

AN AMUSING MISUNDERSTANDING

Jane was looking forward to her stay with her Aunt and Uncle near the New Forest. She had worked hard that term and now the exams were coming to an end. She thought she deserved a well-earned break.

Aunt Marge and Uncle Ted had lived in South Africa for much of their working lives; they had done well for themselves and, after taking early retirement, had bought a property in Spain, thinking that after so many years in the tropics, they wanted to settle somewhere warmer than Britain. But they had eventually sold up and had recently moved back to Britain, as the rest of the family had thought they would.

Aunt Marge wanted somewhere with a large garden; she had missed having a proper garden when they were in Spain. They had bought a property near the New Forest with almost one and a quarter hectares of land. The garden had, it seemed, be somewhat neglected by its previous owners in the last few years. Aunt Marge had plans for reorganizing the garden and, indeed, had already begun work on restoring it.

Jane shared her Aunt's passion for gardening. She was really looking forward to seeing her Aunt and Uncle's garden and what they were doing with it.

Marge and Ted had no children of their own. One reason for their returning to Britain, apart from Marge's wanting a garden, was to get to know the family better, especially their nephews and nieces and grand nephews and nieces. They were particularly looking forward to Jane's visit as Aunt Marge wanted to show Jane the garden and Uncle Ted was also quite excited at the prospect.

"A rum thing for a girl to do," said Ted. "You don't think of *girls* doing forestry."

"You're living in the past, Ted," said Marge. "Young girls nowadays do all sorts of things."

"I suppose they do, Marge," he replied. "But it still seems odd to me. Didn't your sister say Jane was going to set up her own business when she got her degree?"

"That's right," said Marge. "Good for her. It certainly sounds as though she's got ambition."

"But what sort of business do you set up in forestry?" mused Ted, thinking aloud rather than asking Marge.

"I don't know," Marge replied. "I had a cousin once who was a forester; but he used to look after woodland on the estate of Lord something-or-other – I forget the name now. It was a long time ago; I was only a girl then."

"But that's not running one's own business, though, is it?" said Ted. "She's not going to buy up a woodland and look after it. That would cost a packet."

"Not only that," said Marge, "but the work is hard, physical stuff. Wielding a great chain saw is not what you expect a girl to be doing; she'll need some pretty hefty muscles for that."

"I suppose she could employ people to do that," said Ted. "Or maybe

she is a beefy lass, herself" he added.

They both had a laugh and agreed that it was a bit puzzling exactly what business she was thinking of setting up.

"We'll just have wait and see," said Marge.

"Yes, indeed," agreed Ted. "But I still think it's a bit rum."

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At last the exams were over. Now there was the anxious wait for the results. The Examination Board meetings would be held next week. Had she done well enough to pass? Jane thought she had; but you never knew. Was there some weak point? Would she be referred and have to retake a module in September? At least, she was as certain as she could be, she had not failed completely.

It was an anxious fortnight; but planning her visit to her Aunt and Uncle took her mind off things a bit. She was really looking forward to seeing all that garden. There was even a small copse included in the property; it sounded almost idyllic.

At last the waiting was over. It was the morning the results were to be published. When her tutor called her in she was understandably feeling a bit nervous; but she had no need to be. She had not merely passed – she had passed with distinction. Now she really would enjoy the summer ahead before she got down to the serious task of setting up on her own.

She spent a week back at home where her parents had put on a party to celebrate her success. Everybody made a fuss; it was almost embarrassing. But, she realized, they had reason to be happy. She had not really shone at school. She had been impatient to leave and then finished up that dead-end job with no prospects.

She had realized her mistake and, gradually by studying part-time, had bettered herself so that the local University had taken her on for a Foundation Degree. She was not going to make the same mistake twice; she had learnt the hard way.

Now here she was with a Distinction. Yes, she realized, they had every reason to be celebrating and so had she; not so much for her result, but for the support her parents and friends had given her as she had tried to make up for the time she wasted at school.

The following week Jane arrived at her Aunt and Uncle's. They greeted her warmly and were relieved to see that she was not "a beefy lass" (as Ted had put it), but a not unattractive young lady.

They showed her her room. It was lovely and looked out across the fields to the New Forest. They congratulated her on her degree; she tried to explain it was only a Foundation Degree, but she was not sure they really understood.

That evening they chatted about the family. Marge and Ted wanted the missing years filled. Jane did her best but did not dwell too much on herself, her school or the dead-end job she had found herself in. But it was not too difficult; there was so much else for her Aunt and Uncle to catch up on and, of course, there was the inevitable exchange of photographs from over the years. It was quite late when they went to bed. Her Aunt and Uncle

promised to show her over their "estate", as they called it, the next day.

"I should like that very much," said Jane.

"It's going to be a lovely garden," said her Aunt.

"And wait till you see the coppice," added her Uncle.

Jane wondered what he meant, but before she could ask, her Aunt said: "Come on, Ted; don't go pestering Jane tonight. You can see the poor girl's tired."

Then, wishing Jane goodnight, her Aunt and Uncle left her and Jane went to bed and slept very soundly.

The next day dawned bright and sunny. After breakfast, her Aunt and Uncle began showing Jane around the garden. They were pleased at the interest Jane was taking in the things they had already managed to do and with their future plans. She seemed to have quite a lot of ideas herself. Aunt Marge was particularly pleased to find some one who not only shared her passion about gardens but also knew about different types of garden flowers.

"I suppose," thought her Uncle, "she must have learnt quite a bit about wild flowers on her forestry course. I guess the garden plants are an interesting side line."

"You wait till you get to the coppice," he said several times as they went along.

Jane got curiouser and curiouser about this coppice and wondered what she would find there. At last they reached it.

"There," said Uncle Ted, "I'm afraid the undergrowth has got a bit out of hand and the trees have obviously been neglected but I think we can make something of it. I'm just wondering the best way of setting about it."

"Oh," said Jane, "I don't know. Trees are not really my thing, you know."

"What!", said her Uncle, puzzled. "Trees? But that's what forests are made of, isn't it? I thought you'd just got a degree in forestry?"

"Forestry?" said Jane. Then she laughed.

"Oh, Uncle," she said. "I'm sorry. It's a Foundation Degree in *Floristry!*"

"Floristry?" said her Uncle and Aunt together. Jane thought her Aunt said it with some pleasure. Then they all three laughed together.

As they walked back to the house, Jane told them about her plans to set up her own floristry business.

The visit turned out to be very successful. Aunt Marge and Jane got on really well together; and Uncle Ted was happy when Jane rang some one she knew from University who really had graduated in forestry. Uncle Ted was even happier when later in the week a beefy looking young man turned up who was more than eager to get going on that coppice.

In short, Marge and Ted became like a second mother and father to Jane and helped her set up her business; they said it was their little retirement project. Jane's business thrived and, of course, she eventually married the beefy young forester (though she was not aware that she would do so on that first visit) – but that is another story.