and through the gap Mattie could see a policeman's helmet on the table. Its owner, a sergeant, stared at her as she entered the room, and then rose with what felt like deliberate slowness. He had sharp features, and brown eyes that were slightly too close together; a terrier's face.

'Miss Simpkin?'

'Yes.' She remained standing, her chin up and her knees a little bent. *When questioned, imagine you are about to receive a tennis serve; with your senses on the alert, your stance easy and your muscles poised, you'll be ready to return all shots – with backspin!* Behind the policeman, The Flea hovered anxiously, hands clasped.

'My name is Sergeant Beal. I'm here about an incident at the Heath fairground earlier this afternoon.'

'Yes, my handbag was snatched from my grasp. Did someone report it?'

'The incident I'm talking about involved a missile being thrown at a young lady.'

'No, the missile in question was thrown at the thief. The young lady happened to interpose herself between us. I think you will find there is a considerable difference between these two statements.'

'Mattie,' said The Flea, levelly, 'you are not in the dock.'

'Nevertheless, I would prefer to keep the facts straight.'

Beal picked up his notepad and, with deliberation, thumbed through to a page of close writing. 'The young lady claims you threw a bottle at her.'

'A *miniature* bottle. Please don't make it sound as if I lobbed a jeroboam in her direction. A crime had been

committed and I was attempting to delay the escape of the perpetrator. The injury to the girl was entirely accidental, not to mention minor, and I apologized profusely. I cannot see why this is a police matter.'

There was a pause. Mattie had the sudden feeling that she had hit a mis-shot.

'You said that a crime had been committed,' repeated the sergeant.

'Yes, my bag was stolen.'

'Which is most definitely a police matter. And yet you didn't, yourself, report it.'

'No.'

'Why's that?'

There was a pause. 'I chose not to. As is my legal right.'

Beal nodded, as if she'd just confirmed something. 'I gather we're not too fond of the police, are we, Miss Simpkin?'

'I – I presume you are using the first-person plural ironically – I infer from your remark that you know something of my history. The question therefore answers itself.'

'The tea's ready,' announced The Flea, brightly and hurriedly. 'Let's all sit down together, shall we? Would you like a cup of tea, Sergeant?'

'Thank you, Miss Lee, that would be most welcome.'

'Let me clear a space.' She moved the piles of cards to the window ledge, and took her time about setting out the tea cups, waiting until Mattie had reluctantly taken a seat before she began to pour.

'Given that I did not report the incident,' said Mattie, 'may I ask why and how you arrived on my doorstep?'

'One of my constables was patrolling the fair, and he

came across the injured young lady. She gave a description of the person who had thrown the missile and this description was recognized by the constable in question, who had attended an incident involving yourself last summer.'

'Which incident?'

'An argument between yourself and a carter.'

'Oh, that incident. The fellow was refusing to allow his poor animal to stop for water on the hottest day of the year. All I did was unbuckle the harness and attempt to lead the horse away until such time as—'

'Mattie.' The Flea's tone was like a nudge to the steering wheel; Mattie veered away from the side road and back to the main thoroughfare. 'As I say, the injury to the girl was quite accidental and not, I think, serious, and my apology was immediate.'

'The young lady,' said the sergeant, his voice suddenly hard, 'looks as if she's been in a prize fight. She works in the first-class ladies' cloakroom at St Pancras and says she's sure she won't be allowed back there until the injury to her lip has healed. She is thinking of pressing charges.' He leaned back, seeming to relish the silence that followed. 'In the meantime,' he added, 'could you give me a description of the thief, and also of the handbag?'

'He was wearing a purple jacket,' said Mattie, stiffly, 'and he had dark hair, but I barely saw his face. I can tell you nothing useful about his appearance.' Though as she spoke, she recollected that glance back; a broad face, sharply cheek-boned — almost Slavic; she had been reminded of her Serbian refugees.

'And the bag?'

'Black leather. Rather large.'

'Its contents?'

'A purse, a 1928 diary, a pair of nail scissors, a fountain pen, a third edition of Fuller's *Worthies of England*, volume two . . .'

'A large book,' supplied The Flea, as the sergeant's pencil hesitated.

' . . . an apple, a string bag, a handkerchief, a Jew's harp and a small wooden—'

Mattie stopped herself just in time.

' . . . shoe tree.'

'And how much is in the purse?'

'Just over two pounds, but there is also a betting slip which, should Casey's Bride win the 4.20 at Sedgefield, will yield a further three guineas.'

Beal tucked his notebook and pencil into his pocket and rose to leave.

'Thank you for the tea, Miss Lee. Miss Simpkin, we may need you to come to the station to give a signed statement. You shall be sent a letter in due course. In the meantime, I'd advise you not to take the law into your own hands. Again.' He checked his watch. 'Casey's Bride?'

