

Dorothy Higginson's Huge Pear

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Watching like a hawk, Mavis's eyes narrowed as Mr George Tunbridge's hands caressed and stroked the full, roundness of Dorothy Higginson's pear, before laying it into the scales ever so gently. He bent down close and fiddled with the slider, a tap this way, a tap the other, before noting a figure in his book. In one fluid motion, he straightened, removed the pear, and held it aloft, where the sun glinted off its polished skin. The scales clanged onto their stops, bouncing the slider and weights.

"Two pounds!" he bellowed over the heads of the assembled crowd. "I declare Mrs Higginson, this year's winner, with her magnificent pear."

Mavis ground her teeth. She had felt sure the title of the biggest pear belonged to her. Hadn't she nurtured hers - spent days ensuring they wouldn't dry out in the February heat, fought the bellbirds off, treated them with the greatest care? She glared at Dorothy, beaming around the gathering in delight, waving to her friends. What underhand game had she played to snatch the title from her?

A dark cloud trailed after Mavis as she stalked around the rest of the Oxford A&P muttering and grumbling. In the cake tent, Mavis found the cakes were all too dry, too heavily creamed, not light enough. The refreshment tent was the same, the apple juice was not crisp enough and the tea had been brewing too long. Mavis knew Edward would still be watching the shearing competition, and would probably go for a beer

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afterwards with Gregory Patterson. He'd be back for tea. Taking her storm cloud with her, she turned her feet for home.

"I really thought you'd get the prize for the nicest pear." said Edward, sawing at his mutton chop. "It was magnificent."

"Not magnificent enough." grumbled Mavis.

"Ah well. Pipped at the post. Two pounds, I heard."

Mavis snorted. "Like anyone else saw what the scales said. Mr Tunbridge was pretty quick to take them off the scales, and he was in the way so no one else could see."

Edward raised an eyebrow.

"And the way Dorothy kept giving him the eye." sniffed Mavis. "Most unseemly."

"Mrs Higginson has a bubbly, honest, and friendly personality. She's like that with everyone." said Edward. "I'd hardly say she has ever acted unseemly."

"She certainly had all her charm directed at Mr Tunbridge."

"Tunbridge has been judging these things for years." Edward finally managed to saw through the mutton chop. "He knows a good pear when he sees one."

"Well. I think he's been swayed. He's no professional." Mavis glared at her husband, daring him to argue with her.

Edward shook his head and indicated that he had his mouth full of mutton, and would have for the foreseeable future.

That night, Mavis tossed and turned in her bed. She had been angry with Edward for his quite obvious refusal to agree with her about the Dorothy's fiendish manipulations of Mr Tunbridge and the pear competition. While he had been very supportive of Mavis' pear, his lack of spine around this despicable issue was most ungentlemanly. In her mind, Dorothy and Mr Tunbridge were celebrating the demise of that bastion of honour and fair play, the Oxford's best pear competition. What were they concocting together? What had Mr Tunbridge written in his book? Was it the actual weight of the Dorothy's pear, or some made up figure.

Mavis stared at the ceiling. If they were up to anything, they would be doing it now. She resolved to find out, and if possible take a peek at Mr Tunbridge's book. Holding her breath, she listened to Edward's gentle breathing. He was fast asleep. Ever so quietly, Mavis slipped out of bed, and tip-toed down the stairs. Out in the garden, she made her way to the wash-house. Her gardening clothes were behind the door.

Leaves stirred and rustled in the night breeze flowing out of the Waimakariri valley, covering the crunch of gravel, as Mavis made her way towards the white painted gates of Mr Tunbridge's house on Church Street. She felt sure that if she got a peek into Mr Tunbridge's notebook, she would understand what nefarious deeds were being planned. She hoped she wouldn't have to feel around in any of Mr Tunbridge's drawers to find it.

A rhythmic grunting, caused her to freeze in shock. It was coming from the lighted open window on the second floor. Could they be that blatant? Mr Tunbridge's wife was in Christchurch seeing her sister this week. It had been in the paper. Mavis turned red with indignation. The nerve of that woman!

