

## Minnie's Treasure

THE LIVING-ROOM of the seaside bungalow was cushioned and flowery, full of light from the bow windows. Facing these windows, Mrs Gemmell, a cigarette at her lips, scraped the bristles on the pink, ageing scalp, then, uplifting her eyes to the heavenly view, she gave the brush a sharp tug.

"That's sore", whimpered Minnie Dundas to her housekeeper/companion. "You enjoy hurting me."

"We must suffer to be beautiful."

"You're cruel!"

"Now Minnie, Minnie", Mrs Gemmell's voice sank, cajoling, to a sugary whisper, "we've visitors today, dear, remember? We haven't forgotten already, have we? We must be looking our best. Your in-laws, Mr Dundas and Mrs McKie, are coming to lunch."

"What do they want? I never asked them."

"And neither you did." Mrs Gemmell dragged on her cigarette, spilling ash, "But as they're good enough to call I thought it only nice to offer. . . ."

"You're entertaining them in my house?" Minnie stamped her tiny, crooked foot, and her Pomeranian, Froufrou, shivered under the chair. "It's my house, I tell you. Mine!"

"Mine! Mine! I bet you said that when you were a little girl with your dolls?" Mrs Gemmell stood over her a moment—a pampered only child with no children of her own—then, lifting the brush, she again plunged it ruthlessly into the thin, silky, silvery hair. "Look out at the sea", she blew smoke at the window, "it's a beautiful day for them."

"For whom?"

"Your visitors, dearie, your visitors." The housekeeper administered a last flick to the old hair, then gave up with a sigh. A widow like her charge, she was in her early sixties, strong and heavy with bronzed frizzy curls, her cheeks brightly rouged; she was wearing a pink, quilted dressing-gown whose lace trimmings were rather frayed. Resting her cigarette on the window ledge, she held up a mirror. "There we are—fit for Buckingham Palace!"

Minnie eyed the smouldering stub: "You'll cause a fire. . . . You'll burn me in my bed!" Without even glancing at the mirror she ruffled out her painfully brushed hair.

"Naughty, naughty!" Mrs Gemmell smacked her hand and she began to cry.

Froufrou jumped into his mistress's lap, wistfully tilting his topknot with its floppy bow, and she muttered through tears: "That woman hit me, Froufrou! If only Gordon, poor Gordon. . . ." The late Gordon Dundas had been in Clyde shipping in the days when that meant something. Minnie had given up her career for him, her famous name, and he had called her his "precious", spoiling her for half a century. As she stroked the little dog, her many rings reflected the dazzle of the Clyde estuary down which poor Gordon's ships once proudly sailed, and suddenly she smiled, all grudges forgotten, at her patient keeper. "I've got the sea shimmering on my hands. Happy hands!" She clapped them. Above the shimmering sea floated the hills of Arran, lost paradise of her childhood. "There's Goatfell", she pointed at the island's highest peak. "Did you know I'd been to the top of Goatfell? We used to climb it every summer, me and Papa and my cousins, Albert, Jeanie and Sarah, and our Scottie Toby, who used to jump like a flea over the heather. I must climb it again with Froufrou. . . ." She bounced him and he slithered on her satin knees. "Yes, I shall, I shall—I'll do that!"

Bitterly, Mrs Gemmell laughed. She's useless, she thought: useless jewelled hands, useless little feet stuffed into fussy, pricey shoes. Today it was the shoes with bows on them. "You'll climb Goatfell, will you? Not with those feet you won't! Which reminds me—your toenails. . . ."

"No, no! Not my toes, poor toes. . . ."

But Mrs Gemmell was already rummaging in the stained pocket of her dressing-gown for the scissors kept hidden in there with other junk. "Come on then, off with those stockings! Or have I got to undress you?"

Minnie, terrified, shuffled off her stockings and held out a bent, blue-veined foot. As her companion knelt down to cut the nails too close, she remembered her brother-in-law's horrid trick with the wasps.

"Why did you ask him?"

"Who?"

"Ramsay. You know what he does, Ramsay Dundas? He uses scissors to execute God's creatures."

"Wandering again?" Mrs Gemmell wrenched the scissors on the claw of the little toe. "The disgusting things I have to do for you, Minnie—Minnie Dundas." The name was hateful to her. Her man, her own Jamie,

had been crippled in the Dundas shipyards and she, still a bonny young woman, had nursed him till he slowly died. She was left with nothing, no money, no family, no golden memories. All she had, Audrey Gemmell, was her feminine pride, bronzed hair, bright cheeks. “Ugh!” she grimaced at the nail clippings on the carpet. “Well, that wasn’t so bad, was it? You’ll be more comfortable now when you climb those mountains.”

“Go away! Go and change out of that tatty dressing-gown.”

“Housecoat, dear.” Mrs Gemmell tossed her her stockings and flounced off.

“**T**HAT’S GOT RID OF HER, Froufrou—she’ll be an age painting her wrinkled old face.” Minnie rocked the little dog, singing to him in her cooing contralto. It was for singing that she was famous—a household name, concerts in Glasgow, tours of the Western Isles. Though that name had faded long, long ago, an aura of celebrity still clung to her, even in her dotage, in the eyes of her relations, for her popularity had been immense. She had always been a little thing, bird-boned, softly fleshed, and her deep voice was most surprising; when she sang *My love’s like a red red rose*, it was with an almost sensual yearning that stirred the heart, the bowels. Her sensuality, however, was respectably contained within herself as a love of comfort, of toy-like ornaments, silk underwear, bland creamy food exquisitely cooked. A poor man’s Isobel Bailey, she was famous, too, for sacred music, *I know that my Redeemer liveth* and the twenty-third Psalm, whose quiet waters and pastures green were rendered with a velvety conviction that this, more than anywhere on earth, was, surely, the most comfortable place to be.

