

Hedgehog

It was one of those winter afternoons which could occur only in London. As I sat in my rooms in Albemarle Street, the sounds of the everyday *tohu bohu* of the West End were muffled by the slush in the streets and the thick London peculiar. All the sounds of this great city, the beating heart of the Empire, were subdued; the rattle of the cabs, the growling of the motorbuses, the incessant cries of the newsboys and the chatter of the never ceasing passers-by and idlers, gazing aimlessly in the shop windows, laughing and whistling. Tired Hammersmith and jaded Notting Hill were wending their way homewards. To be truthful I was dozing off, having laid down the latest copy of Punch, thinking it's not as amusing as it used to be, when I heard the rattle of the letter box as the postman brought the afternoon post. Since my discharge from Military Intelligence I had been at something of a loose end and I was delighted to see the Hampshire postmark and the discreet coronet on the envelope. It could only have come from my old pal Reggie A-----, whom I'd known from childhood when we met at prep school. We then went our separate ways, he to Winchester, and I to a lesser known school you probably haven't heard of. We met again at Oxford, where, typically of an old Wykehamist, he read Classical Greats, while I read European languages at which I excelled, aided by having a Swiss mother. At home we spoke English French and German interchangeably, and it was inevitable that when War came I'd end up in military intelligence. My War was spent flitting between London and Paris, doing mostly liaison and translation work. It was tiresome at times and I envied my old friend who ended the War as a Captain in the Hampshire Rifles, and saw a great deal of action on the front line, earning himself the Military Cross.

I eagerly cut the envelope open and examined the brief note it contained, which was inviting me down to his family home, H-----Hall, for a few days of socialising, a bit of rough shooting, some trout fishing on his beat on the Test, and a chance to meet some of his old Army chums. There was also a hint that some eligible young ladies would be present, making the invitation all the more attractive.

A few days later I packed my traps and set off in the taximeter cab to Waterloo, where I caught the 2.35 to Andover, then changed to the Sprat and Winkle line to Mottisfont, where I was met by Blount, Reggie's old family coachman. To my surprise he was no longer a coachman but a *chauffeur*, polishing the brass headlamps on a magnificent Hispano-Suiza H6 as he waited in the station yard. A short journey took us to Reggie's estate, through the stag-topped gateposts and up the winding gravel carriage drive to the time-mellowed old pile. The electric lighting twinkled through the mullioned windows of the Hall, creating a welcoming atmosphere, as other vehicles drove up, discharging their passengers who fell upon one another with much laughter and embracing. Waiting to welcome us on the steps was Barker, the old family retainer whom I'd known since I was a boy when I came to stay in the summer holidays.

"Good afternoon Mr Freddie, I hope you're not going to play any tricks on me this weekend", he greeted me, reminding me of the times when Reggie and I got up to all sorts of fun and games at his expense. It was a pleasure to renew my acquaintance with this marvellous old man who had been in the family for three generations. I was shewn to my room, and while I bathed, my traps were unpacked and my evening dress laid out.

At 7.30 I went downstairs to find a scene of frenzied pleasure. The glittering lamps, the cries, the laughter, the scent of the ladies' perfume, the men's cigars, the cocktails, the flowers, combined to

make for a heady atmosphere, dedicated to pleasure, *toute la canaille friande*. I had not witnessed such a scene since before the war, although life in Paris had been considerably more pleasant for me than it had been for those back in England. Dinner was a lavish affair with a choice of the finest wines and liqueurs. There was great merriment in the air but I was slightly mystified by cries of “I say, Hedgehog old chap” directed at our host, “pass the claret”, or “Hedgehog old boy, are you going to introduce me to one of your gorgeous lady friends?” The night drove on with laughter and song, but gradually, guests drifted off to play whist, simply chat to friends they hadn’t seen for years, or some to make clandestine *rendezvous* I suspect. As the last stragglers were retiring Reggie beckoned me, and led me to his snug where we had spent so many happy hours over the years. Passing through the velvet *portiere*, I sat beside the great fireplace in the deep leather saddlebag chair which I knew so well, while Reggie produced a bottle of aged Armagnac. I was lighting up a Boyard papier mais, when Reggie said “Not one of your ghastly French gaspers Freddie, have one of these”, selecting a couple of Romeo e Juliettas from the nearby humidor. We sat in companionable silence for a few minutes, the only sounds the settling of the fire, the ticking of the ancient clock and the click of the death watch beetle in the walnut wainscoting. The shadows played on the wall, lighting up the ancestral crest above the fireplace.

“Ripping night Reggie” I said.

“Yes, wasn’t it”, he replied.

“Reggie, one thing I didn’t understand, some of the chaps called you “Hedgehog”.

“Ah yes, bit of a nickname I got during the war.

“How did that come about?”

“Well”, he said, “it’s a long story”, lapsing into silence again for a minute or two, looking a little puzzled. Just then, there was a scratching and snuffling at the door and a large shaggy dog entered.

“Ah, said Reggie, meet my old pal Lothar. I owe my life to him”, and he began his tale, as the dog settled at his feet on the old Lllihan rug.

“It was like this. We had spent weeks on the Zonnebeke salient, surrounded by the Hun on three sides. There was stonk coming over 24 hours a day, there were sappers tunnelling under our lines, snipers, the bally lot. It was too dangerous for the men to have any visits behind the lines to the local *estaminet*, and in any case the nearest village had been almost flattened. The men were going crazy with a mixture of fear and boredom, and apart from a very occasional night time recce into no man’s land, they had no exercise. Morale was running low. My batman came up with the idea of having some games in the trenches, so we quickly devised a number of pursuits, our own little Olympic games. Each morning after the stand-to and their tot of rum, the men had their usual tasks to carry out; repairing sandbag walls, cleaning latrines, cleaning their weapons and so on. When these were done, we had a number of pursuits; boxing, wrestling, gymnastics, Swedish drill, chucking the bully beef tin, catapulting rats, and my favourite, trench bobbing. This was in fact not only stupid but potentially dangerous. Do you see my right ear?”

“By Jove I hadn’t noticed that” I replied. There was a small nick just at the top of his right ear.

“Well, here’s how that happened. Trench bobbing involved timing a race along the trench for 50 yards while bobbing up and down, the head just appearing above the ground, to annoy the enemy. It should have been dangerous, as of course the Fritzes tried to pick us off, but they never got lucky, except one day. I was going for the record, but stumbled over a tree root, throwing myself up in the

air. Just then a large hairy dog, whom I'd never seen before leapt up, knocking me over, just as a bullet whizzed under my Brodie helmet, nicking my ear. It was of course Lothar, this fellow here, who had appeared out of nowhere, as the odd cat and dog often did. So that's how I got my nickname—saved by a head jog”.

He gave me a wry smile.

“Is that true?”

“Of course not, you blithering idiot!” he cried, at which I leapt on him, and wrestled him to the floor, my hands on his throat, as tears of laughter streamed down his cheeks. “Look up at that family crest, observe the animal passant, gules on vert, dexter chief, and read the family motto, *Erius spinis surgita bestia est*”, he said between sobs of mirth. “Of course I forgot, you're not a classicist—it means *the hedgehog is a spiny beast*. Just look at the little spiny chap in the top right corner of the crest”.

“So, how did you get the nick on your ear, you blighter?”

“Oh, that----that was a stray dart in the Fisherman's' Arms in Mottisfont last month.....”

“And Lothar?”

“Battersea dogs' home old cock”.