

Death among the Delphiniums

By Thea Bates
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Place

Ffyffe Hall, Lady Andering-Ffyffe's country home. A sitting room.

Time

1948. Summer.

Characters

Lady Florence Andering-Ffyffe, 40s, or 50s. Widow of the late Sir Harold Andering-Ffyffe, mother to Enid.

Miss Enid Andering-Ffyffe. Early 20s, daughter of Lady Florence.

Colonel Drysdale Millsby. Sir Harold's oldest friend.

Mrs. Hilda Millsby. The Colonel's wife.

Mabel. The maid.

Fitz. The gardener

Inspector Volper. The detective.

Mrs. Highgate. The vicar's wife.

Act 1

Scene 1

The act opens on the empty sitting room. It is in perfect order, clean, bright, and spacious. We are given the impression that there is more to the room than is portrayed on stage. There are two doors, one leading to the main hall, and one to the back hall. Lady Florence Andering-Ffyffe enters, followed by Mabel, who carries a large ceramic figurine.

Lady F: Put it on the mantel, Mabel, centred, with the shepherd and shepherdess either side.

Mabel moves downstage, but is interrupted.

Lady F: No, no, put it on the bookshelf.

Mabel changes direction and moves to the bookshelf but again is interrupted.

Lady F: No, that'll be too cluttered. Is it too large for the occasional table?

Mabel crosses and places the figurine on a narrow but tall occasional table.

Lady F: Yes. That will do.

Mabel: Is there anything else, ma'am?

Lady F: No, Mabel, thank you. Oh, yes, there is something. The flowers in the dining room. I don't think I like them at all. Tell Fitz to get in some delphiniums.

Mabel: Yes ma'am.

Mabel exits, and Lady Florence gazes at the figurine from various angles, unsure of it. A door bell is heard. Lady F pays no attention, and soon Mabel re-enters.

Mabel: Mrs. Highgate, ma'am.

Mrs. Highgate, the vicar's wife, enters. She carries a parcel, and has a shifty look.

Mrs. H: I'm sorry to disturb you, Lady Florence, but I was in the village post office and this parcel was in for you and Mrs. MacWilliams rang but the line was busy and I said that I wasn't too busy, and I'd drop it by for you.

Lady F: Thank you, Mrs Highgate.

Mrs H: It being such a beautiful day, I rather fancied the walk. It's such a nice walk out to the Hall.

Lady F: Yes. I do appreciate the delivery, Mrs Highgate.

Mrs H: I ran into young Albert from the grocers on the way up, said he was just on the way back from making a delivery to you himself.

Lady F: Yes. Quite a busy day, altogether.

Mrs H: Said he'd had to go at quite a trot. Your Mrs.Grafford wanted tinned salmon in a bit of a hurry.

Lady F: Yes. *(She knows that Mrs H is digging for information and won't be put off)* We're having old friends down to dinner tonight. They're very fond of salmon.

Mrs H: Aren't we all, Lady Florence. Nothing like a bit of tinned salmon to do a body good.

Lady F: I do hate to be rude, Mrs Highgate, I'd love to offer you a cup of tea, but I'm afraid I'm rather pressed for time...

Mrs H: Oh, I wouldn't dream of imposing, Lady Florence. Well, I'll be off.

Lady F: Thank you again, Mrs. Highgate.

Mrs H: But seeing as I'm here, Lady Florence, I was wondering if I might ask a little favour of you?

Lady F: *(with a deep sigh)* Yes, of course Mrs. Highgate. Is it to do with the village fete next week?

Mrs H: Oh, you are perceptive, Lady Florence! Yes, as you know, we are a little short on prizes for the children...

Lady F: We are all a little short, Mrs Highgate. Rationing affects us all, I'm afraid.

Mrs H: Oh yes. Oh yes, of course, Lady Florence. But perhaps you could help with some small trinkets? Some baubles for the little ones?

Lady F: I'll see what I can come up with, Mrs Highgate, of course. But the children may have to make do with portraits of my ancestors and the odd fish slice.

Mrs H: *(with an ingratiating titter)* Oh, I'm sure that whatever you come up with will be absolutely grand, Lady F. Absolutely grand.

Lady F: Yes, well, you're very welcome. Anything else, Mrs Highgate?

