

The one concession Bella's friend Lady Cornford made to summer was her annual garden party, quite as famous for its heat and confusion as the Epsom Downs on Derby Day. Since Cissie Cornford lived in Bedford Square and only ever left the house to go to funerals – and only the most upper-class of those, too – she farmed out the practical arrangements to her sister, who was, if anything, even more light-headed.

Bella went all the way across the river to Roehampton every year because she had never yet been able to come up with a cast-iron excuse. The sudden onset of dengue fever, or a railway accident resulting in the loss of both legs would not have seemed to Cissie sufficient reason not to turn up. If you were invited, you attended.

For example, in 1874 a Mrs Dunstable had pleaded that she as at the full term of her pregnancy, a condition roundly pooh-poohed by Cissie, who was in her seventies and childless. So it came about that an impatient little Tertius Dunstable was born inside a thicket of rhododendrons, ushered into the world by a Captain-Surgeon of the Home Fleet, Lady Culhane of the Irish Peerage and a gardener called Smythe.

'Not one word of thanks,' Cissie Cornford complained. 'And they have given the child the most ghastly nickname.'

'Which is?' Bella asked.

‘Twiggy. In such poor taste.’

This year there was a brass band, as usual, but also a fortune-telling tent. Swami Bandichopra would be giving readings.

‘You must visit this man,’ Cissie insisted. ‘He might be able to help you resolve your various discontents.’

‘As it happens, I am perfectly happy,’ Bella protested.

And she was – perhaps a little tired, for only that week she had completed her latest novel, *The Sailor’s Ransom*. Not many people in London knew that the delightful and rather dashing Mrs Bella Wallis was also the Henry Ellis Margam who published such risqué and provocative books.

Swami Bandichopra was a pleasure to meet. It had been a very long time since he last sat under a banyan tree and he had come no further that day than Limehouse, where his brother-in-law kept a small restaurant.

‘You are far from home,’ Bella teased him gently.

‘I am a pilgrim on the road, madam,’ the Swami replied. ‘You are, I perceive, a widow.’

‘Did my daughter tell you that?’

‘You have no children. Oh dear me, no.’

‘Answer me this, then. How did my husband die?’

‘In the snow,’ the Swami replied, shocking her greatly. ‘He fell from his horse, I think.’

‘Now I am impressed,’ Bella said, feeling a little trickle of sweat run down her ribs. The Swami held out his tiny hand and smiled.

‘That sad day has passed. There is now another gentleman who commands your heart.’

‘Is he here today?’

‘Possibly,’ the Swami said.

‘Was he of any help?’ Cissie Cornford wanted to know.

‘He mentioned the man who presently commands my heart.’

‘If by that he meant that scrub Westland, you will find him at the bottom of the garden, talking to Smythe the gardener. Who is quite drunk.’

Westland was resplendent in a cream linen suit and the softest of soft collars, wearing a tie that resembled an illustration from a seed catalogue.

‘Mr Smythe here has been telling me about Mrs Dunstable.’

‘I am in love,’ Smythe confessed. ‘It was love at first sight.’

‘Isn’t that rather indelicate, considering how you met?’

‘Ho! Don’t you worry about that, missus. There’s a divinity as shapes us all, according to the Vicar.’

‘But does she return your love?’

‘You mean to indicate my lowly station. That counts for nothing with me. There is but one stumbling block.’

‘I am sorry to hear it.’

‘Mr Smythe has a rival,’ Philip explained.

‘Why, and that I have, the black hearted villain!’

‘Tell Mrs Wallis his name,’ Philip Westland suggested.

‘The lady is besotted with a certain Henry Ellis Margam, some sort of scribbling fool that stands between us like that garden roller there. Oh, how I would like to bust him up, be danged if I wouldn’t.’

‘Mr Smythe,’ Bella said. ‘Here is a florin. Away as fast as you can to the fortune-telling tent and tell him all that you have told me. Perhaps leaving the lady’s name out of it. But you will come away much reassured.’

‘That was kind,’ Philip said, after the gardener lurched away.

‘Did you tell him that you see this mysterious Mr Margam

naked every night?’

‘I was coming round to that.’

‘Did you tell him Mr Margam considers you the most lovable man in the world?’ Bella demanded, kissing him.

There was a sudden commotion within the fortune-telling tent. Either Smythe had asked the wrong question or the Swami had given the wrong answer. The little tent rocked and then collapsed. Lady Cornford and her dearest cronies were poking furiously at the canvas with their sun-umbrellas.

‘How lovely England can be,’ Bella declared dreamily.

Philip’s laugh floated high, high into the elms.

‘Because you make it so! Both of you! All of you, beloved Bella.’

Brian Thompson, May 2010