

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Midsummer Meeting

Elvi Rhodes

About the Book

It was an unexpected legacy which brought Petra to the close village community of Mindon. An imposing stone house in the middle of the village, left to her by an old friend of her mother's, promised a very different way of life from Petra's lonely and unsettled life in Yorkshire, and she was immediately made welcome by the local residents - in particular, by the members of the village Amateur Dramatic Society. Presided over by the formidable Ursula, who liked things to be run her way, the ambitious decision had been made (mainly by Ursula herself) to put on *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as the next production. Petra, to her surprise and pleasure, was put in charge of the scenery.

Rivalries, squabbles, love affairs and seething resentments threatened to scupper the production, and all Ursula's management skills were needed to prevent disaster. But Petra had more pressing things on her mind than the set designs. A mystery from the past had begun to haunt her - and the answer to that mystery might solve the puzzle of why she had been left such a beautiful house by a total stranger.

A warm and entertaining novel by the bestselling author of *Ruth Appleby*, *Cara's Land* and *Spring Music*.

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About the Author
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MIDSUMMER MEETING

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CORGI BOOKS

This is for Paul and Mary Scherer, with love.

Acknowledgements

I thank my son, Stephen, in whose New York home part of *Midsummer Meeting* was written. He spent time reading every word of the book and made suggestions (and criticisms!), all of which were improvements.

'So there you are! We've read both plays. Priestley's *When We Are Married* and William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*! We've read them together and each one of us has read them at home, on our own.'

Ursula glanced with some doubt around the group gathered in her sitting room. It was her sitting room partly because no other member had one quite as large or could offer a full complement of comfortable chairs, with no-one reduced to sitting on the floor or on a kitchen stool, but mostly because she was the producer of the Mindon Amateur Dramatic Society and as such had the power. As a sop, or out of the kindness of her heart, as she would have said, she never served anything other than good coffee. None of your nasty instant stuff with semi-skimmed, or worse still, powdered milk which tasted like whitewash. No, the finest filtered Colombian with cream, and it was this delicious smell that was now drifting from the kitchen into the room where they sat.

'At least I *hope* we've all read them at home?' She looked around the circle, not quite trusting one or two of them. 'Hattie and Joyce, would you be angels and serve the coffee?' She was happy to provide it; she was damned if she would hand it round. 'And you'll find a plate of chocolate biscuits on the dresser.'

'Certainly, Ursula!' Hattie and Joyce said in unison, scrambling to their feet.

'Dear ladies!' Ursula said before they were quite out of earshot. 'What would we do without them?'

'Or without you, dear Ursula, and your hospitality,' a man said in a smooth, dark-brown actorish voice.

Ursula smiled at him. 'You know it's a pleasure, Giles! Anything I do for the MADS - I suppose anything any one of

us does for the MADS – is a pleasure.’

There were murmurs of assent which lasted until Hattie and Joyce brought in the coffee on rather elegant trays, though not the best silver ones which would have been too heavy because they were both quite small ladies.

‘So, while we’re drinking our coffee,’ Ursula said, ‘if there’s anything left to discuss about either of the plays, which I do doubt because I think it’s all been said, we’ll do that. And then we’ll put it to the vote.’

She had no qualms about the outcome, and if it came to a pinch she, as producer, had the casting vote. She hoped not to have to use it. She did not like votes. Consensus – or if necessary coercion – was preferable. She was wrong, though, in thinking there was nothing left to say. That was a case of hope over experience. There was always more to be said in any MADS committee meeting, even if it went on until midnight, as it sometimes did.

‘I still wonder whether Shakespeare isn’t a bit too ambitious,’ one man said. ‘You know what I mean. All them characters. All that fancy talk! Will the people of Mindon understand it?’

‘Oh come, Cyril!’ Ursula protested. Really Cyril Parsons could be quite tiresome. He was what she called a professional Yorkshireman, and proud of it. But he was, inexplicably to her, well liked. ‘You underestimate Mindon. It’s quite a cultured place.’

That was perhaps stretching it a bit far, but one could hope and strive, and to bring a modicum of culture to the village was one of the goals she had set herself. In any case she knew why Cyril wanted the Priestley. She could read him like a book. He wanted to play Alderman Helliwell.

‘I think I could play Alderman Helliwell!’ Cyril said. There was no point in beating about the bush. He knew he could do it and what was more, he’d bring a bit of authenticity to the role. ‘I do really think I could do it!’

‘I’m sure you’re cut out for it,’ Giles said.

Cyril turned a beaming smile on him. It was not often Mr la-di-da Giles Rowland gave him an approving word. 'Thank you, lad!' he said.

'But what about the rest of us?' Giles said. 'We don't have a Yorkshire accent between us.'

'Perhaps Cyril could teach us?' someone said.