Mrs H: No, no, Lady Florence. Goodbye. *(She begins to leave, but turns at the door).* Oh, there was one more thing. The Reverend Highgate was wondering if we could count on your support in our fundraising for repairs to the church bell?

Lady F: Of course. Shall I put together a packet and have it ready for you, say, tomorrow afternoon, around two? A few baubles for the fete and my contribution for the bell.

Mrs H: Oh, that would be lovely. Thank you so much, Lady Florence.

Lady F: You are very welcome, Mrs Highgate. My regards to the vicar. Good afternoon.

Mrs Highgate leaves reluctantly, casting glances at the parcel. Lady F ushers her firmly but politely out the door. She then goes back into the room and picks up the parcel. She has it half-opened, when her ungainly daughter Enid enters.

Enid: Mum! There you are! I've just been in the garden and nearly got clocked with my own bouquet!

Mrs F: Enid! What on earth are you talking about? And why on earth have you got shrubbery in your hair? Honestly, my dear, you are more than hopeless! The Millsbys will be arriving any minute, and here you are, looking like you've been dragged backwards through a hedge.

She is fussing over her daughter, plucking leaves from her hair and straightening her clothes, which Enid endures placidly.

Enid: I wasn't dragged backwards through anything, mummy. I was walking past the kitchen windows and that lovely bouquet I picked for the dining room came hurtling out the window and biffed me upside the head.

Lady F: Why on earth were you walking past the kitchen windows?

Enid: Why was Mabel tossing out my lovely bouquet?

Lady F: Well, darling, it was very... nice... but not quite what I had in mind, my darling. I asked Mabel to replace it with delphiniums.

Enid: You didn't like my flowers?

Lady F: Darling, I did not send you to finishing school so that you might go out picking your own flowers, Fitz will pick them, and your job is to approve or disapprove. It's really quite simple.

Enid: But I *liked* my bouquet!

Lady F: Yes dear. I'm sure you did. Now be a good girl and go get dressed. The Millsbys will be here any moment.

Enid: Mum-

Lady F: Go on, Enid. I won't have you lurching about the place looking like a woebegone scarecrow when the Millsbys arrive.

Enid opens her mouth to protest, but thinks better of it, and exits. Lady F picks up the parcel and finishes opening it. We don't see what is inside the box, but whatever it is gives Lady F quite a shock. So much of a shock, in fact, that she has to sit down to compose herself. The door opens and Fitz enters, secateurs in hand.

Fitz: Ma'am? Mabel tells me you want different flowers for the dining room.

Lady F: Yes, please, Fitz. Delphiniums. At least three colours, please.

Fitz: Only, thing is, ma'am, the delphiniums is a bit scraggly right now. Don't know what's got at them but they is a bit rough looking.

Lady F: We've an enormous amount of them, Fitz, and it's only July. Surely you can come up with enough to fill a vase or two?

Fitz: I'll try, Lady Florence, but as I said, something's got at them. Wouldn't you like some nice sweet peas instead?

Lady F: (firmly) No. Enid just dragged in a swathe of sweet pea and while they smell lovely they always make a room look like a chip shop in Brighton. I would like delphiniums.

Fitz: As you say, ma'am.

He exits grumpily. Lady F looks down at the package in her hands, which she covered over when Fitz entered. She now re-wraps it as best she can and leaves the room with it, still looking a bit shaken.

Enid pops her head round another door. Seeing the room empty, she enters, her arms full of sweet pea blossoms, looking rather bedraggled. She finds a receptacle and stuffs the flowers in, adjusting them until they are to her liking. She then exits. Mabel enters from another door and begins to tidy the room. She looks askance at the sweet peas and tries to decide whether they should be removed. As she is making up her mind, Enid re-enters, with a watering can.

Enid: Hello Mabel. Do you like the flowers? I do love the smell of sweet peas, don't you?

Mabel: They do make a room smell lovely, Miss Enid. *(She tidies a bit, then, timidly)* Those aren't the same ones Lady Florence had me remove from the dining room, are they?

Enid: *(They are)* No! I picked some fresh. Mummy may not like them in the dining room, but she can't possibly object to having them in the sitting room.

Mabel: I suppose not, Miss.

Enid: I say, Mabel, what's Cook doing for dinner? She always does the most smashing meals when guests are here.