Minnie readjusted Froufrou’s bow. “I’ve got bows, too, darling. Lookee!” Her feet tap-danced, showing off the bows on her shoes. Then her gaze drifted over the sea from island to island—the Cumbraes, Arran, Ailsa Craig with its lighthouse and rare birds, one of which had come to see her and was resting under the garden hedge. “Pretty birdie, so white, so soft. . . Mrs Gemmell? Mrs Gemmell!”

The housekeeper, changed and smart in one of Minnie’s dresses, appeared in the doorway and lit a cigarette. “Something the matter?”

“Down there—a snow goose! It’ll bring us happiness.”

Mrs Gemmell sauntered to the window. “That’s just a piece of waste paper. Been chucked over the hedge by some tramp—a dirty tramp!”

Above the snow goose, the hedge, the blue sea, blue mist, the crest of Goatfell. . . . Once, when climbing, Minnie had seen an adder on a tuft of bogweed, coiled up. She had looked at the adder, the adder had looked at her, a point of light in the dark eyes she couldn’t see into, couldn’t understand—except that its thoughts

were evil. Mrs Gemmell’s face was turned from the light and she couldn’t see into her small, dark eyes. “Adder’s eyes, that’s what you’ve got!”

The woman sharply exhaled and smoke hissed through her teeth. “Sing a song to your snow goose, you daft old thing! Make a change from blethering to one of those.” She waved her cigarette at the pussies and froggies, china lambs, fine ladies with parasols that cluttered every level surface. “I’m surprised you don’t put bows on them too.” She swept out of the room to open packets and tins in the kitchen. Minnie followed. She saw a ring of mauve lipstick on the cigarette balanced on the stove where a saucepan was gurgling. Behind the pan was a bottle of Famous Grouse.

“What’s that you’re brewing in your cauldron? Smells bad. Arsenic?”

Mrs Gemmell took a pull from the bottle and sweetly sighed: “Your handsome brother-in-law is coming—I wouldn’t poison him.” Another drink, then her livid mouth was stuffed with peppermints. “All ready now. Go and sit down, dear.” She redirected Minnie to the front room, then settled herself, feet up with a thriller, to await the arrival of the guests.

“What’s she reading, Froufrou? *Murder at Dead of Night*. . . . Oh, oh, she’s plotting—she’s getting ideas!” Then Minnie smelled it, that cheap sickly perfume which meant the creature was on the rampage.

**T**HE BELL RANG and the housekeeper rose to open the door, but, instead of standing back to let them pass, she herself received the visitors, at once intimate and servile. “Your coat, dear Mrs McKie, and Mr Ramsay, let me take your hat, your gloves and—ah, your beautiful umbrella.” She ran her fingers, coquettishly, along the umbrella, which was never unfurled and had the function of a dandy’s cane. She addressed him, the younger brother, as “Mr Ramsay” because, though this linked her to the servants in the grand old place, it also put her on a more familiar footing with him.

“Thank you, thank you, Mrs—”

“Gemmell.” She lowered her eyelashes, showing only the modest tips of her teeth.

“Dear lady, you must excuse me—even my once excellent memory plays me ludicrous tricks. Gemmell! How could I forget. . . ?” His voice faded and a grateful, bony hand reached for but did not quite touch the dear lady’s wrist. Tall, well-tailored and with distinguished silvered hair, Mr Ramsay Dundas, professional man and widower, was inclined to sentiment, though narrow at heart. “We are so indebted, aren’t we, Wanda?” He turned to his sister, who compressed her lips.

That they had arrived together was mere coincidence. There was no nonsense about Wanda McKie, who was adorned only by a wedding ring and a cairngorm brooch in the lapel of her grimly belted coat.

The coat now off, a WVS-type hat remained clamped to her brow, shading suspicious eyes and an indignant, jutting chin. Of the housekeeper she enquired: "Well?"

"Oh, Mrs McKie, she's so excited, it's so good of you to have come, to have spared a wee moment. . . ."

Wanda sniffed: of course it was good of her, she didn't need to be told it. Besides, this was her duty—a duty from which her banker husband, a silent man even on the golf course, had abstracted himself. Recoiling from Mrs Gemmell's scent, she glanced at her brother, but already he was making a fool of himself, playing the gallant.

"What a comfort it must be to poor Minnie to have someone so sprightly and cheerful looking after her. If you'll forgive me being personal, that new dress—it is new, isn't it?—is most becoming."

"Oh, Mr Ramsay, you always were a charmer! Yes, it is nice, I've always admired it—a gift from Mrs Dundas. 'I've no use for it', she said, 'I'm no longer in the public eye.' Sad that. . . ."

"Too tight", Wanda glared at the straining seams.

Ignored in her corner, Minnie now startled them: "It wasn't a gift—she stole that dress. She goes through my wardrobes. . . ."

