The Weed That Strings the Hangman's Bag

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Extract

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THE WEED THAT STRINGS THE HANGMAN'S BAG

ALAN BRADLEY

ONE

I was lying dead in the churchyard. An hour had crept by since the mourners had said their last sad farewells.

At twelve o'clock, just at the time we should otherwise have been sitting down to lunch, there had been the departure from Buckshaw: my polished rosewood coffin brought out of the drawing room, carried slowly down the broad stone steps to the driveway, and slid with heartbreaking ease into the open door of the waiting hearse, crushing beneath it a little bouquet of wild flowers that had been laid gently inside by one of the grieving villagers.

Then there had been the long drive down the avenue of chestnuts to the Mulford Gates, whose rampant griffins looked away as we passed, though whether in sadness or in apathy I would never know.

Dogger, Father's devoted jack-of-all-trades, had paced in measured step alongside the slow hearse, his head bowed, his hand resting lightly on its roof, as if to shield my remains from something that only he could see. At the gates, one of the undertaker's mutes had finally coaxed him, by using hand signals, into a hired motor car.

And so they had brought me to the village of Bishop's Lacey, passing sombrely through the same green lanes and dusty hedgerows I had bicycled every day when I was alive.

At the heaped-up churchyard of St Tancred's, they had

taken me gently from the hearse and borne me at a snail's pace up the path beneath the limes. Here, they had put me down for a moment in the new-mown grass.

Then had come the service at the gaping grave, and there had been a note of genuine grief in the voice of the vicar, as he pronounced the traditional words.

It was the first time I'd heard the Order for the Burial of the Dead from this vantage point. We had attended last year, with Father, the funeral of old Mr Dean, the village greengrocer. His grave, in fact, was just a few yards from where I was presently lying. It had already caved in, leaving not much more than a rectangular depression in the grass which was, more often than not, filled with stagnant rain-water.

My oldest sister, Ophelia, said it collapsed because Mr Dean had been resurrected, and was no longer bodily present, while Daphne, my other sister, said it was because he had plummeted through into an older grave whose occupant had disintegrated.

I thought of the soup of bones below: the soup of which I was about to become just another ingredient.

Flavia Sabina de Luce, 1939–1950, they would cause to be carved on my gravestone, a modest and tasteful grey marble thing with no room for false sentiments.

Pity. If I'd lived long enough, I'd have left written instructions calling for a touch of Wordsworth:

> *A maid whom there were none to praise*
> *And very few to love.*

And if they'd baulked at that, I'd have left this as my second choice:

Truest hearts by deeds unkind
To despair are most inclined.

Only Feely, who had played and sung them at the piano, would recognise the lines from Thomas Campion's *Third Book of Airs*, and she would be too consumed by guilty grief to tell anyone.

My thoughts were interrupted by the vicar's voice.

'… earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust, in sure and certain hope of the Resurrection to eternal life, through our Lord Jesus Christ; who shall change our vile body …'

And suddenly they had gone, leaving me there alone – alone to listen for the worms.

This was it: the end of the road for poor Flavia.

By now the family would already be back at Buckshaw, gathered round the long refectory table: Father seated in his usual stony silence, Daffy and Feely hugging one another with slack, tear-stained faces as Mrs Mullet, our cook, brought in a platter of baked meats.

I remembered something that Daffy had once told me when she was devouring *The Odyssey*: that baked meats, in ancient Greece, were traditional funeral fare, and I had replied that in view of Mrs Mullet's cooking, not much had changed in two and a half thousand years.

But now that I was dead, I thought, perhaps I ought to practise being somewhat more charitable.

Dogger, of course, would be inconsolable. Dear Dogger: butler-cum-chauffeur-cum-valet-cum-gardener-cum estate-manager: a poor shell-shocked soul whose capabilities ebbed and flowed like the Severn tides; Dogger, who had recently

saved my life and forgotten it by the next morning. I should miss him terribly.

And I should miss my chemistry laboratory. I thought of all the golden hours I'd spent there in that abandoned wing of Buckshaw, blissfully alone among the flasks, the retorts and the cheerily bubbling tubes and beakers. And to think that I'd never see them again. It was almost too much to bear.

I listened to the rising wind as it whispered overhead in the branches of the yew trees. It was already growing cool here in the shadows of St Tancred's tower, and it would soon be dark.

Poor Flavia! Poor stone-cold-dead Flavia.

By now, Daffy and Feely would be wishing that they hadn't been so downright rotten to their little sister during her brief eleven years on this earth.

At the thought, a tear started down my cheek.