Mabel: I believe she's planned some tinned salmon, Miss, and a fennel soup, and a blancmange for afters. Fitz brought up some new potatoes, just this morning, and I believe Mrs Grafford was sending him out for some beans as well.

Enid: Well, that's alright, I suppose.

Mabel: Yes, Miss.

The doorbell rings, and Mabel exits. Enid has a go at the sweet peas again. Mabel re-enters, with Colonel and Mrs. Millsby.

Mrs M: Enid! Look at you, darling, you've been out in the fresh air!

Enid: It's jolly good to see you both again!

Colonel: Got a bit of a glow about you, Enid, suits you.

Enid embraces the Millsbys with enthusiasm, and they her. Lady F enters.

Lady F: I rather think that's just the pollen clinging to her. Go and change your clothes, child. What have you been doing since I sent you out last? *(She catches sight of the sweet peas and gives Enid a fierce look)*

Enid: Do you like the sweet peas, Aunt Hilda? They do have a most wonderful smell.

Mrs M: *(Seeing the unspoken exchange between mother and daughter)* They do smell lovely, Enid. And they add such a dash of colour to the room.

Lady F: *(Giving Enid the eyeball until she flees to change)* Hilda, Drysdale, how are you?

Col. M: Quite well, Florence, and yourself?

Lady F: Oh, you know me. The country life suits me perfectly. Did you have a good trip?

Mrs M: The train was lovely, Florence. I managed to finish my novel and Drysdale slept like an infant.

Col. M: My dear, I may have dozed for a moment or two....

Mrs M: Psshaw! The second the train moves you're out like a light. No shame in it, Drysdale, I know a dozen ladies who would kill to be able to sleep like you can. Florence, I could absolutely slay a gin and tonic right about now.

Lady F: Of course! (*She rings for Mabel*) Drysdale, same for you?

Col. M: Whiskey and soda for me, my dear.

Mabel enters.

Lady F: A gin and tonic for Mrs Millsby, Mabel, and a whiskey and soda for the Colonel. I'll have some tea.

Mabel nods and exits. Lady F and Mrs M sit, and the Colonel wanders about the room.

Mrs M: Enid's looking very well. Has she any gentleman friends?

Lady F: Enid? Oh Hilda, you must be joking. Enid is twenty and still thinks that it is acceptable to go out to town wearing a pilled jumper and jodhpurs. The girl will be the absolute death of me.

Col M: She enjoys the outdoors, Florence, there's nothing wrong with that. Harold would be proud of her.

Lady F: Yes, well, I'm afraid that's where she gets it. He was a lovely man, and a brilliant military mind, but he did insist on wearing the most horrendously inappropriate clothes. Do you know, he once entertained the bishop wearing plus fours and a linen jacket? In October!

Mrs M: I'm sure the bishop didn't notice, Florence.

Lady F: I'm sure he did. And Enid is just like her father. She is absolutely irredeemable when it comes to her personal appearance, and I despair of finding a suitably blind young man to take her on.

Mrs M: She just needs a little guidance, Florence.

Lady F: I don't know how much more I can guide her, Hilda. I've done all but put wires on her hands and feet and walk her about like a marionette. We had the Gladstones down last month, and I had hoped that young Rupert Gladstone would take a shine to her, but she took him out on the lake and, while trying to adjust her girdle, upset the boat and

dumped them both in the muck, then nearly drowned him trying to pull him out. He avoided her like the plague for the rest of the week.

Col. M: The boy's a bit odd, I always thought. Cares more for his clarinet than anything else.

Mrs M: Don't try to match her up with someone like Rupert Gladstone, Florence. Find someone who doesn't mind a brisk dunk in the duck pond, and you'll have her married and happy. And don't force her to wear a girdle. Those things are the root of all evil.

Mabel enters with the drinks and serves them. Enid enters, slightly less rumpled than before and wearing a different dress.

Enid: Bring another cup, Mabel, I'll have some tea, too.

Col. M: Just talking about you, Enid, how well you look. Any young men on the horizon?

Enid: (Blushing ferociously) I don't know. Perhaps.

Lady F: Perhaps?! This is the first I've heard of it, Enid!

Mrs M: Sit down, love, and tell me all about him.

Enid: Oh, it's nothing, really, Aunt Hilda.

Lady F: Who is he? Do we know his family?