Fay Holliday, Giles noted without surprise. She was known for making quite stupid suggestions. This one made him shudder. His voice had once been likened to that of Richard Burton. There was no way he would waste it on J. B. Priestley.

'I think not,' he said.

Giles was like the rest of them, Ursula thought. He viewed any production according to how it enhanced him. No doubt he had cast himself as Theseus . . . or perhaps Oberon . . . in the *Dream*. She was, she reckoned, the only one who considered what would be good for the MADS, good for the village. So as she was the producer, and as far as she knew there was no-one waiting to jump into her shoes, that was how it would be.

She had expressed these thoughts to her husband more than once.

'You mean you like your own way, darling!' Eric had said.

Sipping her coffee, Ursula looked around. This was the stage at which they started talking to each other instead of through the chair (herself). It had to happen and for a little while she would allow it, but when it had gone on long enough she would call the meeting to order. Ten minutes, she thought, looking at her watch, then back to whatever discussion she might decide was enough before actually choosing the play. That done, all those who were not on the Casting Committee, which meant at least half of those present, could depart, leaving the rest to get down to the nitty-gritty of sorting out the parts. There was no time to fix a separate meeting.

The allocating of the parts was an enormous responsibility which she would gladly have taken on single-handed had not the MADS insisted on committees for everything. They could hardly serve coffee in the interval of a performance, and wash up afterwards, without having a committee for it. Indeed, she was sure they must have one, though it was thankfully not in her field.

'There!' she called out after exactly ten minutes. 'Can we stop having six separate meetings and come back to one? Has everyone finished coffee?' (She never offered seconds.) 'Joyce, Hattie . . .'

'Shall we clear away?' they offered.

'Thank you so much,' Ursula said. 'Don't bother to wash up. I'll put them in the dishwasher later. I don't want you to miss any of the meeting.'

They scurried around like small bright mice, clearing away. She half expected to see them eat up the biscuit crumbs.

'Now!' Ursula said. 'Have we any last-minute, *brief* points to make about either of the plays?'

'I think it's high time we tackled Shakespeare,' Giles said. 'We've been going a few years now and we've never done anything quite so ambitious. I reckon we're ready for it.'

'It won't be easy to stage. Several scene changes. Not one straightforward set like Priestley.'

The speaker was Norman Pritchard, usually and valuably stage manager.

'But I'm sure you'll cope with it, Norman,' Ursula said. 'You've never let us down yet!'

'And lots of props,' Doris, Norman's wife, said. 'And all period. I shall have to have a good look around the attic.'

The Pritchards' capacious attic was the repository for almost anything the Society had ever used or might possibly use in the future. It was access to the attic, and knowledge of just about everything in it, which automatically made Doris property mistress. Swords, stools, drapes, vases, small

tables, jardinières, crockery, artificial flowers, a palm tree – anything, everything.

‘I can’t think of anything sixteenth century except perhaps the sword.’ There was already a worried frown on Doris’s face.

‘There’s sure to be a sword in Shakespeare!’ Hattie said helpfully.

‘I still reckon *When We Are Married* would be more suitable,’ Cyril Parsons said. He was not ready to give up Alderman Helliwell without a bit of a fight. ‘It’s a rattling good play and we could do justice to it. It’s a play performed all over the world. J. B. Priestley is one of our best living playwrights!’

‘He’s dead,’ Giles said.

‘Not all that many years,’ Cyril said.

‘There’d be more parts in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*,’ Jennie Austin said. ‘All those lords and ladies, attendants, fairies.’ She had been in the society eighteen months now with never a sniff of a part, possibly because she was a woman. Females were thick on the ground, men at a premium, and much sought after.

‘The fairies could be played by St Peter’s Brownies!’ Amelia said cheerfully. ‘They’d look awfully sweet!’ She also happened to have two small daughters in the Brownies.

Over my dead body, Ursula thought, though she would not say so out loud. Who knew who might have to be dragged in when flu and broken legs and visits to one’s grandmother had taken their toll?

‘There’s another thing,’ Norman Pritchard said. ‘Put to it I daresay I could manage the Shakespeare, but there’s more to it than just somebody’s living room, tables and chairs and a bookcase. There’s complicated sets. A room in the duke’s palace. A wood – trees, shrubs, animals – that sort of thing. Who’s going to do all that?’

Ursula’s smile was that of a conjurer about to bring the rabbit out of the hat.

‘I think we can leave all that to Petra,’ she said. ‘Petra is an artist. She will design exactly what’s wanted.’

‘Ah, but who’ll carry it out?’ Chalky White demanded. He was a carpenter, both in real life and in the MADS. He’d be the one they’d call on every time they wanted a nail hammered in or two pieces of wood glued together.

‘You will, Chalky dear,’ Ursula said. ‘With your usual skill which we couldn’t do without! But we’ll all help. We’ll all muck in, as we usually do!’

