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Gentleman's Relish

Patrick Gale

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THE LESSON



Jane stepped outside with a basket of washing and her hair was whipped about her face. Even in June, theirs was one of the windiest gardens she had known. Shortly after moving there she had invested in an extra set of pegs; laundry had to be doubly secured if she wasn't to be forever retrieving pillowslips from rosebushes and rewashing shirts the wind had rolled around flowerbeds. It was a miracle there *were* flowerbeds, let alone that she could persuade much to grow in them. Lavender thrived, and rosemary and a kind of low, blue-flowered tree lupin whose seed a cousin had sent up from Cornwall. But the only roses that could cope with the near-constant wind and occasional salt spray were tough, rugosa hybrids, more leaf than flower, and she had abandoned all hope of

recreating the lush beds of Stanwell Perpetual and Etoile de Hollande she had relished at Camp Hill and Liverpool.

The sheets cracked like circus whips as she battled to hang them out. She had heard of governors' wives who cheerfully entrusted everything but smalls to the prison laundries but she had never cared to do that; it would have been a step too far into institutional life. Besides, she needed occupation. With both children away in boarding school – at her parents' expense – her days were all too long and solitary.

She had learned by degrees that marriage to a prison governor was not unlike marriage to a priest, only without the flower arranging or the constant invasion of the family home. As with priests, one lived on the job and the job came first. Her husband left her after an early breakfast then remained in the prison until he returned to her, invariably pallid with exhaustion, minutes before supper was ready. And it was a rare weekend when she did not have to share him with the men at least once a day.

He called them that: *The Men*. They only became *prisoners* if they escaped, and there had been no successful breakouts from this prison in years. On one end of a rocky promontory jutting out from the coast, it had started life as a small fortress in Henry VIII's time, and had then been greatly expanded under threat of Napoleonic invasion.

The prison dated from the 1840s and made use of the enormously thick fortress walls and the ferocious cliffs on the site's two seaward sides. The Governor's House, also early Victorian, was severely elegant. Both were built from slabs of the local stone – prized by town councils the world over – which the prisoners continued to hew from the quarries that hemmed the prison in on its landward side.

Even more than at Liverpool, and far more than on the Isle of Wight, she felt herself imprisoned there. She no longer had the children as an excuse for excursions. The only other women nearby were officers' wives and, even had she wanted to, it was not done to befriend them and risk showing favouritism. At each of her husband's previous, five-yearly postings, she had socialized with the chaplain's wife – in one case making a cherished friend whose comfortingly spiky conversation she missed acutely – but here the chaplain was acidly single, his house kept by a savage widowed sister Jane encountered as little as good manners would allow.

There was nothing to stop her making day trips but she had yet to acquire the habit of enjoying culture or walks on her own and was inhibited by the brutal landscape that lay between the prison and anything of interest.

Her mother had been a governor's wife too and, like many of her tribe, an army wife before that.

She thrived on the predominant maleness of the prison environment, enjoyed the sense of her extravagant femininity in such a setting as her little car was waved through by the guards or her skinny legs were ogled by a working party in her garden.

By contrast Jane had always found that being the lone woman on an island of masculinity made her yearn after invisibility. She had dreams of anonymous city life in which she walked streets so bustling with women, all of them better dressed and longer-legged than her, that she felt herself blissfully eclipsed.

She peered down from one end of the washing line to the heavily supervised road that wound down towards the outer gates. A troop of men was being marched out to work in the quarries. Their voices reached her, noisy with wisecracks and bravado. Her husband claimed they liked the quarry work, which Jane found hard to believe, but certainly they seemed to approach each shift with good spirits. Perhaps it was the sea air they relished and exercise in the sunshine instead of the boarding-school gases of the prison meals her husband insisted on sharing or the medieval stink of the cell blocks at slopping-out time.

One of the men looked up at her then nudged his mate and pointed. She stepped back behind the flapping sheets as the whistling started. The sheets were almost dry already. On some days

the washing had become quite stiff by the time she fetched it in.

'Ma'am?'

She turned, startled. An officer was waiting at the garden gate. He had one of the men with him. An older man. Handsome. Respectable-looking.

'Yes?' she asked, unconsciously holding the peg bag to her front as she approached them.

The officer doffed his hat and she recognized him from the Knobbly Knees competition at the Christmas party. 'Governor said you needed some bookshelves making. We thought Glossop, here, could make them for you.'

'Are you a joiner, Glossop?' she asked.

