

## The Colonel's Daughter

It is July. In Wengen, Colonel Browne is standing in the shallow end of the swimming pool of the Hotel Alpenrose, preparing himself for the moment of immersion on a late Friday afternoon. The sun, which has shone on the pool for most of the day, is grimacing now on the corner of the mountain. In moments, even before the Colonel has swum his slow and stately six lengths, the shadow of the mountain will fall splat across the water, will fall crash across the copy of *The Day of the Tortoise* by H. E. Bates that Lady Amelia Browne is peering at on her poolside chair. Lady Amelia Browne will look up from *The Day of the Tortoise* and call to Colonel Browne: 'The sun's gone in, Duffy!' The Colonel will hear her voice in the middle of his fifth length, but will make no reply. He will swim carefully on until he has made his final turn and his sixth length is bringing him in, bringing him back as life has always brought him in and brought him back to his wife Amelia holding his bath towel. Together, then, they will walk slowly into the Hotel Alpenrose, she with her book and the suncream for her white legs, he wrapped in the towel, shivering slightly so that his big belly feels cramped, carrying his airmail edition of the *Daily Telegraph* and his size ten leather sandals.

Ah, they will think, as they run a hot bath in their pink private bathroom and see their bedroom fill and fill with the coral light of the Swiss sky. 'Ah,' Amelia will sigh, as she takes the weak brandy and soda Duffy has made for her and lets herself subside onto her left-hand twin bed. 'Ah . . . ' the Colonel will bellow into his sponge, as his white whale of a body displaces the steaming bathwater, 'Cracking day, eh Amelia?'

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At the very moment Colonel Browne finishes dinner, at the very moment Lady Amelia Browne smiles at him with fondness and remembers for no particular reason the war wound on his upper thigh which might have killed him but for a surgeon's skill, at this precise moment a green Citroen car enters the drive of one of the most beautiful houses in Buckinghamshire. On either side of the drive, great chestnut trees are in full candelburst. Multiple minute pink blossoms are squashed by the car as it comes on, fast, sidelights two glimmerings of yellow in the quiet grey dusk. No one sees the car. Garrod, the only person who might have seen it, had he been standing at the scullery window, might have heard it had he been walking the dog, Admiral, round the garden, doesn't hear it, doesn't see it because he is laid up with sciatica and dreaming a half-drugged dream of his days in the desert in his small sparse room at the top and back of the house. So the car comes on as if in silence, as if invisible, and stops soundlessly in front of the stone porch.

Out of the car gets Charlotte, carrying a suitcase – Friday visitor come from London as so many have come on summer evenings before, during and after the flowering of the magnolia on the south wall, getting out gratefully from their cars and smelling parkland, smelling cedar and chestnut blossom and aubretia and rock roses on the stones, then opening the heavy front door as Charlotte opens it now, standing on the polished scented parquet of the hall and thinking yes, this is how it always felt to be here: the portrait of the seventh Duke of Abercorn in momentous place at the foot of the staircase, luminous white face breathing a half-smile through the crust and dust of varnish and time; the stuffed blue marlin, caught by the Colonel near Mombasa, clamped fast to the wall above the massive fireplace, robbed of its body's dance and sheen – the trophies of lineage and leisure announcing to the tired Friday traveller that here, by a gracious permission only a few of us understand, is permanence, here at Sowby Manor beats one of England's last-remaining all-to-few unsullied hearts of oak. So welcome, if indeed you were invited. Garrod has lit a fire in the sitting room, drawn the curtains, turned down the beds. Come in.

Garrod sleeps. The dog, Admiral, older by human calculation than Garrod, barks feebly on his blanket-bed in the

gunroom, gets up, turns a circle, sniffing his body warmth on the faded blanket and lies down again in the circle he has made. Charlotte stands by the Duke of Abercorn, above whom she has switched on a bar of light, hears the distant barking and sets her suitcase down. Charlotte is tall. The Duke of Abercorn stares mournfully through time at her bony shoulders and small breasts, at the grey of her eyes, pale-fringed with sandy lashes the colour of her hair that has been pulled back and up into an untidy bundle, making the face stark, a chiselled face, a whitewood face but with a line of mouth as thinly sensual as the Duke's own, a replica, it seems, more moist than his, merely pinker and half open now in expectation, in wonder at her own presence there in the hall, in the summernight dusk . . .

Move, says her voice, begin. So she, who like Saint Joan is obedient to her voices, begins to move out of the hall, opening a door to a dark pannelled corridor. She hears Admiral whimper. So lonely and quivering is the existence of this dog in the stone gunroom, she can imagine, as she carefully removes her shoes, its smooth wiry body tensed to the tiny sound she has made by opening the door and which floods its dog's brain with the obedient question: who?

