

MARKET DAY by Valerie Thompson

Dulcie Warricker was having a fit of the vapours. At least that's how the Vicar described it, but then as Mrs Clement was apt to remark he rarely had any idea what was going on. His head was so far up in the celestial clouds he risked aeroplanes tangling in his hair. Mr Donnelly from the Stag & Ferret reckoned Dulcie was suffering from nerves.

“My aunt was like that, but then she lived in London. They’re all living on their nerves in London.” Maureen Lamb wondered privately if the woman was – how did one put it delicately? - entirely sober. The reddened nose, the gentle swaying motion. Might she, Miss Lamb considered, have concealed a hip flask in that large handbag?

However Dulcie Warricker was neither suffering from a nervous disorder or a surfeit of alcohol. She was in fact feeling travel sick. At least she had been before she'd lurched off a bus, sitting down with a bump on the nearest doorstep. Now, chilled by the damp stone and embarrassed Dulcie just wanted to be left in peace.

It was market day in Sumpton Gall. She'd inadvertently sat between the two busiest places in the village. On her left was the Sunshine Tea Rooms, while on her right was Gleam & Co Butchers. Dulcie was trying to avert her eyes from them. The shop had trestle tables outside, presided over by a stout man in a vast blue and white striped apron. It had to be said the butcher, Mr Gleam, resembled nothing more than a well fed pig. From his thick meaty fingers to his delicately shaped ears he had, Dulcie noted, a remarkably porcine air. Mr Gleam was assisted by a skinny youth, all elbows and knuckles. Above them hung a row of rabbits suspended by hooks, their powder puff tails causing Dulcie to feel another wave of nausea.

“She's got a green look about her,” Mrs Clement observed. “Let's take her into Tina's”

Despite her feeble protests Dulcie was helped to her feet and ushered into the Sunshine Tea Rooms. Tina Brawn, Mrs Clement's sister-in-law and owner of the tea rooms, looked alarmed at the influx.

“You're a very thoughtful woman,” the Vicar was saying to Mrs Clement. “A good strong cup of tea is just what's needed.”

Unknown to him Mrs Clement's motives weren't so pure. Nothing, she was thinking, would give her more pleasure as knowing someone was violently sick all over Tina's well-scrubbed floor, the hoity toity madam.

“I'm alright,” Dulcie kept saying. “I'm much better.” She allowed herself to be sat at a corner table and a cushion put behind her back.

“Tea with lots of sugar in it,” Mrs Clement ordered.

“No, I don't take sugar,” Dulcie told her, but Mrs Clement was adamant.

“It's good for shock.”

“I haven't had a shock.”

“Hmph.” Mrs Clement folded her arms across her chest. “I'd be shocked if I found myself sat on a doorstep.”

“I once found myself in a Sikh temple,” the Vicar said. “Most interesting.”

Mrs Clement decided she'd heard enough.

“I'll leave you in Miss Lamb's hands,” she told Dulcie. “She used to be a nurse.” She bustled out, and to Dulcie's relief the Vicar followed.

Miss Lamb gave a nervous smile and sat at Dulcie's table, perching on the chair as if ready to flee at any second. She was a small birdlike woman, neat in a drab grey. Dulcie felt a sense of pride about her own clothes, knowing her violet coloured skirt and jacket were much smarter. It occurred to her that she and Miss Lamb were about the same age, and noted Miss Lamb's lack of a wedding ring.

Dulcie glanced at her own rings, the thin gold band worn despite the divorce, and the diamond solitaire she'd thought was real but had turned out to be a convincing fake, much like her ex-husband.

“Here we are!”

Tina Brawn bore down upon them with a laden tea tray. The small table was soon home to an array

of crockery.

“I hope the scones are fresh,” Miss Lamb whispered to Dulcie, a remark not missed by Tina who gave her a deathly stare.

“All my cakes and sandwiches are made on the day, Maureen Lamb. ”

“I'm sure they're splendid.”

Dulcie's words were lost on Tina who stalked back to the counter.

“Oh dear,” Miss Lamb whispered. “She's giving me the Evil Eye. Of course - “ Miss Lamb's voice dropped even further. “ - they do say her grandmother was a witch.”

“A what?”

“A witch,” Miss Lamb repeated. “But I mustn't gossip. You're looking better. It must be the tea, or as I call it, Nature's pick me up.” She cocked her head to one side, eyes bright and inquisitive, reinforcing the idea Dulcie had of her as birdlike. “Are you,” Miss Lamb asked, “visiting relatives in Sumpton Gall? Or perhaps you're here for market day? We've been famous for our market since Elizabeth times.”

“Really?” Dulcie said, politely feigning interest as Miss Lamb gave her a potted history of the village. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Tina pretending to rearrange a vase of chrysanthemums. When Miss Lamb's voice eventually petered out Tina Brawn asked,

“Everything alright?”

“Oh yes,” Dulcie reassured her. “Splendid scones.”