'Three-year-old gelding out of Joe's Heaven and Penelope. On striking form this season.'

She stayed seated as The Flea showed the sergeant out, and when she heard the front door close she reached for her tea. Her hand was trembling. How ridiculous that a single fairground tune had led to this; for thirty seconds she'd visited Angus, dear Angus, in that dreadful hospital in Weymouth and for that she'd been robbed and

threatened with court. Her guard had slipped and the barbarians had come smashing through. *Vigilance*, she thought, for the second time in as many hours. *Vigilance*.

‘That poor girl,’ said The Flea, returning.

‘Yes, it was fearfully bad luck for her. For both of us.’

‘Mattie, you could have taken her eye out!’

‘No,’ said Mattie, with certainty. ‘No, I was aiming for the spot between the fellow’s shoulder blades. She would have had to have been frightfully short to be struck any higher.’ She took a deep breath and set her cup down. ‘However, I would rather not be the subject of an assault charge. I wonder . . .’

‘What?’

‘If the girl might accept payment for days missed at work. Compensation, so to speak. I could go to St Pancras and ask for her address. She’s a redhead, it won’t be hard to describe her.’

‘I could do that,’ said The Flea, quickly. ‘I’ll be working in Somers Town tomorrow, right beside the station.’

‘I don’t mind going.’

‘And neither do I.’ The Flea’s tone was bright but firm. Mattie looked at her companion over the top of her spectacles. ‘You fear I may mishandle the situation.’

‘It’s more that you’re very *memorable*, Mattie. After all, what we are talking about is . . .’

‘Bribery.’

‘Yes. Any visitor would need to be unobtrusive. And don’t forget I often have to raise quite delicate matters with my mothers, topics of discussion that I need to’ – she picked her words – ‘sidle around.’

‘I lack tact.’

‘Yes.’

‘Hmm.’ Mattie gave her eyes a rub. ‘You may be right. In which case, thank you. In the meantime, I urgently need to replace my diary, all my lecture dates were in there – do you have a record of them?’

‘They’re on the new kitchen calendar.’

‘Ah. I wasn’t sure, so directly after the incident I went across the road to the Drill Hall to look at the poster outside and . . .’

‘A week on Wednesday,’ said The Flea. ‘Seven o’clock.’

‘. . . and whoever pinned it on to the noticeboard has done so rather carelessly. There is a pleat right down the centre of the paper, eliminating an entire syllable of every line. My lecture is apparently entitled “Some Experiences of a *Mint* Suffragette”, though I fared rather better than Mrs Gretel Neumann and her daughters, who this week will be giving a demonstration of Traditional Germ Folk Dancing. One for you, I thought, Florrie: you could bring your flit-gun and douse the front rows of the audience with prophylactic Jeyes Fluid.’

There was a moment of silence and then The Flea flushed pink and, almost against her will, began to laugh.

‘Thought that might tickle you,’ said Mattie with satisfaction. She drained her tea and then stood and stretched. ‘A *thoroughly* irritating day,’ she said. ‘What I need is some violent exercise. I shall walk down to the bookmaker in Camden and see if he’ll honour my mark.’

‘Across the Heath again?’

OLD BAGGAGE

‘Yes.’

‘Then please be careful. I still don’t understand what happened – was there a struggle, were you injured in any way?’

‘No. I was distracted by something and made myself an easy target.’ Humiliating to think of how she’d been standing, daydreaming like some silly flapper.

‘But distracted by what?’

Mattie shook her head. ‘It really doesn’t matter; it won’t happen again.’ She went to the hall to fetch her cape; it was crisping up for a frost outside.

Twenty minutes later, breasting Parliament Hill in the twilight, she saw a fox trot into the bushes, its mouth crammed with something that struggled. London lay sprawled below, yellow streetlights like a cheap glass necklace, the diamond pin of Venus hanging above. She could hear the jangle of the fair in the distance; the music was still playing, dangerously sentimental, and she took a deep breath and began to sing ‘The Marseillaise’, matching her footsteps to the rhythm of the lines. A spooning couple turned to stare; she nodded at them, pleasantly. People always stared. If one didn’t creep around, if one said what one thought, if one shouted for joy or roared with anger, if one tried to *get things done*, then seemingly there was no choice but to be noticeable. She couldn’t remember a time when her path hadn’t been lined with startled faces; they were her reassurance that progress was being made. What tremendous luck, she’d often thought, that she’d been born into an era of change. She could not have stood to have

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been like Dorothea Brooke, deprived of grand gestures,
incrementally adding to the growing good of the world.