

Problem at Pollensa Bay – Agatha Christie 1936.

Mr Parker Pyne, the confidential private detective was on holiday. The steamer from Barcelona to Majorca landed him at Palma in the early hours of the morning. His suitcases were loaded on to a taxi in a somewhat haphazard manner and they started off to drive round the island. After they had passed through the narrow streets of Pollensa and were following the curved line of the seashore, they came to the Hotel Pino d'Oro – a small hotel standing on the edge of the sea and looking out on that misty haze of a fine morning at an exquisite view.

At once Mr Parker Pyne knew that this was what he was looking for. He stopped the taxi and passed through the painted gate. The elderly couple to whom the hotel belonged knew no English or French. Nevertheless the matter was concluded satisfactorily. Mr Parker Pyne was allotted a room overlooking the sea, the suitcases were unloaded, the taxi driver received his fare and departed with cheerful Spanish salutations.

Mr Parker Pyne glanced at his watch and perceiving that it was, even now, but a quarter to ten, he went out onto the small terrace, now bathed in a dazzling morning light and ordered coffee and rolls.

There were four tables there and at the one at the corner of the terrace sat what were clearly an English mother and son. The woman was about fifty-five. She had grey hair of a pretty tone and was sensibly but not fashionably dressed in a tweed coat and skirt. The young man who sat opposite her might have been twenty-five. He was clearly on the best of terms with his mother and they made little jokes together. As they talked, her eye met that of Mr Parker Pyne. It passed over him with well-bred nonchalance, but he knew that he had been assimilated and labelled. He had been recognised as English and doubtless, in due course, some pleasant and non-committal remark would be addressed to him.

The English boy rose from his seat and passed into the hotel. The woman settled herself in a chair facing the sea with her back to Mr Parker Pyne and unfolded a copy of the *Continental Daily Mail*. As he drank the last drop of his coffee, he glanced in her direction and was instantly alarmed – alarmed for the peaceful continuance of his holiday! That back was horribly expressive. Its rigidity – the tenseness of its poise – without seeing her face, he knew well enough that the eyes were bright with unshed tears – that the woman was keeping herself in hand by a rigid effort.

Already it had been a source of abiding wonder to Mr Parker Pyne that so many people he had come across abroad should know his name and have noted his advertisements. His holiday had been interrupted on several occasions. He had dealt with a whole series of problems from murder to attempted blackmail. He was determined in Majorca to have peace. He felt instinctively that a distressed mother might trouble that peace considerably.

Moving warily, like a much-hunted animal, he retreated into the hotel. There it was, in the book lying open on the desk – a neat signature – C. Parker Pyne, London. A few lines above he noted the entries: Mrs R. Chester, Mr Basil Chester – Holm Park, Devon. Seizing a pen, Mr Parker Pyne wrote rapidly over his signature. It now read (with difficulty) Christopher Pyne. If Mrs R. Chester was unhappy in Pollensa Bay, it was not going to be made easy for her to consult Mr Parker Pyne.

He settled down at the Pino d'Oro very happily. There was a larger hotel, not far off, the Mariposa, where a good many English people stayed. There was also quite an artist colony living all around. You could walk along by the sea to the fishing village

where there was a cocktail bar where people met and young men with long hair held forth about abstractions in art.

On the day after Mr Parker Pyne's arrival, Mrs Chester made a few conventional remarks to him on the subject of the view and the likelihood of the weather keeping fine. Mr Parker Pyne found Basil Chester a most likeable young man. He called Mr Parker Pyne 'sir' and listened most politely to anything the older man said.

Sometimes the three English people had coffee together after dinner in the evening. On the third day, Basil left the party after ten minutes or so and Mr Parker Pyne was left tête-à-tête with Mrs Chester. They talked about flowers and the growing of them, of how expensive France had become and of the difficulty of getting good afternoon tea.

Every evening when her son departed, Mr Parker Pyne saw the quickly concealed tremor of her lips. Little by little she began to talk of Basil – of how well he had done at school – 'he was in the First XI, you know' – of how everyone liked him, of how proud his father would have been of him had he lived. 'Of course I always urge him to be with young people, but he really seems to prefer being with me'.

