

10 Short Stories
each with
a Beginning, a Middle, and an End

by
Josselyn Hennessy

95, Linden Gardens,
London W2
Tel: Bay: 5205

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High spirits

"Samson"

by

Jossleyn Hennessy

95, Linden Gardens,
London W2

Soon after I'd been posted. To Sindhipur, one of India's smaller RAF centres, I happened on. Mrs Murdock, My group captain's wife, in the bazaar. She gave me a sub. Zero stare. I wondered what I'd done. I was only a pilot officer at the time., green and. Scared stiff. It doesn't do to be in wrong. With your old man's wife, especially when she's the queen bee. Of a place so short. On Civilization, that, if you're not liked, solo Shakespeare reading. Is the wildest form of fun and games on tap.

The Mess soon cleared up the mystery for me.

"Have you left a visiting card on her?"

"No."

"And you've been here 14 days and nights! My God? You'd be a social pariah dog! As a matter of fact, although she believes the outposts of Empire are held together by boiled shirts and starched manners, she's really a damn good sort. Get a move on and call today."

I was all set to do so when I was unexpectedly ordered to rush a kite to the other end of India. It would be some days before I could get back. Then I remembered that Edwards, a Flight-sergeant., had to turn out at four **akk** AM next day to pick up some girders from the station. We were building a hanger and started work early before the heat came up. I asked him if he'd stop off at the Murdoch's bungalow and drop my cards in their letter box.

When I got back 10 days later, I'd forgotten all about. Mrs Murdock. And social decorum. But Edwards turned up at once to say that he'd left the cards.

"Fine! Thanks for bothering to come round so soon to tell me.

I thought that having set my mind at rest, he'd hop off, but he just stood there, looking sheepish.

"Thanks a lot," I said, encouragingly, supposing that he must be one of those shy birds who find difficulty in taking off once they've been grounded anywhere.

"I think you ought to know, sir", he said hesitatingly, "I had a bit of a mix up, like."

Slowly and gathered the shattering story from him.

The approach to the bungalow was semi-circular; you know, you drive in at one gate and out at the other. Edwards forgot to leave my cards on the way out to the station, but he remembered on the way back. Of course, he ought to have left the lorry outside and walked the 25 yards to the front door; but he didn't think, so, before he knew what he was. Up., the near side girder. Sticking out over his bonnet in front, had brought the left-hand column of Mrs Murdock's porch down with a noise like a blockbuster. It was just daybreak.

Edwards heard the Group Captain yell 'Out of the house everyone! It's an earthquake!' Murdoch had been in the great Quetta 'quake; so he knew. And within seconds, the old man himself in pyjamas, a scared child in either hand, followed by Mrs Murdoch in a flimsy night dress, run out to the lawn at the side. A dozen excited bearers, khitmatghars, mesolchis and sweepers, headed by an ayah screaming like a jammed steam- whistle, came scuttling from the compound.

If Edwards had been soundly brought up to survive with the fittest, he'd have switched off his head lights and trod on the gas and I bet he'd have got away in the confusion. But in him, the noise, dust, and general bewilderment produced a combined op feeling that he ought to stand by as someone was sure to need help. It didn't occur to him that he might be that someone. Besides, he had not handed in my cards; conscientiousness, not fast thought, was his forte. So he waited until the storm had died to comparative twitterings to step down, salute, and solemnly hand the old man two pieces of pasteboard engraved with my name. Murdoch was a tall, lean, reserved Scot who got things done at the double by the jump-to-it look in his eye. But he could put the atmospherics off a troopship's loudspeaker into his voice if he were riled.

"What the hell's this?" he blared.

"Mr Allerton's cards, sir, with his compliments," Edwards murmured, with that friendly, depreciating smile of his.

The old man, Mrs M., the children, and the servants just gaped at him.

"Did he tell you to wreck the bungalow with his compliments, too?" Murdoch asked finally.

"Oh no, sir," Edwards said, shocked that anyone should think so meanly of a fellow creature. The porch was just a -- a kind of accident -- like, sir ... I'm awfully sorry, sir."

"Well, take your damned lorry away. I'll settle you later."

Amidst an accusing silence that pained him, Edwards slipped in the clutch and had covered a few feet before he heard warning shouts. He was stopped by a jolt, followed by a crash like El Alamein. In turning to make the second half of the semi-circle, the girder jutting from the rear had tackled the remaining column low; the porch roof, now deprived of support, fell flat. In the Police lines, a couple of hundred yards away, a bugle sounded the alarm.

Edwards got down to see dim pyjamaed figures choking in clouds of dust. Overall, he had the old man swearing 'something shocking, sir', and Mrs M. say 'Pas devant les enfants.' She had something there, as Queen Victoria would have snapped. Once more, you or I would have fled; but Edwards first made sure that no one was hurt and then hovered around the old man, guiltily anxious to oblige if someone would only tell him how. 'The Group Captain and Mrs Murdoch were smothered, as if they'd been --- begging your pardon, sir ---- having a go at each other, playful-like, with bags of flour. They needed a bath and a tin of Vim each.'

Mrs M. looked from her husband down at herself, snatched the children and went indoors quickly.

"Have you any more visiting cards to leave?" Murdoch asked hoarsely.

Edwards felt in his pockets.

"No, sir," he said, disappointed that his reply was somehow not as helpful as he would have liked.

At that moment the District Commissioner, 'Bags' Foster, fat and jovial, loomed up and boomed out:

"Hallo, Gregory! Special night bombing exercise? Sounding the last trump? Or just having a party?"

"My newest recruit has been paying me a friendly call," Murdoch replied furiously sarcastic.

Foster surveyed the columns. One had fallen through the front door into the hall. Both were in pieces. The rubble of the heavy sun-proof porch lay three feet deep.

"Good thing he wasn't annoyed with you," he remarked.

Edwards cleared his throat.

"Will that be all, sir?" he ventured.

Murdoch looked at him; he seemed to be searching for words; then he said with a suppressed ferocity that made Edwards feel that the 'Group Captain had got me all wrong, as you might say, sir':

"All? For god's sake get out of here while I've still got a roof over my head."

Sadly frustrated, Edwards was starting his engine when he became aware that

his way was blocked by a sacred cow which had chosen to lie down on the drive for a cud-chewing session. Nearby a couple of Brahmini bulls were rooting the grass on the front lawn. These animals rove the bazaars, eating their fill from the stalls of green-grocers or corn dealers. To prevent them as disrespectful. Riots have started only because a wrathful Muslim has dared to drive a sacred Hindu cow from his merchandise.

Edwards pressed his horn, but the desert dust accumulated in its innards limited it to a husky cough.

“What is it now? Want the whole damned bungalow to move out of your way? Get on out!” (I extract the printable sections of Murdoch 's observations).

“I can't, sir. I've got a sacred cow ahead,” Edwards called back.

“You've got a sacrilegious cow ahead,” rasped Murdoch.

Foster let out a belly laugh while Murdoch charged angrily round the bungalow and struck the animal with all his force. Now the Indian cow's hide is tough and the effect on Murdoch was as though he had smashed his fist on a slab of marble. Speechless, he dropped his paralysed arm. The cow twitched its tail with a fly-flicking movement but remained otherwise indifferent. Not so the bulls. They had not cared for the abruptness with which Murdoch had entered their field of vision, and they cared still less for his attitude towards one who was (Edwards surmised) respectively their wife and mother. Lowering their heads, the bulls advanced. Edwards' well-meaning attempt to distract their attention by what were intended as vigorous blasts on the horn, merely suggested that he thought the situation called for a series of discreet, behind-the-hand, coughs. There was nothing else for it; Murdoch ran. The bearers, khitmatghars and other fascinated hangers-on, took off before him as one man and fled like a ghostly rout of dervishes to the compound in rear. In a twinkling, the bulls had chased the Group Captain and the District Commissioner on to the side veranda and cornered them with a neat wheeling manoeuvre. Fortunately, an almirah (large wardrobe) offered a ready-made funk hole and into this Foster (laughing) and Murdoch (gasping) shut themselves.

Whereupon first one and then the other bull sank cumbrously on to the veranda floor and brooded at the almirah.

The sounds emerging from the D.C. Made it clear that Foster had given himself over to almirah-shaking laughter --- so infectious that even the soured Murdoch spotted the joke and burst into guffaws.

The tug between Edwards' companionable itch to join in heartily and his sense of discipline resulted in fits and starts of the giggles which he kept as respectful as possible. 'Things had been getting so unsociable, it quite cheered me up to hear the gentlemen larking about in their cupboard,' he confided to me. 'I thought Mr. Foster would have it over before he'd finished.' And scores of Indian servants from neighbouring bungalows, who had collected to lean interestedly with both elbows over the garden walls, began to laugh too.

Into this happy picture, which was rapidly warming up as the sun gained height,

there now rode a trim figure on a splendid horse. Edwards recognised the Brigadier commanding the sub-area out for his pre-breakfast counter. The Brigadier, and his horse, appeared frankly suspicious at what they saw: a Hindu cow daring to sprawl on a senior British Officer's drive --- two Brahmini bulls outrageously using his veranda as though it was some naked faquir's hut --- hordes of mutinously jeering Indians ---- a wretched R.A.F. driver terrorised into sniggering imbecility --- the Murdoch's bungalow dynamited!

Only a week ago the Brigadier's troops had to open fire on a bazar-looting mob; and now here was evidently some new form of damned seditious demonstration thought up by that fellow Gandhi. Instinctively he drew a revolver and as instinctively he cocked it.

"Well?" he challenged.

Edwards had begun the process of thinking out some explanation that would put everybody concerned in a good light --- when another unlooked for turn in the exercise had all ranks guessing.

A noise as of a crazy schoolmistress tearing along clanging a jeroboam-sized assembly bell with one hand and firing a sub-machine gun with the other, resolved itself into the Sindhipur Model T Mark fire-engine which skidded to a brake-screaming stop within inches of the sacred cow.

At once, the scene sprang from still-life to high-speed action. Eight Punjabi firemen slid from the engine, unrolled hoses and made other threatening gestures towards any lurking conflagration. From a standing jump, that Brigadier's horse cleared the cow, leaped superbly over the five-foot brick wall, scattered the crowd right and left, and bolted for home, what time the Brigadier circled overhead and (as witnesses afterwards swore) exploded in mid-air ... Actually, he landed, in one piece, on a rose bush with a smoking revolver whose trigger he had involuntarily squeezed on the way. This commotion caused the sacred cow to jerk indignantly to her four feet and to lollop off towards the servants' quarters where her arrival was acknowledged back some seconds later by remote discord. The bulls crashed loyally after their wife and mother (Remote discord renewed tremolo agitato crescendo).

Foster and Murdoch peered sweatily from their almirah, took one look at the fire-engine, another at the inexplicable figure of the Brigadier (his face scarlet as the roses in which he sat) and staggered out, the tears streaming from their eyes.

"Another early morning caller," Foster spluttered. "What a p-p-popular fellow you are, Gregory!"

"Why the f-f-fire-engine?" sobbed Murdoch. "I thought he was cav-cavalry.

"M---me---meme-meme-me---" cackled Foster, in uncontrollable dots and dashes," --chanised," he finished with an effort.

"You don't think I came in that!" raged the Brigadier waving his revolver at the

engine with a motion that he sent the fireman beetling for cover behind it. "I rode in --- but I've lost my horse."

This information swept Foster and Murdoch into new gales of laughter. "He-he didn't come in the f-f-fire-engine. He-he came on a ho-horse, but he's lost it," they assured each other between paroxysms.

The Brigadier seemed ready to let fly some caustic comments, possibly emphasised by gun fire, when Mrs Murdoch stepped onto the veranda. Her ash-blond hair was in review order, her morning make-up in place, and she wore a snowy, short-sleeved dress. She looked like a cover picture from a Vogue summer number.

"Shall we stop acting like characters in a comic strip?" she suggested equably.

Then to the fireman she said in Hindustani: "Enough. It is well done, but it is finished. Thank you. Go now quickly."

To the D.C.: "While Gregory has a bath, I wish you'd come in, Bags, and phone the P.W.D. an order to clear this mess up --- today --- this morning --- within an hour. They'll take it from you. And then you'd better stay to breakfast."

Turning to the rose bush, she said smoothly: "Good morning, Brigadier. It's nice to see you at all times. Some bacon and eggs while we send for your car?"

All the reward that Edwards got for his anxious consideration of everyone's feelings was a curtly waved dismissal.

Alone at last, Edwards was, for the third time, about to leave when his glance fell on my visiting cards lying neglected on the lawn. They would be swept up with the rubble if no one rescued them. He jumped down, dusted them on his sleeve, scrambled over the fallen masonry into the hall, put them on a tray with other cards, and drove off with the satisfaction of one who had done his duty but was glumly aware that the result was not what England had expected.

There was a slight jar as he swung into the road, but as Edwards was more concentrated on watching out to avoid hitting anything more with his girders, it didn't register itself on his mind. Arrived at the hangar, he found a five-barred gate hooked onto his rear. Painted on it in white was: "Group Captain G. Murdoch, R.A.F." The girders were undamaged.

As I listened to Edwards, my stomach turned slowly over. I was barely out of school, and I'd made the heads of Sindhipur's four most important departments ---the Civil, Military, Air and Social ---the laughingstock of the whole District.

"Well, Edwards, don't you worry," I sighed. "I take over the wreck from here. I'd better look in on the Group Captain before he sends for me."

He was, however, away for the day. I had time to reflect. That the D.C. and Murdoch had been able to laugh at themselves offered a gleam. I should have to stand a flaying from the old man and chaff from the Mess but I could stick that out. But Mrs Murdoch? Told maliciously, the story of my cards could make her out a ridiculous snob. She'd watch and drop vitriol on everything I did until Murdoch agreed with her

estimate of my character. The more I thought, the more I felt Mrs M. was the femme that I ought to chercher as soon as possible. If I handed her a man-size apology and was able to weave it into the idea that the joke was against me --- not her --- I might not only get a Cease-fire but perhaps even sign her up as an ally.

I still think that this appreciation was sound but what I didn't allow for was the difference between the man of the world who was running over his lines alone in front of a mirror and the bashful babe who was to prop himself up as a target in front of a woman with a quiverful of experience in shooting down babes of all ages.

A smart head-bearer, all in white, answered my knock at the bungalow. Summoning my courage, I followed him into a large and agreeable living room. There was nice sort of things about and I got the idea that if I'd called on Mrs M. in a less commando manner, I might have found her good value.

In an Indian bungalow, doors are always open to catch the draught and you hear everything from one end to the other. I heard the bearer announce me and Mrs M. say, "Tell him to wait." The minutes dawdled by while the sweat oozed down my back. Funk --- not heat. What on earth could she be doing all this time? At the end of 15 minutes when she'd got me feeling like an advanced battle-fatigue case, Mrs M. strode in. With her came a whiff of the kind of perfume that helps to keep body and soul apart. Her dress was in the expensively simple class that mixed juries sarcastic with each other ...Her face was expressionless.

I opened my mouth but the look in her eye stopped any words from coming. She held two smudged visiting cards in the extreme tips of her fingers.

"I believe these belong to you. Please take them," she observed, and stretched out her hand.

In my numbed state, I failed to catch hold properly and the whirling punkah blew the cards behind me. It seemed a risk to stoop for them, but she kept a grip on herself and took no advantage of my momentarily defenceless base.

Apologies were obviously useless. I bowed and stumbled to the door, ducking instinctively as I sensed a movement behind me.

"If, without smashing anything more than is essential," Mrs M. was saying, "you'd leave your cards in the hall as you go out, perhaps you'll dine and dance with us at the club tomorrow."

I wasn't sure that I'd heard aright but it was no use dodging the flak at that late stage, so I turned round. She was smiling at me. She was a damn good looker, too, that woman.

"But you better walk," she laughed. "The club veranda has six columns."

Here was the cue for my carefully rehearsed apology but I didn't recognise the lines that came out:

"Mrs Murdoch, you're swell! Er --- I mean frightfully decent. I'm terribly sorry about the cards and the columns and the cows and the cupboard and --- er ---

everything. And thanks' awfully."

Old man Murdoch was a sportsman too. He skipped the flaying and just began calling me "Samson" ... That was Edwards' luck all over; he did the job and someone else took the credits.

THE END

“Uncle Hugo’s Blotting Paper”

By

Jossleyn Hennessey

95 Linden Gardens,
London W.2.

If our family expression “pure Hugold” ever gets into the dictionary it'll be defined as “an expensive plan for combining efficiency with economy”, but this leaves out Uncle Hugo’s kindliness, and his gift for dissolving our exasperation into laughter, so impossible was it to be angry with him. To illustrate “Hugoldry” is easier than to define it. Here's what I mean:

Uncle Hugo used to go to Paris to have his watch repaired because they charge there half what he paid in London. Since one of his pre-occupations was what he called killing two birds with one stone, he travelled to Paris via Belfast where, he claimed, shirts were cheaper and better.

He was as much a slave to efficiency as to economy. He kept his clocks a quarter of an hour fast so that everyone should be in time for the theatre or a train. Curtains, however, persisted in rising, and trains in departing, before the scheduled hour whenever he turned up. My mother maintained that this was because theatres and trains observed Greenwich Mean Time and not Hugo’s Mean Time. After that, when Uncle Hugo announced the hour at which he wished something done, everyone would chorus “GMT or HMT?” Uncle Hugo would smile tolerantly and say “Well, just keep your eye on the clock”. He suspected that his household loitered safe in the belief that his clocks gave them fifteen minutes in hand, so, now and again, he would surreptitiously put them back to the correct hour, which made everyone thirty minutes late for their dentists or their dinners. Uncle Hugo would ask innocently “Didn't you see the time?”

He was quite an inventor, too. He once thought up a bed with a row of Bunsen burners underneath, for use on expeditions to the Arctic. The bed never actually passed its tests because after turning the burners on the first time, Hugo discarded the match in his hand and went down to fetch his lighter. This was “mechanisation” and more efficient than doing it by hand. When, two minutes later, he applied the lighter to the hissing burners, the bed blew up. Uncle Hugo escaped with his life.

My father, who was fond of his brother-in-law, used to say that Hugo was like a high-spirited terrier; he had the same wistfully intelligent expression. The terrier illusion was complete if you went for a stroll with him. He never he never walked; he

trotted with short, quick steps. He would dart off to look at a shop-window. Before you could join him, he was away to study a poster elsewhere. If you suddenly heard hoots and screaming brakes, you would see a bespattered Uncle Hugo beaming at the traffic from the edge of the opposite pavement, with “What-fun-life-is” smile stretched from ear to ear. It was best to walk steadily on. Uncle Hugo always came back to the house. One morning, as Uncle Hugo was rushing out of the house -- he was always pressed for time -- my mother called out:

“Hugo, buy some blotting paper, will you?”

Uncle Hugo reversed harassed face round the door.

“What? Quickly now, or I'll be late”.

“We're out of blotting paper”, my mother smiled at him.

“Good God! Blotting paper! Blotting paper!!” Uncle Hugo shrugged expressive shoulders. “As if I hadn't enough on my hands with all this --” he waved vaguely round while my mother's eyes followed the circle in hopes of discovering what it was he had on his hands -- “without having blotting paper thrown in”.

About one o'clock the next day, Hargrove, the butler, came in to my mother and said: “Some blotting paper has arrived, madam.”

“Oh? I thought his lordship would forget, so I bought a packet myself,” Erica smiled. “Never mind, a few extra sheets will be useful.” There's a van outside, with a ton, madam,” Hargrove said distinctly.

“A ton?”

“Twenty hundredweight, madam.”

“What does he want a ton for?” Erica asked, laughing in spite of herself.

“I expect his Lordship is thinking of writing a letter, madam,” Hargrove said, strictly in character.

“How many sheets are there in a tonne?” Erica wondered.

“Several millions by the looks of it,” Hargrove said gloomily.

“Say there's been a mistake and send it away,” my mother had decided, when Uncle Hugo trotted happily in.

“I've saved you £4 in housekeeping money, my dear Erica,” he announced.

“You have?” It was a sigh rather than a question.

“By taking a ton, I got a 20 percent discount,” Uncle Hugo said triumphantly.

“I've already got a packet for a shilling.”

“Yes, at the rate of £20 per ton instead of £16,” Uncle Hugo scorned.

“Where shall I store it, sir?” Hargrove asked.

"Store it?" Uncle Hugo put on his 'For-heaven's-sake-must-I-do-everything-for-you' tone. "The House is big enough."

"We might squeeze a hundredweight into the wine cellar --," Hargrove ventured.

"Hargrove!" Uncle Hugo bristled at him. "I will not have the claret disturbed. What about" -- he thought rapidly -- "one of the maid's bedrooms?"

My mother and Hargrove exchanged glances.

"Where will the maid sleep?" Erica asked, mildly enough.

As my father used to say, my mother's reasonableness only encouraged her brother's aptitude for solving difficulties.

"Sleep?" Uncle Hugo snorted contemptuously. "On the blotting paper, of course."

Suddenly inspiration seized him and he began to pace round the room.

"A new use for blotting paper!" he cried. "We can furnish the room with it! Wallpaper, carpets, chairs, chests of drawers, tables, beds, pillows, sheets, blankets --all made of blotting paper of different colours! There's a fortune in it! And think of the convenience if you are an author. You can't mislay it! There it is, all round you. Are you writing on the mantelpiece?" (Uncle Hugo thought of all possibilities) "You don't need to move -- you blot there. Do you write in bed? You use the sheets! And what a room for children! They could throw ink at the walls -- wallow in it -- and only have to block themselves on the floor to be ready for a party! And no more sweeping or dusting! You simply tear off the top sheet! That's where you'd make the money --" Uncle Hugo said shrewdly -- "on the refills. You'd have a monthly re-blotting day. It's the idea of the century!"

