

October 2010 Raspberry & Vine Short Story Competition Winner

The Good Secretary by Jennifer Hoff

A nervous tingle creeps under my skin. Mr Edgar Worthington is glancing at his father's open watch near the telephone. He intends to spy on that young lady, Felicity Brookes.

Every second Wednesday at three o'clock, my employer walks down Glebe Point Road, turns into Victoria Street and then sits on a shaded bench pretending to read the *Herald* or watch barges on the harbour. Of course, I can't follow him or ask why he wastes an hour of his valuable time. A good secretary knows when to keep her mouth shut.

Mavis and Beryl from St Stephen's Auxiliary told me the details of his secretive visits. 'Our front parlour overlooks the park so we know what goes on,' said Mavis. Beryl shot a worried look at her sister. 'He's grown so thin over recent weeks and he'll catch another bout of influenza sitting in that cold wind. Why does he do it?'

'Have you found the papers for the Addington estate?' His question makes me jump.

'They're not complete. I've sent to the solicitors in Ashfield for the carbon copies.'

Because Mr Worthington has grey eyes, most people misjudge him as cool and unfeeling. If they saw that damn stray cat drinking from the office Minton china or my

file of unpaid accounts, they would know better. His late father was particular about payment within thirty days but Mr Edgar doesn't seem to notice. 'These slow payers will have the shirt off your back, sir,' I say often but he smiles.

He has a lopsided smile like my boy, Frank. 'It may never happen, mother,' Frank used to say in his happy-go-lucky way. 'You worry about such trifles.' But what would a nineteen-year-old lad know of the Kaiser's armies and vast battlefields in France?

'Are you all right, Mrs Clifford?'

'Perfectly all right, thank you. I'll put away these ledgers. Will you be back before five?'

'Don't wait for me. I'll take the De Lacey file. Old Mrs De Lacey wants to change her will.'

'Again?'

'Again.' He turns away and coughs. I remind myself to order another bottle of Dr Moffat's Invigorating Tonic for him. A sinuous ginger form strolls from under the hat rack and winds against his trouser cuff and he stoops to ruffle the tabby fur. 'Oh, I forgot to feed the cat—would you mind?'

The clatter of my new Imperial D typewriter almost drowns the clock's chimes. On the third stroke, I select a clean carbon. By now, Miss Felicity Brookes will be taking the path near the swings and heading for the tree-fringed reserve overlooking the harbour. In such bright sunshine, she might wear a wide-brimmed hat at a fashionable angle or carry a sunshade. Perhaps she has her book of Emerson's poetry under her arm or her black and white spaniel straining at its leash. I shut my eyes for a moment

imagining her graceful step and sunlight on her bobbed hair, and then push the carriage release and begin typing a new line.

On Thursday after evensong, Mavis and Beryl give me a full report over our regular board game. ‘She always takes the same path, twenty minutes there and back. Ethel, you’ve gone one square too far.’

‘No Mavis, I’ve counted one square after “Pride”. It’s your turn to throw. Do they acknowledge one another? Do they speak?’ I pass the dice and metal cup across the table.

‘Never. I don’t believe she sees him. There, Beryl, you’ve been caught on the longest snake. You’ll never win now.’

Beryl’s mottled hand disturbs the coloured discs as she frowns at us. ‘He’s ten years older and she’s already engaged to his friend. It would appear like an assignation if she spoke to him. Not respectable at all.’

‘I’d better be getting home after this game,’ I say. ‘Visiting hours at the hospital start at eight and I mustn’t be late.’

On the bus ride through red-tiled suburbs, I stare through the grimy window and recall that first meeting. Perhaps I could have intervened and saved so much heartache. But Mr Worthington has kept me employed out of respect for his late father. A good secretary can’t overstep the mark.

Bernard Swartz had barged into the office and spread his beefy hands on my outward correspondence. ‘I must see Edgar.’ No telephone call, no appointment—so typical of Mr Swartz. I clenched my teeth and smiled at the garnet-eyed dragon on his tie pin. ‘Don’t be shy, darling,’ he boomed. ‘Edgar is my oldest friend. A bit stuffy until you get to know him.’