“Mine was a tiny bit dry,” Miss Lamb said, earning another of Tina's glares. At that moment the tea room door opened and Mr Gleam walked in. He was still wearing his striped apron, and there were dark rust coloured stains on it. His was a very masculine presence in the dainty, doily filled room.

“Tina, love, can you change a twenty? Everyone's paying me in notes today.” He smiled toward Dulcie and Miss Lamb. “As long as I'm making money, eh?”

“Oh, yes. Indeed,” Miss Lamb said, blushing. Dulcie could feel her own cheeks pinking up as the butcher said in a friendly fashion,

“You're the lady who was ill, aren't you? Feeling better?”

“Yes.” Dulcie nodded. “Thank you.”

“You're in good hands with Miss Lamb,” he said. “Used to be a nurse.”

“Geriatrics,” Miss Lamb told Dulcie, looking pleased. “It was a real vocation.”

“She nursed my father,” Mr Gleam said. “Made the old chap's last days very comfortable.” He might've said more but Tina thrust a bag of coins into his hand.

“There you go, Ronald. Lots of pound coins.”

“You're a lifesaver, Tina. Oh - “ He slapped his forehead with his palm. “Those chops! I knew I'd forgotten something. Hang on.”

As he left the shop Dulcie saw a look pass between Tina and Miss Lamb. Tina dropped her voice to a murmur, leaning closer to their table.

“She didn't turn up, that internet woman.”

“Didn't turn up?” Miss Lamb said.

“Ronald sat in the bar at the Stag & Ferret in his best suit and tie,” Tina told them. “He had a small bunch of flowers. Nice, but nothing fancy. The barmaid said he'd booked a table at The Granary.”

“Goodness!” Miss Lamb was clearly surprised. “It's expensive. I'd heard it's £10 for a starter.”

“More like £14,” Tina declared. “Daylight robbery. £14 for a sliced pear, rocket and a couple of walnuts, I ask you. They should get Dick Turpin working there.”

A wistful expression settled on Miss Lamb's face.

“I'd love a meal there.”

Tina gave an expressive sniff.

“Chance'd be a fine thing. I'm lucky if my husband buys me a ploughman's. Anyway, shush up.

He's back.”

They clammed up as Mr Gleam came back bearing a tightly wrapped package.

“Here you go, Tina. They'll cook a treat.”

“Thanks Ronald. We'll have them for dinner.”

After he'd left the tea room for a second time Miss Lamb poured more tea.

“Poor Mr Glean.”

“I don't know what she was thinking of,” Tina said. “That internet woman. Fancy not turning up.

He might not be a looker, but Ronald Glean's a good catch. His own business, a new car, the caravan.” Tina shook her head regretfully. “I said he was foolish, but men won't listen. He's on that computer all the time. Online dating they call it. Of course,” she added, “Ronald's photo wasn't a recent one. My sister said he'd used one that was over ten years old, when he had a full head of hair.” She laughed. “Maybe the internet woman saw what he's really like and legged it. Silly girl. She could've got a slap-up meal out of it.”

“The Granary,” Miss Lamb said. “Imagine.”

“Never mind.” Tina shrugged. “It'll all come out in the wash.”

Dulcie and Miss Lamb sat in silence as if each was lost in thought.

“I don't think,” Miss Lamb said after a short while, “we were introduced.”

“Dulcie Warricker.”

“Maureen Lamb.”

“You didn't,” Miss Lamb said after another pause, “say why you came to Sumpton Gall.”

“I don't suppose I have a reason,” Dulcie said. “It's a pleasant day for a bus ride and I fancied a change of scenery. Actually - “ She gathered up her things. “I'd better be off. I want to pop into the chemists before I catch the bus back.”

After a tussle over the bill - 'Let me pay.' 'No, I won't hear of it.' 'Please, I insist.' - the women parted. Dulcie left the tea rooms hurriedly, grateful there was only 15 minutes until the next bus was scheduled. She bought travel sickness pills which settled her stomach and was relieved to see the bus trundle up the High Street and to sink gratefully into a seat. From her vantage point she saw the Sunshine Tea Rooms and Miss Lamb standing outside it, hair blowing into her eyes, a tartan shopping bag in her hand. Nearby the butcher dispensed minced beef and good cheer in equal measure. As if feeling Dulcie's gaze on him, he looked over and waved.

From the doorway of the tea room Maureen Lamb watched as Dulcie waved back. Maybe she's another of his internet connections, Miss Lamb thought. Who knew how many women Ronald had chatted to online. An image of what could've been came to Miss Lamb's mind. Herself and Ronald at The Granary, her clutching a bunch of flowers, him ordering wine with a confident air. You should've been brave, Miss Lamb told herself. You should've posted your own photograph on the website, not one of cousin Dora. You should've put on that new green dress, walked into the Stag & Ferret and said 'I'm Reenie, your date. It's me that's caught your eye.'

Instead Miss Lamb buttoned up her jacket and set off along the street toward the fish shop, the empty tartan bag flapping in the breeze. Her slight figure soon became lost amidst the busy crowd.