

LADIES OF CLASS

CHAPTER ONE

Laura Clayton's last day on earth was as ordinary as any other, right up to the few moments before she came to her messy end.

The only unusual thing about it was that she awoke to brilliant sunshine dancing on the bedroom window. March had been a spiteful month, not only coming like a lion but roaring its way through with no let up in the constant rain and lashing gales. It seemed to have no intention of going out like a lamb, but on this Saturday, the 31st it finally relented.

"I don't believe it!" Laura said aloud, scrambling into a housecoat and hurrying to look out at the phenomenon. But it was true and everything in the garden, which yesterday had looked dreary and sullen, was nodding and smiling and perking up in the unaccustomed brightness and warmth.

Laura was a happy person and being a countrywoman at heart was never too affected by changes in the weather, but she loved her garden. As always, her eyes after the first quick look around, came to rest on the flowering cherry tree, thinking how much the buds would be enjoying the sun and picturing in imagination its glory when in full bloom. When her husband died five years previously, all Laura's friends expected she would sell the house with its large garden and move into something smaller. She fobbed them off with vague promises to consider it.

To her son Alec she said, "they'd think I was mad if I told them I couldn't bear to leave my lovely cherry tree, but that is the truth. I think it'd miss me if I went away." Alec wasn't too sure if he understood his mother either, but his young wife said it made sense to her so being outnumbered by his women folk he wisely held his tongue.

Laura, bathed and dressed, went to the kitchen, picking two letters off the mat as she went. Looking at the handwriting with pleasure, she left them unopened until she was sitting down to her coffee, toast and marmalade.

One letter from Alec was short but the other, although reasonably brief, caused her to exclaim with surprise and needed another reading to grasp it. She was just coming to the end of it for the second time when the sound of the side gate closing dragged her thoughts away. A glance at the kitchen clock showed her it was later than she'd thought and here was Milly to prove it.

Milly Patcham, born a cockney and still with the dialect to prove it, opened the kitchen door and bustled in talking as usual. She always began the conversation half way down the path and Laura never knew what the beginning of the sentence was - in fact, sometimes it took her quite a while to guess what the topic of conversation might be. Thirty years of Milly's ministrations had given both women a respect and affection for the other and allowing for a difference in upbringing they could honestly look on each other as friends.

"-said to 'im 'e ought to look after 'er better. No business to be luggin' them 'eavy bags about and so I told 'er too."

"Whom are we talking about this time, Milly?", Laura asked in a resigned tone.

"Bert the milkman, acourse. Yer know 'is wife's due any day. Two misses she's 'ad already and she didn't ought to be takin' any chances. Saw 'er in the supermarket yesterday. You've been lucky this time, I said, don't push yer luck. If yer doesn't watch out, you'll be

‘avin one o’ those mongrels!’”

“Mongols, not mongrels,” Laura corrected her patiently. “What a cheerful thing to say to the poor girl. Anyway, I saw her myself a day or two back and she looks perfectly well to me.”

“That’s as may be, madam dear. But you read some very funny things in the papers. Never ‘eard about all this when I was young - must be all to do with this population explosion I shouldn’t wonder.”

Laura smothered a laugh and stored this new ‘Millyism’ in her memory to tell Alec.

“Sit down and have a cup of coffee before you start work and forget all the gloom and misery. I’ve had a piece of good news in the post this morning - well, two in fact - but the most important is that Alec’s coming tomorrow.”

“Oh that’ll be nice, madam dear. Is ‘e bringing the wife and baby? ‘Ow long are they staying?”

“Only Alec and just a flying visit. He’s going abroad on Monday for the firm, starting early, so thought he’d break his journey here and stay the night.”

“Bet you’re pleased about that. It’ll be like old times to ‘ave Alec all to yourself, won’t it?”

“Milly! You’ll make me feel guilty saying things like that,” Laura protested. “I love my daughter-in-law dearly as you very well know. But yes, I’ve got to admit it’ll be lovely to have him on his own. Anyway, I’ve got a little problem I want to discuss.”

Milly’s eyes lit up with avid curiosity and Laura could have kicked herself. Milly was a treasure beyond price and as loyal as they came but she was an inveterate gossip. If anyone had accused her of being a mischief-maker she would have been scandalized but there was no doubt about it - her unruly tongue had caused more than one bit of bother in the town. Everyone knew Milly and Milly knew everyone.

Wisely, Laura made no comment but said briskly, “come on, drink up. We’ve got work to do - blankets and sheets to get out for Alec’s bed. I’d like his room ready before I go out. I’ve a full day ahead and dinner with the vicar tonight so there won’t be much time.”

That got Milly moving and for the next couple of hours the two women worked companionably together until Laura glanced at her watch.

“I’ll have to be off, Milly. Hairdressing appointment. Will you finish up by yourself?”

“Acourse madam dear. Now, does yer want me to leave anything for yer lunch?”

“No thanks. I’ll probably get a bite at that new café in the High Street. Then I’ll finish the shopping - get a bottle of Scotch for Alec, too. Pity I don’t like it or there would have been some in the house.”

Hurriedly she changed her skirt and top, threw on a raincoat and went down into the white-painted hall.

““Ang on a tick! It’s turned cloudy. Yer needs an ‘ead scarf, ‘specially if you’re going to the ‘airdressers. I put one in the ‘all drawer the other day.”

She rummaged about while Laura waited impatiently. In her haste she pulled the whole drawer out, scattering the contents on the carpet - amongst them a small dog collar.