Garrod sleeps. The dog sniffs the door, sniffs the dust on the stone in the minute dark space under the door. Charlotte walks barefoot down the corridor, remembering the dog's name is Admiral; on its expensive collar hangs a brass engraved disc: 'Admiral', Sowby Manor, Bucks. The stone flags are cold under her long feet. The house felt cold the moment she entered it. Now, outside, light seeps away, dusk becomes near-dark, the white roses on the wall are luminous. Charlotte opens the door to the gunroom and the dog springs up. The dog's feet reach almost to her breasts and she pushes it away, careful to fondle its head, to let it remember her, the Friday visitor who once came often to the Manor – long ago, before Garrod was hired, before Admiral grew old – and took the dog for walks in the beechwoods. 'Good boy Admiral, good boy . . .'

Still holding the dog's head against her leg, her hands calm, she reaches up into the gunrack, takes down the 12-bore cleaned so perfectly by Garrod since it last popped off the scattering birds in the valleys and woods of Sowby, on the

heatherblown moors of Scotland, and places it on a ship's chest, this too cleaned and polished with Brasso by Garrod. She releases the head of the dog. It returns whimpering, nuzzling at her crotch and she pushes it away: 'Good boy, Admiral . . .' The cartridge drawer is heavy. Charlotte takes out two cartridges only, drops them into the twin barrels, clicks the gun shut. Admiral barks suddenly. Charlotte's heart, so calm until this second, jolts under her skinny cotton sweater. She stares at the dog and at the gun. Dog-and-gun. She has seen them from childhood. Dog-and-gun and the red hands of the men going out into the frost: 'hurry, Charlotte, if you want a place in the landrover, if you want to watch the first drive . . .'

She closes the gunroom door, closes her thought of dog-and-gun. She slips silently back down the pannelled corridor to the hall, where the light is still on above the Duke of Abercorn. Garrod sleeps. She has never seen Garrod. 'I was before your time,' she might say, 'and, at the same time, long after it.' She knows the room, though. A man called Hughes slept there all through her childhood. He told stories of the war, stories of missions, crack units, lads with special training, heavily decorated lads, the ones who didn't die. Then Hughes died and somebody cocksure and young and unsatisfactory came and went with an Italian name and a pungent body odour, and then it was Garrod's turn, a meticulous man, she had been told, getting on, troubled by winter colds and sciatica, but thorough. And honest. You could leave the house in Garrod's care and be sure, on return, to find everything in its place, not so much as a sheet of writing paper missing from the bureau drawer.

Garrod sleeps. Charlotte, holding the gun, climbs the back stairs to his high landing. In the hall, near the Duke of Abercorn, the grandfather clock chimes ten. At this precise hour, in Wengen, Colonel and Lady Amelia Browne are served coffee – excellent Viennese coffee – in the comfy lounge of the Hotel Alpenrose, and the Colonel, nodding at the waitress, reaches for his cigar case. In Garrod's dream, he is lying on a stone. The sky is empty and yellowish white with colossal heat. He tries to move the stone from under him, but the stone is grafted to the small of his back. Charlotte reaches his door. She listens. She can't hear the agony of his dreams. She hears only

her own breaths, like sighed warnings, turn back, leave the gun by the front door, go out into the dark and fly. Garrod wakes to night-time and sciatica pains. He turns over, grumbling, tucks his head into the pillow. Sleeps. The door opens. Out of darkness and sleep come the command, the drumroll, the moment when, from nowhere, the wild animal leaps: 'Get up, Garrod!'

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At ten o'clock on this warm night, scriptwriter Franklin Doyle, born Colorado, USA, 1936, is scratching his chin, trying to save a love affair and failing. Opposite him, across a white table in his rented London flat, a woman called Margaret, sullenly, whitely beautiful, is spilling guilt-corroded truths about her body's longings for a man called Michael that squeeze and bruise the chest of Franklin Doyle so that he has to gulp for air and begin this repetitious scratching of his face to keep himself from laying his greying head on the table and wailing.

'It wasn't,' says Margaret, 'the kind of thing I wanted to happen. I didn't invite it.'

'Yes, you did,' says Doyle pathetically, 'at Ilona's party you sat at the creep's feet.'

'There weren't any chairs. Ilona never provides chairs.'

'He was sitting on a chair.'

'On a sofa.'

'On a fucking sofa. Who cares? You sat and fawned and I brought you drinks. But you know you've gone mad, don't you? You know he'll leave you, don't you?'

'He says he loves me, Franklin.'

'And you believe the asshole?'

'You don't need to call him that.'

'Yes, I *need*. For me! Have you forgotten about *me*? You're screwing my life up – and yours – for an asshole!'

'I told you, I didn't want this to happen . . .'

'Why don't you go, Margaret?'

'What?'

'Now. Just go now.'

Margaret is silent, frightened. She's used to Franklin Doyle, his flat, his fruit press, his lumpy dressing gown, his electric typewriter.