



AG *Barnett*

MYSTERY SINGLES



ADA SELWYN

—◆—
The Physic Garden

Victorian

CASE No.3

AG BARNETT

The Physic Garden

The blackberries were late that year, and had Mother Nature had a complaints department, Mrs Fitch would have been sending a stern letter about it.

Ada Selwyn sat in the morning room of Hartwell Grange with a cup of tea she did not want and a volume of Pliny she had been asked to read aloud, and listened to the cook hold forth on the subject from the hallway. The season. The drought. The slugs. The blackberries that had finally come in a great dark rush in the third week of August and now needed picking before the birds had the lot.

"I shall be in the garden all afternoon," Mrs Fitch announced to no one in particular, and went, with a basket and the air of a woman going to war.

Ada turned a page of Pliny and looked at Mr Cornelius Hartwell, who was asleep in his chair.

He was seventy-one, thin, white-haired, with papery skin. He had spent his life indoors counting money and his retirement outdoors counting plants. He had made his fortune in wool and spent it on botany, and the garden behind the house was the living evidence of both habits. Immaculately kept, exhaustively catalogued, and containing enough poisonous plants to dispatch the entire county. His late wife had planted the physic garden. Cornelius maintained it with the devotion of a worshipper

at a shrine.

Ada had been at the Grange for three weeks. Mrs Calder's agency had sent her as a companion to Mr Hartwell, who wanted someone to read to him, manage his correspondence, and tolerate his nephew. She had managed all three, though the nephew was proving the more demanding text.

She closed the Pliny and looked out of the window. The Grange sat three miles from Cheltenham, at the end of a single lane, in the kind of green Gloucestershire quiet that could drive a person slowly mad if she did not have a good inner life. Ada had an excellent inner life. It was the only thing about her that was not on display.

The household was small. Cornelius. His nephew Walter, who had arrived in March to learn estate management and had so far learned the location of every public house within riding distance. Mrs Fitch, the cook-housekeeper, who had been with the family for twenty-two years and regarded the Grange as her personal kingdom. Martha Gibbs, the housemaid. And Miss Lydia Prentiss, the paid companion who had been here before Ada and who remained in a loosely defined role that seemed to involve reading, letter-writing, and being sympathetic.

Ada was aware that two paid companions in one household was unusual. She was also aware that Miss Prentiss had been here fourteen months and showed no signs of leaving, and that Cornelius relied on her for things he did not ask Ada to do. She had drawn no conclusions from this. She had, however, noticed it.

Cornelius Hartwell was dead by Sunday morning.

Martha found him at a quarter to seven, on the floor of his study, the chair overturned, an empty cordial glass on the blotter. His eyes were wide and his pupils vast. His skin was flushed and dry.

Ada heard the scream from her bedroom, dressed quickly, and came downstairs to find Martha in the hallway with her hand over her mouth and Mrs Fitch standing in the study doorway with a face like stone.

"Don't go in," Mrs Fitch said.

Ada went in.

She had seen death before. Not often, but enough. She had sat with her father's parishioners in Shropshire as they died, and she had learned that death was not dramatic. It was still. It was the absence of everything that had been there a moment before.

But this was not still. Cornelius's face was wrong. The flush, the pupils, the dryness of the skin. She looked at the cordial glass. Dark residue at the bottom. She leaned closer. The smell was faint and sweet, underneath the blackberry.

She knew that smell. Her father had taught her the plants in his hedgerows, and she had learned the dangerous ones first because they were more interesting. Belladonna. Deadly nightshade. The berries were dark, sweet, and would dissolve invisibly into a blackberry cordial without

altering the taste.

She straightened and looked at the study. The desk diary was open. She did not read it. The cordial bottle stood on the tray beside the glass, two-thirds empty. She did not touch it.

She went to find the doctor.

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Dr Emery Phelps arrived from Cheltenham at eight and confirmed what Ada already knew. Sergeant Caldwell arrived at ten and began the slow, methodical process of interviewing the household.

Ada was not interviewed as such. She was the companion. She was furniture. Sergeant Caldwell spoke to her for four minutes, established that she had retired at nine o'clock and heard nothing, and moved on to the people who mattered.

She sat in the morning room with her tea and listened to the house talk around her.

Walter Hartwell came in first. He was thirty-four, fair-haired, and handsome in the way that horses are handsome. All surface and a hint of wild behind it. He had been drinking. At eleven in the morning, his eyes were red and his hands were not steady.

"Terrible," he said, sitting down opposite Ada. "Terrible thing. Uncle and I had words yesterday, you know. About money. He was impossible about money." He paused. "I

suppose I inherit now."

Ada said nothing, because nothing was required.