She turned her smile from Chalky White and flashed it across to Petra, who was sitting on a low chair at the far side of the room. She was pleased about Petra Banbury. Petra had been in the village only a few weeks when they’d met at a wine and cheese do. She had lost no time in persuading her to join the MADS.

‘Though not as an acting member,’ Petra had stipulated. ‘I could help with scenery – perhaps costumes – but not acting.’

‘That’, Ursula told her, ‘is music to my ears. We have an absolute gaggle of females scratching around for acting parts. You don’t know any men, do you?’

‘Not yet,’ Petra said. ‘I haven’t been here long enough.’

She had hardly had time to meet anyone. Up-rooting herself from the North Yorkshire market town, where she had lived for all thirty-six years of her life, to this Surrey village – and it had been something done almost on a whim, a decision made on the spur of the moment – had absorbed her mind and her physical energy so that there was nothing left for meeting people. That she fully intended to do when the time was ripe. It was her intention, as far as her work allowed her, to join in the life of the village, but who knew how long that would have been delayed had not Cynthia Clarke, the wife of the local GP, invited her for a glass of wine?

Several of the people there, she had discovered, were members of the dramatic society. Both the doctor and his

wife were. 'Though Preston can take only the smallest parts,' Cynthia Clarke explained. 'He never knows where he's going to be. Called out in the middle of a rehearsal as like as not!'

'The MADS has by far the biggest membership of anything in the village,' Ursula had boasted.

'Except for the church, Ursula!' the vicar had said, joining the group just in time. 'Except for the church!'

So she had been happy to accept Ursula King's invitation to join the society, and therefore here she was, undertaking to do the scenery for *Mid-summer Night's Dream* should it be chosen, which it seemed was highly likely.

This was not her first meeting. She had been to two playreading evenings. She had even been allowed to read a few lines - the reading was spread out so that no-one could say they hadn't had a turn - and had not done too badly though, as she had told Ursula, there was no way she wanted an acting part even in the unlikely event that she was offered one. She would stick to painting and designing, which had earned her a precarious living for several years now.

'Right then!' Ursula said, calling the meeting to order and frustrating at least two people who had been nerving themselves to give an opinion. 'I really don't think there's anything more to discuss. Now we must make a choice! Just a show of hands. Who would like *When We Are Married?*

'Five! And who would choose *A Midsummer Night's Dream?*' Actually, it was in the bag.

Nine hands were raised, followed by three more, rather wavering. What shall I do? Cyril Parsons asked himself hastily. If he didn't vote for it he might not get a part. He raised his hand.

'Thirteen,' Ursula said. 'Let's consider it a lucky number, shall we?' She had noticed Cyril's tardy decision. She knew the reason why. He need not have worried: she had him marked for Bottom the Weaver. That rich Yorkshire voice,

that particular brand of bossiness, made him a natural for the part.

'So the *Dream* it is,' Ursula said happily. 'Democratically chosen. And I'm sure those of you who perhaps *might* have preferred Priestley will rally round and give your support to the choice of the majority.'

'What does she mean, *might* have preferred Priestley?' Chalky White muttered to Norman Pritchard. 'Some of us voted for it, didn't we?'

Fortunately his words were lost in the small hubbub which had now broken out. Ursula gave it twenty seconds and then made herself heard over the top of it.

'Thank you all for coming. You all have homes to go to and I won't keep you any longer, except of course for the members of the Casting Committee. We will continue on your behalf and we'll let you know within the next few days who is to do what. Naturally there won't be acting parts for everyone, and some of you don't want them, but I expect you'll all help as usual and we couldn't do without you!'

Her smile swept around and enfolded Chalky and Norman, Doris, Hattie, Joyce, Angela Hatfield who would hopefully do the publicity and Amelia who was good on costumes. None of them would expect parts but that was no reason why they shouldn't receive encouragement.

'First rehearsal next Thursday, seven-thirty in the Parish Hall,' she said. 'That means everybody, whether you're acting or not.'

Then she left her place and crossed the room to Petra, who was already making for the door.

'I'm so glad you could come,' she said. 'You will be there on Thursday? I like to talk about things like scenery and props and so on right from the beginning.'

'Oh yes, I'll be there!' Petra assured her.

She went out by the front door at the same moment as Adam Benfield, and a group of others, all saying good night to each other, not a soul venturing a single word about

hoped-for parts in the play. She had met Adam at a previous meeting. Someone had told her he was something in the new University of Southfield, which had once been Southfield Polytechnic. She didn't know exactly what he did. He seemed a pleasant man. Thirty-ish, she thought, or perhaps older. He was tall, with dark hair and a tanned skin, as if he spent a lot of time out of doors.

'Can I give you a lift home?' he asked her.

'Thank you,' Petra said. 'But it's no distance. I live right in the middle of the village. Not more than ten minutes' walk.'

