

Tea with Miss Taffy

The vicar of Bellington sighed as he took the invitation card from his wife. It was the usual summons to take tea with Miss Eliza Taffy at three 'o' clock on the afternoon of Thursday 6 June in order that plans may be made for the annual garden party due to take place in July.

Four times a year these invitations arrived. Miss Taffy was a fearfully autocratic organizer and had a hand in every single village event, simply because she lived in Bellington Hall and thought of herself as the squire of the place. She oversaw the Easter Parade, she stage-managed the Harvest Supper, she dominated the Christmas Fair and village pantomime and here she was, about to take over the summer Garden Party once again.

The Rev. Arthur Titchburn propped the invitation up on the mantelpiece and reached into his jacket pocket for his diary.

John Tate, who owned a smallholding in the village and was a Church Warden, also grimaced when he opened his envelope. He threw the invitation on to the kitchen table, savagely. Across the village green his fellow warden, Jack Tennant—local councillor—also groaned as he pulled the gold-edged card from its expensive envelope.

Eliza Taffy's nephew Samuel turned the invitation over and over in his fingers. His heart had sunk to his tattered old shoes, but he knew he would have to obey the summons or all hell would be let loose. And two doors down from Samuel, his daughter Winifred stared at her invitation too and wondered if she would dare ignore it.

Finally, before setting off for the short walk to school, headmistress Eunice Ross also pulled a face when she recognised the bold black handwriting on the thick vellum envelope. So there they all were, seven people, residents and upright citizens of Bellington – caught together, staring gloomily at their summons to Tea with Miss Taffy on Thursday 6 June three 'o' clock prompt: the Rev. and Mrs Titchburn, Church Wardens John Tate and Jack Tennant, nephew Samuel Taffy and his daughter Winifred, and schoolteacher Eunice Ross.

Eliza Taffy at that precise moment was bullying her kind and elderly maid Agnes who had made the unfortunate mistake of forgetting to put a linen napkin on the breakfast tray. As poor Agnes, lame with an arthritic knee, was leaving the bedroom to retrieve the napkin, Miss Taffy's voice demanded Agnes tell the gardener Horace that she wished to see him at eleven 'o' clock sharp in the library. Agnes nodded and went in search of the napkin.

Eliza Taffy was wealthy, miserly, organising, interfering and never ever wrong. If you had seen one song thrush in your garden, Miss Taffy had seen four. If you had a sixteenth century linen chest in your spare bedroom, Miss Taffy had two eleventh century chests in her bedroom. She always had to top you – always be the last to speak, the best, the finest, the first, the oldest, the wealthiest and so on until she rendered her audience dumb.

The afternoon of Thursday 6 June was warm and still. Agnes potted quietly in the kitchen preparing sardine paste sandwiches and tea bag tea for the expected guests. Horace potted gently amongst the rhododendrons, making sure last year's wasp nest, which he had dealt with by means of a lethal helping of insecticide, paraffin and fire, had not become reinhabited by

wasps. Miss Taffy also was pottering gently in the garden armed with a selection of tools by which she organised the pollination of her roses and delphiniums and other such species, for she even interfered with her flowers – not trusting Mother Nature to do things naturally.

The church clock chimed the hour of two.

The vicar and his wife washed up their lunch dishes, grumbling gently over the soap suds about Miss Taffy and her Hitler-like hold on the village. Ever since he had accepted the living of St Thomas's Bellington, Rev Titchburn's activities had been tampered with by Miss Taffy. She was the most maddening old goat ever created, thought Arthur, wiping up his coffee mug and hanging it on a hook, Lord forgive him. His wife, her heart aching for Arthur, laid a comforting hand on his shoulder and went to answer the phone which was ringing in the hall.

John Tate leaned on the gate of his only field and watched the lambs run races round and round in a woolly cloud. He needed more land to keep livestock and more grass for the few sheep he owned. The village was surrounded by fields all belonging to Miss Taffy. Would she let John have one of her fields? Not bloody likely, muttered John to himself. He had asked time and time again, but there was always some reason why John Tate could not lease another field from Miss Taffy.

