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# Bury Her Deep



HODDER

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For my sisters,  
Sheila, Audrey and Wendy  
with all my love.

# I

Pallister the butler swept into the dining room with platter aloft and glided to the side of our luncheon guest where he proffered the dish with unimpeachable propriety but with every muscle of his face sending the silent message: 'Don't blame me.' (It is miraculous how, with never a frown nor a smile, Pallister manages to carry a tray of brandies to Hugh's library like a godmother bearing an infant to the altar, and a tray of tea to my sitting room like a maid with a shovel clearing up after a dog.) The Reverend Mr Tait eyed the dish, first through his spectacles and then over the top of them, and his hands twitched a little but he was clearly stumped. I managed to suppress a sigh.

One of the more unforeseen consequences of my recent expansion into the realm of private detecting was the problem of what to do with my fees. I had bought a little motor car with the spoils of my first case two years before but since then I had been reduced to burying parcels of the loot here and there in the household economy and I had developed a new-found regard for the worries of Chicago racketeers. Laundry work, I was fast learning, is no picnic. Grant, my maid, effortlessly absorbed a good chunk of it into my wardrobe and relations between her and me became, as a result, warmer than they had ever been since the days of my trousseau. Grant satisfied, my next thought had been Mrs Tilling, my beloved cook, the only soul under my roof who I could be sure loved and admired me with all of her heart, excepting Bunty of course and even Bunty if given a choice between me and a marrow-bone would, I fear, show her true colours.

Accordingly, I had increased Mrs Tilling's grocery account and

reinstated the office of second kitchen maid which had disappeared in the general retrenchment after the war. I had expected these two augmentations to lead Mrs Tilling back to the good old days of plenty, sloshing around lots of cream and Persian cherries and never troubling with rissoles, but I had reckoned without the influence of the cooking columns recently sprung up in even the best newspapers and the endless reams of ‘clever’ recipes churned out by the new *Good Housekeeping* magazine, which Mrs Tilling devoured in gulps every month and out of which she had quickly amassed a formidable scrapbook. In short, with an extra girl to help and money to spare, Mrs Tilling’s kitchen had taken a reckless leap into the twentieth century and the results were quite something, the current luncheon menu being a case in point.

Mrs Tilling’s saddle of mutton had long been a fixture of our table in the colder months; indeed, I think roast saddle of mutton was wheeled out at the very first meal to which Hugh and I ever sat down together in this house, eighteen years before, while Grant unpacked my honeymoon trunks upstairs and the maids peeped curiously at their new mistress and tried not to giggle as they handed the sauces. More than anything else, more than the ring upon my finger, more than the presents heaped in my sitting room demanding thanks, more even than the honeymoon itself, it was that saddle of roast mutton which persuaded me that I really was married and for good. It was, however, delicious and I had come to welcome the sight of it and even the thick, engulfing smell of it on chilly mornings as I came in from my walk.

How I should have welcomed the sight and the smell of it now. Instead, what Pallister proffered with his air of being somewhere else entirely, engaged on quite some other task, was a saddle of mutton only in the sense that a smoked salmon soufflé is eggs and fish. I squinted at it down the table and tried to piece together its history. The fillets had been removed, leaving the backbone and ribcage as a frame for Mrs Tilling’s art; the whole had then been covered in a cloud of mousse – one would guess at mutton mousse, although it pained one to imagine those fillets being

pounded to paste and mixed with whatever bottled horrors the recipe described – which had been piped back onto the carcass from a bag to resemble a woolly sheepskin coat; a few slivers of fillet, left intact, had been rolled into rosettes to be tucked all around under the thing like flowers in a meadow, or rather like flowers in a florist's.

‘It’s mutton, Mr Tait,’ I supplied, despairing of his ever working this out. ‘Just dig in with a spoon.’

Hugh almost always remembers not to scold me when we have guests and he would certainly never lament my management of the household in front of them, even when tried to the extent that this concoction was trying him, but he treated me to a glare which promised me an unenticing conversation when Mr Tait had left.

I felt rather sorry for Hugh, truth be told. Had I come clean to him about my new source of income we could easily have spent the lot long before he had finished appointing the garden boys and under-stewards his beloved estate so desperately required, but then if Hugh knew about it I should not be reduced to laundering it through the household accounts at all and we could put it to better use, making sure that our own two sons did not leave school to become gardeners and under-stewards themselves. Of course, if Hugh knew about it he might well put an instant stop to it, and the question of what to do with the money would disappear, to be replaced by the question – mine alone – of what to do with the days and months and years stretching emptily ahead without it.

