

*No.6*

*Amanda and the Rocks*

By Rod Bull

I'd have found a nice girl years ago if it wasn't for my mother. She's more like Mrs Bucket than the TV character has ever been. Everything's for effect, and she lives her life by labels, whether it's Crown Derby on the teacups, Bang and Olafson on the stereo or BMW in the garage. In her eyes, she's at the top of the social tree and intends to keep the others in their place

My poor dad? He just wants a quiet life and puts up with it, so long as he can disappear to the Golf Club when he wants. Mother, of course regards this as an approved activity for the middle-aged aristocratic gentleman so he gets a pass for this whenever he wants.

I suppose I'm my own worst enemy in lots of ways, and I should have cleared off long ago, but I'm just too lazy to do it. Apart from anything else, as mother constantly reminds me, there's the family name to think of (we have a title; I expect we stole it) and this damned great house. I keep saying they should sell it to the National Trust or somebody, but that falls on stony ground. There'd be even more cash to go round, then, although to be fair there's quite a bit left, hoarded from the time we were very good at oppressing peasants and getting them to work their guts out for us and be grateful for it.

I'm the only son and heir to all this, though. My sister Helen was lucky to be born a girl, so she's been able to do what she wanted. She married some boneheaded farmer called Angus and they now live in the middle of nowhere (well, Scotland actually) and breed cattle and children on a regular basis. One of their kids might succeed to the Estate if I can't get my act together, but mother keeps telling me it

would be a disaster if, in her words, the “son of some Scots peasant were to inherit the House and all the heritage that goes with it.”

As I try to tell her, she’s not exactly making it easy for me to progress on that front, which leads me to tell you what the problem is that needs solving.

There doesn’t appear to be a girl in the world that my mother approves of, and that I’m willing to marry. It’s not that I’m that fussy, but to be frank, I think mother’s a bit on the batty side. She’s so hung up on breeding and sensitivity and lots of other stupid things that she thinks important that it’s been an impossible job for any poor girl to get over the tests that she’s set when she’s considered for the position.

Of course, being loaded, there seems to be no shortage of girls sent in our direction by their mothers to see if they could be married off in our direction. But none of them pass muster with my mother, even though plenty of them seem to me to be absolutely gorgeous.

Previously, the one I really fell for was called Sophie. She was a lovely girl, chestnut hair, petite and rounded in all the right places, as well as being thoroughly nice with it. I thought we’d hit the jackpot with her. I think even mother thought so at first.

“Take Sophie into dinner, Roland, and escort her to the seat overlooking the lake.”

I did that, and she managed to select the right cutlery for the right course and was able to open an oyster without injuring anybody. She didn’t get squiffy on the wine, and got into mother’s good books

by offering her opinion on some scheme that mother was working on to decorate the Orangery.

“I’m sure Lady Beatrice, that crepe de chine would go very well just in that corner.”

There was the bed problem to overcome, though. No, not that. I never get that far, for Heaven’s sake. I told you that mother was barmy. This is the proof of it. She says that no girl with the proper breeding and sensitivity could sleep on a bed that had even the slightest imperfection, so she always puts a few dried peas under the mattress in the guest room. That proves nothing, I know other than that she’s read too many fairy stories and probably should be locked up somewhere safe, away from normal people. I’ve never been able to stop her doing it, and of course none of the girls can ever feel a few peas under the bed.

It was the same with Sophie. When she came down in the morning mother pipes up as usual,

“ So how did you sleep, Sophie dear?”

“ Very well, Lady Beatrice, I feel so refreshed, and that bed was so comfortable.”

So, that was that. Sophie left, never to be seen again. Although I tried to argue about it, it was made very clear that I could go off with her if I wanted, but I would never darken the ancestral door again, and so on. I very nearly did, but in the end the thought of finding a proper job and all that goes with it meant I stayed put. Pathetic, isn’t it?