'No matter,' Adam said. 'I have to go through the village. I live on the Southfield Road, a couple of miles out. I probably go right past your door.'

'Well,' she said, 'if you put it like that . . .'

'I managed to park quite close,' he said.

They walked down the broad drive, through the large, well-tended garden. Pinks, pansies, roses, all in orderly profusion, scented the dusk, reminding Petra that she really must get to work in her own garden, which showed serious signs of neglect.

'So are you enjoying living in Mindon?' Adam asked as he helped her into the car.

'Very much. People seem friendly.'

'Oh, they are!' he agreed. He wondered what had brought her here. He knew she had come from Yorkshire. But why to Mindon? It was nice enough, but why pick on it especially? There was no sign of any man around, whose job might have brought him here, whom she had to follow. She didn't wear a wedding ring, so presumably she was not a young widow. Did a divorced woman continue to wear a ring? He didn't know the etiquette of that.

'Have you lived here long?' Petra asked.

'Going on three years. I teach English in the university. Have you discovered the university yet?'

'I've driven past it, that's all. I hear they do some quite good courses in the neighbourhood.'

'That's right,' Adam said. 'Mostly in Southfield though, not Mindon.'

'Mindon seems quite lively,' Petra observed. 'Do you belong to many things?'

'Only the MADS. That takes up a lot of time.'

'I can imagine.'

They were at the door of her home, Plum Tree House. She had found out very little about him, only that his subject was English. He probably knew everything about *Midsummer Night's Dream*. Was he married? Was there a Mrs Benfield and one or two little Benfields waiting for him in his house in the Southfield Road?

He nipped out of the driver's seat and came around to open the passenger door. She added good manners to the little she knew about him. Should she ask him in for coffee, she wondered as she got out of the car. She decided not. A move best made, if at all, when she knew him better.

'See you on Thursday,' he said.

He waited, and watched her as she walked between the stone gateposts - the iron gates which had swung between them had been commandeered more than fifty years earlier, supposedly to be made into a piece of a Spitfire - walked up the path and inserted her key in the door. For a moment she was silhouetted in the light from the porch as she turned around to wave to him, and then she was in the house and he drove away.

The house welcomed her as it had on that first day when, accompanied by Mr Craig the solicitor, she had stepped into the wide hall. When she'd boarded the train in Harrogate - it was still not quite daylight - she had left behind her a North Yorkshire in the throes of winter. In Mindon, stepping out of the taxi which had brought her from Southfield station, it was already early spring. The sun shone, daffodils were in bloom, blossom was bursting on the plum tree in the garden at the back of the house, from which the house presumably took its name. She had been a stranger to these parts.

Surrey was a place she knew existed, but France, Italy, bits of Spain, were more familiar to her than the South of England. She was a stranger, yet she had felt herself welcomed.

She had stood side by side with Mr Craig in the hall, surveyed its black-and-white tiled floor, partly covered by a turkey rug in rich blues and reds. There was a door to the left and a matching one to the right, both of dark, heavy wood with large brass doorknobs. On the left a staircase rose, not overwhelming but of a generous width, dark wood, not carpeted. On the right the hall narrowed to a corridor, passing another door, then leading to the rear of the house.

‘Oh! This looks nice!’ Petra had said. ‘Roomier than I’d imagined.’ She had not been sure what to imagine. Perhaps a smallish cottage. There had been no clue, which was one reason why she had thought it best to make the journey to Mindon to take a look at it. There had been nothing in Mr Craig’s letter to tell her what it was like. It might have been, in spite of its pretty name, a tumbledown shack. It was certainly not that.

‘It’s a good house,’ Mr Craig had agreed, ‘substantial without being over-large, though one might think it was for Miss Harden on her own.’

He had told her earlier that Dr and Mrs Harden had died within a fortnight of each other, both of influenza which had turned to pneumonia.

‘But she never gave any sign of wanting to move,’ he said. ‘She was born here. She’d never known a time when her father wasn’t the GP. Shall we look around?’

The door on the left of the hall led to what had been Dr Harden’s waiting-room, and leading from that his consulting room. It was almost as if nothing had been done in the surgery rooms except to tidy things. The desk and tables were clear but in the area where the patients had waited chairs still stood close together around the room.

‘Dr Harden was within weeks of retiring,’ Mr Craig said. ‘We now have Dr Clarke, who’s chosen a more modern house on the edge of the village.’

The rest of the house, with the exception of the rather formal dining room and what had presumably been Dr and Mrs Harden’s bedroom, had a much more lived-in look. Partly, Petra supposed, because it had been left entirely as it had been on the day when its owner had so suddenly died. There were dented cushions on the sofa and chairs, magazines in the canterbury to the left of the fireplace, and on the low table by the fire some knitting and a knitting pattern, a long-sleeved sweater with a roll neck, the wool in a shade of moss green. The knitter had so far reached only to the armholes on the back, but, in a plastic carrier bag lying on the floor beside the table, was a supply of wool. Petra had put it all away in a cupboard though one day she knew she must finish it. Obviously Claire had started it, and because it was Claire who had changed her life she felt duty bound to complete it.