My father entered. From the expressions with which everyone turned to him -- Hugo rapt -- Hargrove respectfully washing his hands of the whole thing -- Erica signalling an S.O.S. -- my father knew that he was being called upon to play his recognised role as salvage officer to the household

"Hugo's got the idea of the century," my mother said.

"Which century?" My father asked, deeply interested.

Hugo ran up excitedly and seemed about to leap all over him, but instead he began walking my father rapidly up and down while he explained. My father, who was a tall six feet to his brother-in-law's short 5 foot six, took one stride to Uncle Hugo's two, and listened so sympathetically that he looked like a Saint Bernard humouring a puppy. When he had finished, my father said impressively:

"Hugo! If people would only listen to you --"

"There!" Uncle Hugo rounded on the other two. "You see! James understands at once."

"-- they would be richer and happier," James continued, in the pious tones of a Victorian moralist." But, alas! You are, as usual, a century before your time. Remember that the *Inquisition* imprisoned Galileo for fooling about with the sun --"

"But I'm not 'fooling about' with blotting paper," Uncle Hugo interrupted with some heat.

"I'm only putting the stupid official viewpoint," James said. "Remember that it took half a century to persuade the War Office to adopt the breech-loading gun. People will make absurd objections. They'll say that a blotting paper room would absorb the damp in wet weather."

"But you could devise a non-absorbent blotting paper" - Uncle Hugo cried.

"Of course, you could," my father agreed warmly. "A blotting paper which didn't blot! It would catch on like --"

"Wildfire that didn't burn," my mother said.

"That suggests an advertising campaign," my father approved. You know the sorts of things: 'Keep that escutcheon blotted', or --"

"Mothers! It's babies blotting time!" Uncle Hugo nodded enthusiastically.

Erica rose.

"Whether it's GMT or HMT, it's certainly MLT," she said.

"What's that?" Hugo said, suspiciously.

"My lunch time," Erica answered, moving towards the dining room.

Uncle Hugo looked at the clock, which said 1.55. He turned slightly away and stole a glance at his watch.

"It's alright, it's only --" he began, checked himself, and finish carelessly: "Five minutes to two."

As Hugo followed Erica into lunch, James quietly told Hargrove to put a hundredweight of blotting paper in the cellar, and to send the rest back.

Uncle Hugo received the bill a few days later, and when he came to write the cheque, he unerringly spotted that the company had reduced the discount from 20 to 15 percent.

"I'm not going to throw money away like this," he said angrily.

"If that blotting paper comes into this house, I leave," Erica replied.

"How like a woman to force a man to choose between his blotting paper and his sister!" Uncle Hugo said bitterly.

But after a moment, a "big business" expression came over his face, and he retired to his study at a purposeful trot. That evening a heavy packing case was

delivered and with difficulty deposited by two men in a corner of his bedroom.

A week later at breakfast, my father, who was holding The Times in one hand and raising a cup to his lips with the other, suddenly burst into coffee-splashing laughter, and handed the paper to Erica.

"Look at the subscriptions to the Lord Mayor's Fund for the Assam Earthquake Victims," he gasped, mopping busily.

Heading the list was the Duke of Glamorgan, with a cheque for £500. Next came: "Lord Bramber -- 15 cwts of blotting paper."

"We have one hundredweight in the house," Erica said. "That leaves four unaccounted for."

They looked across at Uncle Hugo who was beaming.

"Have you any friends getting married?" He asked.

"You know we're invited to Tom's wedding, and --"

"Come upstairs," said Hugo, conspiratorially. He led them to the packing case in his room.

"I have a gross of silver blotters from Aspreys -- whole sale --15 percent off -- in there," he said. "Whenever there's a wedding, we'll send a blotter, and 3 lbs of blotting paper as a re-fill. That'll use up my four hundredweight all but 16 lbs.

"And where are you storing it meanwhile?" Erica asked.

"I'll give you two guesses," Uncle Hugo said in high glee.

"You've taken a suite at the Savoy for it?" Erica suggested, frivolously.

"Wrong!" Uncle Hugo replied seriously. "Give up?"

"You've deposited it in the strong room at your bank," my father said after careful thought.

"How did you guess?" Uncle Hugo was crestfallen.

"It's the one place where he could keep it for nothing," my father explained to Erica, and he managed to inject such admiration into his voice that Uncle Hugo spirits were at once restored.

"Look at all the money I've saved!" he said.

"Yes," said my father, patting him affectionately on the shoulder, "And look at all the married couples you're going to make happy -- why, it's -- it's -- pure Hugold!"

END.

“Uncle Hugo’s Elephant”

By

Jossleyn Hennessey

95 Linden Gardens,

London W.2.

On different dates every summer, the small town of Bramber used to have a Flower Show, was visited by a circus and a fair, and the Territorials used to hold a Military Tournament. One year, Lord Bramber, my Uncle Hugo, urged that it would be more economical, more efficient, to hold these attractions in one and the same place on Bank Holiday. His offer to organise a super-Bank Holiday in the grounds of Bramber Castle was accepted.

My mother, Erica Frensham, had learnt to be dismayed whenever her brother began talking about economy and efficiency. She was appalled when she realised the scale on which his theories were now to be applied. My father, James Frensham, the one person who had any influence over Hugo, was unable to leave London until late on the great day, but he did what he could: he ensured that a St. John's Ambulance detachment was invited and that Major Tew, chief constable of the county, called up his reserves.

My mother stepped out onto the lawn and looked about. Cheerfully discordant music from merry-go-rounds, the crack of rifles, the knock of wooden balls on coconuts, and roars from lions, mingled with the hubbub of the holidaymakers. The thought that all this happiness had been assembled by her brother made Erica ashamed of her opposition. “It's a credit to you, Hugo,” she murmured, pressing his arm.

Uncle Hugo did not hear. An elephant with a howdah full of children was approaching. What elephants are to a twelve-year-old boy elephants still were to Uncle Hugo. He darted from Erica's side.

"Shake hands with his lordship, Rosie," the keeper said, touching the elephant with his stick.

Rosie and Uncle Hugo looked at each other with an approval that deepened from instant to instant. Uncle Hugo was wondering if Rosie did not find this boring, carting children about, making herself ridiculous doing tricks in the circus, instead of roaming the jungles with plenty of other elephants of her own to talk to.

Rosie recognised in Uncle Hugo an entirely natural person -- kindly, straightforward, ingenuous, devoid of side, ready to meet her on an equal footing, different though their sizes in shoes might be. Uncle Hugo took Rosie's proffered trunk, gravely removing his grey top hat as a matter of course. Rosie caressed Uncle Hugo's face with her trunk, ending up with an affectionate blast in his ear.

"She don't do that often," said the keeper. "She likes you, my Lord."

"I like her too said Uncle Hugo, gratified. "But I'm glad to know and that she doesn't do it often," he added, juggling with his hat and stick while he held his nose and blew in order to equalise the pressure on his eardrum.

The children's elephant ride was from the Castle stables to the Flower Tent and back. For the next hour, Uncle Hugo trotted to and fro, talking to Rosie and the children. By the third trip Uncle Hugo and Rosie had established such relations that the keeper felt safe in handing over to Uncle Hugo while he had a drink with Higgs, the coachman. The sight of Lord Bramber in white waistcoat and grey Ascot tails, complete with gold knobbed cane, leading an elephant, caused crowds to follow him, and the queue of waiting children lengthened.

Hargrove, Uncle Hugo's butler, now came up with a message from Erica to remind him that he was due to present the Flower Show prizes. Disappointedly Uncle Hugo looked about for Rosie's keeper. That official and Higgs were found snoring in a loose-box with an empty bottle of whisky between them. Greatly relieved, Uncle Hugo said: "Tell Mrs Frensham I'm sorry I can't leave Rosie".

"But the whole town will be upset, your lordship, if you are not there to present the prizes," Hargrove protested.

Uncle Hugo looked at the queue. "The children will be still more upset if I do," he said.

The band outside the Flower Show marquee struck up the Eton Boating song. Rosie immediately became restless. She could not explain that her big turn consisted of picking up Miss Christabel, the circus queen in her trunk and waltzing round the ring to this melody, swaying Christabel gracefully from side to side. But where was Christabel? Rosie knew what punishments awaited her if she were late for her cue it was unendurable. She snatched Uncle Hugo up and made off towards the band. The Flower Show marquee did not look like the "Big Top" that she was expecting. She hesitated. Uncle Hugo, who adored novelty, was enjoying himself so much aloft in Rosie's trunk that his conscience warned him that he must be behaving badly. As a salve, he said Rosamond in the severe tone that the keeper had told him was used to Rosie if she were naughty. Thus unfairly admonished, Rosie began to waltz towards the marquee's

entrance.

"Hang on!" Uncle Hugo cried gaily to the children.

Rosie's approach was greeted with diverse exclamations.

"It's alright," Uncle Hugo shouted. "Rosie wouldn't hurt a fly."

Colonel Battersby looked at Rosie's feet. "Flies can't be what they were then," he grunted, adding by force of habit, "nothing is, these days."

"One, two, three... absolutely in time, by gad!" Archie Spatters said.

"Yes, and if you'd kept yourself down to three beats to the bar at the Hunt Ball, you wouldn't have such quavers the morning after," his sister retorted.

There was a searing rip as Rosie wedged her head and shoulders into the marquee. This place was not big enough for a waltz. Where was the ring? Rosie wrenched herself free and turned round, inadvertently pulling up the marquee's main ropes. Over his shoulder Uncle Hugo had a glimpse of the marquee giving from point to point until it collapsed like a deflating balloon, letting loose and audible escape of profane humanity. "Rosamund!" Uncle Hugo sternly reported Rosie for carelessness over the ropes, but as the band was still blaring the Eton Boating song, Rosie mistook his meaning and, deeply troubled set out to find the ring.

Her eye lighted on the circus tent and, with a squeal of joy, she hurried in. The centre was occupied by a cage full of lions. The tamer, whip in hand, had just opened the door when Rosie waltzed in with Uncle Hugo held high. The crowd acclaimed his performance as, entering into the spirit of the show, Uncle Hugo waived his grey topper this way and that. The children, shrieking in tumbled delight on Rosie's back, received an ovation. ("Oh! The darlings! Oo – er --there's Georgie!"). All eyes were on this unannounced turn, and the lion tamer, forgetful of the open cage door, angrily folded his arms. A lion slipped out. The tamer slammed the door and rushed after the lion. Bedlam broke loose. Circus attendants sprang up on all sides feverishly urging everyone to keep calm. Those spectators who had seen the lion disappear were shouting contradictory advice. Those who had not were singing "For he's a jolly good Bramber!" Animals in neighbouring cages, quick to sense the unusual, began to chatter, roar, scream, or bellow. Uncle Hugo, the amateur, was enjoying his evident triumph. Rosie, the professional, was ready to cry. If Uncle Hugo did not know that something had gone wrong again, she did. She was expecting him to cut the act short as Christabel would have done. Puzzled, but sure that she was right, Rosie transferred Uncle Hugo to a position astride behind her ears, made her customary bow, and retired. Unaware of the lion's escape, Uncle Hugo was in fine fettle.

"What shall we do now?" he cried.

A weakling wailed "I want my mum!" Another wanted tea. But when one small boy squeaked "More adventures!" He got the majority vote.

"Adventure! That's the ticket!" Uncle Hugo said.

They turned towards where the Military Tournament was in progress. A troop

of cavalry, clad in flowing Saracen robes, were charging with bloodcurdling yells down the field.

It was the finale of the tent pegging. Rosie was in the open space in which the Saracens were to pull up after their charge and when she found herself among yelling men and snorting horses, her self-confidence returned: this was a circus turn that was obviously going well and, raising her trunk, she trumpeted as though the walls of Jericho were being tiresome. Panic seized the horses and thirty Saracens bolted in all directions. The tournament crowd had never seen anything to equal it and howled “Bravo! Encore!” But Uncle Hugo heard the colonel ordering up the artillery and he judged it better to break off the action. Not that he doubted Rosie’s ability to disperse the enemy. He was thinking of the anxious mothers whom he might have to appease. So far, the incidents of the ride could be defended as “special treats”, but he feared that exposure to shellfire **Romeuer** blank, would it be blamed as “over-exciting”.

The Castle grounds were surrounded by a moat, long since dry, which had been fed from a nearby lake. A swimming pool, filled from the lake, had been built into the moat. To this Uncle Hugo steered Rosie and stop to explain its mechanism to the children.

“You give half turn to that wheel which lifts the sluices an inch and the water trickles in.”

“Make it work!” The children chorused.

Nothing loath, Uncle Hugo coax Rosie into turning the wheel. Water ran down the channel towards the swimming pool. It was a hot day so, while Uncle Hugo was lecturing the children on hydraulics, Rosie steps into the channel. The water was balm to her tired, dusty feet. She sucked up a trunk full and, without thinking, squirted herself and Uncle Hugo. She knew at once she had done wrong, but the children laughed and as long as they were happy Uncle Hugo did not mind. He laughed too. Tentatively Rosie did it again. The children screamed. Thus encouraged, Rosie, who for years had had to do what other people wanted and had never been allowed to do a thing that really amused her, soused herself (and her passengers) with joy and gratitude.

Masses of green duck-weed, oozing through the sluice, recalled jungle practise to Rosie. Perhaps this also would be allowed? Diffidently she gathered a trunkful and spread its beautiful cool slime on her head. Uncle Hugo raised no objections. What a man! From that moment Rosie would have put her trunk in the fire for him. She gathered trunkful after trunkful and smothered herself, Uncle Hugo, and the children, in glorious technicolour duckweed. Everyone was soaked, draped, and happy. They looked as though they had been wallowing in the green mud of a Bengal swamp at the height of the monsoon. Uncle Hugo had several other Ascot outfits and he hoped that the children also had reserved party frocks. Alternatively, he hoped that their mothers would see that this was one of those “well—all—right—dear—just—once” occasions that compel indulgence. But all pleasures cloy and after a quarter of an hour saturation gave way to satiation.

Tapping the sluice wheel with his cane, Uncle Hugo told Rosie to close it. Rosie

had a broad grasp of the English language but its subtleties on occasion escaped her. She understood that she had to turn the wheel. The direction in which she had turned before had won approval, so she turned it that way again. The more severely that Uncle Hugo said "Rosamund!" The faster she turned until she had opened the sluices fully and water was foaming through in thousands of gallons. Uncle Hugo became anxious. Roberts, the Castle engineer, had once calculated that if the sluices were open fully, the moat would fill to a depth of six feet within an hour. In which case five thousand people would be prisoners in the Castle grounds. Uncle Hugo slithered down and tried to explain what he wanted. Rosie didn't understand and Hugo had not the strength to reverse the rusty wheel. He must get help. Mothers be blowed! This was adventure!

My father, just off the London train, walked in at the park gate. His eye was caught by the collapsed marquee. Next, the attitude of the crowds seemed curious: instead of being dotted all over the grounds, people were gathered in gesticulating groups. He saw Major Tew ride by at a fast trot, followed by policemen carrying sporting guns at the ready. People asked questions but even as the chief constable reassured them, he and his men were scattered by a rush of Saracens on maddened, plunging horses. Then he saw an elephant moving quickly towards the lake. It was being urged on by an excited green lizard. My father strained his eyes and decided that this was Uncle Hugo in some kind of fancy dress. Behind him was Roberts with a paraphernalia of tools sticking out over the edge of the howdah.

My father turned the corner where the drive dipped into the moat: it was full of water.

"Good God! Hugo's been letting in the jungle!" he exclaimed.

Among the rhododendron bushes on the other side of the moat, there was a summer house which had been turned into a shelter where babies could be left while their parents enjoyed the fair. Infants were toddling all around. With its back to the moat, the summer house was laid on foundations which raised it a couple of feet above ground. Cowering in the rubble under it my father saw a lion.

Hastily removing his town suit and shirt, my father plunged into the moat in his drawers and shoes it was difficult to extricate himself from the squelching mud and he emerged plastered from head to foot.

Miss Briggs, the District Nurse, was startled by the appearance of half-naked savage whispering agitatedly: "Get the children away quietly. There's a lion underneath you."

Miss Briggs had dealt with lunatics before. "A dear little lion?" She humoured my father.

"Come and look," he snapped. Nonplussed, Miss Briggs followed him round to the back. Cautiously he peered under the summer house. Then he stood up aghast. "The lions gone!" he said.

"Why don't you follow after him?" Miss Briggs suggested cleverly.

My father wondered what to do. Miss Briggs thought that he was meditating wholesale infanticide. ("He looked as though he wanted to out-Herod Herod," she explained afterwards). She measured him with her eye. "If you touch one of my babies, I'll kill you," she said.

"Oh, go and jump in the moat", my father said irritably, and he strode round to the front towards the Castle, brushing against a child in his pre-occupation. Miss Briggs attacked him with her parasol. My father did not stop to argue. He ran. As his appearance was evidently so frightening, he ran stealthily from tree to tree, in hopes of escaping notice, towards a side door into the Castle. Her suspicions thus confirmed, Miss Briggs sent an assistant to warn Major Tew that a dangerous lunatic was loose.

Everything that King Midas touched turned into gold. Everything my Uncle Hugo touched turned into happiness and laughter -- pure Hugold. Consequently Rosie, under Roberts' skilled directions, soon stopped the rise of the flood. True, it took days to subside, but by 6 p.m. Hugo had got the Territorials to span the moat with a passable bridge and most people were able to leave at their intended hour. Clemence, the lion, was found still under the babies' pen (my father had missed him because the bewildered animal who nerves were not what they had once been, had crept further in). Major Tew wanted to shoot Clemence. Uncle Hugo said that he would shoot Major Tew if he did. Major Tew reluctantly ordered a constable to fetch the tamer with a cage and Uncle Hugo ordered the reluctant Hargrove to fetch the chef with a joint from the kitchen.

The chef, mindful of the house party's Sunday dinner, brought a string of sausages which Clemence refused and which Rosie snaffled when no one was looking. The St. John's Ambulance man gave the day's total casualties as "four faints and one mumps". The police reported the arrest of a madman who claimed he was Uncle Hugo's brother-in-law. On being assured that he was, they were not surprised and they sent a constable on a cycle to the local asylum to meet my father who was being marched there across the fields with a policeman's water-proof over his shoulders. The puce underpants with white polka dots that he was wearing were visible for miles around. That they had been made to measure in Bond Street might have helped to sustain a certain dignity but, in their bedraggled condition, that was neither here nor even, on the whole, there. And he had lost one sock suspender.

There remained Rosie. Uncle Hugo would not hear of letting her go after all that she and he had lived through together. He offered to buy her; the circus refused, he offered to join the circus as her keeper; they accepted. Erica hauled my father out of his bath to solve that one. She knew that she could not cope with her brother; if Hugo maintained that the moon was made of green cheese, Erica would produce logical reasons against the idea and they would argue half the night and get themselves nowhere. My father, on the other hand, would start off by pointing out that whatever colour the cheese was it couldn't be green, obviously not Gorgonzola but Dutch, and

they would talk half the night and enjoy themselves vastly.

My father was sympathetic about Rosie. "I admit," he said, "I find her extremely good fun myself. But after all, what is she, merely an attractive baggage whose trunk is her fortune. She is at home in a circus, yes. But in a Buckingham Palace state banquet? She'd probably do the most embarrassing things to cool her soup."

This was a mistake on my father's part. Uncle Hugo was no snob. He retorted that Rosie could (if the plate were big enough) put her foot in it for all he cared. My father then stressed that, as a peer, Uncle Hugo had obligations. To elope with an elephant, however attractive, would be to shirk his duty to the nation. Uncle Hugo was sensitive to appeals to his conscience and by the time that they were ready for bed, about three a.m. he had drafted a bill for the Lords, to open banks on bank holidays as a service to holidaymakers.

But he kept in touch with Rosie and used to send her a cellophaned box of duckweed on ice on her birthday.

End.

"Uncle Hugo's Gold Rush"

by

Jossleyn Hennessy

95, Linden Gardens,

London W2

In May 1940 there lay in the British bank in Paris 6 tonnes of gold, worth £1 million, the ownership of which was disputed between the British and French treasuries. When the German panzers broke through in the north, the French government prepared to flee to Bordeaux and might Father, chest French him, manner it is bank, feared that if the gold also were to leave his Paris strongroom, the French would jump their claim and seize it. He consulted the British embassy who consulted Whitehall. The upshot was that the gold was loaded into two removal vans which, to the dismay of the ambassador, Lord Thorne, were parked in the embassy courtyard. They were to be driven to Bordeaux and there put aboard a British destroyer.

I don't care what the treasury says, Lord Thorne said crossly. The whole thing is illegal, a violation of diplomatic privilege in the spirit if not in the letter. The embassy premises should not be used for the benefit of one of the parties in an unsettled legal dispute. If the gold is discovered, out his own all knowledge of it. Get it away quickly. He was speaking to my father, to Lord Bramber (my Uncle Hugo), and to a treasury official named Foxx. Since you're only a nunnery attach a, Hugo, I put you in charge, the ambassador added. Then, if you slip up, we can sling you out as an irresponsible amateur and the good name of the service will not be disgraced. Worriedly he looked at his wrists. Heavens! Churchill will be back any minute and from seeing the French. You must go.