A hush, an awkward moment was relieved by Wanda, mistress of the damning retort: "Rubbish!"

"Oh, don't be angry with her", interceded the keeper, "she's just confused. We get confused, don't we, Mrs Dundas dear?" To Ramsay she murmured in a croaking whisper: "She's such a sweetie—it is sad."

"She calls me Minnie when we're alone."

"What am I thinking of?" Mrs Gemmell wrung her hands. "I haven't even offered you a drink. A bitter lemon for Mrs McKie? And, Mr Ramsay, a wee taste of your favourite tipple?"

Ramsay, growing irked by her fawning, applied his charms to the sister-in-law whose fame had once so awed him he'd never realised, as now with a shock, that she was quite so small. To kiss her he had to bend right down, while she flinched, bejewelled and fluttering, from his prickly moustache.

"You're thinner, Minnie", Wanda gripped and shook her after they brushed cheeks, "*your* dress is hanging on you."

Minnie's little ringed hands clutched at and mournfully flapped her dress. "No food, no proper food."

"What's that? I can't hear you when you mumble."

"Horrid food."

Wanda turned to Mrs Gemmell: "What did she say?"

"Ssh!" Mrs Gemmell laid a finger over her lips. "She pretends I don't feed her."

Missing this too, Wanda gave her shoulders an angry twitch, then thrust a packet at Minnie: "Present for you."

"For me?" The little hands greedily unwrapped it. "A tea-towel? What made you think I'd be needing a tea-towel? A leftover, I suppose, from one of your kirk bazaars?"

"Now, dear, manners! It was very kind of Mrs McKie. We can never have enough tea-towels, can we? And it's such a pretty one!" Mrs Gemmell pulled out chairs and settled the guests, then left them to discuss the view, the fine day.

"A very decent woman." Ramsay knotted his fingers, cracking the joints. "A worthy woman."

"A treasure", agreed his sister.

"She's not, she's horrid. It frightens me every time I hear her taproom voice."

"What?"

"I said taproom—drink and cigarettes. Dirty thing, she never has a cigarette out of her mouth."

"Nonsense!" Wanda nodded significantly at Ramsay.

"I tell you she is dirty. Look down there on the carpet—my toenails. She never even bothered to pick them up."

"Well, at least she cuts them—you're lucky to have someone to do it for you." Averting her eyes from the clippings, Wanda looked around with disapproval at the clutter of ornaments, a nightmare to dust. "She probably forgot to sweep them up, there's so much to keep her busy."

"Busy! It's my cleaner, my Mrs Cameron, who does all the work in this house." The little dog jumped into Minnie's lap and she cuddled him, her eyes moistening: "And she hits me, doesn't she, Froufrou?"

"I can't make you out, you're mumbling again."

"D'you hear that, Froufrou? I tell her she hits me and she doesn't listen, she doesn't care. I don't suppose she'd care even if Mrs—Mrs—murdered me in my bed. At dead of night—murder at dead of night."

"Preposterous! If you go on like this you'll drive that excellent woman away."

"Who are you?" Minnie peered, mystified, at her sister-in-law. "Ah, I know!" She shook her head. "Servants aren't what they used to be."

"You mustn't treat her like a servant", Ramsay, unctuous, reproved. "Mrs Gemmell is really a companion."

**M**INNIE, IGNORING HIM, was transfixed by the eyes glaring at her from under Wanda's dreadful hat. "Take that look off your face! I may be a little vague, but I know perfectly well who you are. So off you go", the concert-hall idol of yesteryear drew herself up and pointed at the door, "back to the servants' wing!"

Wanda, mortally affronted, crossed her arms over her bag, while Ramsay murmured: "Poor old soul. There's no servants' wing, Minnie, you're not at Craiganthor House any more. Craiganthor was sold some years ago after dear Gordon—after he passed away."

"Stop trying to confuse me. She's no right to be here,

doesn't know her place—she's the housekeeper."

Mrs Gemmell, announcing lunch, tiptoed over to Minnie's chair and put her arm round her. "We're in one of our muddles. That's your sister-in-law, Mrs McKie. It's me, Mrs Dundas lovey, who's your housekeeper."

"You? Oh, no! No, I don't want it to be you. . . ."

"Must be trying to cope with", said the outraged Wanda. "Perhaps the doctor could give her some pills to calm her down?"

"Pills?" Minnie's faded blue eyes swivelled: "Poison!" She could only with difficulty be persuaded to totter into the dining-room where, instead of ornaments, an array of silver cups, jugs, teapots, goblets were crowded together, for want of a better place to put them, in the centre of the table.

"What's all this? Minnie playing shop?"

"No, no, no, Mrs McKie", the keeper's cheeks flushed under their rouge, "I'm the one who put it there. I found all this lovely silver stuffed away in an old packing-case so I brought it out and polished it up—I've polished every item on that table!"

Not very well, thought Wanda, noting smears on the handles, but she tactfully nodded when Mrs Gemmell stood back to admire her handiwork.

"Gorgeous, isn't it?"

"I don't like it, I don't want it there."

"Oh dear! Mrs Dundas, I'm afraid, didn't thank me, she doesn't care for her silver at all. Odd of her, don't you think? She only likes things she can talk to, china cats and lambs—dollies. But then that's the way of it, you know what I mean. . . ." Then, as if her employer were no longer present, as in a sense she was not, the woman chattered on: "Now what I'd like to see is a glass cabinet over in that corner where the silver could be properly set off. I've always wanted a house with a display cabinet."