Not that she knew Claire. Not that she had ever met her. All she had known of Claire was an entry in her mother’s address book, a great thick thing with entries going back for years, lots of them crossed out. Amongst those which weren’t was Claire Harden’s, Plum Tree House, Mindon. She had no idea who this woman might be, she had never heard her mentioned, but she had written to the address in Surrey, apprising Claire Harden of the date and time of her mother’s funeral, just in case. Claire had replied at once, from a hospital bed. Two days earlier she had undergone a hysterectomy and was in no fit state to attend anything.

‘I am truly sorry I can’t be with you,’ she had written. ‘Though I had not seen your mother for many years I shall never forget her kindness to me when we were at school together. I was new and frightened. She looked after me like an older sister. At troubled times of my life she was always there for me . . .’

Petra had replied, thanking Claire for the nice things she had said about her mother, hoping, though vaguely, that one day they might meet. Nothing more until, much later, out of the blue a letter came addressed to her mother. This still happened from time to time and never failed to give Petra a shock, never failed to make her feel guilty as she opened an envelope addressed to someone else.

The correspondent was John Craig, of Craig, Craig and Butler, Solicitors, Mindon, Surrey, with the information that Miss Claire Harden, who had died suddenly of a heart attack, had in her will left her house and a sum of money to Marion Banbury, and would the said Marion please get in touch.

Letters flew back and forth between John Craig and Petra. Because Claire had specifically stated that, should Marion pre-decease her the legacy should go to *her* heir, Petra was now the rightful owner of Plum Tree House.

‘But why?’ Petra asked the solicitor, sitting across from his desk.

‘I have no idea,’ John Craig said. ‘She told me nothing, except to agree, when asked, that your mother was not a relative.’

‘Was she . . . well, eccentric?’

‘Not quite eccentric. She was a very good headmistress of the village school here. She never married. She was unusual, perhaps. She gave money to unusual causes and people. The bulk of her estate has gone to a Home for Abused Women.’

‘Abused women?’

‘Yes. No reason given. One supposes just something which took her fancy. And she wasn’t a lady who invited questions. At the time Miss Harden made the will, several years ago in fact, the residue wasn’t much. The house only came into it after Dr and Mrs Harden died, and then since it became part of your mother’s estate it was passed on to you.’

Petra hung her jacket in the hall, then went into the kitchen, filled the kettle. What she craved was a cup of Earl Grey tea with a slice of lemon floating in it. The coffee at Ursula's had left her thirsty. She would take the tea up to bed, have an early night. If she could keep awake long enough she might reread *Midsummer Night's Dream*, see if any ideas came to her for sets and scenery.

The Casting Committee consisted of four members, Tina Jackson, Nicola Pearce, George Shepherd and the producer herself. They were all, by common consent, non-acting members, so there would be no sound of gnashing teeth. It was the smallest casting committee Ursula had been able to get away with, though in fact she would much have preferred to do the whole casting on her own and, she reckoned, she was quite capable of so doing. But no matter, she thought as they arranged their chairs in a tighter group, she would get there in the end, hopefully without too much time wasted.

‘Now!’ she said briskly. ‘We have quite a job to do. More than thirty parts, not including Cobweb and that little lot of fairies *or* all those lords and ladies and attendants.’

‘Thirty parts?’ Tina Jackson said. ‘We’ll never do it!’

‘Of course we will!’

Ursula’s voice was firm, she would stand no nonsense. The trouble with Tina was that she would much have preferred them to do the Priestley. She was a nice woman but she had no vision, no get-up-and-go. She liked a play with a maximum of ten performers and one domestic set. It was a pity she was on the Casting Committee at all but George Shepherd had voted her on, without Ursula noticing, so that couldn’t be helped now.

‘It’s all a challenge,’ Ursula said. ‘We must rise to it. The Bard himself! It’s what Mindon has been waiting for!’

‘You’re right, Ursula,’ Nicola Pearce said. ‘As always!’

Smarmy devil, George Shepherd thought, though all he said was ‘Shall we get on with it?’ He had come straight from work, no time to call home for the supper which his wife would have left for him to heat up in the microwave before she went on night duty at Southfield Hospital.

‘Quite right, George!’ Ursula agreed. ‘And I’ve already given some thought to it—’

‘But we didn’t know we were going to choose this one,’ Tina interrupted.

‘I gave thought to *both* plays,’ Ursula said. It was not totally true. The only thought she had given to the Priestley was that it shouldn’t be chosen.