Uncle Hugo was bubbling. What a chance for his gifts for organisation an efficiency! The first job, he decided, was to find two more bands-- fill them with boxes of bricks! Don't you see? We'll get the gold well away and then lay a false trail. Will tip off the French with the description and root of the vans with the bricks! Meanwhile, the genuine gold carriers will be safely embarked on a way to see.

Uncle Hugo waited impatiently for news of the promised destroyer. None came. On the second day, my father heard through devious channels that the French intended within a few hours to send police to his bank to remove the gold for safety's sake to the Bank of Frances Bordeaux branch. Hugo was triumphant. He foresaw a gorgeous slapstick chase across France after his bricks.

"Terrific," Fox, the Treasury man, said without enthusiasm. But what do we do with the gold? When and if (fox we're talking officialese when and if making love, my father used to say) the French find it gone from the British bank they have every British ship watched. They'll know we must aim for Bordeaux. The German advanced rules out the channel ports.

The cruiser Thunderer is taking Churchill back to England from Bordeaux tomorrow, Uncle Hugo said, rubbing his hands. The ambassador 's going to I'll send a signal to the captain to say he is bringing some gold along with him. Now, let's hustle.

It was quickly agreed that James must leave at once with the gold via Chartres and Tours. The vans would be driven by Green and Trent, the bank's chauffeur, and my father would act as their relief. When the French turned up at the British Bank, a clerk playing the idiot boy, would let out that the gold had gone via Orléans and Châteauroux, the route which Uncle Hugo would himself take with the bricks.

But before setting out, my father insisted on telephoning to say goodbye to Erica.

The French are probably at your bank this minute! Uncle Hugo cried, dancing with impatience, and you want to ring up my sister!

Solely in her capacity as my wife, James said.

When after a financially successful 20 minutes and struggle with the war traffic laid in Paris telephone system, he ran out into the embassy courtyard, he expected to find Hugo fulminate ING at the delay. But my uncle was in the sunny mood that came to him with the launching of one of his great schemes and had infected everyone with his bonhomie.

Green and Trent were all smirks; even the tight-lipped Fox, who normally disapproved of everything, spared my father a wintry demi-official smile.

Solicitously Uncle Hugo said: "You'll need to sleep on the way, so I've thrown a mattress into the first van."

The responsibilities and risks of his mission were weighing on my father and he was touched by this friendly send-off. He strove against the lump in his throat as he replied: "Thanks, thanks... So long, Hugo, old man!"

About midday, some miles past Chartres, my father, who had been working all hours since the outbreak of war, could no longer keep his eyes open. "I'll take a nap," he yawned.

They stopped and opened the van. For'ard the gold containers, covered by sacking, filled the van from floor to roof, leaving a space in the rear just big enough for a mattress. But -- great heavens! What was this? Two women's hats pinned to the sacking and two dresses hanging from it! On the mattress -- Good god! -- 2 girls -- clad in nothing but their slips -- sat up and giggled. Their looks proclaim their members in good standing of the world's oldest profession. Green and Trent hovered round smiling discreetly.

"Which of you is responsible for this?" James said in cold anger.

"Not us," said Green. Lord Bramber.

"What on earth am I supposed to do with them?" James said, exasperated.

Trent choked but Green managed to say in an admirably controlled voice: "His Lordship picked 'em up from the cafe across the way while you were phoning, sir. He said if anyone started asking questions, you'd pretend you were fleeing from the Germans, taking your furniture and – er -- doings with you. He said that, in French eyes, a man who was travelling with his girl was obviously a good citizen up to no harm. He said two would drive the point home to the denest mind, like."

"Why the hell didn't you tell me before we left?"

"His lordship ordered us not to. He said you'd object."

"Dress and get out," James snapped at the girls.

"His lordship thought you'd turn 'em out, sir," said Green, "so he told 'em you'd stolen the gold – "

"Told them I'd what?" James shouted.

"Oh, I don't suppose they believed him, sir. Still, it'd be risky to let 'em go. Two flashy Paris filles stranded on the countryside, nattering about stolen gold, would stand out a mile. The police would get curious and before we knew what was up, they'd be on our trail. His Lordship's rather forced our hand, like, sir."

Common sense told my father to get rid of the women but Hugo had created a situation awkward enough to make a man hesitate who had £1,000,000 worth of gold on his tired mind.

"Where can I get some sleep?" he asked weakly.

"There's nowhere else," Green said, hiding a grin. "The second van's chock-a-block."

Swaying with fatigue, my father gave way. "Put on your clothes," he told the girls.

"Mais non, chéri," both protested. "They'll get crumpled and yours will too, if you keep them on."

Ninette and Tina remained in their slips. My father compromised by taking off his coat, unbuttoning his waistcoat, and loosening his braces. In 1940, he was barely forty; He was tall, handsome and debonair. Tina found him pleasing.

"Viens, chéri," she melted at him. "Viens, mon chou."

Green and Trent retired hastily. From what he could hear, my father judged they were leaning against the side of the van in convulsions.

He ignored Tina's invitation to lie between her and Ninette. Instead, he took the outside position against the tail-board, but it was so resistant and Tina was so soft that, once the van was in motion, my father could not help sliding into the line of least resistance; he was aware that Tina took his head on her shoulder, and his last half-conscious thought was that Uncle Hugo's ideas always had something to be said for them. Then he was asleep.

He awoke to find that the van had stopped. His head was still on Tina's shoulder and she was shaking him gently. "Reveilles-toi, cheri," she was saying. "On te demande."

A short, thick-set man in a neat dark suit was looking down at him over the tail-board. His close cropped hair showed iron-grey under the bowler hat which he now removed. "Pardon, m'sieu," he said with grave courtesy. "Spinelli, Commissaire of Police, at your service."

"Enchanted," James murmured, without managing to look it.

"My instructions are to escort this gold to the Bank of France in Bordeaux."

To deny the gold would be futile. Spinelli had only to lift the sacking. Besides, my father's guilt was written across his face. Still, that was no reason why five gendarmes, lounging against their car, should be sniggering at him. Then he understood:

Tina was largely concealed behind my father then what emerged of her -- a pair of glossy legs which suggested a cover picture from *La Vie Parisienne* -- was charming. The raven-tressed Ninette had struggled to a kneeling position. With her diaphanous pink slip aslant one shoulder, she looked like an illustration for a privately printed edition speciale of Maupassant. Uncle Hugo's choice had been hurried, but not careless. My father's hair was tousled and, although rather more clad than his companions, there was a certain disorder about him which a prejudiced observer, or a Frenchman, could misinterpret. He felt like a French caricature of an Englishman's idea of "le shocking", and he completed his own discomfiture by blushing so hotly that he knew his whole face must be puce.

"There's no need to derange yourself," Spinelli said suavely. "Why not stay where you are -- comfortably -- until we reach Tours? You may have an appetite for lunch by then."

"Mais oui, cheri, Mais oui, mon loup," Tina murmured. "And now that you have rested a bit --"

My father cut her short with a brusque movement. Stung by the utter falsity, the ghastly unfairness, of his position, he was consumed by anxiety to explain the inexplicable. He felt it essential that the Commissaire should grasp that he was a dignified figure in the world of international banking, that he was a respectable married man, and that it was no more difficult to sleep, with the innocence of a babe, in the arms of a woman than anywhere else. But then he glanced at the mascara-eyed Tina, at the full bosomed Ninette, and he imagined Spinelli's soothing reply. Nor would it help if he were to say: "These girls are not mine. My brother-in-law produced them!" Spinelli's comment would probably be: "By blue! What a brother-in-law wonderful!" He would only involve himself in a character sketch of Uncle Hugo and have to explain his feeling for the poetry of administrative problems. He suspected that the more he were to enlarge on Hugo, the less would the Commissaire believe that such a man could exist, even in England.

"I'll drive," he muttered, re-adjusting his braces.

"I could do with a rest," Green said, eyeing Tina's legs.

"You leave me, cheri?" Tina pouted at my father. "I did think when you'd rested a bit –". She heaved a huge sigh.

"Oh, come now, don't disappoint to ces dames," said the Commissaire. The gendarmes frankly guffawed. Green and Trent lost control.

My father lost his head.

"Monsieur le Commissaire, you are mistaken," he said desperately.

"I've never seen these women before. I know nothing about them. He just stopped himself from adding "I love my wife," but it was touch and go.

"Mais voyons, m'sieu, your situation is all that that is of the most natural," Spinelli re-assured him. To a Frenchman the discovery that a banker (even an English banker) was also a man was about as novel as the discovery that water ran off a duck's back. Mon Dieu! The contrary would have been amazing. What tickled Spinelli was that my father was behaving as their *reductio ad absurdum* of all that he had ever heard of "British hypocrisy." Here was a character who, having first doubled the evidence in favor of himself as a man, wanted you to think that he had acquitted himself like a martyr. C'était a se tordre -- which means "it was enough to wring oneself out with laughter!"

My father's feelings were bitter as, for the next sixteen hours, he drove, or sat bleary-eyed next to the driver, or stopped for food that he did not taste. The future was black. He had cost his bank £1,000,000 and disrupted its good relations with the British government, the owner of the gold. He knew that he was in line for the chairmanship. Now, if he survived at all, he would be relegated to a back room, an object of mingled contempt and amusement: "The man who found the women and lost the gold!". What a story! My father heard all London's laughter, and he winced. He could never enter his club again. He would be pointed out at Ascot. In a music hall, he would rank with mothers in law. And his bitterest thought was that if he had not dutifully telephoned to say goodbye to his wife, Hugo would not have had the time to plant these women on him. It took a virtuous husband to look so ridiculous!

And Hugo? Again and again his grandiose schemes had spread alarm and despondency in all, save my father -- the one person who had always backed him up, imperturbable in the conviction that Hugo was "but mad north, northwest", and that when he chose to reveal his hand it would display a straight flush of laughter and happiness. To be ruined by Hugo of all people, my father felt, was fates unkindest cut.

In Bordeaux, my father was arrested. He was charged with the theft of £1,000,000 claimed by the French government. The boxes that he had brought from Paris had been opened on arrival in Bordeaux and found to contain bricks. For a few terrible moments my father thought that this fresh blow meant he would spend the rest of his life in a French penal settlement -- they had not yet abolished Devil's Island in those days. Then suddenly he burst into peal upon peal of laughter. "Did you say my vans were loaded with bricks?" he cried. "Not bricks! Pure Hugold!"

He realized the Hugo not only wanted the bricks captured but, to gain all the time possible, he wanted the man who had the bricks to give such a convincing portrayal of a man who had lost £1,000,000 that the boxes would not be checked until, hours later, they arrived in Bordeaux. Who could do this better than the manager of the British Bank in person, providing he thought that he had the gold?

After his release on bail had been secured by the British consul, my father was eager to find out if the gold had arrived safely aboard the Thunderer. The council said that a man named Fox had arrived who was going to England in the cruiser; The consul was about to pick him up to drive him to the docks; my father should come to.

"No wonder you laughed when you saw me off in Paris," James greeted Fox. But his geniality failed to dislodge the expression of distaste which years of something or other had chiseled on Fox's interdepartmental features.

My father's heart leapt as they drove through the dock gate: lashed to the deck of the great grey cruiser he saw a removal van, while a crane was manoeuvring to hoist a second from the key.

But what was this? Two coffins, smothered in wreaths, we're being carried up the gangway by blue jackets. On the on the deck, others waited motionless, with arms reversed.

Lord Thorne, the ambassador, and Winston Churchill had just got out of the embassy Rolls which was alongside. Seeing scores of dock hands and officials standing bareheaded, Thorne and Churchill remove their hats.

My father and Fox joined them. The ambassador asked her French police inspector if he knew who had died. The inspector was sympathetic.

"Your ambassador and his wife were killed in an air raid in Paris yesterday. Their bodies are being taken to rest in their patrie. The hearts of the French people go out to you in your sorrow," he said with the Frenchman's courtesy and gift for a phrase. He was gratified to see how deeply Thorne was shaken by his news.

"How did the coffins get here?" asked the dazed ambassador.

The inspector became confidential. It seems that your ambassador kept a petite amie named Erica Frensham in Paris. He was sending her to Bordeaux out of harm's way with all her furniture to set up a little love nest here –"

"Sending whom?" James exclaimed.

"To do what?" Thorne cried.

"Sa maîtresse, quoi?" The inspector was amused. How squeamish these English were. "When Madame Frensham learned that her lover and his wife had been killed, she behaved very well. She offered to take their bodies to the ship –"

"The coffins came in those vans!" James said, suddenly catching a glimpse of daylight.

"One on each roof," said the inspector.

"If this gets into the papers!" Thorne said in anguish.

"It's in already," said the inspector. "Madame Frensham was interviewed on the way down in Chateauroux. She said Lady Thorne was a poisonous individual who had led your ambassador an impossible life. Madam Frensham thanked God that she herself had been able to help and comfort him so that he could struggle through his public duties. She was very touching about it all."

"But this is libellous!" Thorne fumed.

"That's why you don't need to worry," James said. "The British press won't dare reproduce it." He was overcome by a happy, familiar feeling: all was right with the world again, once more he was soothing one of Hugo's victim's. "It's a sad story," he murmured, shaking his head the sententiously.

"A man who could inspire such love in a woman --!" The inspector agreed appreciatively. "We, in France, often think you English have no feelings, no heart. Madame Frensham shows how wrong we are." He looked up. There she is," he said.

Thirty feet above their heads, my mother was leaning over the side. Her chestnut curls peaked from a chic little hat. She looked sweet. Next to her was Uncle Hugo, grinning from ear to ear. He had the satisfied air of a fox-terrier who knows he has done a lot that he shouldn't.

"Erica!" James cried joyously.

"Hugo, you damned scoundrel!" Thorne shouted.

"Introduce me to your petite amie, Thorne," Churchill chuckled." Damn Pretty Woman."

Fox remained silently sour. The inspector saluted; His attitude conveyed respect and admiration for Erica with a hint of regrets that there were so many people about.

"I'll tell the Captain you've arrived, sir, Uncle Hugo called out. "We've got drinks ready in his cabin."

The party in Captain Hall's cabin got off to a sticky start. Indeed, if Uncle Hugo hadn't been explaining bimetallism ("Take Strauss' Gold and Silver waltz, for example") to Hall, not a sound would have been heard. Churchill was pre-occupied with cares of state. Fox was reading Erica's interview in the evening paper with sardonic satisfaction. Thorne sat next to him, appalled. My father and mother were in a corner, surreptitiously holding hands.

The Captain tactfully plied everyone with double whiskeys. But after the second round had seeped in (and Uncle Hugo had suggested the raising of a battalion of money lenders to be called the Goldstream Guards), Hall said breezily to Thorne:

"Well, Sir, Bramber's done a fine job. Diddled the Frogs out of a cool million in gold, ha-ha, what?"

"Hall's been a perfect brick," Uncle Hugo said.

"He's not the only one," my father said modestly.

"Hall didn't much like the idea of bringing the coffins on board," Uncle Hugo went on, "but as soon as I told him they only contain stink bombs -- just a precaution, you know, against anyone sniffing around the goal too closely -- I spotted them in a toy shop window in Orleans, next to the undertakers where we stopped to fill up with coffins -- why, then old Hall roped in the ship's company as a supporting cast."

"Why did Emily and I have to be killed in an air raid?" Thorne demanded resentfully. "And need Erica have told the press all that infamous rot about us?"

"I haven't spoken to the press." Erica was startled.

Fox grimly handed her the paper.

"Hugo! So that's why you were so long telephoning in Chateauroux." My mother blushed scarlet as she skimmed through what she was supposed to have said. "Oh, Lord Thorne! That you and I -- that we --! What will Emily think!"

James thought that the time for explanations had come. "Hugo had to send four conspicuous vans three hundred miles," he said. "What would camouflage them best in France? Women and patriotism. Two women kept the police from checking up on my bricks --"

"I had to be even more careful with the gold," Uncle Hugo said.

"So he thought up a couple of coffins to keep the police at a respectful distance. How to account for the coffins?"

"What would appeal to the French more than to find a man with a nagging wife and a consoling mistress and make him die for his country?"

"But why pick on me?" Thorne cried.

"An ambassador and ambassadress command more respect than some obscure commoner," James said. "It would have been sacrilegious to pry into vans carrying such noble dead."

"The only trouble is that all this elaborate idiocy has been wasted," Fox said. "You've loaded empty vans into this ship."

"Empty?" Thorne said huskily, as the implications of Fox's allegation penetrated: in a lost cause, of which Thorne disapproved, Uncle Hugo had, behind his back, in the most public manner possible, barked him (and Emily) up the wrong tree.

"But where is the gold, then?" James gasped.

"Captured by the Germans," Fox replied.

"My God!" said hall.

Uncle Hugo said nothing.

"After Frensham had left Paris," Fox explained, "I had a cypher from London saying that the expected destroyer was in Le Havre and an R.A.S.C. lorry with a motorcycle convoy arrived at the embassy. While Bramber was off fetching Mrs. Frensham, I ordered the gold to be transferred to the R.A.S.C. lorry."

"But how do you know it was captured?"

"The convoy took a wrong turning and drove into the Germans. An R.A.S.C. motor cyclist managed to get back and tell us. He was the only one to escape."

"Fool!" James said. "You're responsible for the loss of £1,000,000."

"I'm not responsible. I obeyed orders," Fox said, smugly acid.

"Theirs's not to reason why," Hall mused. "Theirs's but to –"

"-- explore every avenue, leave no stone unturned, concur, and die a knight," James finished for him.

There was a lonely gloomy silence... It was broken by a rumbling upheaval from Churchill. "Look here," he said, waving his cigar at Fox. "Exactly how many R.A.S.C. men were there?"

"The lorry driver and two men on motorcycles."

Churchill turned to wave his cigar at Uncle Hugo. "How long were you away fetching Mrs. Frensham?"

"Twenty-five minutes, I suppose."

"Well," grunted Churchill, "I doubt that one hundred and twenty boxes, each weighing 112 lbs., could be loaded into the lorry in that time."

Uncle Hugo grinned. "They were not," he said. "Fox forgot that a copy of his cypher would automatically be circulated to me, so before he had his word with the R.A.S.C., I had mine. I told them the gold was in the embassy cellar and they loaded up with 40 cases of –"

"My best vintage claret!" cried Thorne. "My God, Hugo! You kill me. You kill my wife. You make her out some kind of hell cat. You gave me a mistress. You plaster the headlines on the front page: AMBASSADOR STRIKES ALL TIME LOVE HIGH. You make me take off my hat to my own coffin –"

"He saved the gold though, sir," Hall said.

"May be, but he's entirely without conscience."

"Yes," James agreed reluctantly. "That wonderful claret in Nazi hands. It's a terrible blow to the allied cause."

End.

Entertainment

"Mona Lisette"

by

Jossleyn Hennessy

95, Linden Gardens,

London W2

I was dining at one of the embassies in Washington. The food was choice; the wine raft; my neighbours agreeable; but my attention was absorbed by the woman who sat opposite me. Her hair was a beautifully shaded silver, yet I guessed her to be in her late 40s. Her features were small and delicate; her skin had an open align transparency; she had an enchanting little mouth that smiled easily, although in repose it was sad and A trifle hard; her chin was as firm as any woman's need be; her conversation was animated; she was the wife of Count Tribesco, Ambassador from a country of south-eastern Europe. When I had been introduced, she had made no special impression, but the moment that I was seated at looked across the white damask, she was haloed for me as in a still picture of 1/2 dissolved fade out, and an I-have- been- here- before sensation invaded me, strangely mingled with feelings of sympathy an excitement, envy, an admiration. In vain, I wrapped my memory. The more that I looked Madame Tribesco, the more I was I convinced that she had once inspired in me the emotions that I was now reliving.

In the crisscross of the after dinner move to the terrace, where an intermittent breeze occasionally relieved the damp heat of a Washington night in July, I contrive to sit next to her.

You know, Excellency, I began, we've already met somewhere.

If only I'd made a more lasting impression on you, you'd be able to remind me when and where, she said, faintly but amiably ironic.

Her tone struck echoes in my mind. I heard a girl's voice say "You mean—Mona Lisette!" With exactly the same lilt, and I half saw her small mouth, then neither sad nor hard, curved in amusement. What Mona Lee set meant, I could not think, but the feeling of a mood of happiness, of romance, grew strong in me.

I see you as a girl in love-- triumphantly in love, I said. You are dining opposite

me, as you were tonight. But of course! It was in a Paris restaurant. You were the Princess Titonescu and you have run away with the young count from an elderly husband. If she was startled by this frontal attack, her recovery was immediate:

I hope he was dashing, and handsome, and deserved my love.

He was 23--a year older than you, and he was as handsome as you were, as you are, beautiful. He had smooth, blonde hair and pale cheeks--

Interesting pale cheeks--?

How easily raillery came to her, and how attractive it was.

He was a country gentleman son. He had had a brilliant university career, great things were expected of him in your diplomatic service-- but he had given it all up for you.

Madame Tribesco rose somewhat abruptly.

The leaves are moving in the garden, she observed. So we try to catch more of the breeze? And, in the most natural way, she took my arm. Wasn't it tactless of you to burst in on this romantic twosome in Paris? Didn't I object to you strongly?

