

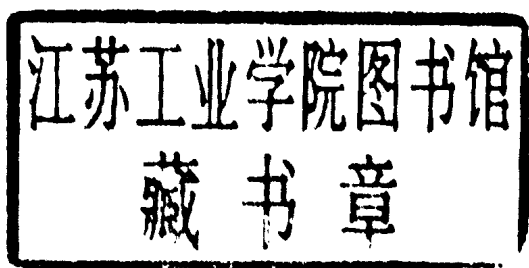
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BETTE PAUL

Ladlass

Bette Paul



André Deutsch Children's Books

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Chapter 1

“There’s a splendid view from the top!” That was the Geography tutor, Mr Baxter – Soupy to us. I could tell from his voice that there wouldn’t be a view; it was all jolly, and encouraging and . . . nervy. I mean, there would be a view on the right sort of day, but you didn’t have to be a meteorological genius to know that this was not one of them. Poor old Soupy, I thought. Although he wasn’t old, really.

I bent my back, pulled on my cagoule strings in a pathetic attempt at keeping the rain out and pushed onwards – and upwards. “Mist,” he called it. “We’re at cloud level,” he’d chortled just as we stepped into a sodden – sodding – white wall of nothing. When does condensation become precipitation? It wasn’t mist that was seeping down my back, it was bloody rain. My sympathy for Soupy evaporated.

We all followed Soupy up this track, deep between two very wet dry-stone walls. Why two, I wondered. It was daft enough to build even one wall right up there on the fell. I let the others go and paused to get my breath, propping myself on a big oblong stone that looked as if it had been a gate-

post. What for? Who would need to be shut in – or out of – that god-forsaken hole?

As if in reply to my ponderings, the last group of lads overtook me.

“Come over faint, have yer?”

“Giving up, then, are you?”

“Poor little thing – want to go home to your mam?”

They ended their witty chorus with a loud jeer and disappeared into the rain – sorry – mist, yowling, “You’ll never walk alooooone.” I had no intention of being left to walk alone in that fog, on that fell, in all my sodding clobber. I could just see three of them stepping daintily from stone to stone like puppets dancing. I squelched on, feeling mud ease its way through the lace-holes in my fell-boots. I didn’t care. God knows I’d had enough time to get used to it by then; it had rained all and every day since we’d come to the Tarn House to do course work for Geog or Biology A-level.

Course work? Oh yeah, of course. Traipsing around in the siling rain, catching pneumonia, that’d get me an A-Level Geog all right. The rain – sorry – the mist – dropped off my glasses, off my nose-end, off my chin. Seeing nothing I missed a squelch and slithered down onto a rock.

“Sodding hell!”

“Hurt yourself, Roslyn?” Soupy Baxter was right over me.

I staggered up. God! Even my knickers were soaked now.

“The name’s Lyn,” I muttered.

And that’s the least of my troubles. I mean, I don’t rate Roslyn at all; reminds me of baby powder, pink frills and lace nighties. But it can be cut to a neat little word – monosyllable, my English teacher calls it. It still sounds soft and soppy but if you just mutter it nearly disappears. Not like our surname. Wait for it – Bugge. Can you believe it? Why my Grandad or my Dad didn’t get round to changing

it I don't know. I can only think they want every new generation of our family to suffer as they did. Roslyn Bugge, that's me. The nicknames I leave to you, but don't kid yourself they're original - or funny.

"Ach, come on then, Lyn," said Soupy, giving me a hand up. I was so surprised I took it and let him pull me along to the top. It did seem funny, to be walking hand in hand with a teacher, but I had to admit, I needed that lift up.

And he was very nice about it, not chatting or urging me along, just plodding silently, guiding me out of the worst of the mud and smiling a bit now and then. For a moment it felt as if there was only us two in all that quiet space. For a moment I was nearly happy. It was a short moment though.

"Aye, aye. Where've you been, sir? In the heather with Livid Lyn?"

"Be careful, sir, she bites does that one - not in interesting places either."

"What're you doing with that ladlass, Mr Baxter, when there's lovely girls like us around?"

And so on and so forth, banter, banter, banter. Right suave lot that Geog set. They made me sick. Them and everybody else at that college. Soupy walked me straight through them and told everybody to follow on. I felt a right fool, leading the group. But Soupy kept me walking with him along the track until we reached a sort of stone hut. He unlocked the big wooden door and led us all in.

It was just one room with a stone floor and a few benches. There was only a window at one end, and when the last one shut the door, it was nearly dark. So of course the boys had to start whooo-ing and howling in a spooky way. The girls cooperated by squealing so I had a chance to bag a bench, take off my rucksack and sit.

God, I was knackered! Funny, I was full of energy some days and dead tired on others. I just sat, listening to the daft

noises from the others, too tired even to get my packed lunch out. I peered at the blurred images across the room. My glasses must need cleaning, I thought, but I couldn't be bothered.