So I kept my mouth shut, opening it only to add to the ever taller, ever more rickety edifice of lies necessary to keep the whole thing rolling along. My first two cases, and the only two so far of any length and complexity, had arisen amongst the members of my own set, more or less, and Hugh had been almost insultingly pleased to wave me off on visits and remain at home with his dykers and grooms and visiting fruit-tree-pruning experts, engaged in those mystifying enthusiasms of his, all out of doors and most perfectly filthy, which I think of collectively as ‘making

mud pies'. As well as those two major cases, murders no less, I had taken on a few lesser problems: a thief at the Overseas League in Edinburgh and a terribly enterprising blackmailer (so enterprising and so nicely judged in her attempts that one almost regretted catching her). For these and other minor engagements which took me briefly from home I had found that Hugh could be persuaded to swallow cover stories of pitiful thinness, so long as I was careful to make my supposed mission appear sufficiently dull. So, I should never tell him that I was off to luncheon at the Overseas League for the third time in a fortnight; that would cause a great deal too much huffing into the moustache and muttering about tying up the chauffeur (as though I did not always drive myself and as though he, Hugh, ever went anywhere anyway), but if I told him I was going to the League to sort clothes donations for some African mission he sent me on my way smiling.

Recently, however, I had wondered whether he was beginning to smell a rat. He had taken to eyeing me very speculatively when he believed I was not watching and he had made more than one rather pointed remark, not quite compliments, about my clothes; my new fur-trimmed evening coat attracting particular attention of a rather sharp kind. I had gone so far as to ask Alec Osborne, dear friend and frequent Watson to my Holmes, whether I should make a clean breast of it. After lengthy consideration, Alec had advised continued secrecy, regular reviews, and a measure of wifely sucking up for, as he had pointed out, if something juicy came along it would be cruel torment to have to wave it by simply to keep on Hugh's right side. Far better, Alec thought and I agreed, to get squarely in his good books in advance and then spend the capital when it was needed. My presence at this luncheon with the Reverend Mr Tait, whose yearly visits I usually avoided, was to be seen as laying down a stiff deposit.

One does, as one's life unfolds, collect acquaintance and connections pretty much willy-nilly and no one can hope for a social circle peopled solely by those individuals so jolly that one invites them to stay for a week and forms parties effortlessly around them simply

by sticking pins in one's address book. On the contrary, it is inevitable that there must be at least a few so dull that dinner cannot be borne, let alone an overnight visit, and even although only luncheon is offered, no one else can be invited to dilute the tedium because the only acquaintance who would not be bored into months of sulks are those so cripplingly boring themselves that they would only add to the gloom. Of course, intimates can be taken into one's confidence and begged to help. Alec could have been leaned on today, for instance, but I have never approved of this use of intimates and so I try whenever I can to shoulder the burden myself and not inflict it upon others.

This morning, however, as I had fumbled with the scores of silk-covered buttons on my modish new sailor blouse, fingers clumsy in the October chill, I had begun to think I had bitten off considerably more than I could chew, for a descending scale of guests arranged in order of entertainment and diversion for their hostess runs out long, long before one gets to retired chaplains from one's husband's old school.

'Damn these things,' I said. 'Grant, there are so many buttons there's hardly space between them to get one's fingers in and do them up. And it's freezing in here.'

'Yes, no chance of it gaping,' said Grant. 'Madam. Such a clever idea. Nothing worse than gaping. And you're right. It's wonderfully fresh this morning. You look quite youthful.'

I squeezed the last silk button through its loop at last and looked up to check my reflection in the glass. My cheeks were rosy for once and my eyes clear.

'Hmph,' I said. 'That's not fresh air. That's a muck sweat from wrestling into my clothes.' But I could not help noticing that, for some reason which I admit might have been the weight of the buttons all down the middle, my front was beautifully flat in the new blouse, no billows, no puffs. I did not go so far as to smile at Grant – one cannot prostrate oneself – but I gave her a kind of hard stare and she knows what it means.

Grant duly unbent a little herself.

'I'm sure it will soon go past,' she said. 'And besides, Margaret

always says that he's quite a card in his own way. Said that last year Mr Gilver and he were shaking with laughter in the library after luncheon. And Mrs Tilling's got some lovely treats in store too.'

I could quite believe that Hugh and the chaplain would laugh hard and long about the japes and scrapes of schooldays. That was the problem. And I had no doubt either that Mrs Tilling, quite savagely devout in her way and keen to impress a minister of the kirk, would be scouring her *Good Housekeeping* scrapbook, fried fronds of Florence fennel just a dusting of cornflour away.

