

MRS.
POLLIFAX
PURSUED

DOROTHY GILMAN

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Also by Dorothy Gilman

CARAVAN

UNCERTAIN VOYAGE

A NUN IN THE CLOSET

THE CLAIRVOYANT COUNTESS

THE TIGHTROPE WALKER

INCIDENT AT BADAMYÂ

GIRL IN BUCKSKIN

THE MAZE IN THE HEART OF THE CASTLE

The Mrs. Pollifax Series

THE UNEXPECTED MRS. POLLIFAX

THE AMAZING MRS. POLLIFAX

THE ELUSIVE MRS. POLLIFAX

A PALM FOR MRS. POLLIFAX

MRS. POLLIFAX ON SAFARI

MRS. POLLIFAX ON THE CHINA STATION

MRS. POLLIFAX AND THE HONG KONG BUDDHA

MRS. POLLIFAX AND THE GOLDEN TRIANGLE

MRS. POLLIFAX AND THE WHIRLING DERVISH

Nonfiction

A NEW KIND OF COUNTRY

About the Author

DOROTHY GILMAN has written books for adults and children. She is the author of ten Mrs. Pollifax novels, including *Mrs. Pollifax and the Second Thief*, *The Unexpected Mrs. Pollifax*, *Mrs. Pollifax and the Golden Triangle*, *Mrs. Pollifax and the Whirling Dervish*, and *The Amazing Mrs. Pollifax*—as well as eight other novels.

She divides her time between Norwalk, Connecticut, and Albuquerque, New Mexico.

MRS. POLLIFAX PURSUED

PROLOGUE

Henry Bidwell was rich but this was of little consequence to him since he had always been rich. What mattered most to him was that he was successful in his work, his wealth increasing each day as a result of his own clear thinking, acute judgments, and calculations. He held a vital position in Claiborne-Osborne International, a conservative investment and holding company that prided itself on its global connections and was dedicated to making even more money smoothly, discreetly, and with well-concealed ruthlessness. He traveled abroad frequently to inspect these varied interests and to investigate new acquisitions, moving in a world made seamless by ease and convenience.

On this late Friday afternoon in April before departing from his desk he checked his calendar, noted that his wife was entertaining a dozen people for dinner that evening, and that he could anticipate a weekend of golf. As he nodded with satisfaction his phone rang and he frowned. His secretary had already left for the day and he did not appreciate phones that rang without Miss Ferguson's intervention. Nevertheless he picked up the receiver, said sharply, "Bidwell here," and listened to the voice at the other end, murmured,

"I understand . . . you can't tell me when?" And then, "Of course, yes," and hung up. Following a glance at his gold Breitling watch he brushed a speck of lint from his Armani suit and picked up his briefcase, knowing that his chauffeur, Georges, would arrive punctually in five minutes. Walking to his private elevator he descended eighteen floors to the lobby, made his exit through the bank of glass doors, and walked out into the pleasant late afternoon sunlight. His limousine had not yet pulled into the NO PARKING space opposite the lobby doors; at the moment the space had been usurped by a dirty white van with a misspelled CHIGI SCAP METAL painted on its panel.

The driver of the van, giving him a sharp glance, looked a cheeky fellow in a ragged cap; his confederate had just walked around the van to its rear and was unlocking and opening the two rear doors. Bidwell stepped to the edge of the sidewalk and said sternly, "Look here, my good man, you can't stop here. Can't you read? No parking allowed."

The man gave him a mocking glance and said scornfully, "Put your head in a bucket, mister."

"The law is very strict," pointed out Mr. Bidwell. "On this street especially, the police—"

The man narrowed his eyes and moved toward him aggressively. "Yeah?"

Bidwell retreated a step from the curb but the man followed, thrusting his face close to Bidwell's. "Yeah?" he repeated, and lifted a dirty hand to shake a filthy rag in Bidwell's face.