‘Well now,’ she continued, ‘let’s start at the beginning. Theseus, Duke of Athens. I wonder if you agree with me that Giles is a natural for the part? He has the bearing, the dignity, and one can’t deny that he has the voice for it.’

‘I wondered about Oberon for Giles,’ Tina said helpfully.

‘I don’t *quite* see him as Oberon,’ Ursula said as if actually considering the possibility. ‘A little bit lightweight for him.’

King of the fairies, George thought. Should suit him very well.

‘And we must remember,’ Ursula added, ‘that Theseus is the very first person to speak in the play. Giles would grab the audience at once. “How this old moon wanes/She lingers my desires . . .”’ She could hear him saying it. ‘Yes, I really think Giles for Theseus, don’t you?’ She looked around the group as if it had been their suggestion and then, before they could reply, she put a firm tick against Theseus.

‘Arabella for Hippolyta!’ Nicola exclaimed, as if announcing a parliamentary candidate.

‘She has the figure for it,’ Tina agreed.

George nodded. ‘Statuesque!’

‘Right!’ Ursula agreed, making the second tick. If she *were* to take an acting role, if it wasn’t that she had more important things to do, she would quite like to play Hippolyta herself. Not that at five feet two with a 34A bust she could compete figure-wise, but in other ways . . . “Four days will quickly steep themselves in night,” she quoted. “Four nights will quickly dream away the time”.’ But no, she had a duty to all of them to produce this play.

‘Dr Clarke will do very well as Philostrate,’ she said. ‘He doesn’t have anything to do in the first act except stand around, and then leave when Theseus tells him – and in the last act no more than a dozen lines at most. And we all know that learning lines is *not* the doctor’s forte, bless him! And then we come to the two pairs of lovers, Demetrius and Helena, Lysander and Hermia. I propose Adam Benfield for Lysander. I always think Lysander is much the nicer of the two men. Demetrius is a little mean. And Adam Benfield is a most attractive man and a good actor. He’ll be a fine Lysander.’

‘He certainly attracts me,’ Nicola said. ‘I wouldn’t mind playing Hermia to his Lysander.’

Ursula suppressed a shudder at the thought of Nicola playing Hermia to anyone’s Lysander. ‘It’s always been agreed,’ she pointed out, ‘that members of the Casting Committee took only the smallest roles, and then only when everyone else had been fitted in.’

‘I know,’ Nicola sighed. ‘It was wishful thinking!’

And would remain so, Ursula thought. Nicola, alas, had a voice like a corncrake and an accent which was a rich and unusual mixture of Birmingham and Scouse. There was seldom a role, unless non-speaking, which fitted these constraints. It was a pity because she was more than presentable to look at: tall, slender, red-haired and indeed a very nice woman.

‘I am hoping,’ Ursula said kindly, on a sudden flash of inspiration, ‘that in addition to your valuable work on the Casting Committee you will head Hippolyta’s train of attendants. You would lend dignity to it!’

‘Why, thank you!’ Nicola said. ‘Thank you very much!’

‘I suppose Lucinda will be Hermia?’ Tina said.

Ursula frowned. ‘Why?’ she asked.

‘Well, she usually plays the lead, doesn’t she? So I thought . . .’ Tina floundered.

'The fact that Lucinda has played the lead in several productions doesn't mean that she must do so for ever,' Ursula said. 'On this occasion I happen to think she's not suitable.'

'Why?' Tina persisted. She hadn't realized before that Ursula didn't like Lucinda. 'Why isn't she suitable?'

'Because . . .' It was Ursula's turn to flounder, but not for long. 'Her appearance is wrong for a start. Lucinda is tall, with long blond hair—'

'And beautiful!'

Ursula ignored Tina's interruption.

'Who says Hermia is small?' George demanded.

'George dear,' Ursula said patiently, 'Shakespeare says so! "Though she be but little, she is fierce". It's in the script.'

'We don't have to do every little thing by the book,' George grumbled. He was fed up, tired and very hungry. He couldn't do with going without his food. It gave him a pain in the belly. He fished in his pocket for an indigestion tablet. 'Anyway, who says Hermia's the lead?'

'I agree with that,' Ursula said. 'I can't agree that we needn't do everything by the book. Shakespeare didn't write his immortal words for us to change them. But I do think that though Hermia cannot possibly be tall and blond, she is not necessarily the lead.'

'I find it all very confusing,' George said. 'All these people chasing each other around a wood!'

Ursula's face split into a beaming smile, which she turned entirely upon George.

'Absolutely right, George, you've hit the nail on the head!'

In his astonishment - he seldom met with the approval of Madam Bossy Boots - he swallowed the indigestion tablet before he had sucked the goodness out of it.

'Right? I said I was *confused!*'

'But that's it! Confusion! That's exactly what the play is about. Confusion!'