Even I could not have foreseen the mutton, but I had been quite wrong about Mr Tait too, who turned out to be neither damp nor dour – not like a minister at all – but rather a comfortable figure in country tweeds and with a grey bib to his dog collar. He had a little round nose like a potato and when he smiled, which was often, his eyes were crescent-shaped above his cheeks. The high, bald dome of his forehead lent some gravitas and the slow burr of his Scotch accent, conversing calmly but with great good humour on whatever topic arose, rounded him off to perfection. So, before we had even finished our sherry, I had moved him out of the mental category of duty-inspired bore and entered him onto my list of spare men. Not that I often gave the kind of formal dinner which demanded a balance of the sexes and could be thrown into confusion by a missed train or attack of influenza, but if such a crisis ever did arise I would far rather send to Fife for Mr Tait and park him next to some difficult dowager than trawl round my immediate neighbourhood for the best that *it* had to offer.

For Mr Tait, I had learned from Hugh, was a widower. He had married rather late in life for a minister, at around forty, and it had been this marriage which had occasioned his giving up the chaplaincy at Kingoldrum Boys' College and taking a parish where his wife would have a manse to call her own. The young Mrs Tait, however, must barely have had time to inter-line her curtains against the east coast haar before she was carried off to the graveyard, leaving Mr Tait with a baby daughter and a pack of attentive

female parishioners clambering over one another to take care of him. That is to say, the parishioners were my own conjecture, but I was sure that Mr Tait did not get those cushiony cheeks and that air of great ease from whisking up powdered soup over a gas ring and my theory was only strengthened when after a mouthful of the mutton mousse, he exclaimed: ‘Delicious!’ and smacked his lips. I considered what a useful talent it was for a minister, and a widowed one especially, to be able to consume this gelatinous filth with such convincing relish. It would never do, after all, if he blanched at the baked offering of one of his less talented parish ladies, a peripheral matter in other sects, perhaps, but the Church of Scotland, make no mistake, gets by on a little doctrine and a lot of scones.

‘How kind of you,’ I murmured. ‘I’m afraid we don’t – Hugh and I – always appreciate our kitchen staff’s forays into the latest cuisine. I shouldn’t have believed how set in my ways I had become, until these odd concoctions from below showed me.’

‘Oh, but Mrs Gilver,’ exclaimed Mr Tait, ‘you must keep up to date, my dear. We must encourage and applaud enterprise wherever we find it. We must not be suspicious of the new, but embrace it in all its forms. This is something I’ve had cause to think about a great deal just recently at home in the parish.’

I looked at him with expectant interest – clearly there was a story coming – but before he could start, Hugh weighed in.

‘Men are suspicious,’ he said. ‘And prone to discontent.’

I stared at him, speechless. Hugh does not usually go in for that quelling habit of dropping quotations into the conversation and I am glad, since I never know what to do when it happens. Should one simply laugh in appreciative admiration of the other’s knowledge of the great writers – but how could one laugh at such a quotation as that? – or should one try to cap it? Or simply agree with what has been said? It must, I concluded, be the presence of Mr Tait and the resulting echo of Hugh’s schooldays which prompted his unusual outburst and so I left it to Mr Tait to find an answer. This he managed with aplomb.

‘Ha, ha,’ he cried in happy recognition. ‘Herrick, yes indeed.’

Robert Herrick. A man of the cloth, like myself, you know. But not . . . my goodness me no, not at all . . . And it goes right to the heart of my recent troubles, as it happens. Men *are* suspicious. They certainly are prone to discontent at Luckenlaw these days.’

‘What’s the matter?’ I asked.

‘Have you ever heard, I wonder, of the SWRI?’ said Mr Tait. Hugh and I each frantically tried to assign the initials to something sensible.

‘Scottish?’ I began. A safe bet.

‘Workers’ Rights?’ ventured Hugh, incredulously. It was a topic he had never thought to have brought to his luncheon table.

Mr Tait threw back his head and laughed.

‘Women’s Rural Institute,’ he said. ‘Perhaps it hasn’t come to Gilverton yet.’ I shrugged. As far as I knew, there was the Women’s Guild, exclusively the preserve of the minister’s wife and therefore nothing to do with me, the Brownies and Guides and Scouts and Cubs, for which there was never any shortage of hearty volunteers, and that was it. I had heard of the new Women’s Institute, of course, but had thought it confined to England and had thankfully embraced the belief that, to quote the wife of our tenant farmer at Gilverton Mains on the topic of Clara Bow’s rising hemline, it was all very well down there but it would never do up here with our weather.