'I trained as a cabinetmaker, ma'am.'

'Excellent. Let me show you what we're after.'

Seen closer to, Glossop was younger than she thought: her husband's age, only prematurely aged by prison. His eyes were the colour of English sea, his dark hair silvered at his temples.

Along with the house and unlimited heating and hot water, one of the perks of the job was the regular availability of trusties – many of them with valuable trades – to help around the place. Over the years she had seen roses pruned, lawns edged, rooms plastered and painted, sash windows repaired, even silk lampshades made by men eager to break the monotony of prison routine by exercising old skills. Apart from the shopkeepers who delivered provisions from what

she thought of as *The Mainland*, the only tradesman she ever had to pay herself throughout her marriage was her hairdresser.

Now that her son was away at school and showing every sign of becoming as keen a reader as his father, she wanted to replace his rather babyish painted bookcase with something larger and more adult that would be a pleasant surprise for him on his return.

Glossop took measurements and scribbled them on a pad while the officer stood by.

'Seven shelves, do you reckon?' he asked. 'Or six with a larger one at the bottom?'

'Six with a larger one,' she said.

'And how about a nice cornice at the top?'

'A cornice?'

'Like on that lovely bureau bookcase on the landing.'

'Well that would be lovely.' She was startled that he had noticed her antiques and automatically wondered if he had been a burglar.

'And a sort of skirting board to match what you've already got in here?'

'You could do that?'

'I could.' Glossop smiled, at which the officer's expression grew yet more wintry.

'Then yes please.'

'I can't do you mahogany, like out there.'

'No. Of course not. Pine, I suppose.'

'Or oak. We've got plenty of oak at the moment.'

'Have you?'

'Glossop has been making new pews for the chapel, ma'am.'

'I must go and see. Oak would be much better than pine. It ages so nicely. When could you start?'

Glossop glanced at the officer. 'I could measure and cut the shelves and framework this afternoon,' he said cautiously. 'Make the joints. I could bring them in and start fitting them together in here same time tomorrow.'

'That would be lovely. Thank you.'

Invariably she found she was too friendly, even gushing, when talking to the men, which she never was with officers. She supposed she felt sorry for them. Sorry and rather afraid.

'Is that yours?' he asked as they turned to go, pointing at the fishing rod propped in a corner.

'No. It's my boy's. His godmother gave it to him and he never uses it.'

'Shame,' Glossop said. 'That would make a nice little spinning rod.' And the officer led him away.

As she closed the door behind them, she noticed he had left behind him a trace of the prisoner's habitual smell – an entirely male tang; a blend of cheap tobacco, under-washed clothing and confined body. It was a smell she found penetrated her husband's tweed jackets but never his person.

That afternoon she rang her husband on the

internal telephone and asked if she could visit the prison chapel to inspect Glossop's handiwork. He was too busy with interviews to take her himself but he sent an officer to escort her.

Most of the pews were just as she had remembered from the last carol service: the worst kind of late nineteenth century pitch pine, dull, dark and penitential, deliberately cut too short in the seat for slouching. Glossop's pews – he had made four – were far paler, made of simply waxed oak. He had felt obliged to echo the silhouette of the others but his furniture was lightened by small details. A fine moulding along the seat edge and the back was just made for one's thumbs to fiddle with during hymns and sermons. On the length of the little retaining shelf designed to hold hymnals and prayer books he had carved a sequence of birds. They were all local ones, clearly identifiable, the sort the more observant men must spot all the time – cormorant, shag, herring gull, jackdaw; toughened, cliff-top birds for a tough, cliff-top prison.

'Aren't they lovely?' she exclaimed, charmed, but the officer would not be drawn beyond a 'Very nice, ma'am.'

'What did he do?' she asked her husband over dinner.

'Glossop? You know it's much better if you don't know. He's a trusty, though. Quite harmless. You'll be perfectly safe.'

'I wasn't worried. Just curious. Cheese or fruit?'

When Glossop returned the following day, bringing his tools and wood with him on a trolley, she encouraged the officer who had escorted him to leave them alone together. 'It's quite all right,' she said, when he hesitated. 'I'll ring when Glossop's ready to leave.'