For once Mr Parker Pyne did not make the tactful response he could usually achieve so easily. He said instead:

'Oh! Well, there seem to be plenty of young people here – not in the hotel but round about.'

At that, he noticed, Mrs Chester stiffened. She said: 'Of course there were a lot of *artists*. Perhaps she was very old fashioned – *real* art, of course, was different, but a lot of young people just made that sort of thing an excuse for lounging about and doing nothing – and the girls drank a lot too much.

On the following day Basil said to Mr Parker Pyne:

'I'm awfully glad you turned up here, sir – especially for my mother's sake. She likes having you to talk to in the evenings.'

'What did you do when you were first here?'

'As a matter of fact, we used to play piquet.'

'I see.'

'Of course, one gets rather tired of piquet. As a matter of fact, I've got some friends here – frightfully cheery crowd. I don't think my mother really approves of them. The mater's very old-fashioned. Even girls in trousers shock her!'

'Quite so' said Mr Parker Pyne.

'What I tell her is – one's got to move with the times.The girls at home round us are frightfully dull.....'

'I see' said Mr Parker Pyne.

He was a spectator in a miniature drama but he was not called upon to take part in it.

And then the worst – from Mr Parker Pyne's point of view – happened. A gushing lady of his acquaintance came to stay at the Mariposa. They met in the tea shop in the presence of Mrs Chester.

The newcomer screamed:

'Why – if it isn't Mr Parker Pyne – the one and only Mr Parker Pyne! And Adela Chester! Do you know each other? Oh, you do? You're staying at the same hotel? He's the one and only original wizard, Adela! Didn't you *know*? You must have *heard* about him? Haven't you read his advertisements? "*Are you in trouble? Consult Mr Parker Pyne.*" There's just nothing he can't do!

It went on a good deal longer. Mr Parker Pyne disliked the look that Mrs Chester turned upon him.

The climax came quicker than he expected. That evening after coffee, Mrs Chester said abruptly:

'Will you come into the little salon, Mr Pyne? There is something I want to say to you.'

As the door of the salon closed behind them, she sat down and burst into tears.

'My boy, Mr Parker Pyne. You must save him. *We* must save him. It's breaking my heart!'

'My dear lady, as a mere outsider...'

'Nina Wycherley says you can do *anything*. She said I was to have the utmost confidence in you. She advised me to tell you everything – and that you'd put the whole thing right.'

Inwardly Mr Parker Pyne cursed Nina Wycherley.

Resigning himself, he said:

'A girl, I suppose?'

'Did he tell you about her?'

'Only indirectly.'

Words poured out in a vehement stream from Mrs Chester: the girl was dreadful.

She drank, she swore – she wore no clothes to speak of. Her sister lived out here – was married to an artist – a Dutchman. The whole set was most undesirable. Half of them were living together without being married. Basil was completely changed. He had always been so quiet, so interested in serious subjects....

'Well, well,' said Mr Parker Pyne. 'Nature will have her revenge.'

'What do you mean?'

'It isn't healthy for a young man to be interested in serious subjects. He ought to be making an idiot of himself over one girl after another.'

'Please be serious, Mr Pyne.'

'I'm perfectly serious. Is the young lady, by any chance, the one who had tea with you yesterday?'

He had noticed her – the trousers, the vermilion mouth and the fact that she had chosen a cocktail in preference to tea.

'You saw her? Terrible! Not the kind of girl Basil has ever admired.'

'You haven't given him much chance to admire a girl, have you? He's been too fond of *your* company. I daresay he'll get over this – if you don't precipitate matters.'

'But you don't understand. He wants to marry this girl – Betty Gregg – they're *engaged*.'

'It's gone as far as that?'

'You *must* do something. You must get my boy out of this disastrous marriage! His whole life will be ruined.'

'Nobody's life can be ruined except by themselves.'

'Basil's will be.' Said Mrs Chester positively.

'I'm not worrying about Basil.'

'You're not worrying about the *girl*?'

'No, I'm worrying about you. You've been squandering your birthright.'

Mrs Chester looked at him, slightly taken aback

'What are the years from twenty to forty? Fettered and bound by personal and emotional relationships. That's bound to be. That's living. But later there's a new stage. You can think, observe life, discover something about other people and the truth about yourself. No man or woman is actually himself (or herself) till after forty five. That's when individuality has a chance.'