‘Well, the SWRI has landed on the shores of Fife,’ said Mr Tait, ‘and caused a bit of a stir there. The local men are terribly old-fashioned in some respects – I daresay it’s just the same here – and to listen to some of them you’d think their wives were off out to supper and a show.’

‘When in fact?’ I prompted.

‘A perfectly wholesome gathering of respectable married ladies and girls, to discuss matters of domestic interest and learn handicrafts,’ he said, sounding like a pamphlet. Hugh said nothing. ‘And some of the womenfolk themselves are just as bad,’ Mr Tait went on. ‘One of my older parishioners, a wonderful old lady, came begging me to stop “thon sufferer-jets” from pestering her.’

She said she had not been off her farm except to church and market for forty-three years and she was not about to start.'

'Remarkable,' I murmured, although my decades at Gilverton had taught me that it was nothing of the kind.

'So while I daresay there would have been a fair bit of interest in a great many topics, even suffrage itself, the whole thing is having to creep along on tiptoe. Talks on infant nutrition, don't you know, and home-made lampshades. For next month, my daughter tells me they are trying to find a speaker to address "The Household Budget".' He sighed. 'Well, I suppose it's better than nothing. Men are suspicious, right enough. And prone to discontent.'

'Dandy,' said Hugh, and I turned to him. He looked at me out of innocent eyes. 'You could do that.'

'Do what?' I asked, frowning. For a moment I thought it was a clumsy attempt at a joke, implying that I could make a man suspicious and discontented. I soon realised, of course, that it was much worse. He bared his teeth at me and turned back to Mr Tait.

'Dandy here could do a wonderful talk on managing a household budget,' he said. 'She's a whizz at it. Aren't you, my dear?'

'Hugh, I hardly think my languid remarks to cook, butler and maid are quite what Mr Tait's good ladies are looking for.' I laughed a tinkling little laugh, but it turned rather dry towards the end.

'You could scale it down,' persisted Hugh. 'You could extrapolate from a large household to a small, surely. The principle is the same.'

'Indeed it is,' said Mr Tait. 'If you have a flair for it.'

'Oh, she does,' said Hugh. 'She certainly does. You won't be surprised to hear, sir, that things have been tighter and tighter every year since the war, the same as everywhere,' – Mr Tait inclined his head in gentle sympathy – 'and yet what Dandy manages to squeeze out of her dwindling housekeeping . . . oh, you wouldn't believe me if I told you: new clothes, a little motor car, extra staff. I don't know,' he finished sternly, 'how she does it.'

I was blushing now to the roots of my hair. So he *did* suspect

something. Luckily, Mr Tait took my blushes to be modesty, and he went as far as to lean over the table and pat my hand.

‘It’s nothing to fear, Mrs Gilver,’ he said. ‘Just a village gathering, and your name on the list of speakers would help no end in quashing some of the suspicions for good. Can I tell Lorna that you’ll come?’

I was trapped, unless luck was on my side with the calendar, so I asked the date.

‘Now then, let me see,’ said Mr Tait, reaching into an inside pocket and drawing out a slim diary. ‘November, November . . . It will be Tuesday the eleventh.’

‘Wonderful,’ said Hugh. ‘There won’t be any problem with that. Mid-week, absolutely nothing to hold you back, Dandy.’

He was right. I knew he was.

‘I shall have to check my own diary,’ I said. ‘The eleventh is ringing a distant bell.’

‘Very well,’ said Hugh. ‘Take Mr Tait to your sitting room after luncheon and make quite sure.’ I was astonished. Where was Hugh finding these depths of cunning? Of course, I had had no intention of taking the good Reverend with me. I had thought to go to my sitting room, count to ten, and come back with an expression of deep regret and news of an engagement in town, but if Mr Tait were standing right there beside me I could not possibly look at a blank diary page and pretend to find an appointment there.

‘I’ve no idea about this,’ I told him again. ‘I’m bound to make a fearful mess of things.’

‘Come to the October meeting first then,’ said Mr Tait. ‘It’s a hospitable sister. You’ll pick up some good hints from her.’

Hugh was practically stroking his moustache and saying heh-heh-heh like a pantomime villain by this time.

‘When is the October meeting?’ I asked, sensing defeat.

Mr Tait once again flicked through the pages of his diary.

‘Sunday the – oh, but it won’t be Sunday, of course. And I would doubt it would be Saturday. So probably Monday the thirteenth. A week on Monday. I can telephone to you this evening

and make sure, of course. But I would imagine it would be on the Monday. They always have it at the full moon.'