"Not that I wanted this. God, no. But a man has debts, and Uncle kept me on the shortest possible leash." He looked at her suddenly, as though remembering she was alive. "You won't tell the sergeant I said that."

"I'm sure the sergeant will form his own conclusions, Mr Hartwell."

Walter left. Ada looked at the doorway he had walked through and thought that if stupidity were a crime, Walter Hartwell would hang.

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Mrs Fitch was in the kitchen, making bread. She made bread with her whole body, rhythmically pushing her knuckles into the dough over and over.

"Twenty-two years I've been in this kitchen," she said, without looking up. "Since Mrs Hartwell was alive. Since before that garden was half what it is now." She punched the dough. "He told me Friday he was closing the house. Moving to Cheltenham. Lodgings. Staff dismissed. And now this."

"I'm sorry," Ada said.

"I'm fifty-eight years old. Who employs a cook of fifty-eight with no written character?"

Ada sat down at the kitchen table. She looked at Mrs

Fitch's hands. Blackberry stains, deep in the creases of her fingers and under her nails. She had been picking fruit all afternoon yesterday. The basket was still on the dresser, full of blackberries.

"You were in the garden yesterday afternoon," Ada said.

"The kitchen garden. Blackberries. You can see for yourself." She nodded at the basket. "I was making preserves until half nine."

"And the physic garden?"

Mrs Fitch's hands stopped moving. "I don't go in the physic garden. That was Mrs Hartwell's garden. Mr Hartwell keeps it locked."

She returned to her bread with a firmness that closed the subject.

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Ada found Lydia Prentiss in the sitting room, writing letters. She was twenty-seven, dark-haired, composed. Well-educated and precise, from a respectable family in Herefordshire. She wore plain colours well. People described her as pleasant and then forgot her.

"How are you bearing up?" Ada said.

Lydia set down her pen. "I keep thinking I should be doing something useful. He would have wanted me to catalogue the last of the summer specimens, but it seems wrong to go into the garden now."

"Did you know the garden well?"

"Intimately. I helped him catalogue every plant. The physic garden was his pride. Foxglove, hemlock, belladonna, monkshood. All the old medicinal plants, properly labelled, properly maintained." She paused. "I suppose someone will have to decide what to do with them now." She paused. "There was something odd yesterday, actually. The gate to the physic garden was unlatched when I walked past at about five o'clock. The latch was up. Mr Hartwell was always particular about keeping it locked. The key lives on a hook in the scullery."

"Did you go in?"

"No. I simply noticed it as I passed."

Ada looked at her. Lydia met her eyes and held them. Open. Steady. Unblinking.

"You set out the cordial tray yesterday evening," Ada said.

"As I do every evening. At six o'clock. A fresh bottle from the pantry, opened that morning. A clean glass. He liked his cordial after supper."

"And who else handled the bottle?"

Lydia thought. "Mrs Fitch keeps the pantry. She would have placed the bottle there. Martha cleans the glasses. I set out the tray. After that, only Mr Hartwell."

She picked up her pen and returned to her letters. Her hand was steady. Her eyes were not.

Ada left her and walked to the garden.

The physic garden was behind a high stone wall, reached through a wooden gate with an iron latch. Ada stood in front of it. The latch was a simple drop mechanism: it could be lifted from either side, but once closed it dropped into its bracket and could only be opened from the garden side, or with the key from the scullery.

If someone had gone in with the key and come out through the gate, the latch would have dropped behind them. They could not relatch it from outside without the key. The gate would be left unlocked.

The key was on its hook in the scullery. Ada had checked. She opened the gate and went in.

The physic garden was beautiful. Dangerous things often are. Foxglove in purple spires along the south wall. Monkshood, blue and hooded. Hemlock, feathery and pale. And there, in the far corner, belladonna. *Atropa belladonna*. Deadly nightshade. The berries were ripe, black and glossy, the size of cherries. Sweet enough to eat. Sweet enough to dissolve into a blackberry cordial without altering the taste.

Ada crouched beside the plant. Three crushed berries lay on the flagstone path. Fresh. Dropped within the last day, the juice still dark on the stone.

Someone had picked belladonna berries yesterday and been careless about it.

She stood and looked at the garden. Three people with

reasons to want Cornelius Hartwell dead. Three sets of hands that might have picked these berries. Sergeant Caldwell would look at the obvious ones first, because Sergeant Caldwell was a man who believed the obvious.

Ada walked back through the gate. She stopped.

The latch dropped behind her into its iron bracket. She looked at it. From this side, the garden path side, you saw a closed wooden gate in a stone wall. The latch sat on the inside. You could not see whether it was up or down unless you tried it.