Would Harriet be waiting to welcome me to heaven?

Harriet was my mother, who had died in a mountaineering accident a year after I was born. Would she recognise me after ten years? Would she still be dressed in the mountain-climbing suit she was wearing when she met her end, or would she have swapped it by now for a white robe?

Well, whatever she was wearing, I knew it would be stylish.

There was a sudden clatter of wings: a noise that echoed loudly from the stone wall of the church, amplified to an alarming volume by a half-acre of stained glass and the leaning gravestones that hemmed me in. I froze.

Could it be an angel – or more likely, an archangel – coming down to return Flavia's precious soul to Paradise?

If I opened my eyes the merest slit, I could see through my eyelashes, but only dimly.

No such luck: it was one of the tattered jackdaws that were always hanging round St Tancred's. These vagabonds had been nesting in the tower since its thirteenth-century stonemasons had packed up their tools and departed.

Now the idiotic bird had landed clumsily on top of a marble finger that pointed to heaven, and was regarding me coolly, its head cocked to one side, with its bright, ridiculous boot-button eyes.

Jackdaws never learn. No matter how many times I played this trick, they always, sooner or later, came flapping down from the tower to investigate. To the primeval mind of a jackdaw, any body horizontal in a churchyard could have only one meaning: food.

As I had done a dozen times before, I leapt to my feet and flung the stone that was concealed in my curled fingers. I missed – but then I nearly always did.

With an '*awk*' of contempt, the thing sprang into the air and flapped off behind the church, towards the river.

Now that I was on my feet, I realised I was hungry. Of course I was! I hadn't eaten since breakfast. For a moment I wondered vaguely if I might find a few leftover jam tarts or a bit of cake in the kitchen of the parish hall. The St Tancred's Ladies' Auxiliary had gathered the night before, and there was always the chance.

As I waded through the knee-high grass, I heard a peculiar snuffling sound, and for a moment I thought the saucy jackdaw had come back to have the last word.

I stopped and listened.

Nothing.

And then it came again.

I find it sometimes a curse and sometimes a blessing that I have inherited Harriet's acute sense of hearing, since I am able, as I am fond of telling Feely, to hear things that would make your hair stand on end. One of the sounds to which I am particularly attuned is the sound of someone crying.

It was coming from the north-west corner of the churchyard – from somewhere near the wooden shed in which the sexton kept his grave-digging tools. As I crept slowly forward on tiptoe, the sound grew louder: someone was having a good old-fashioned cry, of the knock-'em-down-drag-'em-out variety.

It is a simple fact of nature that while most men can walk right past a weeping woman as if their eyes are blinkered and their ears stopped up with sand, no female can ever hear the sound of another in distress without rushing instantly to her aid.

I peeped round a black marble column, and there she was, stretched out full length, face down on the slab of a limestone tomb, her red hair flowing out across the weathered inscription like rivulets of blood. Except for the cigarette wedged stylishly erect between her fingers, she might have been a painting by one of the Pre-Raphaelites, such as Burne-Jones. I almost hated to intrude.

'Hello,' I said. 'Are you all right?'

It is another simple fact of nature that one always begins such conversations with an utterly stupid remark. I was sorry the instant I'd uttered it.

'Oh! Of course I'm all right,' she cried, leaping to her feet and wiping her eyes. 'What do you mean by creeping up on me like that? Who are you, anyway?'

With a toss of her head she flung back her hair and stuck out her chin. She had the high cheekbones and the dramatically triangular face of a silent cinema star, and I could see by the way she bared her teeth that she was terrified.

'Flavia,' I said. 'My name is Flavia de Luce. I live near here – at Buckshaw.'

I jerked my thumb in the general direction.

She was still staring at me like a woman in the grip of a nightmare.

'I'm sorry,' I said. 'I didn't mean to startle you.'

She pulled herself up to her full height – which couldn't have been much more than five feet and an inch or two – and took a step towards me, like a hot-tempered version of the Botticelli *Venus* that I'd once seen on a Huntley and Palmer's biscuit tin.

I stood my ground, staring at her dress. It was a creamy cotton print with a gathered bodice and a flaring skirt, covered all over with a myriad of tiny flowers, red, yellow, blue, and a bright orange the colour of poppies, and, I couldn't help noticing, a hem that was stained with half-dried mud.

'What's the matter?' she asked, taking an affected drag at her angled cigarette. 'Never seen anyone famous before?'

Famous? I hadn't the faintest idea who she was. I had half a mind to tell her that I had indeed seen someone famous, and that it was Winston Churchill. Father had pointed him out to me from a London taxicab. Churchill had been standing in front of the Savoy with his thumbs hooked in his waistcoat pockets, talking to a man in a yellow mackintosh.