"Hey, are you all right?" I didn't know the girl who sat on my bench. She wasn't in my group else she wouldn't have sat with me.

I nodded and shut my eyes. I could have slept right there on that hard bench, but this lass kept twitting on. She took a packet out of her rucksack and slammed it on the side of the bench to break it. Then she offered me some; it gleamed ever so white in the dim light. But I shook my head. I was too tired to eat. Besides, my mouth was really dry; that was ironic, considering how wet I was outside.

"Eat!" she ordered, pushing the stuff at me. "You need something for energy. Everest climbers eat this, so it's good enough for us."

She bit a chunk off the bar and crunched it loudly. She didn't seem to be lacking energy. I pushed my piece into my mouth and sucked on it. It was very sweet, and very minty.

"Kendal mint-cake," she explained through a mouthful. "Chew it up and have another. It quenches your thirst and raises your energy-level."

"Does it dry wet jeans?" I asked, sarcastically.

She laughed in a low, gurgly way, not shrieking like the others. "There you are, you see," she said. "You're feeling better already. Have some more."

She was right, I was feeling better. I pulled my hood off and shook my damp head. My short fuzzy hair clung to my head, soaked with the sweat inside the hood.

"Now eat your lunch," she ordered. "It'll drive the mint-cake round faster."

I nearly laughed, but I was still too wet and tired. "You sound like my grandma, ordering everybody about," I said.

“Your grandma probably knows more about survival in these conditions than I do. But I have studied metabolic rates.”

We unwrapped the cling-film from our baps and chewed silently. The others were still larking about, flipping bits of crust at each other and squirting fizzy coke. I noticed they were coming back into focus now.

“What was that about metals, you said you studied?” I asked after two cheese rolls and a Penguin. “At least I feel alive again, now.”

“That’s exactly it. Your metabolism is balanced again now, your energy level is up. Metabolism is the rate at which we convert our food into energy. I bet you didn’t have much breakfast this morning.”

“I had a cup of tea and some toast,” I said.

“And then set out on a ten-mile hike over rough country in foul weather. Yes. Well, no wonder.”

She was a strange lass, talking like an old granny, or a doctor, looking like a schoolgirl with her pale smooth face and lengths of fairish hair plastered on her forehead. She told me she was taking maths and sciences and the Geog was just an extra.

“Insurance,” she explained. “Just in case.”

“In case what?”

“In case I don’t make it to medical school.”

“Well, thanks for the consultation,” I said. “The treatment seems to have worked. If you need a reference for that medical school, I’ll write you one.”

She laughed and passed me another block of the miracle mint-cake. “Keep it in your pocket for this afternoon’s stint. And don’t let yourself get that low again this week. Eat a lot more than you do at home. It’s a tough life out here.”

I saw Anna a few times at the Study Centre, but she was

usually with a group of lads we called 'boffs' – meaning clever, scientific students. I wasn't part of that crowd – or any other crowd, come to think of it. Soupy was always on at me to join the others, but I knew they didn't want me. I don't know what was the worst part of that week: the days of trudging around in the rain or the evenings of jolly games. In between, we had to work on a diary and sketch-book of the day's expeditions and cook the supper. I hated cookery at school, fiddling around cutting radishes into water-lilies and beating hell out of cake mixture, but at the Field Centre you only had to open the freezer and a few tins and there was supper for twenty. Any idiot could do it – I could do it. In fact I often swapped duties with the others so that I could cook and miss the homework, then wash-up and miss the jollifications.

I sometimes wondered what our Mam would have said if she could have seen me slaving away in the kitchen. At home Kev and me had arguments about washing up – and usually we both won. Dad couldn't stand the noise so he washed the pots. If he could see me now, I thought, it'd bring tears to his eyes. But these days everything did. Mam would have turned me out of the kitchen into the classroom, but I was just too fagged by the end of the day to do anything intelligent. During the walks, when we were supposed to be collecting data for the homework, I was propping myself up somewhere, trying to get the energy for the next hike. It didn't seem fair, puffing and panting at the tail end of the twenty-a-day lads when I never ever smoked. I never ever realised I was so unfit, either.

I found out, though, on the last day when we had to take maps and compasses and find our own way back. Soupy took us out in the mini-bus, gave us a list of clues that we had to follow and left us to it. It was actually fine, too, but grey and cold. I couldn't use a compass so I tagged on to Anna's

group. They were all boffs who were doing top A-Level sciences. They were also very tall, even the girls. I had to work three times as hard as they did just to keep up.

“We have to head down the valley after this turn,” somebody called from the front.

“No we don’t, we can get back over the tops,” said Gary Baldwin.

“I know we can get back over the tops, you nerker. That’s not the point; we’ve got to follow Soupy’s route to pick up the answers to his clues.”