Jack Tennant, in his council office three miles away, closed his file, put the lid on his pen and told his secretary that he had an appointment at three 'o' clock and would probably not be back in the office till the morning. Miss Taffy believed in prolonged meetings. He thought bitterly of the objections with which she had spoiled his plans to create a children's playground behind the Bellington bowling green. The village children needed a safe play area and it was only a matter of time before a child, playing on or near the village green, was knocked down and injured. Miss Taffy, however, had stated that a playground in Bellington would bring noise and vandalism to the community and had refused the sale of any of her land for the project.

In his small damp living room, Samuel Taffy wondered why it was, that even on a warm June day like today, his little house felt chilly and cold. It had no heating of course, so it took almost the whole summer to air the place out, only to find that by October, the mould was returning to the walls in the pantry and the flagstones in the kitchen adopted their usual slippery sheen. Oh, it was a cold place, but even though Eliza Taffy was his aunt, not a penny piece had she ever seen fit to give to him. She had implied that on her demise, she intended to entail her entire estate to Winifred – simply because Winifred, as a baby, had borne a startling resemblance to herself.

Winifred, a community nurse, had been unable to tolerate her father's cottage and had bought her own little dwelling two doors away, hoping that he might eventually give up his place and move in with her, where at least central heating had been installed. But her dear, proud and gentle father had refused. He was not one for charity, he had said, and that was that.

Miss Ross, gathering up a pile of essays, pinned them together with a paper clip. Although Bellington Junior School was state run, its patron, Eliza Taffy, was responsible for a certain amount of upkeep and maintenance. Time and time again the governors had requested aid from Miss Taffy, and each occasion had been utterly refused. "What was good enough for her," stated Miss Taffy, "was good enough for today's children," and the building had

continued to deteriorate.

The clock of St Thomas's Church, Bellington, chimed three.

Seven people approached Bellington Hall. Agnes, following her instructions to the letter, brewed the tea strong and bitter like Miss Taffy, and grieved over the revolting paste sandwiches. Always the same, penny pinching to the last farthing, sardine paste sandwiches and over stewed tea.

Miss Taffy, basket of tools in her hand walked slowly and silently up the garden, stopping to check Horace's activities beneath the rhododendron bushes and making the poor old man jump. The great white-belled blossoms with their deep purple centres, perfumed the still warm air. Horace, on his knees, clutching a spatula of powdered insecticide, suffered the familiar interrogation with his usual resigned mumble.

The front doorbell rang and Agnes soon appeared in the garden, with the seven guests, who were immediately placed in hard upright chairs, around the low wooden table on which sat the tea and sandwiches.

At Miss Taffy's bidding, Agnes poured out. Miss Taffy chose the largest chair with the floral cushion, and sat down, swinging the basket of tools imperiously over the table.

Stilted conversation was made. Miss Taffy's voice overrode everyone else's, her strident accents richly dipped in upper class drawl. The terrible sandwiches were passed round.

No one dared refuse them. The tea, stewed and oily, was sipped, except for Miss Taffy's—she was too busy laying down the agenda for the imminent meeting.

The Rev. and Mrs Titchburn listened dispassionately to the voice, he wishing he had not agreed for the twentieth time, to the party being held in Miss Taffy's garden, and his wife wondering desperately if she had remembered to defrost the chicken portions for supper tonight.

Lambs bleating across the village green inflamed once again John Tate's anger at not being allowed more land for them, and the sharp sound of a car skidding on the road outside reminded Councillor Tennant of his playground. Sam Taffy took another paste sandwich, remarking to himself that this was probably all he ever would get from his ancient aunt, while his daughter Winifred watched him sadly, trying to dispel the suspicion that her father was beginning to lose weight. A bell sounded across the quiet air and Miss Ross recognised it as the end of the last lesson. Back in her little kitchen Agnes poured a fresh cup of tea and wept inwardly over the horrible repast she had been forced to serve up. Satisfied the wasps were dealt with, Horace put the lid on his insecticide tin, and shuffled off to tie up the sweet peas.

Miss Taffy picked up her tea cup, took a mouthful of the bitter stewed brew, grimaced, dropped the cup, saucer and teaspoon, clutched at her scraggy neck, gasped, choked and fell dead upon the flagstones.