'Good old Winnie,' Father had breathed, as if to himself.

'Oh, what's the use?' the woman said. 'Bloody place …

bloody people … bloody motor cars!' And she began to cry again.

'Is there something I can do to help?' I asked.

'Oh, go away and leave me alone,' she sobbed.

Very well, then, I thought. Actually, I thought more than that, but since I'm trying to be a better person …

I stood there for a moment, leaning forward a bit to see if her fallen tears were reacting with the porous surface of the tombstone. Tears, I knew, were composed largely of water, sodium chloride, manganese and potassium, while limestone was made up chiefly of calcite, which was soluble in sodium chloride – but only at high temperatures. So unless the temperature of St Tancred's churchyard went up suddenly by several hundred degrees, it seemed unlikely that anything chemically interesting was going to be happening here.

I turned and walked away.

'Flavia …'

I looked back. She was reaching out a hand to me.

'I'm sorry,' she said. 'It's just that it's been an awfully bloody day all round.'

I stopped – then paced slowly, warily back as she wiped her eyes with the back of her hand.

'Rupert was in a foul mood to begin with – even before we left Stoatmoor this morning. We'd had rather a row, I'm afraid, and then the whole business with the van – it was simply the last straw. He's gone off to find someone to fix it, and I'm … well, here I am.'

'I like your red hair,' I said. She touched it instantly and smiled, as I somehow knew she would.

'Carrot-top, they used to call me when I was your age. Carrot-top! Fancy!'

'Carrot tops are green,' I said. 'Who's Rupert?'

'Who's Rupert?' she asked. 'You're having me on!'

She pointed a finger and I turned to look: parked in the lane at the corner of the churchyard was a dilapidated van – an Austin Eight. On its side panel, in showy gold circus letters, still legible through a heavy coating of mud and dust, were the words 'PORSON'S PUPPETS'.

'Rupert Porson,' she said. 'Everyone knows Rupert Porson. Rupert Porson, as in Snoddy the Squirrel – *The Magic Kingdom*. Haven't you seen him on the television?'

Snoddy the Squirrel? *The Magic Kingdom*?

'We don't have the television at Buckshaw,' I said. 'Father says it's a filthy invention.'

'Father is an uncommonly wise man,' she said. 'Father is undoubtedly—'

She was interrupted by the metallic rattle of a loose chain-guard as the vicar came wobbling round the corner of the church. He dismounted and leaned his battered Raleigh up against a handy headstone. As he walked towards us, I reflected that Canon Denwyn Richardson was not anyone's image of a typical village vicar. He was large and bluff and hearty, and if he'd had tattoos, he might have been mistaken for the captain of one of those rusty tramp steamers that drags itself wearily from one sun-drenched port to another in whatever God-awful outposts are still left of the British Empire.

His black clerical outfit was smudged and streaked with chalky dust, as if he'd come a cropper on his bicycle.

'Blast!' he said when he spotted me. 'I've lost my trouser clip and torn my cuff to ribbons,' and then, dusting himself

off as he walked towards us, he added, 'Cynthia's going to have me on the carpet.'

The woman's eyes widened and she shot me a quick glance.

'She's recently begun scratching my initials on my belongings with a needle,' he went on, 'but that hasn't kept me from losing things. Last week the hectograph sheets for the parish bulletin, the week before a brass doorknob from the vestry. Maddening, really.

'Hello, Flavia,' he said. 'Always nice to see you at church.'

'This is our vicar, Canon Richardson,' I told the red-headed woman. 'Perhaps he can help.'

'Denwyn,' the vicar said, holding out a hand to the stranger. 'We don't stand much on ceremony since the war.'

The woman stuck out two or three fingers and touched his palm, but said nothing. As she extended her hand, the short sleeve of her dress slid up, and I had a quick glimpse of the ugly green and purple bruise on her upper arm. She covered it hastily with her left hand as she tugged the cotton fabric down to hide it.

'And how may I be of service?' the vicar asked, gesturing towards the van. 'It is not often that we, in our bucolic little backwater, are called upon to minister to such august theatre folk.'

She smiled gamely. 'Our van's broken down – or as good as. Something to do with the carburettor. If it had been anything electrical, I'm sure Rupert could have mended it in a flash, but I'm afraid the fuel system is beyond him.'

'Dear, dear!' the vicar said. 'I'm sure Bert Archer, at the garage, can put it right for you. I'll ring him up, if you like.'