“No we haven’t. We’ve got to stop playing silly buggers, get the worst of the walk over, then stop in the pub for the rest of the afternoon.”

This argument went on while we walked along the road. Even I could hear it from fifty yards back. I saw them all stop by some steps in the stone wall; some set off down to the valley road but a few lads were climbing the steps when I caught up. “What’re you doing?” I puffed.

“Oh God, it’s Ladlass Lyn!”

“Piss off, this is a stag party.”

“She thinks that’s where she belongs. Macho Maiden!”

Gary Baldwin lived near us; he had been in my gang when we were kids. He pointed down the road. “The right route is down there – follow the boffs. We’re taking a short-cut on our own.”

I nodded. I was used to this. Without speaking, I set off down the road after the others. Even if they were well ahead, the road was better than that vertical hillside.

“You OK, Lyn?” Gary shouted from the top of the wall.

I didn’t turn, just jerked my thumb up. What the hell would he do if I wasn’t?

By now I’d lost sight of both parties but that didn’t bother me; I’d got used to being on my own now. It had been different when I was a kid; I was always out on the streets

with my gang, building dens, climbing walls, racing bikes across the allotments. I'd always been a leader until we went up to the comprehensive. After that the gangs seemed to melt away. The same lads were there, but they played different games: team games like football or cricket, with rules that excluded girls. The girls went to aerobics, gymnastics or dancing classes. I took to staying in and scribbling. I even got to like being on my own; at least that's what I always said when our Kev offered to take me out.

On my own right now didn't feel so great. Surely I had put on enough speed to meet the others? I felt puffed enough anyway. The road dropped into the village and I stopped to get my breath, and my lunch-time apple.

I went to the nearest wall and leant against the bus stop. At home I often didn't eat anything until dinner and I never even noticed. It must be all this exercise and fresh air that was killing me. Wait till I saw Dad. Do me good indeed! I might even raise a smile when I told him. Just.

Chewing hard, I looked at the map, framed in a plastic holder, tied round my neck. I could see the road I'd just walked along, and find the track across the hills that the lads had taken, and – that was it – the footpath along the dale, just before the dip into the village, where the boffs had gone. I'd been so far away in the past that I'd missed it.

“One of these days you'll be in real trouble with that dreaming of yours,” our Mam told me, very regularly. And now I was.

I set off up the hill, feeling sick. After the apple my energy should improve, according to Dr Anna-Boff-Hitchens. The thought of Anna cheered me up a bit: if I could catch them up, she might talk to me a bit. I moved back out of the village, my legs feeling as if they were under water, found the track and turned off the road onto the soft wet grass of the dale.

Chapter 2

I started off quite cheerful – for me.

“Why don’t you smile sometimes, our Lyn? It might make you look attractive,” our Mam said almost daily. “No wonder you’ve got no friends; you’re hardly the life and soul of the party, are you?”

Well, I wasn’t, but left to myself I might be the life and soul of my own party. Why did everybody keep on at me about friends? I could do without. I’m a lot happier with my scribbles than giggling with the girls or grappling with the boys of a Saturday night.

It was a Saturday morning when all this field-study-lark started. Dad had been tidying up – again – and found my letter from college. When I went down to the kitchen he was poring over it.

“Field studies . . . Tarn House. . . November. . . .” Dad was blinking as he read it out to Kev.

“Eeh bah gum, fancy sending them college kids to study out in fields! We all know what they’ll be studying out there.” Kev was doing his impersonation of a professional

Yorkshireman. "Ah never knew there was sustificates for that."

"If there was you'd never get one," I told him. I can be quite withering at times.

"Ark at the sex-pot of South Yorks!" he jeered. His stubbly cheeks puffed out as he laughed and his bright blue piggy eyes twinkled. He's four years older than me but not much bigger. He's got such ridiculous long golden curls that he looks like my younger sister. You don't tell him that, of course.

"Eeh, ah don't know about this," said Dad. He wasn't doing an impersonation, he just talks like that. "Ah don't know, I'm sure." And he's not; he's never sure of anything these days. "It'll cost, you know, and your mam's got enough on." He was right there. Our Mam had the lot of us on: Dad signing on sick, Kev signing on the social, and me not even signing. Then she had her job on the Housing Association, her place on the Council, her fund-raising for the homeless, her dozens of meetings. No wonder Dad . . .

"Never mind," I said quickly, to stop him getting his shakes. "I don't want to go." I did, though. For one thing, I'd already capped two humanities outings to Stratford because they were so expensive. If I missed this one I'd be in trouble.

"Nay, you should go if it's for college. And you'll enjoy it right up there. It'll be like we used to . . ." Dad was off again, his eyes filled with tears. Kev looked across the table at me and raised his eyebrows. I scowled back. Our Kev and Dad represent the two unacceptable faces of unemployment: the one won't work for a living and the other can't live without working. They should do a documentary about them.