It was impossible to tell if Glossop appreciated the gesture or not. He simply concentrated on bringing his things up the stairs and carefully spread a spotless dustsheet over the bedroom carpet. She offered him the radio but he gently declined and she realized that if there was any pleasure for him in this assignment, it lay in the brief luxury of peace and quiet, of being amidst muffling surfaces – wood, carpets and curtains – after the cold clangour of metal doors, metal walkways, metal plates and metal mugs. She made them both proper coffee – in a pot – and set a tray with china mugs and a plate with chocolate biscuits and rock cakes on it – far more than she would offer should the acid chaplain come to call.

He didn't seem to mind her watching him work – perhaps he appreciated feminine company, even a middle-aged housewife's – and he answered all her questions, about wood and tools and how he learnt his trade from his father but had taught himself to carve since imprisonment to give his hands occupation.

'Must get lonely for you, living out here,' he said at last, as he was checking the angle of a shelf with his spirit level.

'Sorry,' she said. 'Am I talking too much? Sometimes people visit, real people. Sorry. That sounded awful. But you know what I mean. And I think I gabble at them like a thing possessed . . . Yes,' she admitted at last, when he had let her foolish, rambling answer wither on the air. 'It does get lonely. With the children both away and my husband at . . . at work and no friends nearer than a day's drive away. I like my own company but not here. Not much. It's oppressive.'

'I think it's meant to be,' he said drily. 'Why not go for walks?'

'Oh I used to. But then our dog got old and died and, with the children not here, I didn't have the energy to train another puppy.'

'You should go fishing.'

'Fishing?' The idea was absurd. She pictured herself, mannish in tweeds and waders. 'Oh I'm sure it's terribly complicated and I wouldn't know how and anyway, the nearest rivers are . . .' She realized she had no idea where the nearest angling rivers were and tried to remember where she and the departed dog had last come upon anglers at their intently private business.

'Rod like that and the right sort of float, you wouldn't need a river. You could fish for bass.'

'In the sea?'

'Off a rock.'

She thought of the bass her brother had presented her with last time they stayed with him, of its sweet white flesh, and its skin deliciously crisped with a rubbing of soy sauce before grilling. 'Oh,' she demurred. 'It's my boy's rod . . .'

But her son had barely touched the rod – a present designed to lure his head out of books – and she knew he'd be only relieved to see it get some use.

'I wouldn't know where to begin,' she said, staring at it.

'It's easy,' he said. 'If you're patient and you're not squeamish. It was my mother taught me. You might want gardening gloves, for when you come to handle the scales. The fins can be sharp as any rose thorn.'

Impulsively she took the rod from its corner and held it out to him. 'Show me,' she said.

'Are you left-handed,' he asked, 'or right?'

Standing closer than was probably appropriate, so that she could smell the sweat and wood shavings on him, and guiding her hands with his, he showed her how to hold the rod, how to cast, how the winder thing worked and how to prevent it spinning the line into an impossible tangle at the moment of casting.

While she blushed furiously, he raided her son's little fishing satchel (simultaneous gift of a second

godparent carefully briefed by the first) and assembled float, tiny plastic balls and a hook for her and tied them on along with a tiny length of rubber band he called her *stop*. He showed her how to adjust the stop until the float hung vertically in the water. He showed her how she could carefully secure the hook to part of the rod then tighten the line so that she had everything in place for fishing and would need less to carry. He showed her on her Dorset road map how to find the rocks where he had often caught bass when the tide was on the turn and he told her where in Weymouth to buy little packets of sand eels to use as bait. He wrote the name and address in tidy script with his stump of carpenter's pencil.

'Just tell him I sent you,' he said. 'And he'll give you good service. He knows me. We were in the war together.'

At first she had been humouring him, merely being politely curious, but he took the matter so in earnest she found herself swept up in it. And as he described where to park the car on the coast road and how to find the discreet footpath that led to his favoured fishing rocks, she could see what it was costing him to picture a loved place he could no longer visit. She felt shamed into following his instructions to the letter.

As Glossop had suggested, she spent an hour practising casting on the windswept lawn, far from

any bushes, until she was fairly confident. Then she went fishing. She didn't tell her husband. Eccentricity unsettled him. Besides, he showed little curiosity as to how she spent her days so long as she wasn't spending money.

She felt some doubt about presenting herself at the angling shop as an acquaintance of a criminal in case she was unwittingly passing on a coded message to an accomplice but the name worked like a charm and the weather-beaten man behind the counter was at once all affability and helpfulness, checking over her kit to ensure she had all she needed for the task in hand and adding a ladylike little club called a *priest* to her armoury. When he explained what it was for she realized she had always pictured fish as somehow dying of defeat, in effect, within moments of being landed and the man saw her doubt.