Mrs Chester said:

'I've been wrapped up in Basil. He's been *everything* to me.'

'Well he shouldn't have been. Love him as much as you like - but you're a person, remember - not just Basil's mother.'

'It will break my heart if Basil's life is ruined.' Said Basil's mother.

He looked at the delicate lines of her face, the wistful droop of her mouth. He did not want her to be hurt. He said:

'I'll see what I can do.'

He found Basil Chester only too ready to talk:

'This business is just hellish. Mother's hopeless – prejudiced, narrow-minded. If only she'd let herself, she'd see how fine Betty is.'

'And Betty?'

'Betty's being damned difficult! If she'd just conform a bit - I mean leave off the lipstick for a while - it might make all the difference. She seems to go out of her way to be - well – modern – when Mother's about.'

Mr Parker Pyne smiled.

'Betty and Mother are two of the dearest people in the world, I should have thought they'd have taken to each other like hot cakes.'

'You have a lot to learn, young man,' said Mr Parker Pyne.

'I wish you'd come along and see Betty and have a good talk about it all.'

Mr Parker Pyne accepted the invitation readily.

Betty lived with her sister's family in a small villa a little way back from the sea. Betty had red hair, freckles and a mischievous eye. She gave him a cocktail and said with a twinkle:

'You're in on the big bust-up?'

Mr Parker Pyne nodded.

'And whose side are you on? The young lovers or the disapproving dame?'

'May I ask you a question?'

'Certainly.'

'Have you been very tactful over all this?'

'Not at all,' said Miss Gregg frankly. 'But the old cat put my back up.' (She glanced round to make sure Basil was out of earshot). 'That woman just makes me feel mad. She's kept Basil tied to her apron strings all these years – that sort of thing makes a man look a fool. Basil isn't a fool. Then she's so terribly *pukka sahib*.'

'That's not really such a bad thing. It's merely unfashionable just at present.'

Betty Gregg considered.

'Perhaps you're right. I'll be honest. It was Basil who put my back up – being so anxious about what impression I'd make on his mother. Even now I believe he might give me up – if his mother worked on him good and hard.'

'He might,' said Mr Parker Pyne. 'If she went about it in the right way.'

'Are you going to tell her the right way? She won't think of it herself, you know. But if you prompted her –'

She bit her lip – raised frank blue eyes to his.

'I've heard about you, Mr Parker Pyne. You're supposed to know something about human nature. Do you think Basil and I could make a go of it?'

'I should like to ask you three questions.'

'Suitability test? All right, go ahead.'

'Do you sleep with your windows open or shut?'

'Open.'

'Do you and Basil enjoy the same kind of food?'

'Yes.'

'Do you like to go to bed early or late?'

'At half past ten I yawn – but of course I daren't admit it.'

'You ought to suit each other very well,' said Mr Parker Pyne.

'Rather a superficial test.'

'Not at all. I've known marriages entirely wrecked, because the husband liked sitting up till midnight and the wife fell asleep at half past nine and vice versa.'

'It's a pity,' said Betty, 'that everybody can't be happy. Basil and I, and his mother giving us her blessing.'

Mr Parker Pyne coughed.

'I think,' he said, 'That could possibly be managed.'

To Mrs Chester he was soothing but vague. He himself was going to Soller for a week. Whilst he was away, he suggested her line of action should be non-committal. He spent a very enjoyable week at Soller.

On his return he found that a totally unexpected development had arisen.

As he entered the Pino d'Oro the first thing he saw was Mrs Chester and Betty Gregg having tea together. Basil was not there. Mrs Chester looked haggard. Betty looked as though she had been crying.

They greeted him in a friendly fashion, but neither of them mentioned Basil.

Suddenly he heard the girl beside him draw in her breath sharply as though something had hurt her. Mr Parker Pyne turned his head.

Basil Chester was coming up the steps from the sea front. With him was a girl so exotically beautiful that it quite took your breath away. She was dark and her figure was marvellous. No-one could fail to notice the fact since she wore nothing but a single garment of pale blue crepe. She was heavily made up with an orange scarlet mouth – but this only displayed her remarkable beauty in a more pronounced fashion. As for young Basil, he seemed unable to take his eyes from her face.