"She wants to change everything, she thinks this house belongs to her."

"Oh, you've no idea", Mrs Gemmell's voice sank in whispered confidence, "what I have to put up with. Why, if there's one cushion out of place. . . ." Aggrieved and long-suffering, she retreated to the kitchen, the new tea-cloth ostentatiously hooked over her arm.

The guests seated themselves and were served tinned soup followed by railway-station pies, the pastry like cardboard, the lids embellished by a dollop of tomato sauce. Then there were éclairs, bought as a special treat, filled with artificial cream and served straight from their box. Ramsay's elegant features became shadowed with melancholy and the dutiful Wanda swallowed with an effort. All of a sudden they began to treat their rich brother's widow with sympathy, almost affection, making excuses: "She wasn't trained as a cook, hasn't the background, doesn't know any better." Then, seeing Minnie's eyes brighten, they added hurriedly: "But it can't be helped, it's so difficult nowadays to get people to live in."

"Ladies and gentleman", Mrs Gemmell beckoned, pert, from the door, "coffee in the lounge."

Wanda pushed away her éclair, while Ramsay placed his hand under Minnie's fragile elbow, chivalrously guiding her to the room with the beautiful view. At this they stared, these three related people who had so little in common, and the conversation languished. Minnie was watching the clouds, so soft, so fleecy, now turning pink, that frolicked around the crest of Goatfell, and her in-laws, their hostess grown absent, started talking to one another, while a wasp buzzed on the window-ledge, about things which did not concern her, their own domestic problems, their children and grandchildren, the difficulty of passing money down the generations; in the room so full of light from the calm, calm sea they gradually forgot themselves, referring indiscreetly to the hidden interest which had inspired their visit. They talked of wills, death duties, and were disagreeably startled when Minnie cut across them:

"Look at those little kids skipping about above the top of Goatfell! That's how it got its name—because of the goats. All gone now, all gone. . . . But their ghosts are still there. Happy ghosts!"

"Ghosts!" Wanda laid a fearful hand on her bag. "What's she talking about?"

"I heard you. I know what *you* were talking about."

There was a pained silence. The wasp, meanwhile, continued to buzz, unconcerned, against the window. Veins protruded on Ramsay's noble brow. Removing from an inner pocket a boy's climbing knife, he opened it out, isolating a minute pair of nail-scissors. Then, stealthily creeping up on the insect, he relieved his discomfort by neatly snipping it in two. "Looks cruel", he wiped his scissors, "but it's a merciful way to deal with them. Instant death! Though what wonderful little fellows they are—so clean, so industrious, devoting the whole of their active lives to the common good." He frowned, sorrowing over their Presbyterian virtues.

"How dare you!" Minnie was trembling. "You've no right to be cutting up wasps in my house!" She rang for her servant. "It's time you went. And you, too, Wanda. I can't think why either of you come to see me."

"OFF HOME? Ah, well, all good things come to an end. Now, Mr Ramsay, let me see that you've got everything, umbrella, hat, gloves—yes, both gloves. . . ."

"Dear lady!"

"Thank you, Mrs—" Wanda thrust her arms into the sleeves of the coat held out for her.

"No trouble."

"Nothing", Ramsay inclined his fine silver head, "is too much trouble for you, one can see that—everything in order." Absently he added: "Nice little place Minnie's got here."

"Very nice." Belting her coat, duty done, Wanda

looked around at the thick carpets, the costly furniture littered by trinkets, and resented the waste—downright disgraceful—when all Minnie was fit for was a playpen.

It was the housekeeper who saw them out, descending with them through the slanting garden to whose narrow terrace plastic donkey-carts had recently been added, filled with plastic flowers.

"Those are new."

"Oh, d'you like them, Mrs McKie? I thought they'd look kind of cheery, I've always admired that sort of thing in other people's gardens. But Mrs Dundas, there's no pleasing her. . . ."

Trying not to look at the objects, Wanda forced herself to say kindly: "She's full of whims, take no notice."

"I try not to."

"That's the way, patience, patience." Ramsay's hand hovered over but did not quite touch the woman's shoulders. "We know she's difficult, we do sympathise, but we're so very grateful. She flatly refused to go into a home, and without you to care for her what would become of our poor, unfortunate. . . ." As if overcome by emotion, he shadowed his eyes against the light, now warmed and rosy, that dazzled from the sea.

The instant, however, that Mrs Gemmell had left them Ramsay's bowed shoulders straightened and he swung his umbrella. "Nice situation, no finer view in the country. Spectacular sunsets!"

Wanda rapped his arm. "Those plastic horrors, d'you think Mrs Thing paid for them out of the house-keeping?"

The smart umbrella remained poised in mid-air. "Are you insinuating. . . .?"

"Not just insinuating! Still, the house is full of knickknacks, why even in the bathroom there are heart-shaped soaps and a frilly on the—" Wanda pinched up her lips, "you-know-what. So who's to blame her if she yielded to the temptation? It's a judgment, Minnie always was too taken up with her possessions. I'm sure it was done with the best of intentions."