Ada stood very still in the late summer garden, her hand on the white streak at her temple. Something was wrong with that. She could not yet see what. But she could feel it, the way you feel a change in the weather before it arrives.

Something in this house was not what it appeared to be.

* * *

Ada asked to speak to Sergeant Caldwell in the morning room. He agreed, because the morning room was warm and because he had been interviewing in the study all day and the study still smelled of something he could not quite identify.

"I appreciate you seeing me, Sergeant."

"Of course, Miss Selwyn. Though I should say we have matters well in hand."

"I'm sure you do." Ada folded her hands in her lap. "May I

ask whether you have examined the physic garden gate?"

Caldwell consulted his notes. "The gate was found unlatched. The key was on its hook in the scullery. We noted it."

"The latch on that gate drops into an iron bracket. Once closed, it can only be opened from the inside or with the key. If someone entered with the key and left through the gate, the latch would drop behind them. They could not refasten it from outside without the key."

"Yes."

"The key was on its hook on Sunday morning. So whoever entered the garden returned the key to the scullery after leaving."

"That would follow."

"Miss Prentiss told me she noticed the gate was unlatched at five o'clock on Saturday, when she walked past."

Caldwell turned a page. "She told me the same."

"Sergeant, the latch sits on the inside of the gate. The gate is set into a high stone wall. From the garden path, walking past, you see a closed wooden gate. The latch is not visible from outside. You cannot tell whether it is up or down without trying the gate."

Caldwell looked up.

"Miss Prentiss could not have known the gate was unlatched unless she tried it. Or unless she was the one who left it that way."

He was quiet for a moment. Ada let the silence work.

"Mr Hartwell quarrelled with his uncle about money," Caldwell said. "He has debts. He inherits the estate."

"He does. And he was at the King's Arms from seven until half past ten. Your publican will confirm it. The cordial was drunk after supper, in the study. Walter was three miles away."

"Mrs Fitch was in the garden picking fruit. Her hands were stained. She has knowledge of the plants."

"She was in the kitchen garden, Sergeant. The blackberries are in the kitchen garden. The belladonna is in the physic garden, behind a locked gate. Mrs Fitch does not go into the physic garden. She told me so herself, and Martha Gibbs will confirm she was picking blackberries, not nightshade. Her basket is in the kitchen if you wish to examine it."

Caldwell set down his pencil.

"There are three crushed belladonna berries on the flagstone path inside the physic garden," Ada said. "Fresh. Dropped yesterday. Someone picked the berries in a hurry and was not careful. Miss Prentiss catalogued every plant in that garden alongside Mr Hartwell. She knows where the belladonna grows. She knows what the berries look like. She knows the cordial is dark and sweet enough to mask them."

"But what reason would Miss Prentiss have?"

"I believe you will find the answer in Mr Hartwell's desk

diary. He was a methodical man. If something troubled him, he would have written it down."

Caldwell left the morning room. He was gone twenty minutes. When he returned, his expression had changed.

"The diary entry for Saturday the seventeenth reads: 'Spoke to L.P. re: the cheques. She denies nothing. Will inform Sgt Caldwell on Monday.'" He paused. "There's an earlier entry. The fourteenth. 'Checked bank ledger. Three cheques in Gilbert Prentiss's name, my signature, not my hand. L.P.'"

"Gilbert Prentiss is her brother," Ada said. "A clergyman in Hereford."

"She was forging his cheques."

"Three cheques over six months, I would expect. Mr Hartwell discovered it, confronted her on Saturday morning, and told her he would go to the police on Monday. Miss Prentiss set out the cordial tray at six o'clock that evening, as she did every evening. She was the last person to handle the bottle. Between the pantry and the study, she added the belladonna juice."

"And waited."

"And went upstairs at a quarter past nine, knowing he would pour his own glass after supper, as he always did. She did not need to be in the room. She did not need to watch. She simply prepared the bottle and trusted his habits."

Caldwell sat down. "The one who seemed the most upset."

"She is upset. I do not think the grief is false. I think she was fond of him and killed him anyway, because the alternative was prison."

The morning room was quiet. Outside, the late summer garden was heavy with fruit and heat. Somewhere in the physic garden, behind the wall with its unlatched gate, the belladonna berries hung black and ripe and beautiful, and would go on hanging there long after everything else had been settled.

"Thank you, Miss Selwyn," Caldwell said.

Ada inclined her head and said nothing, because there was nothing to say that the garden gate had not already said for her.

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*Miss Lydia Prentiss was arrested on Tuesday 19th August 1895 at Hartwell Grange. She was charged with the wilful murder of Mr Cornelius Hartwell by poison. The three forged cheques were recovered from a bank in Hereford. The physic garden was dismantled the following spring on Walter Hartwell's instructions. He sold the Grange within the year.