'You're very late, Basil,' said his mother. 'You were to have taken Betty for drinks this evening.'

'My fault,' drawled the beautiful unknown. 'We just drifted.' She turned to Basil.

'Angel – get me something with a kick in it!'

She tossed off her shoe and stretched out her manicured toenails which were done in emerald green to match her fingernails.

She paid no attention to the two women but she leaned a little towards Mr Parker Pyne.

'Terrible island, this, she said. 'I was just dying of boredom before I met Basil. He *is* rather a pet!'

'Mr Parker Pyne – Miss Ramona,' said Mrs Chester.

The girl acknowledged the introduction with a lazy smile.

'I guess I'll call you Parker,' she murmured. 'My name's Dolores.'

Basil returned with the drinks. Miss Ramona divided her conversation between Basil and Mr Parker Pyne. Of the two women she took no notice whatsoever. Betty attempted once or twice to join in the conversation but the other girl merely stared at her and yawned.

Suddenly Dolores rose.

'Guess I'll be going along now. I'm at the other hotel. Anyone coming to see me home?'

Basil sprang up.

'I'll come with you.'

Mrs Chester said: 'Basil, my dear –'

'I'll be back presently, mother.'

'Isn't he the mother's boy?' Miss Ramona asked of the world at large. 'Just toot around after her, don't you?'

Basil flushed and looked awkward. Miss Ramona gave a nod in Mrs Chester's direction, a dazzling smile to Mr Parker Pyne and she and Basil moved off together.

After they had gone there was rather an awkward silence. Mr Parker Pyne did not like to speak first. Betty Gregg was twisting her fingers and looking out to sea. Mrs Chester looked flushed and angry.

Betty said: 'Well, what do you think of our new acquisition in Pollensa Bay?' Her voice was not quite steady.

Mr Parker Pyne said cautiously:

'A little- er - exotic.'

'Exotic?' Betty gave a short, bitter laugh.

Mrs Chester said; 'She's terrible – terrible. Basil must be quite mad.'

Betty said sharply: 'Basil's all right.'

'Her toenails!' said Mrs Chester.

Betty rose suddenly.

'I think, Mrs Chester, I'll go home and not stay for dinner after all.'

'Oh, my dear - Basil will be so disappointed.'

'Will he?' asked Betty with a short laugh.

She smiled at them both and went off.

Mrs Chester turned to Mr Parker Pyne.

'I wish we had never come to this place – never!'

Mr Parker Pyne shook his head sadly.

'You shouldn't have gone away,' said Mrs Chester. 'If you'd been here this wouldn't have happened.'

Mr Parker Pyne was stung to respond.

'My dear lady, I can assure you that when it comes to a question of a beautiful young woman, I should have no influence over your son whatever. He – er – seems to be of a very susceptible nature.'

'He never used to be.' Said Mrs Chester tearfully.

'Well,' said Mr Parker Pyne with an attempt at cheerfulness, 'this new attraction seems to have broken the back of his infatuation for Miss Gregg. That must be some satisfaction to you.'

'I don't know what you mean.' Said Mrs Chester 'Betty is a dear child and devoted to Basil. She is behaving extremely well over this. I think my boy must be mad.'

Mr Parker Pyne received this startling change of face without wincing. He had met inconsistency in women before.

Basil ran up the steps from the sea front.

'Hullo, Mater, here I am. Where's Betty?'

'Betty's gone home with a headache. And I don't wonder.'

'Sulking, you mean.'

'I consider, Basil, that you are being extremely unkind to Betty. You *are* engaged.'

'That doesn't mean that we're not going to have any friends of our own. Look here, if Betty isn't going to dine with us – I think I'll go back to the Mariposa. They did ask me....'

'Oh, Basil.'

The boy gave her an exasperated look, then ran off down the steps.

Mrs Chester looked eloquently at Mr Parker Pyne.

'You see,' she said.

Matters came to a head a couple of days later. Betty and Basil were to have gone for a walk, taking a picnic lunch with them. Betty arrived at the Pino d'Oro to find that Basil had forgotten the plan and gone out for the day with Dolores Ramona.