'One quick tap on the back of the head does the trick,' he told her. 'If it's a mackerel, you don't even need the priest – just stick a finger in his mouth and click the head back, like this.' He mimed the swift, deadly gesture and made a soft, crunching noise as he did so.

On her first trip to Glossop's fishing spot she caught nothing, although something took sly bites off the part of her sand eels that dangled free of the hook. She did not mind, though, since there was intense pleasure to be had simply from standing

still on a flat rock so near the surface of the sea, where she could admire the acrobatics of seabirds and commune with the doggy faces of the seals that bobbed up to watch her.

She reported back to Glossop in detail as he rubbed beeswax into wood. His questions taxed her powers of recall. What direction was the current moving? Was there much weed? How far from the rock was her float landing? How good was visibility through the water below her? And how far off were the gannets feeding?

Awareness sharpened by his keen questioning, she returned two days later, at the time of morning when much perusal of a tide table told him the water movements would be ideal for bass.

She caught something almost at once. It was big. She could see it fighting the line in the water. In her excitement she forgot which way to wind the winder and which way its little levers should be flicked. She paid line out when she meant to reel it in. She snagged the line on a rock. She was entirely unprepared for the way rod and line seemed to stretch and bend to the point where her frantic winding seemed to take almost no effect. Then, with a lunging and tugging that was surely as incorrect as it was ungraceful, she managed to land the beast.

Even to her eye, trained solely by a lifetime of fishmongers' slabs and a few evenings of poring over *The Observer's Book of Sea Fishes*, she knew

it wasn't a bass. But it *was* beautiful, covered in a violent pattern of turquoise and dull gold and with thick, gasping lips of sky-blue. It was hard to believe something so glamorous could come from such unexotically British waters. She was quite unready for the way its eye met hers, rolling, desperate, or for the violence of its thrashing when her hands drew near, or the threatening spikes of its dorsal fin.

She couldn't kill it. Not possibly. She ignored the priest, tugged on the clumsy gardening gloves and, fighting the urge to cry out in distress, held it firmly down while she tried to free the hook from its mouth. This was not a thing she had discussed with Glossop. They'd talked only in terms of hunter and prey, not of captor and release. After what felt like minutes of the poor thing drowning in air, she worked out for herself that the hook's barb meant it had to be drawn through in the direction it was already travelling. She took her little pen knife, fumbled off the gloves to open it, got the gloves back on, almost lost the knife into a rock pool, cut the line, teased the hook out through the creature's jaw – which produced no blood, she thanked God, or she'd have surely given up – then tossed it back into the water.

For a few dreadful seconds she thought she had killed it, as it merely hung in the water and began to turn its pale belly to the sky, a plump offering

for gulls. Then it shook itself and flew down into the shadows beneath the rock.

'Sounds like a wrasse,' Glossop told her. 'Corkwing Wrasse. A proper sport fish. You're blooded now. No stopping you!'

She looked *wrasse* up in her cookery books and was relieved to find it described as having watery, rather yellow flesh, fit only for Portuguese stews. Its Latin name, aptly enough it seemed, was *turdus*.

Glossop went on to make shelves for her daughter's room and two bedside tables for her own, then, without warning, was deprived of trusty status halfway through making her a cheese board.

'An act of violence,' was the only explanation her husband offered, and he took against the bedside tables and banished them to the spare room, claiming his had a wobble.

After several more wrasse and a dispiriting quantity of mackerel, which at least taught her how to kill unflinchingly, she landed her first bass later that summer and fed it to him, steamed, *à la Chinoise*. She would have liked to cook it for Glossop but, of course, that was out of the question. Instead she bought him an oceanographic map of the Dorset coast and posted it to him from Weymouth, along with a postcard of swans at Abbotsbury.

Success at last! she wrote. *Only 2½ pounds but delicious and so satisfying. First of many, I hope. Thank you so much*. She hesitated over how to close,

aware of rules, aware that a prison cell was all too public and that letters went astray. She used *Yours sincerely, Mrs Whiteley* correctly then defiantly gave him her Christian name, in brackets, and added a ps – *I shall guard your rock for you* – knowing it would mean nothing to anyone else.

Jane became rather an expert at sea angling and bought much and varied tackle from Glossop's army friend in Weymouth but her husband's next posting was a landlocked one. The new house's lush and sheltered rose beds were no compensation.