"Ah!" The umbrella again swung easily. "Like the food—those pies. I suppose she was trying to make them look appetising when she covered them with tomato sauce?" A flutter of wind resurrecting the sorry meal caused Ramsay to congratulate himself on his own excellent housekeeper who never left lumps in his porridge. "It was a struggle to get them down, I must say."

"Disgusting! But it'll keep her healthy to eat less. Minnie's far too fond of her food."

"True, true. She looks well."

"Well in body. But it's extraordinary, don't you think, that she should be senile at seventy-four? Why, she's only eight months older than I am!" Wanda tightened her grip on her bag, thinking of her many activities: the kirk bazaar, meals on wheels, hospital visits to the aged, and her afternoon off to play for tuppence a hundred at the bridge club. "No wonder

Minnie looks well—she does nothing to wear herself out."

This comment was unfortunate. They closed the gate and paused in the roadway before separating to their cars, united in thoughts it would be unseemly to express. Wanda's balding son was an accountant's stooge; with Minnie's money she could buy him a partnership. Or, if Ramsay were to be the lucky one, he could abandon the worthy causes with which, on retiring and through vanity, he had encumbered himself, the demands on his time and his pocket, his daughters' querulous pleas for help with their children's education; he could leave them behind, his duties, his family, all—he glanced at his sister—his tiresome relations, and sun himself in the West Indies.

"He was a fine man, our brother Gordon", murmured Wanda, incensed that his riches should be uselessly frittered, "we owe it to his memory to care for—to keep an eye on. . . . That woman, d'you think she'll do?"

"Oh, but she must!" Ramsay's laughter choked him. Whatever their hopes, it was unthinkable that he, or even the dismal Wanda, should have to house Minnie, her toys, her lap-dog. "She'll most certainly do, most suitable—as you said, she's a treasure."

FROM THE WINDOW the treasure watched the departing relatives, waving at them till their hats had disappeared behind the hedge. "She's so considerate, dear Mrs McKie, and Mr Ramsay—oh, Mr Ramsay, but he's a real gentleman!"

Seated behind her, Minnie was staring at the things cut up on the carpet, her toenails, the severed wasp. Her shoulders drooped, her flowery dress hung limp.

"Goodness, you're a pathetic sight! Who'd have thought you'd have had it in you to tell those wicked fibs? So I starve you? I go through your wardrobe—wardrobes I should say! I stole this dress, did I? You trying to get them to put me out?"

"No use, they wouldn't listen."

"Oh, so that's the way the wind blows? You meant it, you weren't just rambling?" The housekeeper leaned over and blew smoke into her eyes. "You're a sly one, Minnie. But beware. Audrey Gemmell is a match for your tricks. She has a score to settle—and settle it she will! A little later", airily she wafted her cigarette, "later, later. When I've had a wee rest and got my strength back."

"What d'you mean? What are you going to do to me?" Minnie cowered, ashen.

"My! The white face on you! Ticker trouble? You're not fading out on me. . . ." Suddenly alarmed, Mrs Gemmell snatched at her wrist to feel the pulse. "No, not yet. Just doddering. The usual." Her charge, shrinking from her touch, let out a feeble cry, then hung her head, ashamed. "Why, you've wet yourself! And me worn out with all that cooking and enter-

taining! Well, you can just stew in it—teach you a lesson, you filthy old crittur!”

Mrs Gemmell kicked off her tight shoes and padded away into the kitchen where she put the leftovers into the fridge to be reheated another day. From behind the dirty dishes she collected the Famous Grouse, a new thriller, a silver ashtray, and retreated to her room, leaving Minnie, stupefied with apprehension, on her sodden chair.

“I’ve wet myself”, she whimpered, “I’ve spoiled my dress. When Nanny finds out she’ll be cross.” Not daring to rise and leave a stain, she miserably awaited her punishment. Though time meant little to her, whole days evaporating like the passage of an hour, this particular afternoon seemed to stretch to infinity and when the sunset blazed at last behind the peaks of Arran she had become so cramped she was quite unable to twitch the bows on her toes. Even Froufrou, as if scenting death, had abandoned her.

IT WAS ANOTHER SCENT that brought Minnie round, familiar and sickly sweet, worn for a purpose. Then a shadow blotted out the fiery sky.

“Nanny, don’t be cross—I couldn’t help it.” But it was not Nanny. Nanny didn’t smoke or wander around in her dressing-gown. Nanny would never have gone through her desk, ruffling papers, trying to force locked drawers.

“Where is it?” croaked the taproom voice. “Lost your tongue, eh?” Froufrou reappeared, whining. “You bite me, you nasty little dog, and I’ll do you!”

“No, no!” Minnie caught up her pet.

“Ah, dearest dearie!” Mrs Gemmell’s pink, quilted arms enfolded her. “I wasn’t going to hurt little Foofy. It was only pretence, I couldn’t think of any other way to rouse you. Naughty Minnie, sitting there like a corpse—you had me worried. But we’re all right now, aren’t we? Let me move you”, she glanced at the soiled chair, “to where you’ll be more comfortable. There we are. And now I’m going to brew us a nice pot of tea.” The tea was brought, two cups, the best silver, and the companion settled for a chat at her lady’s feet. The room was dim, the sunset staining red the chairs, the pussies and lambies, the rifled desk.

“What were you looking for in the desk?”

“Your will, dear.”

“My. . . ?”