There's a perfectly simple explanation as to how you came to dine with me at the birth Ala mode. Don't you remember that--

Explanations are tedious, she interrupted quickly. I'm more curious about your heroin than about you. I hope her young count was rich. Love conquers all, no doubt, but all conquers love in a cottage.

You forget the pomp of power and all that wealth air gave etc etc. Lead book to the grave, I croaked it reproachfully.

May be, but they avoid the simple flannels of the poor... What happened next?

You caught the blue train to Monte Carlo. And on to Venice--to the end of the world! So young, so much in love!

You're wasted as a foreign correspondent. You should write novelettes.

I was nineteen at the time, so naturally I was stirred by your romance. You were both young enough to seem young to me, but you were also just old enough to be grown up, master and mistress of your fates. To me, it was an exquisite experience to dine with you. In all these 25 years since, I've never seen the word 'romantic' without re capturing the mood of that evening.

But how charming of you! She was never less than pleasant, never more than elusively satirical.

We had reached a stone balustrade, looking away over the silvery shadows of Rock Creek precipitously below us.

You were the first woman in love I ever saw. Oh! I don't mean engaged couples in Surbiton or Brooklyn holding hands in the corner and giggling when the elders archly

"Now, you two, time's up". I mean a grand passion. (Was it my fancy, or did she shudder?). You had a wonderful position in your country; Your husband may have been old enough to be your father, but he was a Prince of the realm. 100 servants sprang to your call--

I like your Anthony Hope style. Or would it be an Eleanor Glenn? She scorned, in the prettiest way, her straight little nose in the air her eyes screwed up to the stars.

You had power. Your husband was near the throne. Important people sought your favour because you were his wife. And you threw all this away for Paul-- a country Squire.

Then, so softly that I cannot now decide whether to follow the words by this faintest note of exclamation or by a question mark, small and wistful, Madame Tribesco said:

"Was I crazy"

You loved Paul, I said. You never really saw me at that dinner. You saw only him.

There fell a silence between us.

Excellency, how did it end? I ventured at last.

Madame Tribesco opened her vanity bag and began powdering her face; she kept her head averted but a passing moment revealed that her eyes were glistening. With cheers?

"They lived happily ever after?" I suggested-- heartlessly, as I suspected.

Madame Tribesco closed her bag with a determined snap.

Your story needs livening up, she said energetically. Let's see. The adoring couple reached Venice. They glide about the canals to melodies by Schumann orchestrated by Cole Porter.

She slipped into reverie, resting her cheek on her hand, so that again I could not see her face.

When suddenly--I prompted.

She roused herself their ambassador called on the Princess. He told her that if she didn't return at once, her passport would be cancelled. She would be a girl not only without a husband but without a country. What's more, her wicked Lord would see to it that her lover's estates were forfeited so that much money as he and she had would stop. They would starve,

There followed so long a pause that I had to summon courage to ask:

And Paul gave way and sent her home?

On the contrary, Madame Tribesco retorted with quick indignation. Paul didn't falter. He said he'd get a job. It was the Princess who scoffed. She asked what sort of a job, he, unknown, penniless in a foreign country, could hope for. She refused to give up

her Vionnet dresses, her Chanel sense, her little dinners at their birth Allah mode, the comforts and luxury 's which were the only life she knew. She went back to her husband.

And lived unhappily ever after--

Did she? Madam Tribesco smile became enigmatic. You tell me your Princess was seized by a great passion. If so, would she have meekly allowed herself to be packed up in disgrace to her husband's state? Wouldn't she have used her beauty-- you said she was beautiful, you know-- to save her love?

How?

Obviously, she lured her husband to their most distant castle, and there, after a discrete interval, she gave him an overdose of something fatal, and he was buried with full state honours.

And after another discreet interval the beautiful Princess married the young count, I exclaimed, delighted.

Without a pang of conscience, she said dryly "Provided you leave Hollywood to me, you can keep the fiction rights out of this."

I will keep your confidence, Excellency, I said with respectful sympathy.

Madame Tribesco turned slowly round. In her low necked, pastel blue dress, with her air of gracious unconcern, she seemed, as she leant back on her elbows against the moonlit balustrade, like a figure from a cotton canvas by water. Cocked her head a little on one side to look at me out of the corner of her eye and said with a smile both quizzical and bewitching:

You believe the nonsense I've been making up?

I was taken aback, and I suppose I showed it, for it was with a ripple of mirth that she went on,

"With whom, and wherever, you may have-being- here- before, it's not with my husband and me. We were married a mere 10 years ago, and we didn't elope.

You didn't murder your husband in order to marry Paul!" escaped from me in my disappointment.

It's true I was a widow, but my first husband was killed in a railway accident, the responsibility for which, she added with a glint of mischief, was clearly fixed on a signalman who couldn't keep awake.

Then what a loping couple did I give dinner to? I asked ruefully.

As for that, the ambassador S remarked, you'd better slip back into that you-have- been- there- before trance and see where you come out next time, Ann she laughed politely, charmingly, but definitely at me.

I found myself in the state of mind that follows unanswerable demonstration

that one of your innermost convictions is untenable. Your whole being rejects the argument, but reason is baffled. I knew that I had dined with that a loping couple in Paris... Down the years Madame Tribesco's pet name floated back to me-- Lisette. And with that, I remembered Paul telling me that he always knew when she was up to mischief--because she puts on a Mona Lisa smile. Whereupon she had said with a comic slyness that she would have compelled Leonardo to repaint his picture on the spot:

"You mean a Mona Lisette smile!"

And thus, she smiled at me tonight when suggesting that the Princess had killed her husband.

My God! Lee set! I said, roughly (for I had not enjoyed being made to feel a fool). You and Paul did dine with me. That night in Paris is as real to me as-- as--

--as it is to Paul and Lisette, she filled in quietly, making me ashamed of my churlishness.

Then why did you deny it? I asked apologetically.

Madam Tribesco lifted her elbows from the balustrade and stood up.

To you, that night opened the doors of romance; you want to remember it. But to lease at, it brought realities-- that for years she tried to forget.

"She was happy with Paul. What had she to forget?"

The self-possession of the ambassadress momentarily deserted Madame Tribesco, and I saw only a frail woman, remembering sad things.

That she had returned so meekly to her husband. That she had dared to kill him only in her daydreams, she murmured, to herself rather than to me.

I wondered how I could pick up the pieces that I had broken.

"To have killed him would have solved nothing and led to greater unhappiness, I suggested."

With an abrupt change of mood, she said tartly:

"The Princess agreed with you. She found another solution. She decided to enjoy life." And Madame Tribesco laughed outright at my surprise. Parties. Theatres. Balls. Travels. Sport... Lovers," she sketched airily.

"So the train accident was not a release but a bore," I said feeling cheated.

"Of course not. It smashed wide open-- to use your favourite language--the long-closed doors of romance. Lisette and Paul rushed into each other's arms--"

"The happy ending, "I nodded my approval.

"--and entered on the unhappiest time of their lives" she finished.

*Let me get this straight," I said patiently.

"They sought the ecstasies of that stolen honeymoon," she explained with a captivating caricature of my patient tone. "They grasped at vanished shadows."

I reflected that nothing daunted this woman. She mocked happiness, and thereby increased its intensity. She mocked tragedy and took the sting out of it. Here, uninvited, had I strolled into her memories, taking things off shelves with sacrilegious hands, dropping them like a boar, and, with fantasy shot with irony, she had defended herself, and me, against my clumsiness. I did not believe that she and Paul had been unhappy after they had come together again. She had said that so that she, and I, should enjoy my bewilderment. To keep the superficialities of life to the surface where they can be enjoyed-- that was her gift. Doubtless after years of separation, she and Paul had had to adapt--I stopped at the word; And I went on aloud:

*One thing about you is clear. You're adaptable, Lisette. If you manage to find ways of making life tolerable with a man whom in your dreams you wanted to murder, it's a safe bet you found out how to be happy with a man whom you wanted to love. And I laughed at her (for I felt that it was about my turn).

Yes, she admitted demurely. After we had learnt to know the different man and woman that we had each grown into--

"You found love!"

"What a teenage mind!" she said. We found children, duties, responsibilities, and some pleasant interests in common.

"And so, you lived as happily ever after as we all do!" I cried.

"As more than most of us do," she amended, and the enchantment of her smile returned.

END

Entertainments

"Out of This World"

by

Jossleyn Hennessy

95, Linden Gardens,
London W2

Mark Brinton and I stood for a moment at the door, watching his wife and son.

"The dog - - -," Noel read slowly.

"Yes darling. What's he doing? Look at the picture. He's - -."

Noel's forehead was puckered. His serious eyes moved back and forth from word to picture. His right hand tugged reflectively at his left ear. His tongue strained to reach his nose. He was a study in concentration.

And Alice was absorbed in the delightfulness of her son and the immensity of his effort.

"It's a shame to break it up," Mark said. "But I've brought a guest to pot-luck dinner."

Alice and Noel came back to this world with a reluctance immediately suppressed by the hostess in Alice but entirely unconcealed by the student in Noel.

"At the moment you are both the living embodiment of Sergé's theory," Mark chuckled.

I had the curiosity to ask what Sergé's theory was, and this is the story that I was told over dinner.

Some years previously, Mark, who was in the Diplomatic Service, had been consul in Baltimore, Maryland. One day, he was feeling exhausted and disgruntled. In the morning he had struggled with a report in a race against time to catch the diplomatic bag, followed by a dash to a Rotarian lunch, without having prepared the speech that he was to make, and he had returned to face a long and trying interview with the irate captain of a British ship.

As he was leaving his office, he was handed a telegram from the New York Consulate, which said that a firm of London solicitors wished urgently to trace a woman named Mrs Lentaigne. New York had ascertained that she was with Vladimiroff's Russian Ballet. The company was due in Baltimore that afternoon. Instead

of sending one of his vice-consuls, Mark decided to take the message himself. A behind the scenes glimpse of the ballet would be a refreshing contrast to the irritations, responsibilities, and monotonies of consular life. He might perhaps secure a ballerina for supper after the show. He put on his dinner jacket in hopes.

Mark parked his car outside the stage door, and, entering a narrow, brick-walled passage, unavoidably thrust himself into the six-inch space between a black-bearded colossus and a small apologetic man.

"Zee train she arrive 'ere at seven o'clock, so now we 'ave eenoff time for preparink nothink. Everybody moost dance vizout feeds. On top of zees - vun hour before coortain she ees not up - - I find Sylphides scenery 'e 'as gone to Washington and Schéhérazade scenery 'e cominks 'ere".

The speaker's wrath was the more terrible for the magnificence of the turban and jewelled robes of Shahriar in which he was clad. The small man, tired and unshaven, held out weak hands in protest to the Emperor of all the Indies.

"Now, be reasonable, Sergé. I can't help it if the railroad sends the wrong freight car here - -."

"Ach, Joe! Now you blame yourself on ozzers! You are baggage master; zee baggage she ees your mistress. You neglect 'er; she leave you. Zen you expect me to opset zee right you 'ave put wrong! I split myself of you viz a week's notice. You are on fire." Sergé strode off.

Gloomily, Joe pushed Mark aside and went out. The stage-doorkeeper's office was empty; Mark walked up the passage.

He saw a row of dressing-rooms. Voices came from the nearest. He knocked. He knocked louder. No one heard. He ventured to open the door. Before him were six girls: (1) clothed; (2) half clothed; (3) naked. Horrified at his intrusion, fascinated by its outcome, he stood there for a full 5 seconds, staring. The hurrying girls - - making up - - dressing - - washing - - gave him unseeing glances, but a shivering member of category (3) called out: "Come in or go. But shut that door."

Mark stepped back and shut it.

Perspiring slightly, he leant against what he thought was the wall behind him. It yielded, and he was precipitated backwards into a small dressing-room. Reflected in a mirror, he saw a man and a blonde locked in a lip-to-lip embrace. Mark was about to retire quietly when the man disengaged with a succulent smack and said: "Anything I can do for you?"

Normally Mark was not shy, but he found it difficult to explain to two people thus intimately occupied (1) who he was, (2) why he had entered (a) without knocking and (b) backwards.

"Er - - well, I'm the British Consul," he said. "I'm trying to find a Mrs Lentaigne. I've -"

The man glanced down at the blonde in his arms.

"Are you a Mrs Lentaigne?" he enquired.

The blonde giggled. "Mais non, Monsieur Pavlovsky," she murmured.

Pavlovsky shrugged politely helpless shoulders at Mark and reapplied his lips.

Round a corner, Mark's progress was barred by the mighty form of Shahriar. He was wrestling in a doorway with a glorious creature clad in a brassière that glittered with diamonds and pyjama-trousers that shimmered with pearls. From photos that he had seen, Mark recognised Luba Petrovna, one of the world's greatest ballerinas, in the costume of Shahriar's chief wife, Zobeide. Her features were distorted with rage. She was pummelling Shahriar's well-padded chest, and from her dainty mouth Russian spouted in screamfuls.

Since Mark had only too frequently to deal with angry and unreasonable people, he was interested to see how Sergé would cope, and since he knew no Russian, he was able to enjoy the argument as a pure art form.

He quickly realised that Sergé's technique was on a higher plane than his own. Whereas he, Mark, adopted deliberately lowered voice and soothing tone, Sergé met shrieked unreason with shouted unreason. When Luba uttered evidently ridiculous threats, Sergé challenged her to carry them out. He fanned her rage that it might consume itself the sooner. As she weakened, his became the dominating voice, until it rose to impassioned heights in sonorous appeal to Luba's artistic pride, her duty to herself, and to Vladimiroff's company. She ceased her alternate pacings and pummellings. Slowly, her wrinkled forehead cleared itself. Touched by Sergé's outpourings, spent by her own, she said what Mark took to be:

"Very well, Sergé, I will."

Sergé kissed Luba's hand with the respect of an Emperor to his Queen. They emerged together in the serenest amity. It was Mark who felt it necessary to take out his handkerchief and mop his brow.

"Er - - I'm the British Consul - -," he began.

"Ach! I am Breetish sobject!", Sergé said heartily. "You vant see my passport, yes? Bot not now. Zee train she was be'ind 'erself, so everytink ees viz its feet in zee air. I am in a flat pirouette - - 'ow you say, f - - flat spinster."

"I have a message - - "

"You give me after," Sergé said. "You like see ballet from vinks yes?"

On the stage, men were sweating to complete the set for Schéhérazade, while every moment more guards, eunuchs, odalisques, sultanas, and slaves, arrived breathless from dressing-rooms and began loosening their limbs by bar exercises. It was a bustling scene of purposeful confusion.

Among the medley of noises, Mark heard someone carolling gaily to the melody of the Blue Danube:

"I have a new baby, teep-teep, teep-tap. Though I'm sixty today teep-teep, teep-top."

Beside him stood a jolly, grey-haired man in white tie and tails whom Mark assumed to be Effrem Constant, the conductor, Mark smiled sympathetically. Constant

grasped both his hands and shook them enthusiastically.

"Overture, Mr Constant," shouted a voice. "House lights".

"Sixty today!" Constant sang, and giving Mark a final triumphant squeeze, he broke off and hurried away.

Suddenly Sergé reappeared.

"Ve 'ave not told audience Sylphides she cos Schéhérazade," he said."

"You 'ave nice dinner-jacket. You go before coortain. You announcink."

"Oh! But I - -"

"You 'ave experience. You mek meny spichs after deener, yes?" Sergé flattered him.

"Everybody 'as deener before comink to ballet, so after-dinner spich ees same as before-ballet spich, he persuaded.

You moost tell zem so nicely, audience will be glad ees Schéhérazade not Sylphides," he indicated the required line.

"I am Breetish sobject. You are my consul. I confide to you," he declared in patriotic appeal.

"You go!" he commanded.

Mark now understood more clearly Luba Petrovna's feelings before Sergé, and he also realised that Sergé would have dispatched this afternoon's irate British sea captain in half the time that he had.

"Coortain spotlight!" Sergé shouted to the electrician, and putting an arm round Mark's shoulders, he led him to the centre of the curtain and pushed him through. Mark was deafened by the audience's cheerful din and the orchestra's tuning scrapes and blasses, and he was dazzled by the spotlight. Then he heard Constant tap his baton on his desk, and he discerned the old man smiling paternally up at him. Audience and orchestra were stilled to a pin-drop silence. For a second Mark was paralysed. But he had, after all, faced innumerable audiences before, and there was nothing difficult in what he had to explain.

Mark spoke.

When he bowed, there was a round of warm appreciation, and he knew that he had successfully conveyed his own feelings of the great effort that the company, disorganised by a late train and errant scenery, was making in order that the audience's pleasure should not be spoiled. The curtain re-enveloped him, and he found himself clasped to Sergé's billowing bosom.

"You are artist!", Sergé said. "Now I give you to George, zee stage manager. 'E look after you. Watch 'im. 'E ees artist too."

George greeted Mark sourly. "See here, brother", he said. "I'm plenty busy with my music cues for entrances, and props, and lights, without having visiting firemen on my hands. Stand behind that flat there. Don't move. Don't balk the dancers going on and off . . . Let's go."

Mark was the least bit disappointed that the ballet was Schéhérazade. He had never seen it; but he knew the plot. Shahriar's brother, Shah-Zeman, warns him that his favourite, Zobeide, is unfaithful, and persuades him to pretend to leave on a hunting expedition. Shahriar returns without warning to find his wives at the height of an orgy with the palace slaves. He orders his guards to slaughter all without mercy. The curtain falls with dead bodies littering the stage. A tawdry melodrama.

But . . . as the slowly folling majesty of Shahriar's motif rose from the orchestra, followed by the sinuous legato line of the violins weaving Zobeide's perfumed spells, Mark was soon lost in the kaleidoscopic world of Bakst's gorgeous set, Fokine's exciting choreography, and Rimsky-Korsakov's iridescent music. He Shahriar sat moodily next to Zobeide on voluptuous cushions heaped on a blood-red carpet. Overhead, from among the heavy folds of sensuously green curtains, hung ornately massive incense-burners. At the back, a blue-gold night streamed in from the shimmering harem gardens.

Gone were Sergé, the resourceful ballet-master, and Luba, the temperamental ballerina. In their places were Shahriar and Zobeide, - Emperor and Sultana of all the Arabias. No cardboard figure Shahriar, but a human being, tortured between his passion for Zobeide and his cynical brother's whispered insinuations. And Luba's Zobeide was a vibrant woman, frustrated behind the harem's marble lattices. If love was to be her only object, she would not love where she was commanded, but where she willed. Her beauty should be used for no ends but her own. Shahriar left.

Immediately, the harem bribed the eunuchs to admit their lovers. The orgy began.

Constant, his eyes on the score, on the orchestra, on the dancers, smote movement and music into one - - - building the tension up - - - increasing the shrill anxiety of the trumpets and the sinister warnings of the bass drums - - to the climax - - the thunderous brass of Shahriar's revenge - - so that when the Emperor suddenly burst in with his guards, his wrath froze Mark as well as the guilty harem; and the fearful significance of Bakst's blood-red carpet hit him . . .

At last, Zobeide, alone of all, remained alive, clasping Shahriar's knees in supplication.

From the swirling aftermath of vengeance and slaughter, the music died away, and a single violin now gave forth Zobeide's bewitching theme. Her beauty weakened Shahriar's determination, and she saw it. Tremulous, she was summoning her wiles, when, with lazy scorn, her enemy Shah-Zeman drew Shahriar's glance to the body of his rival, Zobeide's golden slave. Fury shook the Emperor; violently he signed to his waiting guards.

But Zobeide forestalled the flash of their scimitars.

She drove a jewelled dagger to her heart and fell to Shahriar's feet . . . while the violins softly filled the air with memories of her kisses, her enchantments - - all false, false! Yet burning raptures - - never again to be tasted. Shahriar hid his face and wept.

Mark's eyes were misty with the beauty that he had seen, heard, and felt.

George pressed a button, and the curtain began its slow descent. A storm of applause broke out, drowning the orchestra's final, lingering chord. George watched

the audience intently. Ten times he sent the curtain up and down before he relaxed.

"They were good for four, but I got ten out of them", he said to Mark with a friendly satisfied grin.

Mark realised that there must be a right and a wrong way with curtains as with everything else.

"What's the secret?", he grinned back.

"Applause is like bath water when the plug's pulled up. It's running out on you all the time," George said. "You can splash up your bath water by hooshin' your hand first one way and then the other, and you can splash up your applause by hooshin' your curtain down when they're on a crescendo, and up when they're slackening. You gotta watch and listen."

"I tellink you George ees artist," Sergé came up and patted his assistant's back.

Mark turned to Sergé. "I can't tell you how much I enjoyed your Schéhérazade. You and Madame Petrovna were magnificent," he said.

"I'm glad vee tek you viz us into our dream," Sergé replied gravely.

"But now we are back in this world", Mark smiled. "I've come to see a Mrs Lentaigne on business. Where can I . . . "

Sergé laid a finger on his nose and looked round quickly.

"Sh!" he said. "You 'ave sopper viz us after zee show and tell 'er zen, I not vant 'er opset. She moost dance again tonight. Pat Lentaigne voz 'er 'osband for few weeks only. Zen 'e die and 'is muzzer she tek all monies. She vas a mean woman. To save monies she doesn't keeps a dog. She barks at burglars 'erself - - zee bitch."

Towards midnight Mark found himself having a buffet supper with a score of the leading members of Vladimiroff's company in somebody's flat. Blinis, chicken salad, glasses of Russian tea and vodka were circulating.

