

Mrs. Pollifax and the Whirling Dervish

DOROTHY
GILMAN

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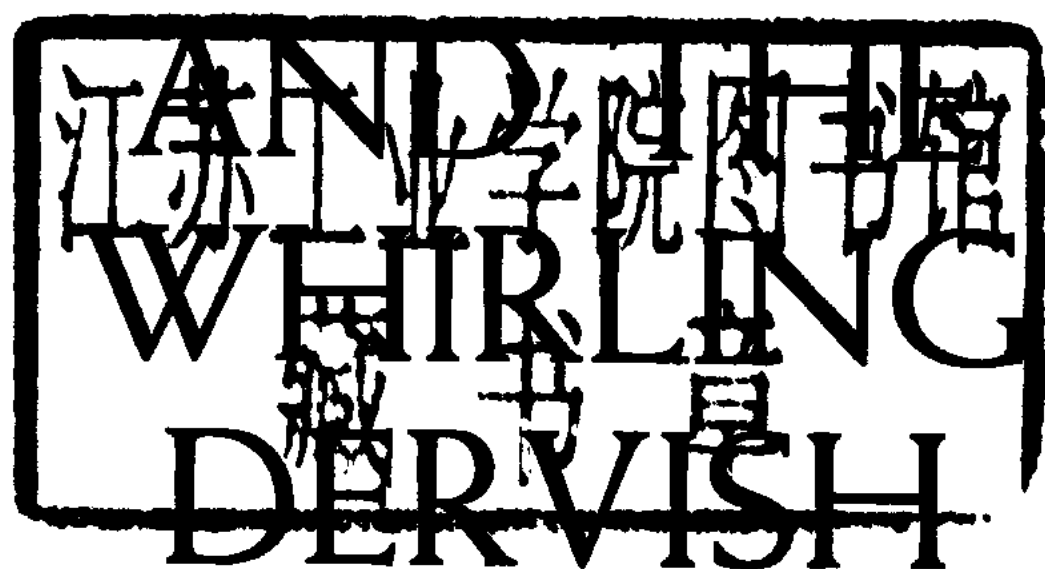
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MRS. POLLIFAX



Dorothy Gilman

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MRS. POLLIFAX
AND THE
WHIRLING
DERVISH

PROLOGUE



THEY HAD BEEN WAITING AMONG THE LOW dunes for two days, a few goats feeding nearby on an impoverished growth of desert grass. They were Reguibat, members of a tribe that had made the Sahara their home for centuries, and they gave every evidence of being no more than pastoral nomads except that each man wore a nine-millimeter submachine gun strapped to his back and the tents behind them concealed a pair of camouflaged Land Rovers. They wore coarse khaki-colored *djellabahs* that melted into the khaki-brown of the desert around them and their heads were snugly wrapped in turbans that hid their chins and all but their eyes. In the flat empty expanse of desert nothing moved except a vulture that drifted down from the sky to look over the small *frig*, or encampment, curious as to whether the two men lying across the slight rise in the ground were dead or alive, and then—as one of the men lifted binoculars to his

eyes—the vulture, cheated, wheeled and flew on, heading south.

The older man said, “He should have been here yesterday and I do not think he comes to us today, either.”

His companion nodded. “It is not good. We go at sunset?”

The older man grunted. “Already we’ve stayed too long, it’s fortunate for us no planes have seen us, only the vultures.” With a glance at the sun he nodded. “One more hour and we load tents and goats and leave.”

“You think there’s been trouble? His message spoke of danger, he felt himself watched.”

The older man had not exhausted his faith. “His message said also that if not this week he will be with us next week.” He nodded. “Insh’Allah, he will come.” He adjusted his binoculars to look again yet still there was nothing to be seen but empty desert and a horizon that shifted and shimmered under the merciless sun, and presently they returned to their tents to wait for darkness.

CHAPTER 1



CARSTAIRS SAT AT HIS DESK HIGH IN THE CIA building and studied the photograph that lay in front of him. "I don't like him, Bishop," he said crossly. "I don't like at *all* the choice they made for us in Cairo, I feel damn uneasy sending this man into Morocco alone. It's too important a job—there are seven lives at stake, damn it!"