“I thought you might like to leave me something, a few teaspoons, some cut glass, just a little memento. I’ll look after Foofy for you, I’ll give him chicken or fillet steak—anything he wants.” A perfumed hand tugged the bow on Froufrou’s topknot. “Or an annuity would do, ten thousand say, or twenty, more if you like. There’ll be nobody to look after me in my old age.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

The adder’s eyes smouldered. “Oh, yes, you do. Why not leave it all to me?”

“You?” Minnie kicked up her toes, shimmering with merriment. “I wouldn’t leave anything to you.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t want to, I don’t like you.”

Mrs Gemmell laid down her cup on the silver tray. Then she was on her feet, a quilted shape, her arms ominously folded. “You owe it to me, Minnie Dundas. Not for this—mopping up your messes, attending to your stupid whims—but for my ruined life. My Jamie was crippled building your husband’s ships, I nursed him all my youth and when he died there was nothing left. While you were being pampered and petted, I was suffering. Suffering, I tell you—poverty, drudgery, grief. And at the end of the day who cares? I don’t count, I’m a nobody, why even your fancy relations have trouble remembering my name. And you—you grudge me. . . .” She bent right down and hissed in Minnie’s face.

“She wants me to die, Froufrou! She’ll poison me—she’ll smother me with a pillow. . . .”

“Of course I don’t want you to die! It’s just that when you are dead. . . .”

“Oh, Froufrou!”

“Well, you can’t take it with you—not even you, who always keeps the best things for herself. I’ve watched you, I know your selfish little ways—you can’t hand round a box of chocolates without keeping your thumb over the one that you want to eat. But now it’s my turn. I, Audrey Gemmell, could do with some sweeties.” She paused to light a new cigarette from the stub, her rouged face momentarily flaming as she sucked on it. “Minnie Dundas, I’m warning you. If you fade out and leave me nothing, d’you know what I’ll do?”

“Why should I care? I won’t know.”

The sunset gleamed on Mrs Gemmell’s yellowed, smiling teeth. “That’s just the point. I’ll come for you, I’ll haunt you in the afterlife. You didn’t know that, did you? Haunting can work the other way round, from the living to the dead. That’s why there are ghosts. Most souls rest in peace, but there are some, the ghosts, who pay for the sins they’ve failed to make right by wandering forever, for all eternity. Very uncomfortable—you know how you hate discomfort. . . . So you do right by me, Minnie. Remember now”, she patted the old lady’s rings, “you’ve been warned.”

“Go away—I can’t bear that stuff you spray on yourself. And pick up those papers you scattered under the desk!”

“I didn’t leave them there, it was a poltergeist. The spirits are at work already.” With a triumphant swish of her quilted hems, out she went in a puff of smoke.

“She’s plotting, Froufrou, she’s trying to frighten me into my grave.” The little dog, panicking, wriggled free of his mistress’s frenzied embrace and, leaping to the carpet, fluttered the pages of a thriller: *Murder Without Trace*. “You, too, Froufrou? Even you don’t love your Minnie any more, poor Minnie.”

Across the sea, light behind the jagged islands was now sunken, greenish, and the room was almost dark,

its pallid objects turned green and sickly, the tea cups, the silver tray, the crumpled thriller. Minnie twisted her rings, then her fingers uncurled and reached down, trembling as if it might sting her, to lift the book. "The perfect murder is no murder", she read. She blinked. So this was where the harpy got her ideas? It was all quite plain, and just as she had suspected: the victim without a bruise, a wound, dying of terror. But it could work the other way round, she thought. Like the haunting. And she laughed—laughed and laughed till greenish tears sparkled on her old, faded eyes. "They think I've lost my wits, it's me they treat as a nobody. But come here, Froufrou, let me tell you my plan—that book's given *me* ideas."

By the time she tottered into bed, however, Minnie's courage had left her and, though she'd heard her keeper safely snoring, she hid under the blankets, paralysed with fear. Her thumping heart she mistook for footsteps; her prayers were empty, void into void. She lay for an age, eyes wide open in the dark, then she remembered her magic voice. When she dared herself to sing the aria which had once won her such applause, *I know that my Redeemer liveth*, her confidence returned and she heard again a wild, rhythmic clapping that lulled her to sleep.

ON THE FOLLOWING MORNING her redeemer opened the little gate and walked up the garden. Minnie knew at once who she was: angels take whatever form they please. This one was young, in sandals and shorts, chains and bangles, a rucksack on her back. A band round her forehead kept her long, fair hair out of eyes that were blue and vacant, widely spaced. She rang the bell, asked for Aunt Minnie, dumped her rucksack and bounded into the room with the sea view.

"I'm Marigold Stuart from Vancouver."

"You've flown in?" Minnie was gazing at the filmy outline of Ailsa Craig where the rare birds nested.

"Sure I flew. Landed at Prestwick this morning."

"And came straight to me?" The little ringed hands reached out to her. "So you're my niece Maisie's girl? I saw a photo of you in your mother's arms. You've grown. What age are you now? I ought to know, but—" Minnie lowered her voice, her eye on Mrs Gemmell hovering in the doorway, "I lose track, I've no sense of time."

"I'm nineteen."

"Nineteen? But that's a lovely age. And you, darling, you're lovely."