“Oh blast!” she said, quickly trying to shuffle it out of sight but Laura had seen and the tears came into her eyes. She picked the little collar up, stroked it affectionately, sighed and put it back in the drawer.

“It’s no good Milly. I’ll have to get another dog. When old Sammy died I swore never again but I do miss him about the place.”

“Now madam dear! You know you said you wouldn’t and when young Alec was ‘ere ‘e told me not to encourage you if you started talkin’ about one. You nearly break yer ‘eart and make yerself ill when they die. Don’t do it.”

Laura snuffled and blew her nose. Looking at Milly’s anxious face, she gave a watery smile. “I’m an old fool, aren’t I? But as a matter of fact, I’ve already broken the news to Alec that I’m thinking of having another. So far he’s made no comment but I expect I’ll get round him. Goodness! Look at the time. I must fly. I’ll see you on Monday.”

Milly wasn’t to know it was the last time she’d ever see the woman whom she’d learned to love and respect.

Later on, when it became vitally important to work out Laura’s subsequent movements it was the easiest job imaginable. Practically every minute could be accounted for - she was so well known. More to the point, there was barely a minute when she was alone. Even taking a neighbour in while she was dressing for her dinner with the vicar, in order to complete plans for the next W.I. sale of work.

Laura lived in the oldest and nicest part of the town; the heart of what had been a village when she came to it as a bride more than forty years ago. But the tentacles of progress had stretched out greedily, snapping up farms, meadows and woods; spawning streets of Council houses, a factory estate and a shopping complex; swamping the charm and character Burshill once possessed. Her house was in one of four roads surrounding the original village green - now a more formalized park, with a covered-in swimming pool, children’s playground and made-up paths. But most of the trees had been left and cricket was still played in summer. The neighbouring houses had maintained their standards and although Laura was saddened by all the changes she still loved her house - and her cherry tree.

The Vicarage, to which she was headed for her dinner engagement, was diagonally opposite on the further side of the green, standing beside the parish church, half empty these days. The Reverend George Amberley and his wife, Julia, were old friends and the five minute walk across the grass was a two-way passage in constant use from both houses. This evening, mindful of her long skirt and high-heeled shoes, Laura kept to the paths; her W.I. companion walking with her as far as the Vicarage gates, where she said goodbye.

Julia Amberley opened the door before she knocked and greeted her affectionately. George’s melancholy face peered out from a door to the right of the hall.

“Hullo!” Laura said cheerfully at the sight of his woebegone visaged. “And what’s the matter with you this time?”

Julia laughed. “How well you know my dear old hypochondriac. But he really had got something to worry about tonight - a bit of bronchitis rattling around and he’s afraid it’ll keep him out of the pulpit tomorrow. As if it would! I’d be expected to produce a death certificate if George didn’t turn up on the dot.”

George gave the two smiling women a reproachful look. “It’s nothing to joke about, my dear. I ought to be in bed resting for my big day. You know the Bishop’s coming for the evening service. I don’t want to be croaking away in his presence.”

“Good thing Laura knows you, George, otherwise she’d be feeling most unwelcome. If you want to go to bed, go. We shan’t miss you.”

With a martyred air George refused. “I wouldn’t dream of doing such a thing when we have a guest in the house.”

“Come now, George,” Laura rallied him. “I’m one of your oldest friends and I shan’t

mind in the least. You know how beastly your attacks of bronchitis can get. I'd hate to have it on my conscience if your voice deserted you for the all-important service tomorrow. Please go to bed, to oblige me."

George was finally persuaded and took himself off upstairs. By doing so he helped to forge the last link in poor Laura's destiny. For this he'd never forgive himself.

After the two women had eaten and Julia nipped up to peep at the invalid - "Sleeping like a baby," she reported - they settled down by the fire, heavy curtains drawn against the chill March night, for a comfortable gossip.

"I hope we'll see you in church tomorrow evening, Laura. Help to swell the congregation a bit and impress the Bishop."

Laura was apologetic. "I'm afraid not. Alec's coming on a flying visit." She explained the circumstances, adding, "So you see I'd like to spend the evening with him. We'll have a lot to talk about." She said nothing about the special topic she wanted his advice on. This led to a cosy chat about their respective families and time passed quickly. At ten o'clock Laura said she'd be on her way knowing her friend would want to attend to George's needs for the night. When Julia opened the door to let her out, she uttered an exclamation. "Good grief, Laura! Look at that!"

To their equal surprise, a dense fog surrounded them, thick and impenetrable as a London pea-souper. Totally unexpected.

"Must have been all that glorious sun we've had today," Laura commented. The lunchtime cloud had soon gone away.

"You can't go home in this. It's horrible. Oh, why on earth did George have to get his rotten bronchitis tonight. He'd have escorted you back."

"Stop clucking, Julia. It's only a five-minute walk away, for goodness sake. I'm a big girl now and not likely to get lost."

Julia wasn't happy about it but Laura insisted; she went off with a cheery "Goodnight," and was immediately swallowed up in the fog. She kept to the paths which were as familiar to her as her own garden, but she found the silence more eerie than she would have imagined. Even distant traffic noises were hushed and she felt completely isolated in a strange world. She pushed doggedly on and without any trouble found herself turning onto the path, lined with tall trees, which would lead her out almost opposite her own house.

Suddenly, surprisingly, a figure stepped out from behind one of the great horse-chestnuts and stood in front of her. Laura wasn't of a nervous disposition but she was startled. Then, coming face to face with the apparition, she recognized it.

"Oh, it's you!" said Laura