It was at this moment that Bidwell realized he had misunderstood the situation, that this confrontation had been planned, it was premeditated, because something was certainly wrong: the rag shoved into his face had been saturated with a chemical both unpleasant and penetrating, and his

quick gasp only made worse the fumes searing his nostrils and throat. He was aware of the sidewalk beginning to move giddily up and down in front of him, ultimately coiling like a snake and then blurring fuzzily. As Mr. Bidwell slid down to join it he felt himself caught, lifted, carried away, and dumped on a hard metal surface. When the door slammed he was already unconscious on the floor of the Chigi Scap Metal van.

Mrs. Pollifax, relaxing for a few minutes over coffee at her kitchen table, dutifully scanned the headlines of the morning newspaper: OPEC MEETING ABORTIVE; FOOD RIOTS IN UBANGIBA; TORNADO HITS KANSAS; but she was far more interested in the abduction of Henry Bidwell four days ago, about which there was a long article, but with very little fresh news. His disappearance intrigued her; she enjoyed mysteries, having been involved in a number of them herself. Words like *snatched* appealed to her, and *no witnesses*—on such a busy street, too—fueled her curiosity. Reading further she discovered that “no witnesses” was not quite true: the police had now unearthed a fruit vendor on the next block who had noticed Bidwell standing on the curb because he’d seen him sway dizzily and be helped into a car. *Taken sick*, the vendor had thought, but since his view had been blocked by lines of parked cars, and he had been half a block away, his information was too scanty to be of help. Bidwell, however, remained missing and it was becoming more and more obvious that because of his position he’d been abducted for ransom.

If his situation intrigued Mrs. Pollifax, his importance did

not, since planting basil in her greenhouse was the more vital to her this morning. Draining her cup of coffee, she picked up her trowel and walked through the open door into the bright sunny greenhouse. Her geraniums were blossoming in colorful profusion but this year she was planting herbs, too, and she noted that both the mints and the sage were nearly ready to be transplanted into the garden. This was where she celebrated spring, planting and nurturing, adjusting vents and shade and drinking in the pungent smells of warm earth, lime, bone meal, and mint.

Glancing up from her work she was surprised to see a shabby white van once again drive past the house on its way up Maple Lane. She frowned because she had seen it pass the house three times yesterday, noticing it especially because of the sign on its side panel, which she had mentioned to Cyrus as he packed to attend the meeting of the American Bar Association.

"Lost art, spelling," he'd said. "Emily, where's the other blue tie I wear with this shirt?"

"You'll only be away until Monday," she'd reminded him.

"I spill," he pointed out. "Bound to spill if I don't carry spares."

She had laughed and restored the extra ties to his suitcase, but later the van had driven past for the third time and she had noticed how it slowed at the sight of Cyrus checking the tires of the car in the driveway. It was impossible to mistake it because it bore the same misspelled sign: CHIGI SCAP METAL.

Now it was passing the house again.

This, she told herself sternly, is *what comes of working for Carstairs and the Department; the antenna keeps working, there is too MUCH awareness, which is all very well on assignments*

fraught with danger but I am NOT on assignment, I'm in my own house and trying to plant basil.

On the other hand, she reflected thoughtfully, very few cars used Maple Lane; it was a shortcut to the highway that only neighbors used, and few people knew about, and its usual traffic was familiar to her: Mr. Gogan off to work each morning and returning; Mrs. Haycock driving to her job at the hospital; the young Abners delivering their son to day care, the mail truck, the carpenters building an addition at the Witkowskis.

She supposed that eventually there would be a reasonable explanation for this new vehicle going up and down the lane at such odd hours. What she did not understand was why its frequent appearances had begun to make her uneasy. *I need food*, she decided; of course she needed food after such an early breakfast, and with a glance at her wrist watch she put aside her trowel and returned to the kitchen. Opening the refrigerator door she inspected its contents critically: the chicken was for dinner, the salad—but she didn't want salad, she was too hungry after driving Cyrus to the airport at dawn. Her eyes fell on the package of Cyrus's favorite salami, and—*living dangerously*, she thought with a smile—she opened a fresh loaf of bread, unwrapped the salami, and made a sandwich. Pouring a glass of milk she carried her lunch on a tray to the patio where she could sit in the sun and admire the tulips and crocuses.