"You too, I've wanted to meet you ever since I was in diapers. Mom played your records till they almost wore out." The great blonde girl beamed down on her famous aunt, so daintily ancient, pink and white, and the dog in her lap with its crazy bow. "You're just as I'd imagined. And everything else—I knew it'd be like this." She looked around, enraptured, at the

embroidered cushions, the china cats. "All those things. . . . In Vancouver we've nothing but gadgets, streamlined, I hate it. But this, why it's a real home! I knew it, I just got this feeling as soon as I was in the door that I'd—well—I was home."

"You want to stay?"

"Why not? I'm doing a history course, I'll be studying in Glasgow."

"This is a long way from Glasgow."

"No sweat, I'll get a car. Over there", Marigold jerked her head at the sea, "all the kids have cars."

Mrs Gemmell called from the doorway: "You won't want to stay with old ladies like us, not someone your age? A night or two perhaps. . . ."

"Oh, no, I guess it'll be three four years, maybe more. I'm researching my ancestors and you don't know where that might lead. I'm descended from the Scottish kings."

"Is that so? Then you'll save me", Minnie glanced at her keeper, "from her!"

"She bad to you?" Marigold rattled her bangles. Then she seated herself, cross-legged, at her great-aunt's feet.

"You'll stay with me? It's you who'll be my treasure?" Minnie absently caressed her flaxen hair. "We'll go in a boat to Arran and Ailsa Craig. That's where the lighthouse is and the birds—special birds. We've one in the garden, can you see it under the hedge? It's a snow goose."

Mrs Gemmell now bustled into the room, spilling ash. "She means that dirty piece of paper. She imagines things, it helps her to pass the time."

The student looked from the woman in the dressing-gown to her pink, fluffy aunt, a little bird herself whose feathers had suddenly drooped. She clasped Minnie's fingers in her own firm, sunburned hand. "For real it's a snow goose—we know that! She needs her eyes tested."

"Now look here, you may be Minnie's niece, but. . . ."

"Minnie! She calls me Mrs Dundas when we've visitors. I suppose she thinks you don't count? She never smokes when they're here. They're taken in by her. They don't believe she tries on my clothes. She pinches things and hides them in her room—her den."

MRS GEMMELL tapped the girl's shoulder. "If I pick something up to clean it she says I'm stealing. Your poor old auntie's wandered, hadn't you noticed? Very sad, but there it is. You've come to the wrong house, dear. Better try somewhere else."

"No, no, Marigold, you stay! You knew it really was a snow goose, you believe me when I'm telling the truth. And she—she frightens me when there's no one around. But they won't listen. They pretend not to hear when I tell them she hits me."

"She hits you? Wow!" The wide, young, vacant eyes turned to the keeper. "Doesn't she ever get dressed?"

"Only when they come."

"They? Who are they?"

Mrs Gemmell wedged herself between them. "This must be puzzling for you, Marion—"

"Marigold."

"Marigold, dear, you see it's like this—" She touched her bronzed temples. "I'd better explain. She's talking about her brother- and sister-in-law, very kind people, very good to her, so regular in their visits."

"I don't know why they come."

"Now Minnie, Minnie." Mrs Gemmell tapped her hand. "That's what she calls hitting her."

"I get it." The girl's mouth fell open and she rocked herself.

Mrs Gemmell, disconcerted, retired to the kitchen, muttering: "She's like her aunt—cuckoo. Must be in the blood."

"What's she doing now?"

"Brewing things. The food. . . ."

Marigold ran her tongue slowly, thoughtfully, over her lips. "Tell you what, if you let me stay I'll cook for you. I'm a real home-maker. In Canada it's all out of a packet, fast food. That's another reason I came over here. I'll bake our own bread, I'll make jam. . . ."

"And we can send her away? She's a vulture, she's waiting for me to die so she can get her hands on my money. She tries to scare me in the night. It's horrid living with someone who wants you to die."

"Why don't you fire her?"

"They won't let me."

"The in-laws?"

"The visitors." Suddenly Minnie smiled. She had flown in to nest at her feet, blue-eyed and golden, her redeemer. "I'll find a way, I'll get rid of her. They think I'm half-witted, but you know, you understand. You were sent to me, we'll have happy times."

**A**T DEAD OF NIGHT moonlight, penetrating the housekeeper's room through a chink in the curtains, crept over her frizzy curls, the patterned carpet, a jumble of clothes on the chair. Something moved behind the chair, a shape, whispering: "Murderess!" The shape came closer and the wakened sleeper screamed.

**"C**HILD! CHILD!" Minnie roused her young guest. "Mrs Gemmell, it's her heart. You must call an ambulance." The ambulance arrived, sirens screaming, and took her away. She didn't die, however, and was only in hospital a few days, but, once discharged, she refused to return; she lacked the training, she said, the nerve to manage the insane. When she came for her things, Minnie received her with astonishment: "You can't fool me and it's no

use pretending, I know what you are—you're Mrs Gemmell's ghost."

"Her reason's finally gone", said Ramsay, "it's the shock."

"The will. . . . Does anyone know where it is?" Wanda snuffled her handkerchief while Marigold brought in a delicious tea.

"Treachle scones! You made these yourself?" Ramsay reached for another, surreptitiously licking his fingers.

"But what's to be done? Who's to look after her? The difficulty we had in finding poor Mrs—"

"I'll do it."

"You?" Wanda glared at the girl's shorts, her long brown legs, her bare feet. "Don't be ridiculous!"