George shrugged. Since he seemed to be on a winning streak he'd say no more – though it was beyond him why people would pay good money to be confused.

Nicola brought them back to the subject in hand.

'So who *will* play Hermia?'

'Oh, I think Victoria Cattermole would do that very well,' Ursula said. She had never had anyone else in mind. 'She'll work nicely with Adam. As for Lucinda,' she added, again feeling suddenly kind, it seemed to follow getting her own way, 'she is exactly right for Titania! And I suppose one could say that Titania *is* the female lead, so that should be all right.'

Added to which, she thought, making a firm tick against Titania's name, she will spend a fair amount of time asleep on the ground, during which she cannot indulge in her usual habit of upstaging everyone else.

'So we come to Helena and Demetrius,' she said. 'Why not take a chance on Jennie Austin for Helena, and as for Demetrius, I think I'll have to ask my poor Eric. He didn't want a part this time but I'm afraid needs must. As always we're short of men.'

'He'll do it well,' Nicola said.

George looked at his watch. As well as needing to eat, he wanted to give Tina a lift home. Time spent with Tina was the bright spot of any day.

'I'm afraid I'll have to go soon,' he said.

'Quite!' Ursula jumped in. 'So, if I may make a suggestion, since we've dealt with most of the main parts you might like to leave the rest to me and if I need to I'll discuss with you on the telephone before Thursday.'

'We haven't chosen Bottom the Weaver,' Tina pointed out. 'He's very important.'

'Of course he is,' Ursula agreed. 'But who could play Bottom better than Cyril? I'm sure no-one could disagree with that!'

As far as I am concerned, George thought, she can ask Prince Charles to play Bottom, I'm off!

'If you would like a lift, Tina, I'm going in your direction.'

'Thank you, I would!' Tina said, as if it hadn't all been fixed beforehand.

'I think that went well,' Ursula said, not looking up from plumping the cushions as Eric came back into the sitting room. He had taken refuge in his study for the duration of the meeting.

'All as you intended?' he asked.

'Don't be silly, darling. It was a democratic meeting.' She switched off two superfluous lamps before settling into her usual chair. 'You can pour me a drink, dear,' she said. 'I've been thinking we should give one last little dinner before we plunge into rehearsals. There'll be no time then. I thought Petra Banbury. I want to get to know her better. And Adam Benfield. He doesn't seem to have gone about much since his divorce, poor man.'

'You're not matchmaking, are you?' Eric asked.

'Certainly not,' she said. 'By the way, you're Demetrius!'

'Did you notice,' Tina asked when they were in the car, 'that Ursula cast all the parts?'

'She always does,' George said.

'It's very kind of you to give me a lift.'

'It's a pleasure. You know that,' he said. She was a lovely woman, Tina.

On Saturday morning, waiting in the baker's to be served, Petra found herself standing behind Adam Benfield. He was buying a small wholemeal loaf and two jam doughnuts, which did not seem like catering for a family, though perhaps the second doughnut was for Mrs B. He picked up his purchases, then turned around and saw her.

‘Good morning!’ he said. ‘I didn’t expect to see you here, which is a silly thing to say because you live here!’

‘And you don’t,’ Petra pointed out.

She was pleasantly surprised when she left the shop to find him waiting outside.

‘I sometimes go for a coffee after the baker’s,’ he said. ‘I wondered if you’d like to join me?’

‘Thank you. I would. Where do you go?’ Petra said.

‘Ye Old Tudor Tearoom. Built in the 1930s. Totally pseudo, but they serve the best coffee, not to mention shortbreads.’

The place was busy but they found a table by the window from which they looked out on to the street.

‘You have a sweet tooth,’ Petra observed, watching him stir a heaped spoonful of sugar into his coffee and bite into a shortbread finger. ‘And you bought two jam doughnuts in the baker’s. Does your wife have a sweet tooth also?’

‘I hate to disillusion you,’ he said. ‘They’re both for me. I don’t have a wife. I did once. We had an amicable divorce about a year ago. We married too young, both of us still in university. My wife – my former wife – has remarried, and gone to live in Suffolk.’

‘I see.’

‘And you? Is there a Mr Banbury?’ Or was there, he meant. He knew she lived alone.

‘No,’ Petra said. ‘I never married. Not that . . . well, he was already married. He couldn’t make up his mind between his wife and me.’

‘I’m sorry.’

She took another sip of coffee and changed the subject.

‘I didn’t expect to see you shopping in Mindon. I thought you’d go to Southfield.’

‘I do mostly. There’s a good Sainsbury’s in Southfield, but I come here for bread. No-one beats Mr Vickers as a baker. We’re lucky to have him.’

‘I know. And a village store, a butcher, a bank . . .’

‘And at least four gift shops!’ Adam said.