It was a pleasant scene; beyond the beds of flowers, at a distance, marched a row of birches that lined the unpaved road into the woods, but as her gaze moved from the tulips to the distant trees she saw that she was not as private as she had hoped: something white caught her eye. A car was parked on one side of the woods road, no doubt its occupant

eating his or her lunch, too, she thought, and wondered why the discovery made her uncomfortable. With a sigh she stood up and carried her tray back into the house. Depositing it on the dining table, and scolding herself for doing this, she drew out Cyrus's bird-watching binoculars from the drawer of the buffet and walked to the window.

I'm being ridiculous, she thought.

They were very fine binoculars and, although a tree concealed the front of the car and its occupant, she could see that it was a shabby white van and she could make out five letters of the sign on the panel: SCAP M.

"I think," said Mrs. Pollifax aloud, very firmly, "that I will move the car out of the driveway and into the garage."

She had no idea why this was important, and as she walked out of the house and climbed into the car she asked herself why. *Because Cyrus is away?* she wondered, *and I'm alone here? But why move the car?*

Finding no ready answer she drove the car to the rear of the house; the garage doors obediently swung open and closed behind her, and for that moment she felt snug and relaxed. Reentering the house from the garage she walked down the hall past the living room and through the kitchen, and as she reached the greenhouse saw the white van drive past the house and disappear.

She sighed with relief.

Emily, she thought, *you've behaved very irrationally this past hour, and need I remind you that this is the route to paranoia?* With grim resolve she resumed her planting of basil and presently found other matters to think about: the Garden Club meeting tomorrow, for instance, and the sandwiches she had volunteered that were already made and covered

with a damp cloth in the refrigerator. Wondering if the men attending the meeting would be content with cucumber sandwiches, it occurred to her that she might add half a dozen sandwiches of salami. *Cholesterol be damned*, she thought, and abandoning the basil she walked into the kitchen to expand the refreshment menu.

The salami, however, was not in the refrigerator.

This seemed odd, since she had made a sandwich of it scarcely an hour ago; nevertheless the salami was not where it should have been in the refrigerator, nor was it on the counter or the kitchen table.

Puzzled, she emptied the refrigerator's top shelf of chicken, bread, salad, the platter of Garden Club sandwiches, and a carton of eggs, but the salami had not been hiding behind any of them; it was simply not there. With a sigh of exasperation she began the tiresome job of returning the food to the top shelf, but when she picked up the newly opened loaf of bread it struck her as surprisingly light; she examined it more carefully and felt a vague sense of disquiet because earlier she had extracted two slices from the top of the loaf and now there were at least five slices missing, as well as the crust.

Definitely uneasy now, Mrs. Pollifax walked to the cupboard in which she stored canned goods and ran a sharp eye over its contents. There had been eight tins of sardines yesterday and Cyrus had packed two of them for snacks; there should have been six left but there was now only one. Gone, too, were the screw-top jars of herring, and the six-pack of colas had been reduced to four.

The house suddenly felt oppressively silent. Mrs. Pollifax was no longer uneasy; a small chill was racing down her spine.

What this means, she thought, feeling her way gingerly toward an explanation, is that while I drove Cyrus to the airport this morning someone broke into this house and stole some food.

This was the rationale that she preferred, but of course it was entirely wrong because only an hour ago she had made a sandwich of the missing salami and bread.

Very reluctantly she approached the only viable explanation, and she did not like it at all. It meant that she was not alone here, there was someone else in this house with her. Now, at this moment. Hiding somewhere.