"Why not? I need her, I've got to live somewhere, and she needs me. We get on, don't we, auntie?"

Minnie, the dog in her lap, had been staring at the view, rather misty today, the peaks of Arran just visible. "We're going there", she said, "we'll catch the steamer to Brodick and climb Goatfell. Froufrou too."

"What did she say?"

"Nothing, Wanda, she's drifting. But, my dear", Ramsay turned to the girl, laying a gnarled hand on her naked leg, "I don't think you quite appreciate, this is—how shall I put it?—a nursing problem. She ought really to be in a home."

"Shush!" Wanda silenced him. In his ear she whispered, but not inaudibly: "She'll cut us out!"

"Oh, ho ho!" Ramsay's laughter brought tears to his eyes. Helping himself to a fourth scone, he said to Minnie: "Well, you've certainly got yourself a better cook."

"Yes, she'll do, I'm keeping her on."

Ramsay exchanged glances with his sister, who noisily blew her nose. "I suppose", she said, "for the time being. . . ."

"No, this is a permanent situation. She's staying four years, she'll see me out."

"See you out!" Wanda's handkerchief fluttered in desolation.

"Now then, now then, this is no way to talk. . . ." Ramsay looked away from his doting sister-in-law and blandished a smile on the young woman cross-legged on the floor. "So you really like it here, Marigold? Marigold Stuart, descended from the Scottish kings. . . ."

They took their leave. At the garden gate Wanda gave a final sniff: "Marigold! I knew someone with a cat called Marigold." Before separating to their cars they gazed mournfully at the view, united in the unspoken fear that the descendant of the Scottish kings might get it all.

THE ISLANDS were growing dim, the rosy sky reflecting in the sea where boats, big and small, left satin ribbons. The room facing the view was warm and calm, a rosiness on the knick-knacks, on Froufrou's brow, his mistress's soft hair and skin, which

was like pink tissue-paper faintly crinkled, and the girl at her feet whose eyelids, contented, were drooping.

"They've gone", said Minnie. "I've just heard their cars. Awfully tiresome, but they will insist on visiting me. I can't think why, we never liked each other. I don't know what they want."

The sleepy eyelids opened. "I guess", Marigold's tongue travelled slowly over her lower lip, "it may be something to do with. . . . I heard them mention your will. They're your closest relatives, aren't they?"

"You mean they want my money—they want me to die? Like Mrs Gemmell? How extraordinary! I'd always thought it was because of my fame. I'm the only celebrity in the family." Minnie, in a huff, twitched her little feet. "That was the only reason I put up with them, it doesn't do, you know, to give oneself airs. . . ." Her faded eyes drifted to the window where a great ship was proudly sailing for the open sea. "I remember launching Gordon's ships, it was I who broke the champagne bottle over the bows. "Speed bonny boat", she sang, "like a bird on the wing. . . ." Her voice trailed and she ground her pearly baby teeth. "Money? So that's what they're after! But they've a disappointment coming to them—I only have the life rental of Gordon's estate. When I—when I join him, the money will be used for a scholarship in marine engineering, the Dundas Award. You see, Gordon, he longed to be like me, a celebrity; he, too, wanted his name to live on."

"He did? Wow!" Marigold's eyes lost their vacancy as she envisaged the scene when the will was read out:

Ramsay, head bowed, his hat on his knees, Wanda still with her gloves on, her hands grimly folded over her bag. "And you're not leaving them anything?"

"Oh, yes. It's just the money, the things are my own. I'll leave Wanda my hymn-book and Ramsay can have my nail-scissors—pretty scissors with mother-of-pearl handles. My daily, my Mrs Cameron, can have the rest. She really loves my little people, she cleans them with such care, she'll give them a good home." She saw Marigold gazing at her in wonder. "Oh, I'm sorry, dear, perhaps you'd like them yourself? Tell me what you want—anything in this house—and I'll get the lawyer. . . ."

"Oh, don't talk about it! It's not things I need but you, I need you here. Aunt Minnie", the girl buried her face in the old lady's silky lap, "you're not to die—you're just not going to!"

"But I will die, dear, we all die."

"Aw, forget it! Death means non-existence, nothing, so how can nothing exist? What matters is now."

"So we can live happily ever after?" Minnie lifted a strand of Marigold's shining hair and held it up to the light. "Happy hair! I've always had happiness and there's no reason why I shouldn't go on having it." She cradled the head of happy hair and together they looked out with no thought of the morrow upon the sea, the proud ships, the fading gleam behind the summit of Goatfell. "D'you know, darling, when I was a little girl I used to climb Goatfell. Every summer we went up it, me and Papa and my cousins and Froufrou, who jumped like a flea over the heather."

## Other Eden

No longer such a happy breed,  
and soon perhaps no breed at all,  
they drift upon the tide of history,  
little concerned with who they are  
or where they are going.

No longer  
secured from invasion by their moat,  
knowing their country more overcrowded  
than any other, save a few small islands,  
they obscure the dilemmas that threaten  
to engulf them by asserting the virtues  
of patience and tolerance.

No longer  
to be envied, their beliefs and values  
constantly eroded, steadily  
retreating with unflinching compromise,  
they have ceased to hear the authentic cadence  
of their essential being. Lacking any  
unifying vision, they are slowly  
falling away into everywhere  
and nowhere.

*Raymond Tong*