

The Blue Geranium by Agatha Christie

1.

Colonel Bantry hesitated.

'I don't think many of you know George Pritchard? One of the best. And his wife? Well, I'll just say this much. She was one of those semi-invalids who complain from morning to night. George was expected to wait on her hand and foot, and everything he did was always wrong and he got cursed for it. Well, she had a weakness for fortune tellers, clairvoyants, that sort of thing. George didn't mind. If she found amusement in it, well and good.

A succession of nurses passed through the house, Mrs Pritchard usually dissatisfied with most of them. But a young one, Nurse Patrick, had been very keen on this fortune telling stunt, and Mrs P became quite fond of her. Inevitably, they fell out and a Nurse Copling, who'd been with her previously, returned. She was experienced, tactful in dealing with neurotic patients, and according to George, a very good sort.

Mrs Pritchard always lunched upstairs, and it was usual for George and the nurse to come to some arrangement for the afternoon. On this occasion, Nurse Copling mentioned that she was going to see her sister at Golders Green. George's face fell, for he had arranged to play a round of golf. Nurse Copling, however, reassured him:

"Mrs Pritchard's going to have more exciting company than ours. Let me get it right. Zarida, Psychic Reader of the Future."

"That's a new one, isn't it?" groaned George.

"I believe my predecessor, Nurse Patrick, sent her along."

"Well at any rate, I shall get my golf," said George.

On his return to the house, he found his wife in a state of great agitation. "George," she exclaimed. "Zarida...she knew at once. As she came in the door, she said: 'There is evil here - evil and danger. I feel it.'

"Oh yes?" said George. "And what else did she say?"

"She couldn't tell me very much. But she pointed at some violets in a glass and cried out:

"Take those away. No blue flowers. Blue flowers are fatal to you - remember that."

George asked what the mysterious Zarida looked like?

"Black hair - her eyes were half closed - great black rims round them - a black veil over her mouth and chin - a kind of singing voice with a foreign accent - Spanish, I think."

"Ah, the usual stock-in-trade," said George cheerfully..

Two days later, Nurse Copling came to George with a grave face. "Will you come to Mrs Pritchard, please. She's had a letter which is upsetting her."

It was on heavily scented paper, and the writing was big and black: 'BE WARNED BEFORE IT IS TOO LATE. BEWARE OF THE FULL MOON. THE BLUE PRIMROSE MEANS WARNING; THE BLUE HOLLYHOCK MEANS DANGER; THE BLUE GERANIUM MEANS DEATH...'

George caught Nurse Copling's eye and said rather awkwardly, 'The woman's trying to frighten you, my dear. Anyway, there are no such things as blue primroses and blue geraniums.'

But Mrs Pritchard began to cry and say her days were numbered.

About four days after this, the first incident happened. Mrs Pritchard's room was

papered with one of those new wallpapers that make a kind of herbaceous border. Well, among these massed flowers were clumps of yellow and pink primroses, and hollyhocks and geraniums.

On this morning, Mrs E rang her bell violently, and was pointing at the wallpaper, where sure enough was one blue primrose in the midst of the others. Hadn't the blue primrose always been there? was George and the nurse's suggestion. But Mrs Pritchard had never noticed it till that very morning and the night before had been a full moon. Colonel Bantry's wife suddenly interrupted:

"You know I spoke to Jean Instow, a young friend of mine that day and said I thought Mrs Pritchard abnormally superstitious and perfectly capable of dying of fright. She rather startled me when she said that might be for the best. That poor George deserved a bit of freedom. That he was a very attractive person. The last nurse thought so too, the pretty one.... Nurse Patrick. That was the cause of the row between her and Mrs P..."

"Is Miss Instow a pretty girl? And does she play golf?" Miss Marple spoke for the first time.

"Yes. Of course we always have felt that she and George Pritchard - I mean if things had been different - they are so well suited to one another."

'Do you think, Dolly,' said Colonel Bantry plaintively, 'that I might be allowed to go on with my story? I had the rest of it from George himself. Mrs Pritchard got the wind up badly towards the end of the next month. She marked off on a calendar the day when the moon would be

full, and on that night, made both the nurse and George study the wallpaper carefully. There were pink hollyhocks and red ones, but there were no blue ones amongst them. Then when George left the room Mrs Pritchard locked herself in.'

'And in the morning, was there a large blue hollyhock?' asked one of his listeners.

