

# An Appetite for Violets

## by Martine Bailey

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Martine Bailey

Every cook knows it's a rare day when you have all the parts of the perfect dish. But that day back at Mawton I had everything: white fleshed pippins, pink quince and a cinnamon stick that smelled like a breeze from the Indies. My flour was clean, my butter as yellow as a buttercup. It's not enough, mind you, to have only the makings of a dish. There's the receipt honed through the ages, written down in precious ink. And beyond that is the cook, for only she can judge how much stirring is enough, or have the light fingers to rub a pastry well. So it's a rare event, that gathering of all the parts that make the perfect dish.

It makes me think that's how it is for us servants. No one pays you much heed; mostly you're invisible as furniture. Yet you overhear a conversation here, and add a little gossip there. A writing desk lies open and you cannot help but read a paper. Then you find something, something you should not have found. It's not so very often, with your servants' broken view, that you can draw all the ingredients together. And it's a rare day when all the parts combine in one story, and the chief of those parts is you.

So that is where I'll start this tale, on that October baking day. I was making taffety tarts that afternoon in the kitchen at Mawton, as the sunlight flittered across the whitewashed walls and the last roses nodded at the window. I'll begin with a confession, mind. I'd crept into Mrs Garland's room when she wasn't there and secretly copied out her best receipt. It's no wonder our old cook used to say I was as crafty as a jackdaw. 'Your quick eyes miss nothing, Bidy Leigh,' she always said, shaking her head but all the time laughing. I'd kept my scrap of paper secret all year long and often pondered how to better it. That baking day was the third day Mrs G

had shut herself away in the Stillroom, dosing herself with medicinal waters. As I rolled the pastry I lived out a fancy I had nourished since the first apple blossom pinked in May – the making of the perfect dish.

Next day was All Hallow's Eve, or Souling Night as we called it, and all our neighbours would gather for Old Ned's cider and Mrs Garland's Soul Cakes. After the Mumming there'd be the usual soothsaying by the unmarried girls. So what better night, I thought, for Jem to announce our wedding? At the ripe age of twenty-two years old, the uncertainties of maidenhood were soon to pass me by. Crimping my tarts, I passed into that forgetfulness that is a most delightful way of being. My fingers scattered flour and my elbows span the rolling pin along the slab. Unrolling before my eyes were scenes of triumph: of me and Jem leading a cheery procession to the chapel, a posy of flowers in my hand and another on Jem's blue jacket. I turned over the makings of my Bride Cake that sat in secret in the larder – ah, wouldn't that be the richest, most hotly spiced delight? And all the bitter maidens who put it underneath their pillows would be sorrowing to think that Jem was finally taken, bound and married off to me.

The only sour note that struck was the sudden bang-slapping of a bird against the windowpane. It was a robin redbreast pecking at the glass, his wings beating in a frenzy.

'Scarper,' I shouted, flapping my hands about. What was it he warned me of, that he stared so hard and tapped all in a frenzy?

'Is it a robin?' Teg had crept in from the scullery and the fear I felt was echoed in her gawping tones. 'He be a messenger. 'Tis a famous omen. Death be coming here.'

'That's enough of your claptrap,' I snapped back. Risking breaking the glass, I lifted a ladle and knocked it against the pane so hard that the bird flew off on the instant.

'You see. He were only a fledgeling

tricked by the glass. If you've finished the apples there are fowls to pluck.'

Teg cast me a poisonous glance and swore she had not finished half her chores. I'm not daft, I knew our scullery maid would be off to tell her gossips what a Miss Toity that Bidy Leigh was and how this omen must herald my bad end. She wishes it true, I thought, as I checked the oven's heat with a sizzle of spit. She is jealous and rankles under every command I give her. But it was only a gormless fledgeling. No person who knew their ABC would give a farthing for such a sign.

The tarts were scarcely in the oven when the noise startled me. A right how-row it was: hollering grooms, clattering gates, dogs barking their heads off. Then a fancy hired carriage rolled right inside our yard, the team of horses snorting, the heavy harnesses creaking and jingling. My first thought was, what the devil was I to feed any company with? We had a good stock of provender for the servants but nowt for the likes of Sir Geoffrey if he'd come up all the way from London.

Off I scarpered to the back door to see who it was. What with the stable boys jostling and a stray pig upsetting the cider pots, at first I could barely glimpse her. Then I pushed my way through and saw a young woman climb down, no more than my own age, only she was as pale as a flour bag with rosebud lips pressed tight together and two spots of rouge high on her cheeks. She stared at the rabble, her pale eyes narrowing. She weren't afeared of us, no not one whit. She lifted her chin and said in a throaty London drawl, 'Mr Pars. Fetch him at once.' Like magic the scene changed – three or four fellows legged it indoors and those staying behind hung back a bit, fidgeting before this girl that might have dropped from the moon for all we'd ever seen such a being in our yard. What drew my eye was her apricot coloured gown that shone like a diamond. I drank in all her marks of fashion: the peachy ribbon holding the little dog she clutched to her bosom, her powdered curls, but most of all it was her shoes I fixed on. They were made of shiny silver stuff and in spite of the prettiest heels you ever saw, were already squelched in Mawton mud. It were a crime to ruin those shoes, but there were no denying it, she'd landed in a right old pig-sty.

I knew she had to be Sir Geoffrey's new wife, this so-called Lady Carinna we had jawed about since they got married some three weeks ago down in London. One

of the grooms had told us she was near to forty years younger than Sir Geoffrey, and hadn't that set our tongues wagging? While the men made lewd jests, we women asked what kind of life she would live, married to our master?

Next, another woman tottered from the carriage, a scrannil-looking creature with a chinless, turtle head. She was waving a big lace handkerchief before her nose as if she might waft us all away like a bad smell. Her mistress never even gave her a glance, only lifted the little dog and made daft kisses at it, like we weren't even there at all. It were quite a performance, I can tell you.

Thank the stars our steward Mr Pars came bustling out just then and yelled at the boys like a sergeant to get back to work.

'Lady Carinna,' he said, bowing stiffly. 'What brings you here? Why have you come to Mawton?' he said in a voice that was all choked up.

She never even gave him an answer, so I wondered at first if she knew he was our steward, trusted with the charge of everything while the master was away. He seemed suddenly shrunk beside her, with his greasy riding coat and tousled hair.

'My quarters,' she said at last, avoiding his eye.

He made a half bow; his face were liver-purple. Then she followed him down the back corridor. The show were over and I scurried back into the kitchen.

'Get them fowls spitted,' I yelled to my cook maid Suke. 'And a barrel of cabbage chopped right this minute,' I said to scowling Teg. Then I stood awhile, hands on hips, and pondered what on earth a woman like that would ever eat.

**Released: January 13, 2015**

**Hardcover: 400 pages**

**Publisher: Thomas Dunne Books;**

**First Edition edition**

**ISBN-13: 978-1250056917**

**Retail: \$26.99 USD**