The limited space made for intimacy. People squashed into sofas with plates on their laps and glasses at their feet, or ate off the mantelpiece, or sat in back-to-back groups on the floor and were stepped over.

After travelling all day and working under pressure all evening, the ballet were tired and ravenous, and at first the clink of forks on plates was accompanied only by murmurs. But gradually, beneath an increasing haze of cigarette smoke, the talk grew loud and cheerful. Sergé elbowed his way up with glasses of vodka, bundled three girls off a sofa and settled Mark and himself comfortably in their places.

"Ees te-ribble!" he announced. "Tomorrow vee moost get up at seex o'clock and catch zee five o'clock train to Washington. But till zen vee 'ave time. Vee discuss life, yes?"

"Well, at least you lead a colourful life, unlike my routine existence," Mark said.

"Sergé received this harmless remark as a debating challenge.

"Look round zees room," he said impressively. "Vat you see?"

Mark saw some of the most famous names in ballet, but he was sure that was

not the answer. He was right.

"You see lot of ordinary peoples," Sergé said. "Zere ees Pavlovsky; ven hees not talkink nonsenses, hees kissink nonsenses. Zere is Constant, 'e look like everybody's daddy. Over zere Luba Petrovna, she look like any bee-you-tiful woman, good for quarrelink viz eef she your wife; good for beddibyes eef she somebody else's. Zen look at me. I read Times editorial on international messink-ops, and I understand no more after I read than before. I am zee mutt in the street. You agree"?

"Er - -" Mark said tactfully.

"But ven Pavlovsky does grand jeté en tournant, 'e ees like leaf turnink before breeze. But ven Constant conduct, 'e let you listen in to 'is private conversations with minds of genius composers. But ven Luba dance, zere ees no woman in world like 'er. She ees inside out 'erself. And ! Ven I am Shahriar, I am not mutt in street. I am zee Sergé that God loves for 'is immortal soul. I am perspirink viz personality!"

"And then you have your reward - - the audience's applause", Mark said."

"Applause 'e bring you back to zees world" Sergé said. "Ees like red carpet and champagne coktels for you diplomats after you been negotiatink delicately like cats on 'ot cakes. Ees nice, bot ees nothinks to do viz beink 'appy."

Sergé's words sent Mark's thoughts back over his day. It struck him that his report had been good, that his speech to the Rotarians had contributed something to Anglo-American goodwill, that he had sent the British captain away in a reasonable mood, and that while he was doing these jobs, he had been absorbed - - happy! It was only when he had time to think that he began to worry, to wonder if he could have done better, to feel his fatigue, to become disgruntled.

"You know," he said, "that's an extremely encouraging argument of yours. You've made me believe that every now and again I'm an extraordinary, even an exciting sort of person, leading a richly rewarding life." (It must be the vodka, he thought. I could never say that sober).

"Good!" Sergé chuckled. "Now I give you chance to be 'appy again, I put you back in your job. I send you Morosova."

"Who on earth is she?"

"On stage Morosova. On passport Mrs Lentaigue. You now 'ave beezeness talk viz 'er. Give 'er vodka, zen eef she veeps she vill not cry."

A moment later, Morosova was propelled down beside him. Simultaneously, Mark struggled to rise to his feet. They over-balanced, clutched to save themselves, and fell back on the sofa in each other's arms. Mark was acutely conscious of her warm body against his. He knew its hidden loveliness; for this was the girl who had shiveringly ordered him to come in or get out of the dressing-room.

They disentangled as far as space allowed.

"I'm awfully sorry," Mark said in embarrassment.

Her answer was a wan smile. There was an air of discouragement about her, unexpected in so good-looking and young woman.

When Mark had explained his mission, she said quietly:

"Thank God! Now I've come into that money, I can leave the ballet for good!"

"Leave the ballet!" Mark said, amazed, "Why?" From what Sergé has been telling me".

"Oh! Sergé and his theories about achieving your ideal self and submerging in the spirit of the universe! He's a great talker!", Morosova scorned.

"Some of it makes sense," Mark suggested.

"Of course, it does, if you're doing what you're really good at. But supposing you're not. It's all right for Sergé and Luba. The high-spots they strike make up for the routine, the bad tempers, the intrigues, the jealousies, the - - oh! everything."

Mark thought for a moment.

"I expect you're too modest," he said "You couldn't be a member of Vladimiroff's ballet unless you were a good dancer."

"Oh! I'm not bad", she laughed. "For years, Arnold Haskell described me as 'promising'. Now he calls me 'that experienced troupier'. That means I lead the corps de ballet in Sylphides and Giselle, and that if a soloist sprains her ankle, I can be relied upon to take her place without rehearsal. Vladimiroff will be angry to lose me. I'm one of the most valuable people he's got."

"Why did you take up dancing?" Mark asked after a pause.

"It's a living."

"What do you think you'd be really good at?" Mark teased her gently. "What would give you Sergé's' extraordinary moments' that make life worthwhile?"

"Running a home. Having babies." Morosova said.

.

"I hope you aren't bored?", Alice Brinton smiled at me when Mark had finished. "He always tells that story in such unnecessary detail."

"I came, I liked what I saw. I conquered," Mark said negligently.

"Really Mark!" Alice said. "There's no need to tell the world I - hadn't a stitch on the first time you saw me".

END.

"Success Story"

by

Josselyn Hennessy

95, Linden Gardens,

London W2

"And so you see we've all had what we wanted out of life," Neil summed it up for me.

After years abroad, I was dining with the Mckenzie's, and they had been bringing me up to date on the family news.

"You have," I said. "But I doubt that the others wanted what they 've got."

"Think it over," Neil smiled.

Here are the facts that I was invited to think over:

After the First World War, the London "season" recovered its brilliance. The great political hostesses still entertained in their historic houses; the Eaton and Harrow match, Phyllis Court during the Henley Regatta, and the balls of Oxford Commemoration Week, were not then occasions for austerity. Into this gay and splendid pageant, Lord Cheviot, who was good for a Secretaryship of State whenever the Conservatives were in, thrust his twin daughters. "I have put the world at your feet," he said curtly. "If you choose your husbands carefully, you'll keep it there." He was a hard-working Scot, a stern Presbyterian. He had repressed his gifted wife into a colorless creature, and I remember thinking that if Morag and Lalage did not escape soon, they too would be flattened into replicas of their mother.

Dark-tressed were these twins, tall and slim, with faintly olive complexions and fuchsia lips set in pleasantly wide mouths that were made for laughter. Morag's curls crept over her left cheek, close to her eye, so that she had to turn her head to see you on that side. Lalage's did the same to the right. The effect when they entered together was that men lost count of time, which didn't matter if people were just talking, but was hard on the women's feet if it were a ballroom.

By day, they played a smashing game of tennis; by night, they dressed like dreams, danced like angels, and smelled of sinful scents. Hostesses competed for them so as to ensure a photograph in the society press. Rich parties, like Sir Goodsie Stout,

proposed again and again. Married men, like old Lord Steyne, passed from eighteenth century hints of this and that, to downright offers of twentieth century divorce followed by marriage at the Savoy chapel and the family tiaras.

Penniless bachelors, like me, who adored openly and vainly, had the best of the twins, because as we did not complicate their lives, they rewarded us with a charming feminine comradeship. Through it all, they remained two of the honestest, nicest girls you could want to meet. They were both rebels - - Morag deceptively, with a gay, sweet-natured resistance that had wistful undertones, Lalage boldly, and on the surface. Morag burned with a pale, steady flame, Lalage was generously impulsive, passionate in all she did. She smoldered.

Between 1925 and 1926, Lord Cheviot lived in hopes of giving his daughters away in gilt-edged marriages that would keep cabinet vacancies within the family. But then shortly before he sailed to become Viceroy of India, Lalage announced her intention of marrying Patsy Fielden. The whole family disliked him. By birth, he was a gentleman; by instinct, he seemed a bounder. He was twenty-seven, handsome as the devil, and engaged in dissipating a sizeable fortune. Lord Cheviot told Lalage icily that no daughter of his should marry a playboy. Lalage flamed up and the wedding took place in a registry office. The Fieldens disappeared on a yachting honeymoon and Morag spent the next five years with her parents in India. Lord Cheviot kept a cold eye on his A.D.C's and other valueless bachelors in Delhi, and Morag returned to England in 1931, sweeter and lovelier than ever, and still unmarried.

Morag had never liked Patsy, but neither had she joined the family cabal against Lalage, whom she loved. As letter writers, the twins were scrappy and occasional ("Happy birthday, darling. Just back from Biarritz. Saw the babyest seal called Thamar - - but no real resemblance to Karsavina. Kisses. Lalage.") So that then she looked Lalage up, Morag was uneasy at what she discovered. Patsy was inexplicably absent; they had left their Fark Lane flat, and Lalage was in a large furnished suite in Curzon Street. She greeted Morag affectionately but fended off questions; she was living on her nerves in a whirl of pleasure. And Morag did not like her friends; they were the wrong kind of racing and theatrical crowd.

From gossip, Morag heard that Patsy had spent his last penny some months before, deserted Lalage, and fled abroad to avoid his creditors. Since Lord Cheviot had cut Lalage off, she had no money of her own; how then did she dress and gad about as she did? Morag was told that she was being kept by a tailor, a man of humble origin named Neil McKenzie. Today such a situation is perhaps looked upon with indifference; but in the Cheviot world of the nineteen thirties, it was not; Morag was distressed and amazed. There was always a crowd of loud and confusing people round Lalage, but, looking back, Morag realized that the McKenzie man had been there each time that she had. Her heart yearned after Lalage, but she did not try to force her confidence because she feared a scene. She wondered whether she could tackle McKenzie instead. On her next visit to Lalage, Morag observed him. There was a bar and buffet; carpets had been rolled up; there was dancing.

She realized why Neil McKenzie had escaped her notice before: he did not obtrude. He was a small slow-moving Scot. He had thinnish lips and a cast-iron chin; his mild blue eyes were shrewd; his expression grave, but he released a smile whenever a

guest called out "Hullo there! Mack!". No one bothered to stop and talk; they greeted him in passing and passed on. But he did not appear to mind; he helped people to drinks, or sat in a corner, noting all that went on without a hint of what was behind his steady gaze.

Morag joined him behind the bar.

"It's a wonderful party" she said sociably.

McKenzie looked surprised that anyone should want to talk to him, but he gave her his quick smile.

"Aye. They seem to be enjoying themselves fine," he said, with the detachment of a programme seller who has seen the show too often.

"Oh, aren't you?" Morag asked.

McKenzie considered for some moments, then he said "No". He made the word sound like a judicial summing up.

"For God's sake! why do you give these parties then?" Morag exclaimed.

"They amuse Lalage,"

Morag softened. "Do you love her very much?"

After due reflection, McKenzie said; "No."

"In that case, I don't understand what this is all about", Morag said, looking round the noisy, smoke-hazed room.

McKenzie revolved this point, then he said with an unexpected chuckle "I'm just checking up to see whether what I want is what I've got".

Morag was too indignant to speak, but McKenzie raised his eyes to her's and, without embarrassment, looked her over reflectively.

"I'll tell you about it," he said. This, like all his remarks, merged as the conclusion of careful weighing and balancing. But we canna talk here. Come over to the shop round the corner. It's quiet there"

Five minutes later, McKenzie was letting her in to a large work room on a second floor in Clifford Street. It had nothing of a fashionable West End tailor's establishment but was confined to necessities: tables for cutting; mirrors for fitting; electric lights without shades. Morag sank on to a shabby sofa; McKenzie sat himself on a wooden, kitchen chair.

"I'm no living with your sister," he began abruptly. "I just pay her bills".

"Oh!" Morag said coldly. "Why"?

"I'll begin at the beginning", Neil said.

He told her that his father had been a head-cutter who had left to set up on his own in the workroom in which they were sitting. A number of his old customers followed him, and he was not doing badly when he died, leaving Neil, aged eighteen,

the sole support of three younger brothers. This was in 1919. Neil kept on his father's employ es and he and his brothers slaved to learn their trade. They made a bare living.

One day, the furrier below recommended a wealthy undergraduate customer of his, named Patsy Fielden, to try having a suit made by the McKenzie's. It was a success and Fielden sent his Oxford friends to them. McKenzies became the tailor for the smart, younger generation. Their bare premises even had a snob appeal.

The brothers had partitioned off the back regions into a dormitory for themselves. Ian, the youngest, cooked. All that these brothers undertook they did well, and Ian grilled a juicy steak and brewed an aromatic cup of Brazilian coffee. An invitation to join the brothers at lunch developed, as such things could among undergraduates in those carefree days, into an informal but exclusive club. To enter "Mack's" and find half a dozen Oxford men discussing, over their coffee, whether it was morally better to save a child's life for the sake of fame or to sweep the leaves from a dying rose tree from purely disinterested motives, or citing a platinum blonde gold-digger to illustrate Aristotle's conception of a golden meanie, while the brothers silently cut and sewed alongside, was a pleasant example of a depth and diversity of life that passed away with World War II.

The brothers worked harder than ever. They charged top prices and had no overheads; the money piled up. Neil spent his spare hours teaching himself and his brothers accountancy, and he studied company reports. He began investing on the stock Exchange, so shrewdly that in a few years he had substantial capital. His brothers did not know this because he did not tell them, and he, and they, went on working because that was their habit. The witty lunacy that he listened to after the emergence of the undergraduate club enlarged Neil's studies; he read the books that he heard torn to pieces.

Sometime in 1930, Fielden ceased to pay his bills; in 1931 Neil learnt that he was packing up. He had no wish to press Fielden, to whom, he recognized, he owed his start, but he resented the idea that anyone should try to bilk him. He put on his hat and walked to the flat in Queen Street to which Fielden had recently moved; he went upstairs and stood outside the door. Within an argument was at its climax. He heard a woman's voice charged with passion and anger; "This is the end. Goodbye", followed by the furious slam of a door.

He knocked and entered. Fielden, dressed in silk pyjamas, was lounging in an armchair; the frown left his face as he looked up and saw his tailor.

"Why, hallo, Mack," he said. A cordial smile spread over his handsome easy-going features. You could not get away from it, Fielden had charm.

"Good morning", Neil said. "They say you're going abroad".

"I'm broke."

"You owe me £525".

Fielden shrugged his shoulders.

"You could get a job," Neil said.

"I know about horses and food," Fielden laughed. "Ways of spending money, not making it."

"You could teach riding or start a restaurant," Neil said.

"You need capital for either," Fielden retorted.

Neil had nothing further to say for the moment, so he looked round.

The suite was furnished with taste and with luxury; its silks, satins, marquetry, oil paintings, and leather-bound books, revealed a world that he had never seen, it filled him with wonder and admiration.

"Yes, this flat's worth money," Fielden said, misinterpreting Neil's appraisal. "But it is rented. You can't put a bailiff in because nothing here belongs to me - - except my wife's furs."

He nodded at a coat that lay across a sofa. An idea came to him.

"Look, Mack," he said. "You're a good fellow. I like you. Take that fur. I paid £1,500 for it. It'll settle what I owe you, and you can let me have a thousand pounds on it."

The bedroom door burst violently open. Lalage strode in.

The bill is £1,500 right enough," she said contemptuously. "But that coat's not yours. Only £500 has been paid."

Fielden threw his hands up in mock despair.

"She takes the clothes off my back!" he said good-humoredly.

Neil was absorbed by Lalage. Like everything else in the room, this dark, glorious creature, who moved like a tragic queen, belonged to a world that to him was as remote as the Arabian Nights.

Lalage picked up her fur and started to the door. Neil came out of his trance; he was a businessman and he had come for his money.

"Just a meenit," he said. "If you give me your coat, I'll tak' it in settlement of my bill, and I'll pay the furriers' the balance you owe on it."

"Good old Mack," Fielden said easily. "'Scots wha hae wi' Shylock bled.' It's a deal."

"Oh!" Lalage gasped. (From the look of grief and despair that she gave her husband, Neil wondered if her anger were not the measure of her love for him). Her eyes blazing at Fielden, she put the fur over her shoulders with slow ostentation. Then she turned graciously to Neil.

"If you can afford £1,500 for a coat, Mr. McKenzie," she said, "You can have its contents as well."

And she took Neil's arm and led him from the room. Even through the fur, Neil could feel her tension. They descended the stairs in silence, but on the pavement, she disengaged herself, took off the coat and handed it to him.

"Forgive me. I was furious and heartsick - - I didn't know what I was saying or doing."

"I understand, lady," Neil told her, so nicely that Lalage's eyes filled with tears. She swayed as though about to faint. Neil drew her arm through his and held her.

"We'll walk", he decided. "It'll get your blood circulating? again."

Now, there is, on occasion, a current that flows between people, and to Neil there flowed Lalage's tormented spirit, and to Lalage there flowed the honesty of his. So that when he asked what she was going to do next, she told him simply that she didn't know; pride forbade her to seek out her grim father, and she could not stay with friends without inviting awkward questions.

"You love your husband. You'll go back to him," Neil told her.

"Never," Lalage cried passionately.

Neil thought of the variety of moments and moods in which he had seen Fielden in the previous ten years. "What you mean is that you want him to lairn what life's like without you for a wee while. Well, he's proud of you. He canna get along without you. He'll soon ask you back."

"But how are we to live? He's going to Parif to sponge and borrow."

"I'll have him on his feet in four or five months," Neil announced.

"You! How?"

"I'll let you know if I'm successful,"

"In the meantime, what happens to me? I sponge and borrow here, I suppose," Lalage said bitterly.

"No. You can do a job for me," Neil said. "I've worked. I've made money. I'd like to meet people who can talk about other things than business. My manners are alright, but they're no like a gentleman's. I need polishing."

"You mean that I - -?"

"Keep this fur coat," Neil said. "Find yourself a stylish flat. Give parties. Send me the bills ... Ask me to the parties."

Lalage looked at him searchingly. Reckless she was, but not dishonest "What will you get out of it?" she demanded.

"Education. A new angle".

The craziness of the proposal appealed to the rebel in Lalage.

"I'll keep the coat," she said, her eyes dancing. "Let's begin the polishing right away. You shall give me luncheon at the Berkeley and take me to polo afterwards."

"I'll have to phone them at the shop first," Neil said.

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"Well, are you satisfied with your bargain?" Morag asked.

Neil considered.

"Twenty percent" he said. "In speech and manners, I've learnt the right things to say and do".

"And the eighty percent loss?" Morag said tartly.

"Lalage's friends don't use leisure; they kill time. They bore me stiff - - straving across the hills of vanity."

Morag agreed, but she could not criticize Lalage's friends without criticizing Lalage and she was too loyal for that. Instead, she said:

"What is Patsy Fielden doing?"

"I've set him up on a restaurant-cum-nightclub in Paris."

"You'll lose your money."

"I might," Neil said calmly. "But I'm not so sure I will."

"He's a waster."

"If he is, he'll starve because I don't intend to pour money down a drain. But I back my judgment of him. He's never been forced to use his capabilities till now."

"What does Lalage think of it all?"

"I told Fielden he ought not to write to her till he could tell her he had achieved something. I reckoned that would give him an objective - act as a spur - because he does want her back."

"That's kind to Lalage!" Morag flashed at him. "No wonder she's so nervy and feverish. You're heartless."

Neil turned this over for quite a while.

"No," he said. "I'm a good organizer. And I understand people. I wanted her to fret herself enough for him before I sent her back. She'll be the happier for it."

Morag reflected, and her indignation and irritation at what seemed, at first sight, Neil's coldly calculated disposal of Lalage's affairs, melted. She saw his underlying kindness.

"Neil, you're a friend," she said, spontaneously, putting her hand on his arm.

His quick smile answered her warm gesture and her use of his christian name, then he resumed his normal calm and, taking her hand in his, gazed slowly and deeply into her eyes. There was nothing sentimental about it: he was studying her. Somehow,

he gave her the abashed feeling that she felt before her father; but the difference was that Neil did not undermine her self-confidence. She defied her father with a sinking heart; she resisted Neil with a buoyant one.

"Well, how's my balance sheet?" she enquired. "Think I'll pay a dividend?"

Neil took a moment longer before delivering judgment:

"To look at, you and Lalage are alike as twins. God gave you equal beauty but he built your characters from different moulds. You're a sensible body. You'll never know the ecstasies that Lalage knows, nor yet the miseries either. You're a rich, rare, sweet, warm, muddle-headed person."

"You should beware of snap judgments," Morag said, endeavoring to keep her end up, but feeling like an impudent prisoner answering the judge back. "You're really rather a sweetie-pie," she could not help adding defiantly.

"No," he said. "I'm leading up to something."

"You discombobulating phenomenon!" Morag cried. "What do you want"?

"To meet intelligent people who spend their money on civilized things, like Shakespeare, and music, and painting, and politics. People who enjoy leisure seriously. The kind of people you must like," he concluded, fixing another concentrated stare on her.

"If you're offering me Lalage's fur coat," Morag said, laughing merrily, "the answer is your own favourite word; "No".

They were married a year later.

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Those were the facts. I came back to the post-World War II present.

"Well, Sir Neil," I used his title chaffingly. "You and Morag got what you wanted, and Lord Cheviot - - "

I glanced across at Cheviot who had dropped in before dinner and been persuaded to stay. You could not say that he had mellowed but, as the years had bent his body, his once unbending spirit had been forced to make concessions to human frailties - - his own and those of others. If he had ever had feelings, he had killed them half a century ago, but his intellect was unimpaired and from what he now said it was clear that he did not deceive himself.