'It's quite all right,' she said. 'It doesn't matter. But I think – all the same – we'd better call the whole thing off.'

She slipped from her finger the ring that Basil had given her.

'Will you give him back this, Mrs Chester? And tell him it's all right – not to worry...'

'Betty, dear, don't! He *does* love you – really.'

'It looks like it, doesn't it?' Said the girl with a short laugh. 'No – I've got some pride. Tell him that everything's all right and that I – I wish him luck.'

When Basil returned at sunset, he was greeted by a storm

He flushed a little at the sight of his ring.

'Well, I daresay, it's the best thing.'

'Basil!'

'Well, frankly, Mother, we don't seem to be hitting it off lately.'

'Whose fault was that?'

'I really don't see why *you* should get all worked up about it. You begged me yourself not to marry Betty.'

'That was before I knew her. Basil – my dear – you're not thinking of marrying this other creature?'

'I'd marry her like a shot if she'd have me – but I'm afraid she won't.'

Cold chills went down Mrs Chester's spine. She sought and found Mr Parker Pyne, placidly reading a book in a sheltered corner.

'You must *do* something! You *must!* My boy's life will be ruined.'

Mr Parker Pyne was getting a little tired of Basil Chester's life being ruined.

'What can I do?'

'Go and see this terrible creature. If necessary buy her off.'

'That may come very expensive.'

'I don't care.'

'It seems a pity. Still there are, possibly, other ways. I'll see what I can do. By the way, not a word to Basil – that would be fatal.'

'Of course not.'

Mr Parker Pyne returned from the Mariposa at midnight. Mrs Chester was sitting up for him.

'Well?' she demanded breathlessly

His eyes twinkled.

'The Senorita Dolores Ramona will leave Pollensa tomorrow and the island tomorrow night.'

'Oh, Mr Parker Pyne! How did you manage it?'

'It won't cost a cent,' said Mr Parker Pyne. Again his eyes twinkled. 'I rather fancied I might have a hold over her – and I was right.'

'You are wonderful. Nina Wycherley was quite right. You must let me know - er – your fees –'

Mr Parker Pyne held up a well-manicured hand.

'Not a penny. It has been a pleasure. I hope all will go well. Of course, the boy will be very upset at first when he finds she's disappeared and left no address. Just go easy with him for a week or two.'

'If only Betty will forgive him –'

'She'll forgive him all right. They're a nice couple. By the way, I'm leaving tomorrow, too.'

'Oh, Mr Parker Payne, we shall miss you.'

Mr Parker Pyne leaned over the rail of the steamer and looked at the lights of Palma. Beside him stood Dolores Ramona. He was saying appreciatively:

'A very nice piece of work, Maggie. I'm glad I wired you to come out. It's odd when you're such a quiet, stay-at-home girl, really.'

Dolores Ramona alias Maggie Sayers, said primly: 'I'm glad you're pleased, Mr

Parker Pyne. It's been a nice little change. I think I'll go below now and get to bed, before the boat starts. I'm such a bad sailor.'

A few minutes later a hand fell on Mr Parker Pyne's shoulder. He turned to see Basil Chester.

'Had to come and see you off, Mr Parker Pyne, and give you Betty's love and thanks. It was a grand stunt of yours. Betty and Mother are thick as thieves. Seemed a shame to deceive the old darling – but she was being difficult. Anyway, it's all right now. We're no end grateful to you, Betty and I.'

'I wish you every happiness.' Said Mr Parker Pyne.

'Thanks.'

There was a pause, then Basil said with somewhat overdone carelessness:

'Is Miss Ra— er, Miss Sayers – anywhere about? I'd like to thank her too.'

Mr Parker Pyne shot a keen glance at him.

He said:

'I'm afraid Maggie's gone to bed.'

'Oh, too bad – well, perhaps I'll see her in London sometime.'

'As a matter of fact, she is going to America on business for me, almost at once.'

'Oh!' Basil's tone was blank. 'Well,' he said. 'I'll be getting along....'

Mr Parker Pyne smiled. On his way to his cabin, he tapped on the door of Maggie's.

'How are you, my dear? All right? Our young friend has been along. The usual slight attack of Maggie-itis. But he'll get over it in a day or two.'