His assistant, seated across the desk from him, said politely, "Cairo's always been reliable in the past, sir, is there some specific reason for all these 'damns'? I admit that Janko's moustache is rather too ornate for my taste, but otherwise—"

Carstairs was scowling. "You're overlooking his face, Bishop, the eyes, the mouth. He looks brash for a Moslem country, he looks *arrogant*. I realize he's the only person available at short notice who speaks Arabic but still—" His voice faded as his scowl deepened. "You know how

vulnerable the Atlas group is, just one slip, one rash decision, one wrong person—” He shook his head. “Suddenly after years of enmity Morocco and Algeria are establishing diplomatic relations and who knows what will happen, what nooses may tighten or—if you’ll excuse the mix of metaphors—what hells could break loose for our Atlas group, especially if we’re exposed. And now *this*.”

Patiently Bishop tried again. “It could be a very poor photo, you know. A pity he’s in Cairo and you can’t see him or you might feel differently. I don’t quite understand what’s on your mind, sir.”

“I don’t either,” growled Carstairs, “but it’s a very clear photograph and this man Janko doesn’t feel right to me. I realize we’re stuck and there’s no one else to send but I’d feel a hell of a lot better—given the look of him—if he could travel *with* someone, someone to keep an eye on him, to round out his image of tourist—he just doesn’t look like a casual tourist. Someone who could dilute his personality, which strikes me as superior and abrasive, someone to keep him—”

“Non-brash?”

“My dear Bishop . . . !”

“Sorry,” Bishop said meekly.

Carstairs grinned. “All right, I admit I’m being woe-fully inarticulate but I can tell you what he needs: a Mrs. Pollifax.”

At once Bishop understood, and was awed by Carstairs’ cleverness. Carstairs tended to see things in pictures, and at mention of Mrs. Pollifax an unholy glee filled Bishop at such creativeness: he looked again at the photo on the desk, at the fierce black eyebrows, thick black moustache and haughty countenance of the man Janko, and he placed it in the company of cheerful, friendly Mrs. Pollifax—so innocent and trustworthy on sight—and he laughed. “I see what you mean *precisely*,” he said. “Especially about the diluting. Emily would be a great leavening influence and

MRS. POLLIFAX AND THE WHIRLING DERVISH

she could patch up any PR gaffs that might get him into trouble.”

Carstairs nodded. “This Max Janko may be a whiz at languages—apparently that’s his specialty—but I doubt from the look of him if he has the slightest idea what the word tact means.” His smile faded. “Unfortunately there’s only one Emily Pollifax and we can scarcely ask Cyrus to lend us his wife to travel with another man.”

A smile grew slowly on Bishop’s face and very casually, with a touch of mischief, he said, “I happen to know that Cyrus left three days ago to see his new grandson in Kenya, which happens to be where his daughter and her doctor-husband live now . . .”

Carstairs stared at him. “Alone? Mrs. Pollifax didn’t go with him?”

Bishop’s smile broadened. “No sir.”

“Why?” asked Carstairs. “Nothing wrong between them, I hope.”

“As I understand it,” said Bishop, “there has been a recent infusion of new grandchildren and they’ve decided to divide their responsibilities to the next generation before it exhausts them both. He’ll be away for two weeks.”

“Hmmmm,” murmured Carstairs thoughtfully. “Leaving Mrs. Pollifax to tend her geraniums, I suppose.” He was silent for a moment and then he nodded and snapped his fingers. “Let’s go for it, Bishop, except—” He hesitated, frowning. He still found it ironic that an experimental group set up in ’76 as a “checks and balances” experiment had continued unnoticed and unmolested all these years. It seemed a supreme example of unwieldy bureaucracy that once something was begun it developed a weight and a momentum of its own and was rendered invisible: it existed, therefore it *was* . . . He utterly believed in the Atlas group but it continued to amuse him that in this case the right hand didn’t know what the left hand was doing, even at Central Intelligence. He said, “I

wonder how much she ought to be told? Do we tell her she'll be working for a maverick group, quite secret, called Atlas, and not, officially speaking, for the main arm of the CIA?"