A thick-stemmed wisteria, twisted its way up past the open window to touch and cling to the eaves. Anger surged through Mavis. Pushing her gardening shoes into the mass of gnarled stems, she began to climb towards the open window, from which the grunts were becoming even more laboured. Hardly daring to breath, she peeped over the window sill. There was Mr Tunbridge with his bare back to her. With one last triumphant groan, he pulled the Sandow patented chest expander wide, then let it relax. He rolled his shoulders and cricked his neck. A shadow of frustration mixed with relief passed over Mavis, the anger that had driven her to climb the wisteria ebbing away. She clung to the wisteria and pushed herself an inch higher, craning her neck in the hope of seeing more of the room. Was that the notebook on the dressing table?

Just then, in one heart-stopping instant, the wisteria dropped a foot, the plant's hold on the eaves giving way. Mavis gripped the wisteria desperately as it peeled away from the wall. With a wet thud, she found herself lying in a deep mud puddle amongst the shrubbery and the wisteria's tangled mass.

"Who's that?" Mr Tunbridge was framed in the window, casting his shadow out over the garden. Mavis froze. "Whoever you are, you'd better watch it!" he bellowed and disappeared from view.

With an agility and turn of speed that surprised her, Mavis bolted. She dashed for home, a scattering of muddy shoe-prints and wisteria leaves in her wake.

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In the safety of the wash-house again, Mavis dragged off her filthy gardening clothing, scraped as much mud off herself as she could. She shuddered as the cold water hit her like a slap of reality, but she endured it, washing herself as best she could in the cramped wash-house. All the while, her mind churned. What would happen to her if people found out? Would she go to jail? Now she would never be able to expose Dorothy and Mr Tunbridge's scheming. Whatever was she to do?

Feeling like a burglar in her own home, she crept back up the stairs. Edward was still fast asleep. Mavis eased herself back into her bed, and didn't sleep a wink.

Applying a thicker layer of makeup than usual, and a good smear of Lane's Patented Anti-Aging Cream, Mavis hoped her haggard look and bags under her eyes wouldn't show.

"You look terrible." said Edward, when he sat down at breakfast. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." said Mavis, feeling anything but. Under the table, her hands twisted in her lap.

"You're sure?" said Edward. "You're looking awfully pale."

"I'm fine. I'm just a bit tired and have a headache."

"Hopefully you didn't catch a cold at the A&P show. That would be really bad luck." said Edward, knocking the top off his hard-boiled egg.

No sooner than the door had closed behind Edward as he headed off for work, Mavis made for the wash-house. Her gardening clothing was still in a sodden pile on the wash-tub edge. Mud caked her gardening shoes, and there were dirty smears over the door and some of the walls. Mavis sighed, and set to work. She had managed to get the worst of the mud off her shoes, and her clothes were soaking in the wash-tub, when there was a knock on the door.

A sudden sweat threatened to sluice off her foundation, when she recognised the distinctive outline of a policeman through the bubbled glass on the front door. Hands shaking, she opened the door.

"Good morning, Mrs Edgecomb." said the Constable.

"G-good morning." squeaked Mavis.

"Sorry to bother you. But we're hoping you can help us with our inquiries."

Mavis gulped.

"It seems there is a prowler around the area." said the Constable, taking out a notepad and pencil. "We were wondering if you'd seen or heard anything suspicious in the last couple of nights."

"No. No." Mavis shook her head.

"The interloper was disturbed last night, and fled, leaving a trail of mud and leaves."

Mavis nodded infinitesimally, her heart hammering in her chest.

"The prints came this way, so we thought you may have seen something. But no matter." he returned the notepad to his pocket. "Thanks for your help. Good day to you."

"And you." choked Mavis.

She closed the door and leant against it. Slowly, her pulse rate returned to normal. "Stupid! Stupid! I'll never do that again."

For a little while, at least, this one episode was enough to curb Mavis's inclination to see conspiracies everywhere. But there were other events later in her life, where jumping to incorrect judgments got the better of her.