Mrs M: Oh, do stop interrogating the poor girl, Florence. Never mind, Enid, it's your business. Tell me, is anything exciting happening here? Any intrigue in Ffyffe Magna?

Enid: Intrigue? No. Nothing ever happens in Ffyffe Magna. The village fete is next week, and that's about the pinnacle of excitement until the fall Exhibition.

Mrs M: Well, a village fete can be unexpectedly thrilling. I met your Uncle Drysdale at a village fete.

Col M: That's true! I remember seeing the most stunning young thing in the tea tent, and thinking, by god, I'd like to marry that girl!

Lady F: Oh, isn't that a lovely story.

Col M: Then Hilda shot me in the backside, and in the ensuing bloodshed and chaos I lost sight of the girl in the tea tent, and by the time my backside healed I'd grown quite fond of Hilda, who visited me daily bringing with her treacle tarts and a great sense of guilt.

Mrs M: Drysdale! You make it sound as if I were a dippy young thing. *(To Enid)* I'd been trying to hit the coconuts in the coconut stall, you see, and he was standing in a most unfortunate spot, mooning over the girl in the tea tent, I suppose. It was only a pellet, but for a decorated soldier he has the most frightfully delicate constitution, and I think he malingered just so that I would keep visiting.

Lady F: Oh my. Don't get any ideas, Enid. You've already nearly drowned Rupert Gladstone, I won't have you shooting young men at the village fete.

Enid: Mummy! Really. Who would I shoot? Gregory the butcher's boy?

Lady F: I'm having the Bingham and the Poppletons down next week, and if you shoot either of those boys I'll disown you.

Mrs M: Oh, do learn to loosen up, Florence! I think Enid is quite clever enough to know that we're not advocating that she shoot Nigel Bingham to get his attention.

Col. M: No, not at all. Nigel would need something more along the lines of a cudgel to the head, I think.

Lady F: Really, Drysdale. That's not funny at all.

The door bursts open and Fitz enters, distraught.

Fitz: Lady Florence- *(He is out of breath, and cannot finish his sentence)*

Lady F: Fitz! This is absolutely uncalled for-

Fitz: Lady Florence, there's a... in the... he's...

Col. M: Good Lord, man, pull yourself together. Who is this chap, then, Florence, gardener or something?

Fitz: The delphiniums!

Mrs. M: I think he just might be.

Lady F: Fitz. Whatever is the matter?

Fitz: In the delphiniums... I think he's dead!

Lady F: Who's dead?

Fitz: I don't know, ma'am, some bloke... I was trying to find some heads what wasn't mangled, and right there between the blues and yellows was... a bloke. Dead.

Lady F: Are you quite sure?

Col. M: It wasn't just a vagrant having a nap?

Lady F: We do not have vagrants in Ffyffe Magna!

Mrs M: I'm afraid there are vagrants everywhere these days, Florence.

Enid stands and heads to the door.

Col. M: Where are you off to, my girl?

Enid: There's no point us sitting around talking about it, is there? Let's have a look, shall we, and we'll soon see whether it's a vagrant or a dead body.

Fitz: I'm telling you, miss, it's a dead body and it's nothing you should be looking at. I'll call the police, shall I, Lady Florence?

Lady F: Yes, do, Fitz. (*Fitz exits*) Enid, don't even think about going out there. I won't have any daughter of mine poking around dead vagrants. We'll let the police deal with it.

Mrs. M: Drysdale, darling, perhaps you ought to take a look?

Col. M: I don't see why, as Florence says, the police'll- (*The Mrs gives him a look and he changes his tune*) Then again, perhaps I ought to...

Col. M heads out the door, somewhat reluctantly, and Mrs. M follows.

Lady F: Hilda! What are you doing?

Mrs. M: Well, for all his military experience Drysdale does have the most frightfully weak stomach. I'll just go see that he's alright.

Lady F: Hilda!

Mrs. M: Well, I did drive an ambulance during the war, Florence...

She scoots out the door, and Enid tries to follow. Lady F gives her a stern stare, and she desists.

Lady F: Well. This is highly inconvenient. What time is it? (*Looks at clock*) Good gracious! I shall have to tell Cook to keep dinner an extra hour. I don't suppose the police will be quick....

Nattering to herself, she sweeps out to the kitchen. Enid escapes to the garden to peek at the body. End of Scene 1.