Eventually - there seemed no reason to hurry - they ordered a second pot of coffee. 'But no more shortbreads,' Adam told the waitress. 'I shall get as fat as a pig!'

He showed no signs of that, Petra thought. He was slender without being thin, and, though seated he looked no more than average height, when he stood up he was tall. His length was in his legs. She wondered again how old he was and put his age at two or three years below her own. He was one of those men who would look the same whatever age he reached. It was there in the bony structure of his face, the bright intelligence in his eyes.

'What brought you to Mindon?' he asked as Petra poured more coffee. 'It seems a strange step from North Yorkshire. And a long one.'

'It is,' Petra agreed. 'I'm still surprised, almost every day, at finding myself here. I wake in the morning and wonder what's happened to me. The fact is, I inherited Plum Tree House, though in the strangest way.'

Her mother and father, she told him, had been involved in a car accident. Presumably her father had lost control and the car had veered across the road and then plunged down a steep bank.

'My father was killed instantly,' she said. 'My mother died of her injuries two weeks later.'

'How terrible!' Adam said.

'It was. I don't know which was worse, my father's sudden death or waiting every day for my mother to die. I adored both my parents. I'm an only child.'

'Don't go on if you'd rather not,' Adam said.

'I don't mind,' Petra said, which she recognized as strange because she had never talked to anyone about all this, except the solicitor, and then only the barest facts.

She told Adam now about the entry in the address book, and how she had written to Claire Harden.

'So you met her at the funeral?' he said.

‘No. I never met her at all. She was ill. But she told me what I hadn’t known, that she and my mother had been friends from schooldays. It must have been at the same convent school in Bedfordshire. I know my mother was a boarder there. She paid great tribute to the way my mother had looked after her then, how close they’d been.’

‘So how come you’d never heard of her?’

‘I don’t know. My mother never spoke of her and Claire didn’t explain why they lost touch. At any rate that was the only letter I ever had. I’m still mostly in the dark about her, apart from small details the solicitor gave me.’

‘So how did she come to leave you the house?’

‘She didn’t, not directly—’

She was interrupted by a sharp tapping on the window. Peering in, her face fixed in a cheerful smile, was Ursula. She made signs that she was about to enter.

‘I’ll tell you the rest later,’ Petra said quickly as Ursula opened the door and marched across to join them.

She sat down, distributed various shopping bags around, then raised the lid of the coffee pot and examined the contents.

‘Is there enough left in the pot for little me?’ she said. ‘I could just ask for a clean cup and saucer!’

‘It will be cold,’ Adam protested. ‘Let me order you some fresh.’

‘How kind!’ Ursula said. ‘And do you think I might have one of their almond slices? They’re quite delicious. Have you tried them?’

‘Don’t tempt me!’ Adam said.

‘Or me!’ Petra added. ‘In any case I must be going.’

‘Oh, please don’t!’ Ursula begged. ‘You can’t leave me on my own. And I wanted to see you. Such a coincidence, finding you both here together!’

‘We met in the baker’s,’ Adam said.

‘And you decided to come in here for a coffee? How very nice! Such a cosy little place, I always think.’

‘Why did you want to see us?’ Petra prompted.

‘Oh! Surprise! I thought I would give a little dinner party – quite small, nothing formal. Just the two of you, Eric and myself, the vicar and Grace. I’ll make a date and let you know. Have you met the vicar, Petra?’

‘Apart from MADS, only fleetingly,’ Petra said. ‘He always seems to be in a hurry.’

Ursula sighed.

‘I’m sure he is, poor man! It’s a busy parish and he has no curate. I myself have had a word with the bishop about that, but so far to no avail, though I shall keep at it. Apart from that, the vicar has two small children who seem to keep him occupied. Fathers do so much for their children these days, don’t they? Eric would have left home if I’d asked him to change a nappy. Still, they say it’s progress. So will you both come when I fix the date?’

‘Thank you,’ Petra said. ‘I look forward to it.’

‘Me too,’ Adam agreed.

‘Good! And we shall all get to know Petra better!’ A sudden look of apprehension swept over her face. Her eyebrows went up. ‘You’re not vegetarians by any chance?’

‘I’m not,’ Petra assured her.

‘Nor me,’ Adam said. ‘I eat anything.’

‘Thank heaven,’ Ursula said. ‘My vegetarian cuisine is limited. And now, Adam, I have news for you!’

‘News for me?’

Petra hid a smile at the wariness in Adam’s voice.

‘Yes! I that is to say “we” – ’ Ursula corrected herself, ‘have cast the play. Well, most of it. All the important parts. And you,’ she paused dramatically, ‘*you* are to be Lysander! What do you think of that?’ She spoke as if she had just announced a knighthood.

‘Marvellous!’ Adam said in an unconvincing voice. ‘I mean . . . wonderful! Thank you very much. I just hope I can do it, I hope I can live up to it. I’ve never tackled