Hugh looked rather startled and I am sure I blinked.

'That has some unfortunate associations, does it not?' I said. 'I don't wonder that the men are suspicious of *that*.'

Mr Tait looked confused for a moment and then his face split into a grin, his crescent-shaped eyes dancing.

'For the light, my dear Mrs Gilver,' he said. 'To light their way there and home again. These are simple countrywomen, remember. *They* have no little motor cars, no matter how prudent they are.'

After luncheon, after the caramelised orange pudding which was quite a success with Mr Tait, being hot and sweet and stodgy as many men require their puddings to be, he followed me along the passage and through the breakfast-room to my little sitting room in the south-east corner of the house. By habit, I walked over the thick breakfast-room carpet rather than around it and stepped very gently on the four feet of polished boards between its edge and my door. This is usually a sensible plan, since otherwise Bunty can have whipped herself up into a frenzy of excited whining at my approach and is likely to hurl herself upon me as I enter. On this occasion, looking back, I might have been as well to make a little more noise. Her answering din would have reminded me of her presence and would have prompted me to warn Mr Tait. As it was, I made no sound at all and I can only imagine either that he was unusually light on his feet for such a comfortably proportioned gentleman or that for some reason he was wearing India-rubber-soled shoes. Anyway, I opened the door, telling him over my shoulder that it would not take a minute before we could rejoin Hugh in the library for coffee, and at the sound of my voice Bunty, who had been curled on the blue velvet chair, snapped to attention to stand with her forefeet on its back and her head, as a result, towering above ours and let out a tremendous, welcoming Howwf!

Mr Tait took the name of our Lord squarely in vain and then

blushed, rubbed his jaw with a forefinger and apologised, laughing. I had already decided that I liked him, but from that moment I determined that I wanted him as a friend, even if a talk on household budgeting was the price of securing his friendship.

I was disappointed, then, a moment later to see in my engagement diary against Tuesday the eleventh of November two entries, short but unmistakable. *Wreath 11 a.m.*, said one; *Fitting, 2 p.m., Perth*, the other.

Here was the excuse I had been ready to invent, waiting actually in existence for me. Unless . . .

‘I’m so sorry, Mr Tait,’ I said. ‘It seems I’m busy on the eleventh of next month.’ He was teasing Bunty, running the toe of his shoe up and down her tummy as she lay wriggling and whining with pleasure on her back on the hearthrug. I have always felt that Bunty is an excellent judge of character and although she is never exactly stand-offish with anyone – Dalmatians never are – this level of instant and total submission only strengthened my own view of Mr Tait as a good egg. ‘But I’m wondering,’ I went on, ‘will they really have the meeting on Armistice Day? Wouldn’t it be rather . . . ?’

‘Rather what?’ said Mr Tait.

‘I don’t know,’ I said, trying to make it sound light. ‘Rather disrespectful, I suppose. Rather ungrateful. Would these villager women really want to abandon their husbands and homes on that day of all days and go to a public meeting?’

He stopped teasing Bunty at that and she rolled over onto her side with a sigh and lay looking out of the window at the bird-table on the lawn, her tail thumping the carpet.

‘I’m surprised at you, Mrs Gilver,’ he said. ‘Truly I am. A young woman like you with such old-fashioned notions. I cannot understand where everyone is getting the idea’ – he spread his arms wide and looked around the room as though for inspiration – ‘that the SWRI is a hotbed of socialists and suffragettes. I really cannot.’

‘No more can I,’ I said. ‘I didn’t mean to suggest that it was. But I’m afraid if you’re sure the eleventh is the day then I shall

have to decline your invitation. I'm laying a wreath at the service in the morning.'

'But you'll have plenty time to get down to Fife after that,' said Mr Tait.

I was debating with myself whether to agree, cancel my fitting and face Grant's wrath or make up a more serious appointment to account for my afternoon when his demeanour suddenly changed. He sat down heavily on the blue velvet chair and put one hand on each tweedy knee, leaning slightly forward with the manner of one about to explain something terribly important to a rather backward child.

'I want you to come to the meeting most particularly, Mrs Gilver,' he said. 'I meant to ask you even before Hugh . . . dropped you in it, shall we say?' My eyebrows rose at that and I smiled.

'Why?' I asked. 'I assure you that no matter what Hugh would have you believe, I am no housekeeper.'

'But you have other talents,' said Mr Tait. 'I've been hearing about them from an old friend of mine who recommends you very highly. Very highly indeed.'

I closed my diary firmly. Dresses (and Grant) be damned. I had a case.