"Success?" he said. "Yes, I've had it. And now I'm lonely and unloved." He had no pity for himself; he stated a fact. "Lalage hates me - -"

"You have only to write her a postcard" Morag cut in, and the darling would take the next 'plane. She's the world's least rancorous person".

"It may be so," Lord Cheviot said austere, "but I disapprove too much of her whole way of life. She has disgraced the Cheviot name". He paused and resumed his interrupted thought. "Morag graciously shows kindness to an old fellow grown

dependent. I expect she grants me that I've always tried to do the right thing, but," he smiled a thin smile, "righteousness rarely inspires affection."

Morag rose swiftly and sat herself on the arm of his chair. Without speaking, she took his hand in her's.

"You've governed India. You've had the Foreign Office. You've been feared. You wanted power; you enjoyed it," Neil said.

Written down, the words look cruel, but Neil's tone made them sound what they were: a matter of fact exchange between two Scots who respected each other, between whom there was no occasion for conventional insincerities. To a Sassenach, shy of discussing sentiments for fear of becoming awash with sentimentality, the moment had its perils, but I was saved from further embarrassingly intimate glimpses into Lord Cheviot's life because the old man felt tired. Morag put him into his car and sent him to bed.

"And Patsy?" I said to Neil. "He's justified your judgment, but you broke with him when he edged a foot into the underworld. He gets along by bribing the police. Is that what he wanted?"

"He wants to be noticed, to charm. Popularity comes more easily to a night-club director, like him, than to a director of companies, like me. Ambassadors and film stars like to be photographed chez Patsy in Paris. And having one of the Cheviot twins for his wife adds chic, rakes in the cosmopolitan crowd. His walk may not be on a high level, but he's the cock of it."

"Poor Lalage," Morag sighed. "She and Patsy lead such an untidy life - - quarrels, separations, reconciliations."

"She's the heroine of her own dramas," Neil said. "If you can afford £1,500 for a coat, Mr. McKenzie, you can have its contents as well!" What a first act curtain! Fortunately, Patsy enjoys it. I imagine he provokes a scene when monotony threatens. The proof that they give each other what they want is that, although they've no children, they're still together."

Neil looked at Morag affectionately. "And you've got what you wanted, lady," he said.

"An adoring husband?" she scorned happily.

"No," Neil said in his best judicial manner. "As long as you lived with your father, you were muddled. You didn't realize that he had taught you to want to be obedient, to be dominated. Unconsciously, you were seeking someone who would lay down the law to you - - but kindly, not coldly. Hence: me."

"You!" Morag laughed at him, "Pray, sir, will you not tell us the secret of your own fabulous success?"

"There's no secret," Neil said. "Impulses, unconscious wishes, chance meetings dictated your lives. You drifted. As you didn't know what you wanted, you never saw the opportunities that crossed your paths. Now, I've wanted different things at different times, but at any one moment, I've always had a sharply defined aim in front

of me. I didn't drift. When opportunity cropped up, I recognized it, and used it. My father died leaving me, an apprentice, in charge. Did I hire a manager who would keep things in his hands and swindle me? No, I worked to learn . . . An undergraduate liked my food; it amused him to eat with his tailor. If he did, why not others? Result: a club: an advertisement. A visit to a man who couldn't pay his bill opened a window on a new world to me. He gave me a fur coat. His wife offered herself with it; neither she nor I wanted that; but she needed a breathing space and I wanted to get into her world. I found it wasn't quite the world I was after . . . Morag turned up . . . Again, because I knew, what I wanted, I recognized at once that she belonged to the world I sought. I - -"

"You monster!" Morag cried. "All these years, I've believed you married me because you couldn't help loving me!"

"I did," Neil said, "Marrying you is the only thing in my life I didn't plan. You drifted me into it."

E N D.

Entertainments

"L for Louise"

by

Jossleyn Hennessy

95, Linden Gardens,

London W2

Gerald Findon, private secretary to Lord Bevil, British Ambassador In Washington, was perusing a pink sheet headed "Following personal from Prime Minister to Ambassador". The wording was polite, but carried an echo of majestic thunder which led Gerald to forecast that unless immediate satisfaction were forthcoming, blood, sweat and tears would rise above the Embassy's Plimsol line. He had a sunny temperament.

"I bet Louise is at the bottom of this," he smiled as he pressed a bell. A girl entered. Her platinum hair was caught up in a cluster of ringlets by a pastel pink bow, small, but cunningly angled. Her eyes were blue, large and lazy. Her complexion and lips had been assembled by Max Factor. Her expression suggested an affectionate disposition; her contours that she would be in the pin-up class if only she could keep off candy. Her movements were indolent, not from lack of respect for the ambassador's private secretary, but because she found office life fatiguing. This was Louise Gascoigne, confidential file clerk. That Bevil, separated by Gerald's office from that occupied by Miss Gascoigne, had not had occasion to seek a file in person was among the qualifications that enabled her to hold the job down.

"This cable says that H.M.G. Instructed us on July 1-- six months ago -- to urge the U.S. government to provide a 500 kilowatt transmitter for erection on Christmas

Isle to direct B.B.C. news into Asia," Gerald said, adjusting his pace to Louise's average speed of comprehension. "The Prime Minister Is In Churchillian mood because (1) we have never replied to his cable, (2) no transmitter has arrived, and (3) our Supply Mission here have Intimated to their Ministry at home that they have had no support from the ambassador... A triple knock-out, Louise."

"Yes, It's given me indigestion," Louise said, dolefully patting the area affected,

"I don't remember the case. Where is this July cable?" "It's not in my files. I called the cypher room. They say it was a Prime-Minister-to-Ambassador-Most-Secret-Personal, so they had no copies circulated and only sent me a hand-transcribed original."

"Have they your receipt for It?"

"Huh-huh, " Louise said, in the American cadence which means "Yes."

"Oh-oh!" Gerald commented in the "That's-torn-it" tone.

"I've combed every file from 'Abandoned wives - - No allowances for,' to 'Zombies, cocktail recipe, Lady Bevil, for,'" Louise said hopelessly.

"Christmas Isle," Gerald said, meditating the possibilities of Louise's mind. "Did you try the ambassador's Christmas Invitations' file?"

Louise took this as a slur on her thoroughness. "I naturally looked there first , " she countered.

"Well, we're for it this time," Gerald said cheerfully.

Louise retired with a despondent swish of silk underwear. Gerald reflected that friendship seemed likely to cost him dear! Louise's brother, Robert, then a Canadian Rhodes scholar, had been Gerald's best friend at Oxford. Robert and his sister were orphans and when he had left Canada to take a post in Washington, he had asked Gerald if he knew of a job for Louise there also so that they might remain together. The Embassy was taking on extra hands, so this was quickly arranged. Gerald had received a shock when he saw Louise for the first time and she had been adding zest to his life ever since. Within a week, the staff superintendent had looked in and said:

"Your protégée is amiable, polite, and decorative. But she bottle-necked the work in her section to a standstill. I took her out and made her a receptionist, and in the half hour before I removed her, she had bottle-necked the entire Embassy. What am I to do with her?"

"I need a file clerk. Send her to me," Gerald laughed.

The staff superintendent thought of his wife and child. "I'd like that in writing," he said.

Gerald was busy during Louise's first week and beyond telling her that she was to file the cypher cables that flowed in and out, and to answer the telephone in Miss Jones' room adjoining, if the ambassador's stenographer were absent, he left her alone. But eventually he went to her cabinet for a reference.

"I thought I told you to file alphabetically by subject," he observed after a glance.

"But I have," Louise said with anxious goodwill.

Gerald pointed to envelopes A and C to Z which were empty and to B which was bursting.

"Oh! That!" Louise sighed her relief. B" for Britain. We don't get cables on any other subject."

Thereafter Gerald penciled in the classification of each item before returning it to her.

Another day, Gerald entered his room to see the door into Miss Jones' office ajar and to hear Louise answering the telephone for her.

"Hullo there!" she was saying affectionately.

So Louise has a young man, Gerald thought indulgently and immersed in his papers, he overheard no more. But he noted that the conversation went on for a long time.

"Your young man mustn't monopolize the ambassador's personal line," he told her when she came out,

"My young man!" Louise disclaimed indignantly. "That was the President."

"Of what?" Gerald enquired, absent-mindedly.

"Of the United States," Louise beamed at him.

Gerald looked at her blankly. Then he roared with laughter in which Louise joined. She was always ready to laugh, just for the sake of it.

"What passed between you, if it's not indiscreet to ask?"

"Well, a voice said 'The President wishes to speak to the ambassador. I was all excited. I forget what I ought to do and said, 'Put him through'. So next I knew was the President saying 'Hullo there! Is that you Bev?*' And I said 'Hullo there! No, it's Louise!!'"

Why, that's great! Aren't I the lucky man!?" . And who're you, Louise" the President asked, all friendly

"I take care of the ambassador's file s . "

"How's that? I'd've guessed you were American by your voice," the President said conversationally.

"Oh! No! Mr. President. I'm Canadian."

"And how do you get along with the British?"

"I hardly know them. I work for Mr. Findon. His manners are lovely. He never tries to get fresh. But I'm so cut off where I am I don't see much of them socially."

"That's about the way it is with me, Louise," the President said "Their manners are lovely. They never try to get fresh with me, but I'm too busy to see much of them socially. I'll tell you something," he continued, chuckling. "I've gotten a formula for the British, listen to all they say, but I act on my own judgment."

My trouble is I've no judgment," Louise gloomed.

"Everyone's good at something," the President said kindly. My enemies say I understand politics; though, the way they say it, I don't know that I like it."

"My enemies say I understand men. And they don't mean it nicely, either." Louise sympathized.

The President guffawed.

"One thing's clear, Louise. We each of us have gotten far enough in our careers to make folks envious of us."

Louise ceased her story and Gerald asked: "Yes. And after that?" "The rest was private between the President and me" she replied.

"Of course," said Gerald, feeling somehow put in his place. "We talked about careers for women and he said something that made me realize what my career ought to be", Louise added thoughtfully, more to herself than to Gerald.

"I see," said Gerald , and the laughter that normally lurked behind his least utterance to Louise was, unaccountably, absent.

Gerald's recollections were here interrupted by the ambassador's buzzer and he went into Lord Bevil's study.

"Good morning, Gerald," Bevil said, looking up briskly. "I had a successful twenty minutes with the President ... By the way, who is Louise?"

"Louise?" Gerald asked, cautiously.

"Yes. As I was leaving, the President called after me to give her his regards, His secretary had steered me out before I could ask what he meant."

Gerald assumed a baffled air, said nothing, and slipped the Prime Minister's cable before the ambassador, trusting that its

Importance would drive Louise from his mind. Gerald awaited his reactions with curiosity. He had seen Bevil resourcefully riding the whirlwind in too many crises to expect him to be rattled. He merely wondered what point Bevil would select for a delaying action while he reestablished his position. Bevil had need to skin the cable once only, then he said with a frown:

"This is news to me, and If the Supply Mission have intimated that I've not supported them, it means that they've raised it with the Americans on their own. They know they've no right to do so without my authority - - above all in a case originating with the P.M." He buzzed Miss Jones on the inter-com:

"Please tell Sir Walter Rokesby, I want him here urgently," he ordered.

Nor had Bevil achieved the Washington ambassadorship by inattention to detail: "Such blunders must not recur, Gerald, The Supply Mission may not provide us with a loophole next time. Was the cable received in your office?"

"Unfortunately, the cypher room holds our receipt for it, sir." "Who signed it?"

"Louise --,"

Gerald checked himself too late. "The filing assistant, Miss Gascoigne, sir," "Louise?"

Bevil's experienced eye linked the coincidence of the name with something of unease in Gerald's manner, quite different from his usual frankness. He flicked the Intercom again and said:

"Send Miss Gascoigne in."

The ambassador fixed his concentrated gaze on Louise from the moment that she stood, for a countable two seconds, framed in the door and did not once relax it until the interview was ended. In no way disconcerted, Louise entered slowly, and bowed amiably. Instinctively, Bevil responded with the inclination due to visitors and equals.

*Miss Gascoigne," he began pleasantly. "I'm trying to trace the 'Louise' to whom the President has just asked me to give his regards -"I

"Isn't that wonderful of him!" Louise exclaimed in rapture. "When the President telephoned, he engaged Miss Gascoigne in a brief conversation before he could put him through to you," Gerald interposed, fearing the ecstatic account that Louise might offer.

"I was not aware that we were equipped with television," Bevil said, surveying Louise ironically.

Louise's blue eyes flashed. She understood and resented the ambassador's crack at her looks. Anxious not to make trouble for Gerald, she rejected the comment that struck her as required and, as though fending off an awkward social moment, she observed graciously?

"Please don't apologize."

Bevil, who, besides being an ambassador, was a gentleman, said it once:

"Oh! But I do!"

Louise, incapable of nursing resentment, unfroze. "That's sweet of you, Lord Bevil." She glowed at him.

"Thank you. I don't think we need trouble you anymore, Miss Gascoigne," Bevil smiled, quick to withdraw while honours were easy.

This encounter made Gerald realize that he had judged Louise solely on the Blind Man's Bluff performance that she gave among files. But the ambassador's quip had brought within her reach something that she understood and lifting the bandage from her eyes for a moment, she revealed a woman whom Gerald did not know.

Gerald became aware that it was he who was now the object of the ambassador's gaze. Bevil seemed to be skimming his contents as he had skinned the Prime Minister's cable. Gerald saw that he had much to explain. His retention of Louise in charge of the Embassy's most important cables must strike Bevil as irresponsible. His evasiveness when asked to which Louise the President was referring must undermine Bevil's confidence in him. He expected a storm.

But Bevil was always unexpected. It was part of his armoury.

"She has poise and Intelligence," he conceded, as though he had found the excuse for Gerald that he was seeking.

The ambassador's restraint moved Gerald more than any detailed castigation.

"I'm extremely sorry to have caused you this trouble, sir," he said contritely. "However, It may perhaps re-assure you if I explain who Miss Gascoigne is - " But here the buzzer sounded and Sir Walter Rokesby was announced.

When, after an Interval, Gerald emerged to fetch a file, he found Louise, momentarily workless, sitting by the radio which he kept for the news. It was tuned softly to dance music. "What goes on?" Louise asked mournfully.

"Two strong men locked in a death-struggle," Gerald replied, flipping through papers on his desk. "The ambassador hasn't let on that this is the first he's heard of the transmitter and he's bloodying Rokesby's brow for going to see the Americans about it without telling him. The counterattack will come when Rokesby finds out - as he must because after all Christmas Isle is still B.B.C.-less. Ah! Here we are!"

And he ran back.

Barely a minute later Gerald was aghast to see the door of the ambassador's study open and Louise appear. Rokesby and Bevil had their backs to it and Gerald tried to frown her out of the room. Had she gone mad to enter at such a moment?

Rokesby was leaning back like a man who had made an unanswerable point. Louise judged that the enemy was exploiting some weakness in Bevil's position. The ambassador retained, however, the bored but purposeful calm of a surgeon donning his rubber gloves preparatory to a minor operation of no professional interest.

"The fact remains, my dear Rokesby," Bevil parried, "I have no alternative but to report to the cabinet" (He stressed the words carelessly) "that you deliberately tried to engineer this coup behind my back and that you failed. I fancy," he added, with meaning but without heat, "that that may restrict the range of your future activities."

"Excuse me!" Louise interrupted.

The ambassador swung round, If Rokesby's obstructiveness increased his sense of mastery over the situation, Louise's impudence unnerved him. This was --! He rose speechless with anger. Rokesby, welcoming a respite in which to re-group his forces, got up with elaborate politeness. Gerald achieved the feat of rising with a sinking sensation.

"What is it ? " Bevil whipped out.

"I'm getting the news over the air from Christmas Isle now," Louise said, the personification of a decorous answer to prayer.

The three men gaped at her in a silence broken only by the faint sounds of a newscast. Gerald's heart was beating: Louise had obviously sealed his career. Rokesby was confounded; he thought that Bevil had been steadily leading him on in order to confront him with this terrible denouement. Bevil's fury gave way to a curious thoughtfulness; he seemed to be recalling something.

With unhurried tread he led the way into Gerald's office.

An announcer, afflicted with adenoids, was reading the news with a plum in his mouth, "At least she's got a British station," Gerald thought, clutching at a straw. The ambassador sat with impassive face, his hands clasping his left leg crossed over his right. Only an occasional twitch of the foot betrayed strain. Rokesby slouched in an armchair.

Finding the news dull, Louise seized the chance unobtrusively to powder her nose.

At last, the end came: "You have been listening to the news from the Christmas Isle station of the B.B.C. The news in Japanese follows immediately."

Louise strolled across and switched off the noises which followed.

"That's a laugh," she said. "How many people do they think understand Japanese?"

'Only 110,000,000 Japanese,' Rokesby vented his chagrin on her.

"Oh! I forgot about them," Louise said equably.

"A merry Christmas after all, Rokesby," Bevil let fall negligently. "Thank you, Miss Gascoigne," he said to Louise, so kindly that the words sounded like a father's blessing. And, taking Gerald by the arm, he re-entered his study.

Louise looked at Rokesby. Her maternal heart went out to the enemy for whose rout she was responsible.

"A drink, Sir Walter?" she offered sympathetically. "The ambassador has a cocktail cabinet round the corner. What'll it be? I know," she added, fishing happily for Z among her files.

By the time that she had tracked it down, Rokesby had gone. Hospitably, Louise put the Zombie folder back in R (for Rokesby) so that she would know where it was when he called again.

In his study, Bevil was saying to Gerald:

"I owe Miss Gascoigne an apology. The P.M.'s cable wasn't lost. When I heard the radio through your open door, just now, I remembered that on that day last July, I came in before anyone had arrived. The cypher messenger was listening to the news while waiting for you. I penciled my illegible scrawl in his receipt book and took the cables. The Christmas Isle transmitter seemed an Information case, so I wrote a line on it and sent it to our Information people. Since the object was anti-Communist

propaganda, I presume the American Information people pushed it through quickly. They should have told me, but we all make mistakes occasionally," he ended tolerantly.

"How is it that the P.M. and the Supply people haven't heard about it ? " Gerald wondered.

"Perhaps Louise has a sister in Whitehall," Bevil chuckled. "Put me up a reply to the P.M. Just say 'Please listen in on blank wavelength at blank time.' The Indispensable Louise will fill in the blanks for you."

The ambassador's use of her christian name seemed propitious.

"About Louise --, " Gerald began.

"Will that be all, Gerald?" Louise asked, peeping in at 6.30 p.m.

Gerald wearily pushed his files from him and gazed at her. She looked delicious.

"No, Louise. The ambassador wants me to talk to you. Sit down."

"Oh-oh!" Louise said, disconsolately sliding the rest of her contours round the door.

"H.E. is grateful for your timely appearance this afternoon, but--- " . He paused uncertainly.

"He can't forget that I lost the P.M's cable."

"You didn't."

Louise brightened at Gerald's explanation. Then her face resumed its normal office melancholy.

"So, the only cable I didn't lose was one I never had," she said bitterly. "Still, that's no reason for firing me."

Gerald looked uncomfortable.

"Oh! I know," Louise sighed, "It's because I look like a Follies girl and act like a lady."

"He thinks your many talents would find better outlets in another career," Gerald said, in half-hearted imitation of Bevil's manner,

"Gerald, I hope my being here hasn't hurt you," Louise said earnestly. "He doesn't think that you and I - well, that we go out on the town together at night?"

"No. I explained who you are and he was satisfied," Gerald replied apologetically.

I guess It's goodbye, then." Louise rose even more slowly than usual.

"No," Gerald said, clearly dismayed by the difficulty of what he had to say next.

Louise sank, sadly but restfully, back into the armchair. Gerald began to pace about, nervously stopping to finger a book here and a file there.

"Louise," he said desperately, "I must say something that, now that you're going, I realize I've felt for a long time."

Their eyes met.

"The answer is 'Yes'," Louise said softly.

"What!" Gerald cried, surprised and happy.

"You're asking me to marry you and I'm saying 'Yes'", Louise smiled. "That's a career I can make good in. The President thinks so, anyway."

"So does the ambassador," Gerald laughed joyously. "His actual words were 'That girl is so good-looking and so good natured, so Intelligent, and so unintellectual], she'd make a perfect wife.'"

A "typically British understatement," said Louise, greatly pleased.

END

The characters and Incidents in this story are purely fictitious.

Others

Death of A Maharani

by

Jossleyn Hennessy

95 Linden Gardens,
London W.2.

"We've got to jump for it!" Abdul Quayum, the Pakistani pilot, said cheerfully. "We're losing height like hell. You go first. Just count ten and pull the cord. There's nothing in it. The chances of a failure are a hundred thousand to one according to the official gen! Get cracking! I can't leave before you and I don't want to die before I've had another drink and another woman." He spoke encouragingly but urgently.

Mervyn was simultaneously terrified and calm. Terrified at the thought of hurtling through space: calm because reason told him that millions had jumped before him and lived. He closed his eyes and jumped.

Mervyn Sinclair, twentysix year old special correspondent of the World, had been flying on a news assignment in a specially chartered two-seater from Peshawar, capital of Pakistan's North-West Frontier Province, to Gilgit, beneath the Pamirs where meet the greatest and remotest mountains in the world -- the barren Hindu Kush, the fabled Karakoram, the mighty Himalayas. Engine trouble had developed...