As usual, as I knew all along he would, he copped out. "It'll be for your mam to decide."

And of course, she did; very decisive, our Mam, especially

when it comes to education. She handed over the money without so much as wincing, though it was the best part of her week's wages. "It'll do you good to get away with a few intelligent young folk," she said. "But think on, I want no skiving. I want you to come back with plenty of work done, with some friends and with a smile. All right?" Trust our Mam to give with one hand and take away with the other.

Well, by this last day, I'd done no real work, made no friends, and I didn't feel at all like smiling. In fact I felt terribly dry suddenly. I looked at the river alongside me; it clattered onwards, clear and dark over the rocks. It looked so cold and clear that I stopped at the edge and wondered whether to drink some.

I bent over the shallow water and suddenly remembered the last time Soupy had dropped back to walk with me. We were following a stream along a flat valley bottom so the going was easy. I was still way behind; I just never seemed to get into my stride that morning, scuttling fast to catch up then lagging behind to get my breath. Soupy met me on a bend in the stream and strode along, matching his steps to mine and smiling down at me now and then. Together we approached the little bridge where the others were gathered.

Gary Baldwin was filling his water bottle at the stream. Soupy had warned us about that but when Gary saw him, he deliberately took a long drink. Soupy just walked on, talking in a clear, carrying voice. He told us about the time he had filled his water-bottle from a peaty stream up in the Highlands, hundreds of miles from any industrial pollution. Soupy drank that water as he wended his way up the hillside, where he discovered the rotting carcase of a sheep straddling the stream. We all laughed at that. Except for Gary, who looked a bit pale.

Now, my stomach heaved at the thought. I was sweating

too, and dizzy with the effort of walking. I stopped and listened. There was the eternal, infernal sound of running water and nothing else. Surely I should have caught up with the boffs by now? I felt as though I had walked for hours, but my watch was back in my locker and the day was so grey I couldn't tell whether it was past noon.

I leaned against a great outcrop, breathing fast, trying to keep down the feeling of sickness. I felt something hard in my cagoule pocket – the remains of the mint-cake Anna Hitchens had given me the other day. I crunched it slowly, remembering the friendly boff's advice about metabolism.

That's what was making me feel so rotten, I thought, pressing onwards upstream. What I needed was a good dinner.

"What you need is a good dinner inside you," my gran said every Sunday when she came to us. "Get some flesh on them bones. All this dieting nonsense." It was no use protesting that I didn't diet because Gran never listened to anything, unless it was on television.

"You'll go and catch that disease," she said, with satisfaction. She seemed to like the idea of me catching a disease.

"What disease?" I asked her.

"That anoraks disease you lasses all get."

Kev bust a gut laughing. "You hear that, Lyn? Your old anorak looks as if it's got a disease to pass on to you. I should get a new one if I was you." And he laughed all over his Yorkshire pudding and gravy.

"Anorexia, Clara," our Mam corrected her.

"Aye well, be that as it may. That's what she's got, all skin and bone. You mun' feed her up. Give her some dumplings and some suet puddings."

Ugh! There's this belief in Yorkshire that you have to be 'bonny' — meaning big and hefty. Lots of the women of our

Mam's age are hefty and muscular – size twenty upwards; even at school there were plenty of girls who weighed twelve stone and more. I'm short, like my dad, and skinny, like our Mam. And not over fond of stodge: steamed pudding and custard I can do without, and as for the fried breakfasts my dad used to demand, in his bread-winning days, well, the very smell of sizzling bacon of a morning made me heave.

A great wave of sickness rose in me now. I turned off the path, put my head into a bramble bush and retched . . . and retched . . . and . . .

There was the most disgusting smell. I had to get away from that bush. I couldn't believe that I had made that stench; somebody must have dumped some chemical there. It was a chemical sort of smell, like gallons of nail-varnish remover.

Without consulting my map I pressed upwards away from the water. Now I was so faint and so sweaty that I didn't care which route I took, so long as it led back. I was climbing up on my hands and knees, the top of the dale swirling above me. I thought if I made it right to the top, I would have a clear view of the track to Tarn House.

Gasping and grasping at ferns and brambles and grasses, I pulled myself upwards. When I reached the top, I rolled over the edge and lay wallowing in sweat and sick and tears.

Amazingly, I must have slept. When I woke up it was darker than ever and I was parched. Not just thirsty, but dried out; my mouth had no spit in it at all, and my tongue was thick and rough. I had to get some water, even before I set off again. I sat up, holding onto the earth to stop it shifting around me; then I risked standing. There was a stony track along the ridge so I turned back along it towards the sound of rushing water. Reeling like a drunken yobbo I followed the noise.

It was a waterfall; gallons and gallons of clear water