

Camellia

Freda Lightfoot

Paul picked up his spade and sliced it into the thick brown earth then he slid in a dahlia cutting and settled it with a gentle pat. The garden was quiet today, which was a relief. He supposed he should welcome families who visited the gardens set around this Cornish manor house. Children laughing and skipping between the lilac and the rhododendron bushes, mothers seeking shade beneath a wind battered pine so they could enjoy a moment's peace. None appeared to watch him dig on this early spring day. This was his first job since he'd left horticultural college. He was young and fit, proud to be employed in such a famous garden but missing his friends and felt a little lonely.

He was also nervous of making mistakes having pulled up a prize plant in place of a weed, pruning too fiercely or not pruning at all. Meticulously each day he cut the dead heads off prize camellias, a frightening experience, striving to remember all he'd been taught. Fortunately, no matter how many he cut thankfully dozens more appeared to bloom in their place. He checked constantly that they were not attacked by bugs, that they were moist and in no danger of frost damage.

Today, without realising what he was doing he spoke to the flowers. 'There you are my beauties, I've managed to care for you, have I not?'

'You have indeed,' came a soft voice in response. Paul whirled about, surprised as he'd thought himself alone. A woman was seated on the garden bench, smiling at him. She was seated by the fountain in the sheltered, westerly part of the garden where the best of the camellias grew. Her dress was long, white and flimsy, rather old fashioned and in startling contrast to the huge banks of pink and red flowers. She wore a widely brimmed hat, her blonde hair streaming down over her shoulders. Lifting her beautiful face she shielded her eyes as she gazed out to sea. In that moment it came to Paul how he ached to fall in love. She looked so familiar had he seen this lady before?

Raising one finger she beckoned him over. Paul was beside her in seconds, his heart pounding.

'Sir Richard will be pleased with you.'

'Sir Richard?'

'My father.' She turned her head to stare back out to sea, a wistful expression upon her face. 'He has been gone for more than a year on his latest voyage. Sometimes I fear he may never return.'

Something prickled down Paul's spine, unaware of what to say to this lovely girl.

'I've watched you come every day to tend my camellias. You do it well and have eased my concerns. See how the sun glints upon the *semiplena* with its glorious turkey-red flowers.'

Paul half glanced over his shoulder to see where she was pointing and when he turned back she had miraculously disappeared. Even though it had been no more than a second there was no sight of her on any of the paths leading from this sheltered spot to the rest of the garden. The next day he was delighted to again find her waiting for him on the bench. This time he eagerly welcomed her. 'So pleased you wish to spend time with me.'

She laughed, a light tinkling sound that seemed to come from far away. 'I had to be sure that you were worthy of caring for my camellias. I was named after them by my father.' She stared out across the headland at the blue horizon, again looking out to sea. 'I've waited a long time for him here, keeping guard of his beloved camellias. I have kept up my vigil, watching over the plants while awaiting his return but feel in my heart he may have perished.'

'I'm so sorry to hear that.'

Day after day while Paul worked at tending the camellias he would see her seated close by on the bench. Paul tried talking to her of the worries he had about his future but she never seemed interested. This beautiful lady firmly supervised his work and plans for the preparation of new stock for the next year, giving him instructions on how to care for the camellias, which varieties should be

propagated and where they needed to be planted or cut back. She instructed him on how to take long lateral shoots and root the cuttings in equal parts of peat and sand, giving laborious details of temperature and the correct feed.

At times her voice would fade away and he would strain to hear it, as if it floated shoreward on a fragile sea breeze. Or she remained silent, would sigh and complain that she was tired then swiftly vanish.

On other occasions she spoke of the many voyages her father had undertaken, how he had carved out the garden from the bare hillside, tucking plants into every nook and cranny of the cliff. 'My vigil is long, arduous and seemingly without end. Sometimes I wish that this world would lose its hold on me and let me rest.'

Hearing her long-drawn out sigh he daringly stated, 'I suffer a little anguish occasionally too.'

'Are you lonely like me?' She looked at him with such sadness in her sea-green eyes that he could hardly bear it.

'Sometimes.'

'I wish I could help. I understand the pain of excessive solitude. When other girls my age were finding husbands, getting married and bearing children I remained trapped at our home here keeping vigil for my father, as he had asked me to do. Sadly, he never came back. But you have eased my concerns for I can see his camellias will be in good hands.'

When he glanced across to thank her for believing in him he found she had again vanished. Paul experienced a burst of shame and guilt for troubling her with his petty problem.

In the weeks following whenever he visited this western corner of the garden, to his disappointment he found no sign of her. How greatly he missed her. Then one morning when he came to the bench at the usual hour, upon the bench lay a single flower. Filled with wonder he picked it up, astonished to discover that it was alive and real. Being a hot summer's day it was no longer the season for camellias and he found its presence astounding. Instinct told him lady Camellia would not return, that this could be her way of saying goodbye. Had he said something to offend her so that the magic of seeing again was broken? He turned from the seat to stride quickly away, blinded by his tears. Then a bright and cheerful voice caught him off guard.

'Goodness, is that a camellia you're holding at this time of year? How amazing.'

He glanced up to find a young woman of about his own age dressed in denim blue jeans and blazer. She was definitely not a wraith from the past, as was the one he'd been looking for, being very much flesh and blood. But she appeared equally lovely so Paul gave her a warm smile. 'A trick of nature. It happens sometimes, I suppose.'

She smilingly held out a hand for him to shake. 'Allow me to introduce myself. I'm your new assistant, Camilla Lawson.'

For a full half minute he stared at her. 'Camellia?'

She laughed. 'Fairly close but actually *Camilla*.' She was gazing at him now with a startled expression in her green eyes. 'The way you spoke my name sounded so familiar. Have we met before?'

'I don't think so but I'm sure we could become good friends.'

She softly smiled. 'So long as you get my name right.'

'How could I ever forget it?' He blinked and shook himself. The sight of that beautiful lady he'd frequently admired in a picture in this manor house could merely have been a glimmer of his imagination at seeing her here in the garden. Because he'd felt so lonely he'd probably imagined speaking to a ghost, which must be even more foolish than talking to flowers. Although having taught him all he needed to know about caring for her father's beloved camellias that was the reason she had gone, her task complete. Aware these plants would remain in good hands she no longer felt the need to reside in her lonely vigil. At last feeling free to go to her rest and knowing he was lonely, she had found him someone to share his love of the garden. What a blessing she'd been.

Smiling, he handed Camilla the flower. He would explain all of this to her later, certain he would have the rest of his life with her in which to do so.