Mervyn landed unhurt but groggy and shaken near the Torala river. He struggled tensely to his feet.

Tribal territory is no place for a stranger. If he is a white man he may be held to ransom; if the authorities are dilatory, one of his ears may be sent to Peshawar to expedite the cash. His captors will not kill him because that brings punitive expeditions and trouble, but a rival clan, with a score to pay, may raid their hide-out and kill him in hope of fixing the blame on his captors.

Mervyn had, however, two reasons for optimism. Torala is a Pathan tribal principality. Its chieftain, the Khan, is shrewd enough to realise that if he keeps the peace in his inaccessible fastnesses, the Pakistanis, like their predecessors the British, will leave him alone. Mervyn was confident that the Khan, far from holding him to ransom, would send him to Peshawar under escort. Secondly, the Khan's Prime Minister was a former Frontier Political Agent named Adrian Fortescue. Queer tales were told about this man who preferred to spend the years of his retirement among the tribes rather than his own people, but the Peshawar authorities turned deaf ears; they were grateful to the Khan and his minister for preventing the tribesmen from raiding and they avoided incidents by forbidding anyone to visit Torala.

Mervyn and Fortescue had been good friends and he knew that he would be safe if he could find Fortescue in Shahdan, the fortified village nearby, which was the Khan's capital.

His luck was in. Some Pathans who had seen him land pulled him out of the reeds. Mervyn spoke no Pushtu, but he asked in Hindusthani if they had seen another man drop. They indicated by signs that he should go with them. As they walked on Mervyn said that he wanted to see Fortescue. The mention of this name was received with respect. After perhaps half an hour, they came upon a group of tribesmen gathered round something. At Mervyn's approach, they opened their ranks and he saw Abdul Quyum's twisted body. His parachute, unopened, was still on his back. Abdul's cheery voice smote his ears: "The chances of a failure are a hundred thousand to one according to the official gen! Get cracking! ...I don't want to die before I've had another drink and another woman."

Unbidden, the words rose to Mervyn's lips: "I'll have to have them for you, old fellow!" There was a lump in his throat. The tribesmen stared at him curiously.

It was midday when Mervyn was ushered into Fortescue's study in a comfortable looking timber bungalow. The strain of his first jump, the shock of Abdul Quayum's death, and the relief of finding Fortescue, rendered Mervyn speechless for a moment. Then he burst out:

"Adrian! It's good to see you!" and grasped his friend warmly by the hand.

There was no answering warmth.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Fortescue said aggressively. Mervyn did his best to explain.

"H'mph," Fortescue grunted. "You'd better have a wash and some lunch, I suppose ... Mubarek!" he called. "Show the sahib the spare room."

Dashed by this reception, Mervyn followed the bearer out.

At lunch, there was a fresh surprise. A woman entered, slim and lovely, with the wheat-gold skin and the proud features of a Rajput princess. She wore a filmy black sari, its borders brocaded in scarlet; her long lashed eye-lids were tipped with kohl; her lips were full and sensuous; the nails of her fingers and of the bare toes that peeped from emerald-green sandals, matched the scarlet of her brocade. Her expression was sad, her manner listless.

"Tara, this is Mervyn Sinclair," Fortescue said. "Mervyn, this is the Maharani of Yashti, who is good enough to preside over my household."

In the Maharani's fleeting smile, Mervyn caught a glimpse of another being -- spontaneous, gay, affectionate. She did not speak throughout the meal but he was conscious that she was studying him beneath those long lashes. Her name was vaguely familiar.

Ignoring Fortescue's charlish reserve, Mervyn made an effort to keep up a good-humoured exterior. Fortescue was an authority on

tribal lore and by plying him with questions, Mervyn gradually got him talking fluently and naturally.

"When Indian independence came, I was 45," he said. "If the British had stayed on, I'd've ended up as Governor of the Frontier. As it was, I had no future. I didn't want to go home. Before the war, my pension would have given me a comfortable life as a country squire. But today! The England I fitted into has gone!"

He paused and sighed heavily before resuming:

"I'd known the Khan, here, for years. He was no longer young. His sons were beginning to intrigue against each other, and against him, to seize the khanate when he grew too feeble. He knew what to expect!" Fortescue grinned. "He was his father's third son; he murdered his elder brothers to get the throne and his younger brothers to keep it. I saw my chance to go on living and working among the tribes I loved. I offered to become his Prime Minister, to take the load off him, so he could die in peace and I could hand the Khanate on to the son of his choice."

"Don't you ever want to go home for an occasional leave?"

Mervyn had said the wrong thing. All Fortescue's hostility returned. His forehead became a knotted mass of angry lines.

"I've finished with Western civilisation. The graciousness has gone. If you don't tax yourselves to ruin, you'll bomb yourselves to it. My sons disagree. They like the Welfare State and the whole bag of tricks. They're as strange to me as I am to them. I've turned my back on the world." There was a note in his voice which suggested that he was no longer quite sane. He relapsed into moody silence.

When lunch was over, Mervyn said: "If you don't mind, I'll take a nap. I've an awful headache. I'm not used to falling out of the sky, you know. Later on, perhaps we could fix up my return to Peshawar."

Fortescue left the room without deigning to reply. Mervyn's eyes travelled uneasily to the window; outside he saw a greenhouse, flower beds, and smooth lawns. He heard a movement behind him; he had forgotten the Maharani. He wondered if he could discover from her why Fortescue resented him; he sought for an opening.

"It has the peace of an English garden," he smiled, pointing out of the window.

She glanced at him with amused pity. "But it happens to be on the furthest borders of tribal No Man's land. Adrian will have you shot."

Was she joking? Had he heard aright?

The Maharani read his thoughts. "Or stabbed and quietly buried in the night," she added.

"Oh? Why?" he asked conversationally.

"Here, you're not wanted, and it would be dangerous to let you go."

"Dangerous?"

"You're a foreign correspondent. You'd put Torala on the world news map. You'd get the devils of the nether-world curious about paradise," she said ironically.

"But the Pakistan government is bound to enquire about the missing plane."

"They'll send a courier up through Swat. He'll be told nothing's been seen of it here. Adrian will have the wreck cleaned up. The Toralis will give nothing away. They dislike outsiders. And your bones won't talk."

"But the whole thing's impossible!" Mervyn managed a laugh.

The Maharani said wearily: "Nothing is impossible in this ghastly place."

"Why are you here?" he asked.

"I came with Adrian because I loved him. It was an adventure. To flee to a secret kingdom! To live for love! My God! What nonsense some novelists write -- if everyone had to live alone with their lovers in far-off blue lagoons, they'd go crazy, just as Adrian is. Just as I am."

"You?"

"I hate the savage scenery. I hate the savages who live in it. I want companionship, gossip, a little cheerfulness occasionally! And Adrian's no longer the man I fell in love with. He's grown in on himself, wrapped up in suspicions."

"Why don't you leave?"

"I'm as good as a prisoner here. I couldn't escape, a woman, alone, over the mountains. But ---" she went on with a sudden intensity -- "you and I could get away together. I thought it out while you were chattering over lunch. There's a motorable track from here down to Swat. Nobody is allowed through the check post at the frontier pass without a permit. The guards can't read, so Adrian uses his seal. I could steal it and fake-up a permit. We'll take Adrian's car."

Mervyn was baffled and incredulous. "But this is a gangster film!" he protested. "A man like Adrian isn't -- a murderer! It's nonsense."

"You drop from the skies like an answer to prayer and you turn out to be a nit-wit!" the Maharani cried in exasperation. "If it's true I can't escape without you -- don't fool yourself: you won't get out without my help."

Her conviction impressed Mervyn.

"How much time have we?" he asked soberly.

"How can one tell? He'll get rid of you in the course of this night, may be," she said with a faint smile. "Our only hope is

if I can get the seal from his drawer while he's asleep."

"And what if he catches you?"

"I'm desperate," she said under her breath. "I starve, not only for all I can't have, but for something I thought I had here -- love. Adrian is no longer human."

She looked at Mervyn with a new light in her dark eyes.

"If we get through, perhaps you may have a reward," she murmured. Her voice was warm, caressing. She took his arm. "Go to bed. You'll need all your strength for -- " she looked at him beneath her lashes -- "for our escape," she whispered.

Could Fortescue really mean murder? Suppose the Maharani's story was but half true? She was bored stiff here. Suppose that while Fortescue meant him no harm, he had no intention of letting the Maharani go? Was she planning to use Mervyn for her own escape? Was her amorous hint merely bait to lure him into her scheme? Her amorousness? He remembered now that there had been some scandal about a Maharani of Yashti. She belonged to the demi-monde of the Indian aristocracy. She had left the Maharajah and flitted from lover to lover on the Riviera. But she was not mercenary; she threw her heart away for love, not money, so that much was forgiven her and she had many loyal friends.

Mervyn decided that before he fell in with the Maharani's plan, he would sound Fortescue out. Then, because he was exhausted and suffering from shock, he fell into a troubled sleep.

When he awoke, an oil lamp lit his room. Mubarek was laying out a dinner jacket for him! This was but the first, and the least, of the repeated contrasts between the normalities of life and the

unnerving sense of insecurity that he felt growing upon him in this outlandish spot.

He went across to the cosy living room. Shahdan, six-thousand feet above sea-level, is cold at night and there was a log fire crackling. Fortescue, in a black tie, sat on one side, reading. The Maharani, her chin resting on her cupped hands, sat on the other, gazing into the flames. It was a domestic picture. The comfortable upholstered chairs and curtains made up of quaint multi-coloured Swati cloth, and the walls in blond-red panels of pine wood, were cheerful. Surely nothing sinister could happen here?

Fortescue looked up, casually. The Maharani poured out whiskies and sodas.

Mervyn did not trust himself to chat naturally, so he reverted to questions about tribal life. Fortescue was ready to talk; throughout the excellent dinner that followed, he elaborated on the skill with which the Khan had carved out and held his state.

"He can twist a man who's trying to lie to him, inside out, better than any lawyer. And he's shrewd. Why, years ago, when he visited Delhi -- he talks English -- the Viceroy tried to impress him with the might of the British. The Khan chuckled and said: 'A big Khanate like your's has many enemies; too many people to kill. A little Khanate has few enemies. I can shoot mine easily one by one, from behind a rock'".

When the brandy glasses were brought, the Maharani left them. Mervyn felt that the moment had come.

"Look, Adrian," he said. "I'd love to stay a while and see the local sights. But I'm on my way to an important rush job. When can you get me back to Peshawar?"

"Why go back?" Fortescue frowned. "Stay here. We'll shoot and fish, and I'll train you to succeed me as Prime Minister."

"And if I insist on going?" Mervyn challenged him lightly.

Fortescue flushed with anger, then he controlled himself with an effort. Quietly, he told Mervyn that he would not be allowed to leave. For some minutes he continued to talk reasonably, urging the delights of Torala, but every time the possibility that Mervyn might go occurred to him, he spoke faster, and gradually his resentment against the post-war world poured from him in an increasing torrent, until he was cursing and raving.

It grew on Mervyn that Fortescue was a deeply unhappy man; he laid a hand on his arm and said: "Adrian, old fellow, I wish I could help you."

Fortescue blanched. "No one can help me. I've got to struggle on alone," he tortured himself.

"No one can live without friends of his own kind," Mervyn said. His words seemed to stun Fortescue like a blow.

"I know," he muttered. "Stay with me, or --," his mania seized him and he shouted: "Or die!" The words hit the air grotesquely in that civilised pine-timbered room. Fortescue got up. "It's half past ten. Time for bed," he said roughly. "Goodnight."

Back in his bedroom, Mervyn slipped out of his borrowed dinner jacket and put on the slacks and sweater in which he had arrived. Then he smoked cigarette after cigarette.

Around midnight the Maharani entered quickly. Her hands trembled; she was panting, and her words tumbled out in gasps:

"I have the seal ... I've told Mubarek I'm taking you out shooting at a lake two hours' drive from here ... He'll call you with a cup of tea at 3.30 ... The car is ordered ... There'll be sandwiches and a flask ... Nobody suspects a thing."

"But won't Adrian hear the car?"

"Don't argue," she ordered fiercely. "Undress. Get into bed. Act naturally when Mubarek comes." She ran from the room.

Mervyn felt that he was living in a dream, shot through with agonising anxiety, in which everyone, under an appearance of normal behaviour, was moving inescapably towards a pit of terror and destruction. He strove to master these ridiculous fears and to reason calmly. But he could not banish the thought that his future seemed to depend on an unknown woman's sketchily planned scheme. For such a desperate venture, you needed someone who knew how to handle these lawless hill men -- a phlegmatic type, who knew when to bluff and when to shoot, not a helpless city-dweller, floundering amidst the unfamiliar, accompanied by a highly-strung woman.

Mervyn had not slept when the courteously smiling Mubarek came in with the tea. He dressed quickly. The Maharani, enveloped in furs, topped by the gold-brocade of her sari drawn over her head, was waiting in the car. An armed tribesman sat next to the Pathan driver in front. Together the exotically beautiful and richly clad Maharani, the turbaned Pathan with a bandolier across his shoulders and a rifle between his knees, and the American car of lushly gargantuan luxury, looked like Hollywood's dream of sex and blood on the North-West Frontier. It was absurd.

In the utter stillness, the car seemed to make a terrible noise as it started down the gravel drive. The sentry opened the gate and saluted them sleepily.

After a few miles of level going, the valley closed and the river plunged over the rocks of a towering gorge. The track zig-zagged to the top, where it ran along a ledge carved out of the gorge, a sheer drop to the foaming waters countless feet below. It was one of the ancient trade routes from Sinkiang to India, intended for pack animals,

but the Khan had had it widened here and there so that a car could scrape through. The wheels slithered on loose stones; progress in low gear rarely touched ten miles an hour. Now and again, the guard got down in order to direct the driver as he eased the car back and forth, inches at a time, round a right angle bend. By day, a careless driver could not have survived a mile; by night, as the headlights projected over yawning voids, the experience was grim.

The Maharani's teeth were chattering as much from nerves as from the cold. She slid into Mervyn's arms for comfort and warmth... her soft cheek lay against his... her lashes gave him butterfly kisses... (He could almost hear Cecil B. de Mille crying out "Hold it! That's great! Camera! Shoot!").

Mervyn was familiar enough with tribal territory to know that their guard was necessary as a warning to friendly tribesmen not to shoot and to hostiles that shots would be returned, but he feared that the two men in front might complicate their escape.

"What will they say when we tell them we're not going to the lake but on to Peshawar?" he asked.

"I typed a permit on Adrian's notepaper and put his seal on it."

"You had no trouble in getting it?"

"O Mervyn! I killed him," she said, and began to cry quietly. Her tears wetted his cheek.

"You killed him?" Mervyn repeated stupidly.

"The drawer creaked and woke him. At first he misunderstood why I'd come and told me to go away. Then he realised I was at his drawer. He pulled himself up on his elbows. There was only one thing to do ... quickly ... I stabbed at his throat before he could call out. He gripped me, but I stabbed again and again --"

She stuffed a handkerchief into her mouth so that the Pathans should not hear her sobs.

Mervyn was aghast.

He said slowly: "Tara, you've put a rope round your neck and mine. To run away, like this, will convince everyone we're both guilty. If we reach Pakistan, we'll spend the rest of our lives in fear of a charge of murder. If the car breaks down, or the driver refuses to leave Torala, we're caught at once."

"I didn't mean to kill him," she whispered tremulously.

"I didn't take the dagger with me. It was his. He kept it on his desk."

"Unsheathed?"

"Yes. I lost my head. I snatched it up ... Oh, Mervyn, if you knew what I lived through with Adrian in Shahdan! I was so frightened and so unhappy."

"A lawyer ought to be able to build up a case of self-defence out of that," Mervyn said. "But not if we run away. We must see the Khan and insist on being sent to Peshawar for an enquiry."

"No!" she gasped. "The Khan loved Adrian. He'll revenge himself on me. He hates 'shameless' unveiled, Westernized, women. If he doesn't kill me, he'll put me in his zenana."

"I wish to God I'd met him, knew what sort of man he is."

"He's a barbarian. I can't face him," she said vehemently.

"For me, I'm sure the right thing is to return," Mervyn said. "But I don't want to hurt you, Tara. If you think Shahdan's unsafe for you, take the car on to Peshawar. I'll get out here and walk back."

"Do you realise you're condemning me to death?" she cried.

"I can't go on alone with these tribesmen. The whole of this trip is a mad chance. It needs your prestige, as a Britisher, if we're to get through. Alone, at best, these Muslim Pathans won't take orders from me -- a woman and a Hindu. At worst they'll carry me off to some village hovel as a prize. I'd be kept as a slave. I'd kill myself rather than that. And if I go back to Shahdan, the Khan will kill me."

Her words seared him, but his whole being rejected the idea of fleeing like a criminal.

He thought feverishly. "I'll show the driver your permit and order him to take you to Peshawar," he decided.

The Maharani clung to him, imploring him to stay with her, but he leant forward to the driver. "Gharri rogo," he said. The driver obediently stopped.

With the distraught Maharani crying on his shoulder, he would never be able to explain his orders in his inadequate Hindusthani. He managed to disengage himself, get out of the car, and was walking round to the driver's window when the Maharani, half-blind with tears, swayed after him. She flung her arms round his neck.

"For God's sake, have pity," she moaned. "I killed him for both of us. You can't desert me. Have pity!"

"Come back to Shahdan and we'll face it out together. I won't let you down," he said gently.

"I daren't! I won't!"

"Then I must send you on to Peshawar."

He tried to extricate himself but she clung the tighter, so that he was forced to use strength to push her from him. She lost her balance.

"Mervyn! Save me!" she screamed.

Before he could reach her, she had fallen headlong over the abyss.

The gorge slanted inwards. He saw only the writhing mists. He heard only the rage of seething waters.

The Pathans leapt out and pulled him forcibly from the edge. With crude gestures that sickened Mervyn, they conveyed what must have happened to Tara's body.

They had to go on mile after mile before there was space enough to turn the car to go back to Shahdan.

He sat tautly, staring ahead, seeing only Tara's piteously imploring figure.

Events had rushed him, he reasoned with himself. There had been no time for nicely weighed decisions. Of course, Tara was a murderess. Of course, she had no claim on him, a stranger; he had not told her to kill Fortescue. Of course, she, not Mervyn, had created the plight in which she had found herself ... But her perfume lingered on his shoulder, on his breast, where she had lain -- her trust in him. Her expression was not that of a hard, ambitious, or wicked woman, but of a passionate child. She had sought neither riches nor power; as the wife of the glittering Maharajah of Yashti she had had both; she had chosen love. She had killed in a moment of fear and passion. Who knew? Perhaps Fortescue would have killed her if she had not struck first. But -- Mervyn accused himself -- it had remained for him to condemn her to death and then to carry out his own sentence.

As the car entered Shahdan, a red dawn broke, and, to Mervyn's tormenting imagination, each snow-capped peak was splashed with blood.

He ordered the driver to go to the Khan's mud-and-brick fort. Arrived in the courtyard, he said authoritatively: "Khan Sahib, salaam do!" A tribesman of the Khan's bodyguard came up, and, after some talk, Mervyn's driver was taken inside. Later, he saw that Mubarek had been fetched. Evidently the Khan was holding an enquiry before seeing Mervyn. It was a full hour before two armed tribesmen led him before the chieftain.

He entered a room bare of furniture save for rich carpets and a wooden trestle bed on which there squatted, clasping his knees, an old man clad in traditional tribal costume: a jaunty blue, white, and gold pagri, an embroidered waistcoat, and a not too clean white shirt

hanging outside baggy cotton trousers. He had an intelligent forehead, shrewd blue eyes, and ruthless lips set in a humorous mouth. His determined jaw was covered by a bushy grey beard. He had the complexion of a wrinkled walnut. His personality emerged from un-European depths and shallows -- baffling, powerful, and wholly Pathan.

"Badshah Khan" (Great King), Mervyn said, using the ceremonial form of address. "I seek your help."

"You have murdered Fortescue and his Maharani. I do not help murderers," the Khan said coldly.

"I have come to tell you what happened."

The Khan heard Mervyn intently without taking his eyes off him. When he had finished, the Khan meditated. At last he looked up. Mervyn braced himself to hear the verdict. Would the Khan shoot him, send him to Peshawar under arrest, or let him go?

"What I'm not clear about is this," the Khan said. "If another world war comes, will Pakistan fight for the Americans or the Soviets?"

Mervyn suppressed an hysterical impulse to laugh and strove to collect his thoughts. He managed a few halting generalisations. But the Khan wanted chapter and verse and for the next twenty minutes he questioned Mervyn on the policies and personalities of Pakistan. His manner, no longer stern, but relaxed and conversational, finally emboldened Mervyn to say:

"Badshah Khan, do you believe I killed Fortescue?"

"No."

"Thank you," Mervyn said.

"I would not have believed you if you'd tried to get out of Torala. You couldn't have, anyway. Mubarek would have found Fortescue's body when he went to wake him at six o'clock. You'd have been stopped and brought back."

"And then -- ?"

The Khan was amused. "With my own people I do as I like. But I don't ask for trouble by shooting outsiders," he grinned. "I would have told the Pakistan government you had tried to escape after killing Fortescue and, back in Peshawar, you'd both have been charged with murder."

A thought struck Mervyn. "Did Fortescue tell you I was here?"

"He said you'd be staying a while." The Khan chuckled.