A tall, golden-haired vision in a lilac silk dress smiled at me as she followed him into Mr Worthington’s office: Miss Felicity Brookes, a nineteen-year-old debutante from Bowral and heiress to a fortune in mining stocks.

‘Edgar, old fellow, I want you to meet someone special. Felicity, the lovely girl I intend to marry.’

Mr Worthington masked his surprise as he rose from his desk, his grey eyes met hers and he held out his good hand. As Miss Brookes extended her left hand to clasp his, a strange sensation overcame me. A low vibration hummed in the air, papers seemed to rustle in their files, the light brightened and Bernard Swartz and I became as insubstantial as shadows. I pulled the door shut, returned to my desk and made three typing errors in as many minutes.

*I must pretend to know nothing, I remind myself as I alight at the hospital gates.
My employer’s foolish infatuation is not my affair.*

At the Information kiosk, the uniformed porter gives me a cheery wave. I climb the stairs and catch my breath at the door marked Ward 8 where the soldiers felled by mustard gas lie in neat white rows and the reek of disinfectant flows to meet me. Signs glare at me from every wall: Danger-oxygen in use. ‘I’m very sorry to keep you waiting,’ whispers the young doctor whose shoes squeak on the polished floor. ‘We’ve

lost more staff to influenza. I'm afraid your son's burns are too severe for further treatment.'

Two weeks later, Mavis is bursting with gossip as she lays out the dominoes. 'Your Mr Worthington was on the bench under the camphor laurel tree, plain as day. She let her spaniel off its leash and it chased seagulls into the shallows. Where's that cuppa, Beryl? We haven't got all night.'

Her sister bangs the teapot on the floral cloth and a brown stain spreads. 'He should strike up a conversation, walk with her, anything. He's a charming young man, so reserved and well-mannered, a catch for any girl. She'd do better with him than that rogue, Swartz.'

'He's too shy.' Mavis mops the stain with a napkin. 'With his weak lungs and amputation, he feels he's not good enough for her. And Bernard Swartz is a man of influence in the city.'

I join my domino to Mabel's. 'Let's not spoil our evening by mentioning Mr Swartz. His Packard sprays gravel on the office windows, his cigar ash dirties the Ottoman rug and he treats Mr Worthington like a boot boy. I know it's uncharitable to despise him but in my opinion, Bernard Swartz shows too much interest in other people's money.'

Beryl flinches in shock at my outburst. I stare at the table, anger threatening to choke me. In the same week that old Mr Worthington learned that his son was wounded by shrapnel at Villers-Bretonneux, Bernard Swartz defrauded him of £7,250. 'Not a

word to anyone, Mrs Clifford,’ warned the old man. ‘In these troubled times, we mustn’t cause a scandal.’ So I filed the promissory note and forged signatures under “Miscellaneous” and said nothing. Twelve days later, old Mr Worthington was laid to his eternal rest. Who would have guessed that such a robust gentleman had a weak heart?

Beryl unfolds an embroidered hanky and blows her nose. ‘It’s awful—more tragic than a radio serial. Brave Mr Edgar survives war and sickness to lose the sweet young miss he pines for. A blighted romance. Life is so very unfair.’

Her sister’s pale eyes pin me like two shards of glass. ‘Why don’t you do something, Ethel?’

I study the white spots on my domino. ‘About Mr Swartz? What can I do? He’s our best client. About Miss Brookes? It’s her choice to marry him. About poor Mr Worthington?’ Their faces are bright with expectation. ‘It’s hopeless. A good secretary knows her limits.’

Mavis pats my arm. ‘It’s all right, dear, don’t get upset. Have a Neenish tart—I made them this morning.’

At 9.15 on Monday, I sit on a wooden stool near the telephone, taking dictation. ‘To my grandsons, Percival, John and James De Lacey...’ My employer scans his scrawled notes.

I long to grasp his pinstriped shoulder, shake him and say, ‘Come to your senses, Mr Edgar. My dear boy, Frank, will never know a lover’s touch. A legion of

young men can never have the pleasures of courtship and happiness. You must seize your heart's desire before it eludes you forever. You must tell her that you love her.'