There were no Hercule Poirot's or Jane Marples to sort this mystery out. Although the whole village was agog, no one grieved, wept or felt the slightest pang of guilt. The only diligent help the people of Bellington had was from Police Constable Grahame Rowlands within whose beat Bellington lay, and who had a passion for pork chops, beer and rhododendrons.

Naturally a post-mortem had to be held, and all the usual questionings

of those persons gathered around Miss Taffy at the time of her demise. To be honest everyone had a suitable motive to see the old girl off, and also had access to her teacup, for the cause of death was poison—cyanide poisoning by method unknown.

Following the post mortem, which took place the day after Miss Taffy died, PC Rowlands, who had spent the whole of that Friday taking statements from the guests as well as Agnes and Horace, wandered out into the garden, to think. It was evening. The place was quiet and still, as it had been over the last twenty four hours.

He walked slowly down the lawn, pausing every now and then to meditate, to look back at the house, to sniff the exquisite perfume of a newly opened rose. His eye fell upon the most astonishing sight of a late rhododendron in full perfect bloom. Reaching the spectacular bush, he bent to inspect one of the huge purple and white flowers. It seemed to have a faint delicate perfume. He gently lifted the cluster of bells noticing—strangely—what appeared to be unnatural quantities of pollen on several of the trumpet-shaped florets and dusted on the path beneath them. PC Rowlands frowned. Very odd. quite inexplicable was the fact that not all the blossoms had such helpings of pollen. He licked his finger and dipped it into the powdery dust, raising it to his nose

As he did so, the hair on the back of his neck rose. A horrible realisation struck him, in the slow recognition of---not pollen, but cyanide.

Taking pains not to sprinkle the dust from his finger end, PC Rowlands made for the cold water tap outside the greenhouse. There he washed the offensive poison thoroughly from his hand, swilling the entire area to make sure no trace of cyanide remained. Then ran like stink to the cottage home of Horace, Miss Taffy's gardener.

Yes, Horace confirmed, he had been using poison under that rhododendron bush, to do away with the wasps. Yes, Horace had said, when Miss Taffy had accosted him yesterday afternoon, she had indeed given him a fright and the spatula on which his poison was heaped had jumped in his hand. Yes, it was quite possible some of the powder could have fallen into the great heavy blooms.

But how had the cyanide got from the rhododendron blossoms into Miss Taffy's teacup? This was the question. They sat side by side on the low garden wall, mulling this over. The sun slid further down behind the church. A slight evening breeze caught the treetops, whispering in the leaves. A good pollination breeze thought Horace.

Pollination! That was it. Those were the tools Miss Taffy had in her basket yesterday afternoon. Horace, clutching at the sleeve of the policeman, led the way to the back kitchen, where Miss Taffy always kept her gardening accessories.

The basket had been bought inside by poor Agnes yesterday evening.

The two men inspected the tools minutely. Amongst the collection was a large paintbrush bound to a length of bamboo cane. This home-made implement Miss Taffy used for her pollinations. Horace and PC Rowlands stared hard at the bristles of the brush. They were thickly coated with white and yellow powder, a mixture of pollen and...

PC Rowlands, with immense delicacy, removed the brush, and laid it

gently on the chest of drawers. Even then it spilled little grains of powder on to the wooden surface. Then, with Horace close behind he took up the basket of tools and ran to the rhododendron bush. The powdered flower-head with its deadly cargo hung from its stem at exactly the same height as the brush head would have been as it stuck out of Miss Taffy's basket.

PC Rowlands sent Horace back to the house with the basket, while he himself ran across the village green to the vicarage. The Rev. Arthur and Mrs Titchburn both verified that as she had sat down in her chair, Miss Taffy had swung the basket of tools over the table with a great flourish. Connie Titchburn remembered distinctly, because poor Jack Tennant, seated next to Miss Taffy had had to take evasive action.

In effect, some of the powder from the brush had tipped off into Miss Taffy's cup.

In effect, every single person there yesterday was extremely lucky not to have had a dose of poison themselves.

In effect, thought PC Rowlands, walking slowly back across the green to Bellington Hall, the venomous Miss Taffy had poisoned herself.

Rain clouds were beginning to pile up across the valley as PC Rowlands hurried towards the Hall. He realised he'd have to contact CID quickly before his evidence got washed away.