Bishop said with a smile, "I think she might be relieved to hear that, sir. I had a very irate letter from her during the Iran-Contra hearings with innumerable quotes from the U.S. Constitution."

Carstairs smiled faintly. "Nevertheless we can't afford to let her know too much, it would be dangerous."

"It could protect her as well," pointed out Bishop.

Carstairs was silent, considering; reaching his decision he said crisply, "I don't think so. Basically this is a very simple reconnaissance trip. The greatest danger is that of exposure but since there are to be no personal contacts made during the trip there's small likelihood of that—*so long as this Janko chap behaves himself*," he added tartly. "If Mrs. Pollifax can go, if she's available, it can be emphasized that she's working for a separate department, but anything more than that—" He shook his head.

Bishop said lightly, "On the theory that she may not currently trust the CIA but she trusts us?"

Carstairs smiled. "Our hands are clean—well, relatively speaking," he said dryly. "See if you can reach her by phone, Bishop, and ask if she can possibly leave on tomorrow's flight to Morocco to do a job for us, and if so—God help us if she can't—you'll knock on her door this afternoon and brief her."

"Delighted," said Bishop happily, "and if you'll excuse me now I'll race with appropriate haste to my phone, with fingers crossed all the way."

"A small prayer might help, too," Carstairs called after him but Bishop had already vanished into his office, the door slamming behind him.

* * *

MRS. POLLIFAX AND THE WHIRLING DERVISH

Mrs. Pollifax had begun her morning by cutting back a few of the geraniums in her new greenhouse but after clipping three of them she had found herself staring moodily out of the window. *I haven't the slightest interest in doing this*, she thought, and putting aside her garden shears she walked into the kitchen, poured herself a cup of coffee and carried it to the dining table where she did her best thinking.

Something was wrong, she admitted, and she began to cautiously approach what it might be. She could find no regrets that she'd not flown to Kenya with Cyrus; after all, they had spent Christmas with her son Roger in Chicago, and New Year's with her daughter Jane in Arizona, and it had been very pleasant to return home, except that neither of them had expected Lisa's baby to arrive a month early and the news to reach them before they'd even unpacked their bags from Christmas.

Perhaps too many guest rooms had tired her, she thought, or perhaps it was simply the fact that it was January, and the skies unendingly gray, but neither thought produced any response, and impatiently she discarded both. Probing deeper she brought up a discovery that shocked her: she was bored—horribly, depletingly and dispiritingly bored.

Oh God, she thought, *bored?*

And at once she knew—as a part of her had known all along—what was missing in her life. *It's been a whole year*, she thought, *have they decided I'm too old?*

"They," she said aloud, crossly, refusing to name Carstairs, Bishop and the Department, and she gazed unseeingly out of the window at the garden that a January thaw had turned into mud.

It was some years now since Mrs. Pollifax, bored and lonely, had made a daring trip to the CIA to confide her childhood dream of becoming a spy and to volunteer her services. By purest chance—but it had been a miracle, surely?—she had been noticed in the waiting room by Car-

stairs, who was in desperate need of an Innocent Tourist for an important courier job, and off she had gone to Mexico. Since then it seemed to her as if her real life had been lived on those occasions when she abandoned committees and Garden Club to go out into the world on assignments for him. After all, this was how she'd met Cyrus, as well as an assortment of other fascinating people, a few of them bent on killing her, but none of whom she would ever have met at her Garden Club.

I'm spoiled, she thought, I've grown accustomed to those interruptions in my life that send the adrenaline racing and the fight-or-flight responses into high gear, and I cannot—simply cannot—experience either of these with my geraniums, or the Garden Club, and Cyrus is wonderful but I suspect that after last January's adventure, and our nearly being killed in the highlands of Thailand, he is very happy to live quietly and to still be alive.