The postman's whistle sends the cat leaping from its perch under the king's portrait as mail drops through the brass-edged slot. 'I'll go.' I snap my notebook shut, push open the frosted glass door and rush to the hallway. *What madness has come over me?* After such an outburst, Mr Edgar would be within his rights to sack me on the spot.

A manila envelope postmarked "Mount Isa" draws my attention and I retreat to my desk and pull out two bank cheques folded in a hand-written note.

Greetings, Hedley,

Another goose ripe for plucking. Deposit these with the rest. See you in Luxembourg next week.

Your pal,

Bernie S

I peer at the florid signature: Mr Swartz has mistakenly posted two cheques to this office instead of his quarterly statements. When I turn the watermarked slips over and read the printed numerals, my hand begins to shake.

For several minutes, I study the two cheques propped on my typewriter carriage as seductive visions jostle in my mind: a sun-bleached beach in the Hawaiian Islands, a smart hotel near the Champs Élysées during the summer season, the walls of Avignon at sunset, a white ship gliding in an aqua sea. A furred head butts against my leg and

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Thomas whines for food.

I replace the cheques in the envelope, slide it into the second drawer of my desk and make a strong cup of tea. Mr Worthington will emerge from his office at 10.00 for his first appointment.

As I fill the kettle and unwrap minced steak from butcher's paper, my mind wanders. An efficient secretary might cash such an extraordinary amount and disappear to a secluded seaside cottage in California. A widowed lady with a townhouse in Kensington would never arouse suspicion. Perhaps new clothes from one of the less expensive Paris houses and an array of tasteful jewellery...

One idea beats in my head with relentless insistence: a clever secretary could remove her invalid son to an exclusive clinic and visit him every day. The cat pauses from licking its patterned plate and seems to read my thoughts with green-eyed indifference.

The clock has chimed eleven, cigarette smoke hangs in the air and rain drives against the windows as I type *Dear Sir* under a letterhead. The front door bursts open, water sprays across the hall runner and Miss Brookes rushes towards Mr Worthington's closed door. I jump to my feet. 'You can't—he's with Mr Parker...'

'I must see him. He's the only one who can help me. I'm ruined.' Her velvet hat is askew, her short hemline clings to her legs and she rakes me with a haunted look before flinging open the door. 'Papa's legacy, gone...every penny.'

‘I am so sorry,’ I say to Mr Parker a minute later, as he scowls at me and grabs his hat and coat.

‘You’re very quiet tonight, Ethel.’ Mavis studies me through a half-filled vase of cannas in St Stephen’s hall. ‘It’s not poor Frank is it? Not bad news?’

‘Nothing like that.’ I trim leaves from a red bloom, pass it to her and pick up another.

‘Pity you weren’t at Sunday service,’ says Beryl with forced good humour. ‘Reverend Wicks gave a wonderful sermon. The meek shall inherit the earth.’

I put down a trimmed stem and grip the table edge. ‘Bankers, generals and profiteers inherit the earth, Beryl. The meek are fleeced of their money, love without hope or find an early grave in a muddy field.’ Her face grows as white as an altar cloth. ‘Oh, I’m so sorry, my dear. Forget I said anything. I’ve got a lot on my mind.’

Miss Brookes arrives at 9.30 sharp on Tuesday clutching a sheaf of bank statements. She stops at my desk, her eyes red-rimmed and her pale face taut. ‘I know he watches me in the park. I’ve known for months.’ Pain clouds her pretty eyes. ‘Can I trust him?’

That anguished blue gaze holds me and her whispered words pierce like knives. How can two broken hearts matter when the whole world has been scarred by war and plague? How can love prevail over so much grief? My selfish dreams and visions coalesce into a moment of clarity. ‘With your life,’ I assure her.

I open the door marked “Private” and she brushes past me with an indrawn breath. In that unguarded moment as Mr Edgar gathers his scattered papers and recognises his visitor, I feel passion crackle in the humid air.