'Oh, no,' the woman said quickly – perhaps *too* quickly,

'we wouldn't want you to go to any trouble. Rupert's gone down the high street. He's probably already found someone.'

'If he had, he'd be back by now,' the vicar said. 'Let me ring Bert. He often slips home for a nap in the afternoon. He's not as young as he was, you know – nor are any of us, if it comes to that. Still, it is a favourite maxim of mine that when dealing with motor mechanics – even tame ones – it never does one any harm to have the blessing of the Church.'

'Oh, no. It's too much trouble. I'm sure we'll be just fine.'

'Nonsense,' the vicar said, already moving off among the forest of gravestones and making at full speed for the rectory. 'No trouble at all. I'll be back in a jiffy.'

'Vicar!' the woman called. 'Please … '

He stopped in mid-stride and came reluctantly back towards us.

'It's just that … you see, we …'

'Aha! A question of money, then,' the vicar said.

She nodded sadly, her head down, her red hair cascading over her face.

'I'm sure something can be arranged,' the vicar said. 'Ah! Here's your husband now.'

A little man with an oversized head and a lopsided gait was stumping towards us across the churchyard, his right leg swinging out at each step in a wide, awkward semicircle. As he approached, I saw that his calf was caged in a heavy iron brace.

He must have been in his forties, but it was difficult to tell.

In spite of his diminutive size, his barrel chest and powerful upper arms seemed ready to burst out of the seersucker suit that confined them. By contrast, his right leg was pitiful: by the way in which his trousers clung, and flapped uselessly

around what lay beneath, I could see that it was little more than a matchstick. With his huge head, he looked to me like nothing so much as a giant octopus, stalking on uneven tentacles through the churchyard.

He lurched to a halt and deferentially lifted a flat peaked motoring cap, revealing an unruly mop of pale blond hair that matched precisely his little Van Dyke goatee.

'Rupert Porson, I presume?' the vicar said, giving the newcomer a jolly, hale-fellow-well-met handshake. 'I'm Denwyn Richardson – and this is my young friend, Flavia de Luce.'

Porson nodded at me and shot an almost invisibly quick, dark glance at the woman before turning on the full beam of a searchlight smile.

'Spot of engine trouble, I understand,' the vicar went on. 'Quite maddening. Still, if it has brought the creator of *The Magic Kingdom* and Snoddy the Squirrel into our midst – well, it just proves the old adage, doesn't it?'

He didn't say which old adage he was referring to, nor did anyone care enough to ask.

'I was about to remark to your good wife,' the vicar said, 'that St Tancred's would be honoured indeed if you might see your way clear to presenting a little entertainment in the parish hall while your van is being repaired? I realise, of course, how much in demand you must be, but I should be negligent if I didn't at least make the attempt on behalf of the children – and yes, the grown-ups, too! – of Bishop's Lacey. It is good, now and then, to allow children to launch an attack upon their money-boxes in a worthy cultural cause, don't you agree?'

'Well, vicar,' Porson said, in a honeyed voice – too big,

too resonant, too mellifluous, I thought, for such a tiny man – 'we do have rather a tight timetable. Our tour has been gruelling, you see, and London calls . . .'

'I understand,' said the vicar.

'But,' Porson added, lifting a dramatic forefinger, 'nothing would delight us more than being allowed to sing for our supper, as it were. Isn't that so, Nialla? It shall be quite like the old days.'

The woman nodded, but said nothing. She was staring off at the hills beyond.

'Well, then,' the vicar said, rubbing his hands together vigorously, as if he were making fire, 'it's all arranged. Come along and I'll show you the hall. It's rather tatty, but it does boast a stage, and the acoustics are said to be quite remarkable.'

With that, the two men disappeared round the back of the church.

For a moment there seemed nothing to say. And then the woman spoke:

'You wouldn't happen to have a cigarette, would you? I'm dying for a smoke.'

I gave my head a rather idiotic shake.

'Hmmm,' she said. 'You look like the kind of kid who might have.'

For the first time in my life, I was speechless.

'I don't smoke,' I managed.

'And why is that?' she asked. 'Too young or too wise?'

'I was thinking of taking it up next week,' I said lamely. 'I just hadn't actually got round to it yet.'

She threw her head back and laughed toothily, like a film star.

'I like you, Flavia de Luce,' she said. 'But I have the advantage, don't I? You've told me your name, but I haven't told you mine.'

'It's Nialla,' I said. 'Mr Porson called you Nialla.'

She stuck out her hand, her face grave.

'That's right,' she said, 'he did. But you can call me Mother Goose.'