As *am I*, she added quickly and contritely, yet so—so unchallenged that even her weekly karate lessons had begun to seem without point, and giving the knife its final twist she said aloud, "And just maybe you really *are* too old now for adventuring, Emily Pollifax."

The phone's ringing startled her but did not in any way lighten her dark and brooding thoughts. She knew—absolutely *knew*—that it would be either Amos calling from Green Acres Supply House to report the arrival of her fertilizer, or Mrs. Tilliwit to remind her of the Save-Our-Environment meeting on Wednesday. Reluctantly she abandoned her coffee and stilled the phone on its fifth ring.

"Hello," she said, and sighed.

"What a greeting," said a sympathetic and very familiar voice. "I hope I'm not interrupting a wake?"

"B-Bishop?" she faltered. "*Bishop?*"

"None other," he assured her. "Anything wrong?"

MRS. POLLIFAX AND THE WHIRLING DERVISH

She laughed shakily. "Only an excruciating attack of January boredom."

"What an appropriate moment then," he said cheerfully, "to ask if you could possibly leave on tomorrow's flight to Morocco, on an errand strictly for Carstairs. For about a week, in which case—"

"Morocco," she gasped, and at once knew the luxury of anticipation again, and of being useful, felt the walls of her life expand and her sense of claustrophobia dissolve. *Not too old*, she thought, singing the words to herself, *not too old, not too old . . .* and very simply she said, "Yes, Bishop, I can fly to Morocco tomorrow night, I'd be delighted."

"Wonderful! I'll be with you by mid-afternoon to tell you all about it. Check your passport—no visas or vaccinations necessary—and start packing."

He hung up and when she put down the phone she was astonished to see that the living room in which she stood had come to life, too, its colors brilliant against white walls, the solitary geranium on the table a flaming red. And yet how drab it had all looked a few minutes ago, she thought, it wasn't the room, it was *me*, and I allowed it. She added crossly, "Yes, and now that I've said yes to Morocco I suppose I'll suddenly remember all the hazards involved in Carstairs' assignments and be appalled by my recklessness."

She laughed aloud. How difficult it was to be a human being, and how difficult to be consistent. She comforted herself by remembering that Emerson had called consistency the hobgoblin of small minds, and having thus scolded and consoled herself she walked happily upstairs to pack two carry-on bags and wait for Bishop.

He arrived at half-past two. The coffee was beginning to bubble indignantly when she heard the sound of a car sweeping up the graveled driveway and hurried to the door to open it for him. It had been months since she'd seen

him, and as he climbed out of a bright red car she greeted him with a joyous, "Bishop—a Jaguar?"

"Strictly rental," he said, grinning at her as he pulled his ubiquitous briefcase from the front seat. "When I was eighteen it was a jeep, in my twenties and thirties it didn't matter, but when one begins losing the vestiges of youth one turns to this sort of toy."

"It happens," she said, nodding. "But what prompted this choice bit of profoundness?"

"Middle age," he said, walking up the steps and adding gloomily, "I shall turn forty in two months."

"Shocking," she told him. "Come in and drown your midlife crisis in coffee and tell me about Morocco."

"Good," he said and tossed his coat over the arm of a chair. "Let's talk in the kitchen, I like kitchens. Bachelors rarely see kitchens and I *like* them."

"And I never knew," she said dryly. "One of those unguessed dimensions about you, Bishop!"

Heading into the cheerfully bright kitchen he placed his briefcase on the table and sat down, smiling happily at her. "I'm filled with dimensions that people fail to notice, it's the despair of my life."

"Especially the blondes you dote on?"

"Especially the blondes."

"I refuse to feel sorry for you," she told him and poured two cups of coffee and brought out a plate of blueberry muffins.

"Mmmmm," he murmured. "Very tempting, these muffins, I might try just one, thank you."

"Do," she said with a twinkle, knowing that before he left he would have devoured all six of them. "Is Carstairs well?"

Bishop nodded. "But yearning for simpler days. He feels the CIA's becoming too big, too bureaucratic, too profligate and rather arteriosclerotic, considering the global age