From my desk, I hear muffled sobbing, sharp exclamations in a male voice and a long silence. The pencilled loops of my shorthand read like gibberish and my fingers are stiff on the typewriter keys. ‘They’re meant for each other,’ I tell the cat. Ten minutes later, Miss Brookes leaves with her tears dried and a resolute tilt to her chin.

The morning broadsheet thumps onto the front doormat and I scan the headline: *Fraud suspect sacked from mining board.* Beneath the large Times Bold, Bernard Swartz’s grainy image sports the dragon tiepin and a winner’s smile. I slide the two cheques from under my dictation notebook and stare at numbers in thick black ink—£35,800. Mr Swartz will be wondering who has his money.

When the clock strikes two, I hide the newspaper, chase Thomas from a stack of box files, put on my hat and white crochet gloves, stuff the cheques into my handbag and open the front door. ‘I’m popping out for milk and sixpence worth of cat food,’ I call.

‘Righto.’ Mr Worthington’s voice is muffled by frosted glass. ‘Have you seen today’s *Herald*? That careless boy might have forgotten it again.’

At 3.30 I carry my employer’s tea and two digestive biscuits into his office, place the tray between the telephone and the ink well and set two P&O tickets, travellers’ cheques and a bankbook near the letter he is signing. His brow creases in a puzzled frown. ‘What’s this, Mrs Clifford? Are you planning to leave?’

‘No, sir, you are. A month’s cruise on the Kashmir, funds to spend and the

remainder deposited in the Commercial Bank. You'll understand when you read today's *Herald*.' He unfolds the printed invoice pinned to the tickets and smooths it on the polished mahogany. 'A total of £7,250 spent. Extraordinary! Is that amount significant?'

'Very. I'll tell you the whole story after you come back.'

His eyes narrow. A captive fly buzzes against the window glass and my clasped hands grow sticky. I have underestimated Mr Edgar. Of course he would want to know how his secretary acquired such a large amount to spend on a holiday. Like his late father, Mr Edgar is careful with money. 'This is most peculiar, Mrs Clifford, I don't quite understand. Where did this money come from? Would you care to explain?' The fly's impotent tap, tapping is unnaturally loud in the stillness. Mr Worthington's eyes grow dark with wariness.

'You'll find the details in the file labelled "Miscellaneous", sir. The amount is an unpaid debt to your father.' I rub my sweating hands against my pleated skirt. 'I promised him never to tell.'

'Aah, I see. And nothing irregular or illegal in the bank deposit?'

'Nothing at all, sir. Mr Swartz is under investigation and Senior Constable Bickford will be calling tomorrow. He telephoned while you were at lunch. I'll take him through our files and records.'

'Bernie? Bernie Swartz? So the rumours are true. What a damned rascal he turned out. But there are two tickets here, Ethel.'

'Yes Mr Edgar. The young lady will be ready when you call. I understand that a ship's captain can perform a marriage if required.'

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He picks up the tickets, turns them over several times and then flicks through the bankbook with a low whistle. ‘I can’t believe it. I’m stunned. Not some sort of joke? No?’

‘No joke, sir. I’ve telephoned Miss Brookes and I can manage everything here for a month.’ Anticipation follows surprise across his thin features and his colour rises. I had never thought him handsome until now.

‘What about Thomas? We can’t leave him to fend for himself.’

‘I’ll buy his food from petty cash and take him home with me at weekends.’

Something in my expression amuses him because he bursts into laughter. His extraordinary levity almost unnerves me. Old Mr Worthington never laughed during office hours—not even at his own jokes. His laughter stops and the mantel clock’s wheezy chimes echo from the outer office. I wonder if Mr Edgar will become angry and rail at my impertinence or order me to pack my things and go.

He shuffles the documents with his left hand, pushes them into his breast pocket, leans back and regards me with a searching look. Embarrassment heats my face and I step back. ‘An ocean voyage for two, funds deposited, every detail legal, and Senior Constable Bickford arriving to gather evidence. You’re a marvel, Ethel. How could I manage without you?’

His grey eyes are so bright and his smile so wide that I fear he will make some effusive declaration or become overly sentimental. I clear my throat. ‘A good secretary covers every possibility, Mr Worthington.’

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