"He didn't say he was going to kill you."

"Would he have dared?"

"How can we tell now? With my tribesmen, he was strong, patient and just. I didn't know he hated his own people like a madman ... I'm glad he's dead. He'd have made trouble sooner or later."

Mervyn had not the Pathan's familiarity with sudden death. He could not help saying: "I feel so terribly about the Maharani. That ghastly gorge -- I didn't realise how hard I was pushing."

"What's one woman more or less?" the Khan asked. "She was not even of your own people."

"But I belong to her world. I know many of her friends."

The Khan chuckled. "Then you'll be able to give them the latest news of her."

"That's just it. Look what I have to tell them! That she asked me to help her, placed herself in my protection, and that I -- I behaved like a prig."

It is improbable that the Khan knew what a prig was, and the ^{/romantic/} Western view of the relation of man to woman that Mervyn implied was outside his experience, but he thought that the boy in front of him had guts and he saw his distress. He wondered how he could put the heart back into him. At last he said:

"If you could live the last few hours over again, would you let the Maharani persuade you to flee to Peshawar with her this time? Or would you insist once more on coming back to me?"

"I keep asking myself that. But the answer is always the same. How could I not come back to explain to you?" Mervyn said stubbornly.

"Then," said the Khan, "faced with the same choice, you would choose the same consequences. You would run away from nothing. Don't you see what that means?"

Mervyn looked puzzled.

"That you are a man of courage and honour," the Khan said gravely. "There are too few such in the world."

Mervyn tried to understand the Khan's point of view.

"If I had not let the Maharani fall over the gorge ---" he began.

But the Khan had lost interest in the whole thing. "If she had lived, she would have been killed by law instead of by accident," he said indifferently. "It is better that she is dead. A life for a life. The blood debt is paid."

END

Others

The Outcaste

by

Jossleyn Hennessy

95 Linden Gardens,
London W.2.

I liked Tonio Martinelli, but I wouldn't claim to know more of him than could be seen from the outside. My mother saw Tonio from the inside, and she loved him.

Between the World Wars, I was the Paris correspondent of a liberal daily and it was therefore natural that anti-Fascist groups should seek me out. It was some time in 1935 that Mauricet, a French Communist, brought Tonio to my office; Mauricet said that Tonio was a sailor who had been involved in a plot to mutiny aboard an Italian cruiser in protest against the Fascist enslavement of Abyssinia; but the police heard something, made a search, and discovered anti-Fascist leaflets in Tonio's possession. He would have been shot if sympathisers had not enabled him to escape; he was stowed away in a British merchant vessel bound for England, land of Freedom.

If he had been an ordinary political refugee, there might have been hope for him, but technically he was a deserter from the Royal Italian Navy and every Italian consul claimed his extradition. His life became misery. It is ^{twenty}~~fifteen~~ years now since I heard his story so I don't remember the details, but it amounted to this: Tonio's only hope of avoiding the death sentence in Italy was to stow away.

To landlubbers, a stowaway is romantic; to a ship's company, he is a source of delay, expense, and annoyance with immigration authorities. A ship's Master is fined for carrying a passenger illegally and the money comes out of his own pocket; he swears at his officers for failing to search properly before sailing and the officers swear at the stowaway for having eluded them. All that the stowaway gets out of

it are the barest necessities, plentiful kicks and a chance of prison on disembarkation. When I met Tonio, he had been leading this cat and mouse existence for fourteen months; he had literally no other way of living.

An alien, with a legitimate extradition demand against him, he could settle nowhere, and now here he was in France, a man on the run, without a friend in the world -- except the Communists, for he was the sort of person, rejected or persecuted by the existing system, whom the Party leaders seize upon as likely raw material for their purposes.

"What do you want?" I asked Mauricet.

"Two things," he said promptly. "Publish an article about the sufferings of this young hero which will help to mobilise world opinion against the Fascist beasts --"

"-- and which will also tell the world that the Communists alone help the down-trodden," I grinned.

"Why not?" he retorted. "It's true."

"And secondly?" I asked.

"A thousand francs to smuggle him out of France and send him to Russia by the underground. In exchange, you'll get an interesting article out of him."

There were colourful incidents in Tonio's story, which, I saw, would build up an unusual article on the refugee underworld.

"All right," I said. "But I want him alone for the afternoon."

Mauricet didn't like this; he looked searchingly at Tonio and suspiciously at me.

"What are you afraid of? Think I'll hand him over to the police?" I twitted Mauricet, for I guessed why he was reluctant. To me, Tonio was a human being, whose tragedy I wished to tell factually,

leaving my readers to sort out the moral. To Mauricet, Tonio was an instrument for furthering the Communist cause, an opportunity to smear Capitalism in the columns of its own press; his story had to be told in the right way; and Mauricet was not sure that Tonio would do the job as well as Mauricet would tell it for him.

"A thousand francs and Tonio for the afternoon. Or nothing," I said.

Tonio watched us bargain over him with weary indifference, and when Mauricet yielded, he rose automatically like a listless dog who has no idea where he is going, but follows because he knows he'll be beaten if he doesn't.

I drove him to my flat where we could talk in comfort without interruption.

As I questioned him, I tried to disentangle the real Tonio from the People's Hero. It seemed to me that I could in fact distinguish three Tonios. First, there was the well-indoctrinated martyr to the cause, self-righteous and arrogant. But this front broke down into a pathetic fawning, if he thought that he had said the wrong thing, and gave a glimpse of the second Tonio, the wanted man, who felt helpless, utterly at the mercy of strangers on whose goodwill he had no claim save that of charity. Under the influence of cigarettes, a deep arm-chair, and my bedside manner, he relaxed bit by bit, and I saw that in repose he had the expression of a bewildered child. I guessed this to be the real Tonio.

He was nineteen. Give him food and rest, take away his frown of anxiety, and the strain in his blue eyes, and he would be good-looking. He had touselled yellow hair, an intelligent forehead and good features. If you could untwist his mouth, make it smile, it would be warm, even gentle.

About four o'clock, my mother put her head into my study. She is grey haired, plump, comfortable, but energetic; she has a determined jaw, but the kindest eyes. She had come to look after Billy, our three months' old son, while my wife went shopping. She asked if we'd like tea. I said that Tonio and I would join her in the sitting room. On the way, we passed the open door of our bedroom; there was nothing special about it: Jane's bed and mine lay side by side; one of her blouses hung over a chair; Billy was waving pudgy legs in his cradle. On the mantelpiece were photographs: Jane and myself on our wedding day; Jane's mother holding Billy at his christening. In a corner, a shirt of mine overflowed from Jane's mending basket.

Tonio stopped in mid-stride and gazed at these things. His lips began to tremble; he burst into tears.

~~Anyone who has been away from home for a long time in a war (or in a prison) will know what the sight of that room did to Tonio. But only another outcaste could understand how deeply it hit him.~~

"Poor boy," said my mother. "Poor boy." She put her arm round him, led him to the sitting room, and sat beside him on the sofa. She murmured comforting things and he clung to her and put his head on her breast.

"O Mama, darling Mama, I miss you. I want you," he sobbed.

"It's all right, you'll see her again soon," my mother said, rocking Tonio in her arms. (But he never will, I thought).

Gradually he quietened, and my mother coaxed him to a cup of tea.

"I'm sorry," he said, wiping his tear-stained face on his dirty sleeve. "Through your bedroom door, I saw all I've lost. My mother. My wife. My son. My home. My country."

I just stood there, a wooden, tongue-tied, Anglo-Saxon, with an embarrassing lump in my throat. But under my mother's motherly encouragement, he talked on, easing his heart.

Tonio had done his period of conscription in the Italian navy because he was a fisherman's son. He told us about his home. One got the impression of a large family of brothers and sisters, teasing, quarrelling, laughing, fighting; warm, companionable, human; presided over by a silent, slightly grim, but not unkind father, and a bustling, rolled-up sleeved, ample-bosomed, scolding mother.

"Papa would take me to the beach when I was small and find me flat stones to skim the waves, and build me sand castles, without ever saying a word. Mama would spank me for dirtying her washing till I howled; then she'd wipe my nose on her apron, take two cups, fill one with scalding soup from the pot over the fire, and say: 'Here, cry-baby, pour it from one to the other to cool if you don't want to have something really to cry about. Be off, you watery weanling of a mother's catastrophic imbecility.' But she said it kindly."

Yes, Tonio's childhood had been happy.

And then he had fallen in love with Lucia. The mothers thought them too young, but the fathers saw in the marriage an excuse to join hands in a partnership in their fishing boats. So they were married and a great feast was held and there was much junketting.

Tonio was near to tears again as he talked of Lucia; he spoke of her as his bride and indeed they can only have been married a few months before he was called up. He had never seen his son. He showed us a dog-eared snapshot of a baby in the arms of a strapping young woman. (She wasn't glamorous, but she had a merry eye and a passionate mouth).

"My son," he said with forlorn pride.

It was a godsend that my mother chanced to be there that afternoon; she knew the right things to say. Listening, I formed a picture of Tonio as an attractive boy, guileless, with a frank enjoyment of a life's simple things: work, food, chianti, love-making, his family and his home.

"It's a pity you ever went in for politics, Tonio," I said.

Instantly, the good-looking peasant boy vanished, and I saw once more the fugitive, who had learnt that survival lay in saying and doing what was expected of him.

"Non-politicals are traitors to the proletariat," he declaimed.

"But you're the son of a Capitalist," I smiled.

Tonio rejected this angrily. "My father is of the people," he said.

"Of course. But he owns his own boat and employs labour." Tonio had never thought of his father as an "employer"; he was non-plussed. "Were there many 'Comrades' in your village?" I asked.

"None," Tonio said.

"So it was in the Navy that you joined the Party?"

Seeing that he was becoming upset again, my mother took Tonio's hand in her's and held it re-assuringly. "It doesn't matter where you joined that ridiculous Party," she said.

My mother attached no significance to her words, but they struck Tonio. Mauricet had told him that I represented a progressive paper and he must have presumed that he was at least among fellow-travellers. To hear my mother dismiss the Party with such indifference first amazed him, then seemed to relieve him of a tremendous sense of strain. The tears welled in his eyes again.

"I've never been a member of the Communist or any other Party," he said.

"But the mutiny?" I asked.

"I knew nothing about it," he cried passionately. "The leaflets were dumped with my things by someone who didn't want to be caught with them... What could I do?"

I saw that he was speaking the truth; no one could have acted the anguish that seized his being as he recalled the terrible moment of his arrest.

"And all this Party clap-trap that you spout so fluently?" I said.

"You've never been hungry," he muttered.

"Yes, you can afford to spit in a man's eye, if you feel like it," my mother said to me tartly.

Now it was, doubtless, right and just for an Italian to revolt against the Fascist regime, and if the whole Italian people had done so, nobody would have rejoiced in their success more than I, but I was still enough of a bourgeois to feel a certain distrust of a mutineer and a deserter, illogical though this might be, and although I recognised that the Communists were at that time united in a Popular Front against Fascism, I felt myself an ill-assorted bedfellow in their company; so that when I heard that Tonio was no mutineer, that fate had forced desertion on him, and that he was not even a Communist, the last barrier fell that lingered between him and my full sympathy. I was glad; he was so likeable.

"What's to become of the poor child?" my mother said to me.

"His tragedy is that he's not politically minded," I said.

"If he tried to get into any democratic country, the Italians would not bring up any political charges which would turn him into a political refugee who couldn't be extradited. They'd claim him on the criminal charge of desertion, which there'd be no reason to refuse. So the U.S.S.R. is the only place left for him."

"But his wife? His baby?" my mother exclaimed.

"They'd much better stay in Italy. They have parents. They have a home. Do you want them to become vagrants? To end up, with him, as suppliants at the Soviet frontier?"

"It's so unfair. Everybody's against him, and he's done nothing at all, nothing. It's monstrous." My mother looked at Tonio thoughtfully. "How long will he stay in Paris?"

"I don't know. A few days. Till they can shove him onto the underground for Russia."

"I'll look after him in my flat till he goes," she said.

"Impossible," I protested. "He's in France illegally. There's a criminal charge against him. I don't know what the law of it is, but I'm certain you'd risk a large fine or even prison."

"He shall come to me, just the same."

And she took Tonio with her, leaving me to explain things to Mauricet as best I could.

I didn't see Tonio again, for it happened that my paper sent me off somewhere. When I returned, I found that Tonio had spent twelve days with my mother before Mauricet spirited him away.

She said that Tonio was a mixture of docility, loveableness and shrewd practical intelligence. Berthe, the maid, was suspicious of him at first, but he won her heart by singing her Neapolitan love songs while he skated about, bees-waxing the floor with cloths tied over his feet. He was always on the lookout for ways to show his gratitude; and he was always cheerful, except when my mother listened to the news, all full of politics and crises, so she didn't as long as he was with her. At his leave-taking, they wept together, like a bourgeois mother and son. As Mauricet marched Tonio off, she saw Mauricet talking scornfully and she saw, what she had not seen for twelve days, the cowed, helpless expression return to Tonio's face.

For long after, the thought of Tonio gave me a guilty twinge; one realised how fortunate one was to have a secure niche, modest prospects, a home, a family, and the feeling that one was needed.

Mauricet could not, or would not, give me news of Tonio. The years passed. I forgot him.

The end of the war found me in London: Jane had died and my mother lived with me to look after Billy.

One night as we were entering a Soho restaurant, a man stood aside to let us pass. Suddenly he gave an exclamation, and with a joyous shout of "Mama!" he folded my mother in his arms. For a moment, I thought he was mad, and I was about to tear him off when I realised that my mother was kissing him.

"Tonio, dear boy," she was laughing.

"My! It's good to see you Mama!" he cried, hugging her again and again.

He joined us for dinner. I remembered him as fair-haired and emaciated, young and deprecating; his hair was now grey; his body was well-fed but flabby; although he can only have been around thirty-five, he was wizened; his forehead was scored in a never absent pucker of worry. When he talked to me, there was something shifty about him. On the other hand, the man who talked to my mother was a different being; his face was lit with affection; he did not feel the need to appease her that he evidently felt with me, so that with her he was natural and his wariness left him.

When, at his insistence, I had brought him up to date on our news, I naturally asked for his.

"I work in an Italian exporting and importing agency here," he said. "It's dull, but it's a living. Now, tell me more about Billy. What's he going to be?"

"He's only fifteen," my mother smiled. She was always ready to talk of her grandson and twenty minutes later we still knew nothing of Tonio's career. I tried again. "What happened when you got to the U.S.S.R.? What's it like there? How did you ever get out?"

"Listen," Tonio said. "I know the Soviets aren't popular here, and I don't want to get into an ideological discussion, above all with you two. I hate politics. All you need to know is that I've left Russia."

"Have you seen your parents? Your wife? Your --"

"They're dead," he said.

After a moment, my mother said: "Surely you can tell us something of your life in Russia without getting into politics. I'm so interested, Tonio dear."

Tonio was moved by her lovingkindness.

"The Tonio Martinelli you knew died when he left your flat in Paris. But --" he hesitated. "What's a name? A label for a body that has no will of its own, that eats and sleeps to have the strength to slave for others, that has nerves so that it can answer to the jab of the bit. I'm Luigi Bianci now. But the name means nothing. One can never shed oneself, never start afresh, never escape."

"We'll bring Tonio Martinelli back to life," my mother said.

"Will you, Mama?" he murmured wistfully.

"We'll find you a nice wife," she smiled at him.

"Ah! That never!" Tonio burst out. "When you've lived as I've lived, when you exist as I exist, you've nothing left to share. I'm cursed."

My mother said nothing, but I could see that she was planning to warm the cold places in his heart.

Thereafter, Tonio came often to our flat, although I saw him rarely. He turned up on Billy's half-holidays to take him to sail his model yacht in the Round Pond. My mother went with them. She said that with Billy, Tonio was just like another boy. As he judged the wind and set the yacht's sails and rudder, his face had a boy's seriousness and intentness; he followed the yacht's manoeuvres with a boy's triumph or vexation as it held or strayed from its course. He was absorbed in a world in which Billy and he were alone. It was only when it was time to leave that the wrinkles once more knotted themselves on his forehead. My mother took some snaps of Billy with Tonio, one of which I had at home on my study desk.

Now, a newspaper man mixes with all sorts and among my contacts was a man named Harrison; we were useful to each other occasionally. For purposes of his own, he preferred to see me at my home rather than at my office. Shortly after Tonio had re-entered our lives, Harrison came to see me; I was a bit late and my mother gave him a drink. He asked idly who the man was in the snap with Billy; my mother told him about Tonio. Some weeks later he came again.

"I'm afraid I've got a bit of a shock for you," he told us. "I arrested five Soviet spies yesterday. They might've escaped notice a long time if you hadn't been late for our last date, Bruce, so that Mrs Bruce could tell me the story of the man in that snap."

"Tonio, a spy!" I exclaimed.

Harrison nodded.

"But I told you nothing against him," my mother gasped. She was pale and agitated.

"Nothing at all," Harrison agreed. "He sounded a very decent fellow. But with his background I thought there'd be no harm in a routine re-check, and one thing led to another, till I was staggered by what I'd stumbled on."

"So you're a police officer," my mother said dully.

"You have a discreet son, Mrs Bruce, if he didn't let even you know who I was," Harrison smiled apologetically.

"I could cut my tongue out!" my mother cried in despair.

"But why!" said Harrison. "You've done a good job for your country."

"By betraying a man who looked on me as his mother," she said.

"It takes all sorts to make --" Harrison began.

"-- a hellish world," my mother said, and left us.

"I'm sorry, Bruce," Harrison sighed, turning to me after an uncomfortable moment. "Of course, I can see now why it upset your mother so. However, if she knew the appallingly important information that this gang has been sending to Moscow, she'd feel differently."

"I just can't believe that a poor fish like Tonio --"

"Oh, he was no master-spy," Harrison said. "He didn't get the information. He was only a relay point. But by watching him, we picked up the links."

"What'll happen to him?"

"The evidence against him is complete. He'll get the maximum -- unless -- he could be persuaded to help us."

"Help you?"

"We'd've liked to put off the arrests until we had tabs on the lot, but we were told to act because what was leaking had to be stopped at once. Now, Mr Letter-Box-Martinelli could probably put us on to our missing links. If he gave King's evidence, we could get him acquitted."

"He refuses?"

"Yes. Says he knows nothing, but the evidence is against that," Harrison said, looking at me speculatively; he seemed about to add something, thought better of it, and, instead, took his leave.

My mother's eyes were red at dinner. We neither of us ate much.

Harrison rang me up the next day. "Martinelli has asked to see Mrs Bruce," he said. "We've no objections if she'd like to go."

My mother went. She looked so haggard when she returned that I didn't bother her with questions. Of course, the fact of the five arrests was in the papers and Billy thought it terribly exciting to be on christian name terms with a spy -- his prestige at school had rocketted; he asked how Tonio was.

"I think he'll be pardoned," my mother said wearily. "His solicitor was leaving when I arrived. We had a word. He said the best thing for Tonio would be to help the authorities. He said Tonio was sullen and wouldn't. He suggested that if I had any influence over him, I ought to advise him to tell all he knew."

At once I saw the significance of Harrison's parting remarks to me. I guessed that he had reckoned that Tonio's defenders must see that Tonio's one chance was to help himself by helping the prosecution, that, obtaining no response from me, he had found means to hint to the solicitor that my mother was the person who could best persuade Tonio, that he had told Tonio he could see my mother if he liked, and that he had arranged for her visit to coincide with the solicitor. At that moment I disliked Harrison. Unjustly. After all, he was only doing his duty.

"And Tonio agreed?" I asked, hoping somehow that he hadn't.

"Yes," she replied. "He said to me 'If you say I should, Mama, I will.'"

I took her hand in mine, but she was so wrapped in her grief that she didn't notice.

"First, I win his love. Then I cause his arrest. Then I persuade him to be an informer," she said tonelessly.

"I don't suppose the morals of it worry him much," I tried to console her.

"That's where you're mistaken," she said. "This is the first time in his life he's ever voluntarily done anything he knows to be wrong. Everything else he's ever done was forced on him. His freedom of choice in this world has been narrowed down until now he can only decide whether to send others to prison or not. He didn't want to do it... I made him."

"At least he won't spend years rotting in some gaol," I suggested.

"If I'd been thinking of him alone, I would have told him he'd be happier in prison at peace with himself, than free, tortured by his thoughts."

"Then why did you tell him to -- to -- inform?"

"Because I was thinking where my duty lay," my mother said. "It would help us if the whole gang were caught."

"You were right, mother," I said gently.

"Yes," she said bitterly. "I've crossed over to the ranks of those who use Tonio for their own Causes. Mussolini wanted him as cannon fodder to build an Empire. An anti-Fascist without the courage of his convictions foisted incriminating leaflets on him. The Soviets used him against the Capitalists who had made an outcaste of him. And now I -- I, the only person left to him -- have sacrificed him to my tribal god."

"Mother, don't --"

"A fisherman. That's what Tonio ought to have been, what the world would not let him be," my mother said quietly. "Instead, he was caught in the Cold War and twisted and smashed. Why? ... Why?"

At the end of the trial, twelve men and women went to prison, while the police made arrangements for Tonio to emigrate to Australia. My mother let Harrison know that she would like to see Tonio before he left. The days went by; she heard nothing; she rang Harrison up.

"I gave him your message," Harrison told her. "He said -- well, he said he didn't want to see you."

END