Just after Midsummer Day, last year, though the weather turned very nasty. There was a huge thunderstorm, and the wind was lashing leaves and branches from the trees. Mother even told the gardeners they could knock off earlier than usual, so that shows how bad it was. I was looking at the storm through one of the bay windows at the front, when I saw a figure, almost bent double by the wind, struggling up the drive towards the front door. I walked round into the hallway to see what was up.

There was a knock at the door, and I opened it. A girl stood there, drenched to the skin.

“ Sorry to disturb you, but my car’s broken down on the main road. I can’t get a signal on the mobile so I wondered if anyone could call a garage for me?”

“Yes, of course, but come in. You’ll catch your death out there.”

She stepped inside, brushing her long brown hair behind her. I noticed that her eye makeup had run down her face, giving her a slightly hilarious panda look, but I could tell that, despite all this she was something of a knockout.

My parents, coming to see what was going on, interrupted us.

“Mother, this poor young lady is stranded on the road. I’ll call a garage for her, but perhaps we can dry her clothes and she can have dinner whilst all this gets sorted out. Is that ok, Miss...?”

“Amanda, and thank you very much, that would be great.”

Although Mother is a frightful snob and unhinged as well, nobody can teach her anything about good manners and helping the distressed, so she swung right into action.

“My dear, of course. I’ll show you to the guest suite and I’m sure some of my daughter’s clothes would fit you. Roland will ring someone to look at your car, but why don’t you stay here until the morning? It’s such a dreadful night I can’t allow you to go out again in all of this rain.”

It turned out Amanda was on her way to visit friends on the South Coast, and even if her car could be fixed, it was going to take another four or five hours, so she accepted.

At dinner, she came down looking lovely, in a black cocktail dress of Helen’s that mother had found for her. She came from a family who ran a dentist’s practice, and she was an accountant. Mother regards those in some kind of profession as more or less acceptable at a push, so this wasn’t a problem and I could see she liked Amanda. So much so that after coffee, she called me over and whispered in my ear.

“This is all so unexpected Roland but I think I’ll just slip up to the guest room and make one or two adjustments. You never know, do you dear?”

I knew what this meant. The peas, the damned peas were being placed. This time, though, I wasn’t going to let her have her own way. I was sick of it all. In short, I had a cunning plan.

After everyone had gone to bed, I crept out of bed and onto the landing near my room where one of the smoke detectors was placed. I was carrying a candle and matches so lit the candle and lifted it up underneath. Sure enough, the alarms all went off so I walked around, shouting.

“Fire, fire! Out, everyone, on to the front lawn while we see where the problem is. Come on, no time to waste.”

Sure enough, everyone bundled out of their rooms quickly enough. I thought Amanda looked particularly fetching as I escorted her downstairs, with my parents and the couple of domestic staff we still have following on behind and grumbling.

As we got outside, I picked up a couple of large pebbles from the drive and stuffed them into the pocket of my dressing gown.

“Let me go back in, mother. It looks like a false alarm but I’ll just check.”

“Very well, dear but be careful.”

Once in, I made a beeline for the guest room and stuffed the rocks under the mattress before running back down and sounding the all clear.

When morning came, and Amanda came down for breakfast, mother was waiting.

“And how was your night, dear? I’m sorry you were disturbed”

“I never sleep well in a strange bed I’m afraid. I hope you don’t mind me saying, but I think that bed’s little lumpy- perhaps the

mattress needs turning. I don't mean to sound ungrateful, but I thought you'd like to know."

Mother beamed at her.

"My dear, of course. I'll have it looked at right away. Now, why don't you stay for lunch?"

Excusing myself, I was straight upstairs, chucked the pebbles out of the window and replaced the peas before anyone saw me.

It has all turned out rather well. Amanda stayed for the weekend and then came for the weekend after that. Mother didn't repeat the test with the bed, and Amanda and I got on like a house on fire, so to speak and we're to be married next month. It just goes to show that even if most girls are unable to trace vegetables in their bedding, with a bit of ingenuity you can get your princess if you think hard enough.

*The End*