'Nearly right,' said Colonel Bantry. 'One flower of a hollyhock just above her head had turned blue. It staggered George; and made him believe in the supernatural for the first time. The next month sped away. Mrs Pritchard repeated again and again: "The blue primrose - warning. The blue hollyhock - danger. The blue geranium - death." And she would lie looking at the clump of pinky-red geraniums nearest her bed.

'Well, the fatal night came and Mrs Pritchard locked her door as usual. At eight-thirty the next morning, the nurse rapped loudly on her door. Getting no reply, she fetched George, and insisted on the door being broken open.

Mrs Pritchard lay with her smelling-salts by her hand. On the wall beside her one of the pinky-red geraniums was a bright deep blue.' George was sent to telephone for the doctor, but it was too late.

'Any other details?' asked Miss Marple.

'Oh yes,' Mrs Bantry spoke quickly, 'when the doctor arrived, there was a faint smell of gas, and sure enough he found the gas ring in the fireplace very slightly turned on; but so little, there was no question of gas poisoning.'

'And that's the end of the story?'

'No, it isn't. There was a lot of talk. As ill luck would have it, George had been mixing some weed-killer for the garden paths the day before. One of the younger servants had seen him, and afterwards taking up a glass of hot milk for his wife. The whole thing is really very curious. That fortune-teller, for instance - Zarida. At the address where she was supposed to be, no one had ever heard of her, and not even little Nurse Patrick, who was supposed to have recommended her.'

'Has Mr Pritchard married Miss Instow?' asked Miss Marple in her gentle voice. Colonel Bantry shook his head.

'It's eighteen months now. I don't believe they even see much of each other. You know I'll never believe it of George - though - mind you, even Nurse Copling believes George was in some way responsible for his wife's death. She's convinced of it.'

'It really depends on the primroses,' interrupted Miss Marple. 'If it was a pink primrose that turned blue, that fits in perfectly. But if it happened to be a yellow one...'

'It was a pink one,' said Mrs Bantry. They all stared at Miss Marple. 'That seems to settle it,' said Miss Marple. She shook her head with regret. 'And of course the gas. It reminds me a little of the trouble we are having with our district nurse.' A glimmer of light broke upon the Colonel.

'You mean Nurse Patrick?'

'No, not Nurse Patrick. Nurse Copling. You see, she had been there before, and very much thrown with Mr Pritchard. I suppose when she found out about Miss Instow, it turned her against him, and she tried to do all the harm she could. Of course, the letter gave her away, didn't it?' 'What letter?'

'The fortune-teller came, apparently in answer to her letter. But later it was discovered there had never been such a person at that address. So Nurse Copling had pretended to write - she was the fortune-teller herself. I think the warnings and the blue flowers were, if I may use a military term - just camouflage.' 'And the real thing?'

'I remember thinking,' said Miss Marple, 'when I saw the gardener shaking up the cyanide of potassium in a bottle of water, to kill the wasps, how like smelling salts it looked. And if it were put in a smelling salts bottle and substituted for the real one - well, you said they were found by her hand. While Mr Pritchard went to telephone the doctor, the nurse would change it for the real bottle, and turn on the gas a little to mask any smell of almonds. I have heard that cyanide leaves no trace if you wait long enough.'

'But the blue geranium, and the other flowers?' someone asked. 'Nurses always have litmus paper, don't they?' said Miss Marple, 'for - well, for testing. Blue turns red with acids, red turns blue with alkalis. So easy to paste some red litmus over a red flower - near the bed, of course - The ammonia fumes from the smelling salts would turn it blue. Really, most ingenious. Of course, the geranium wasn't blue when they first broke into the room - nobody noticed it till afterwards. When Nurse Copling changed the bottles, she held the sal ammoniac against the wall-paper for a minute, I expect.'

'You might have been there, Miss Marple!' said Colonel Bantry. 'What worries me,' said Miss Marple, 'is poor George Pritchard and that nice girl, Miss Instow. Probably suspecting each other and keeping apart - and life so very short.'

'You needn't worry' said Colonel Bantry. 'I shall telephone the police and acquaint them with your explanation. As a matter of fact, I have something up my sleeve. A nurse has been arrested elsewhere, on a charge of murdering an elderly patient who left her a legacy. It was done with cyanide of potassium substituted for smelling salts. Mmm! Sounds like Nurse Copling trying the same trick again. Miss Instow and George need have no doubts as to the truth.'

'Now, isn't that nice?' cried Miss Marple.