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Abstract

They must be embarrassed that you're coming!' the woman said. It wasn't a joke for she had no sense of humour that he could detect. She was giving her usual wifely support. According to her, the country was rubbing itself out of the international statistics in order to brace itself for the Philpot invasion.

E. A. MARKHAM

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'They must be embarrassed that you're coming!' the woman said. It wasn't a joke for she had no sense of humour that he could detect. She was giving her usual wifely support. According to her, the country was rubbing itself out of the international statistics in order to brace itself for the Philpot invasion.

Philpot merely smiled. The voice was Maureen's, but it was dictated by someone else — her lover, one of her women...

Maureen was holding a little red pamphlet from which she drew satisfaction: statistics like Yugoslavia with its 22.50 million inhabitants at 3.70 per household doing better than, say, Bulgaria with its 1.015 thousand sales of watches and clocks in 1977. She went on in this vein, accompanying him as he packed.

'Albania? ... Albania! ... You mean Albania?' They were younger and more suggestive than his wife — particularly the first one; and it reassured Philpot in a way: he didn't have to make tiresome distinctions between one lot and another lot taking him for granted. It was the great Cooke's Travel Agents that he was disturbing now. He leant nonchalantly against the counter betraying neither impatience nor, he hoped, smugness, as the professionals set about finding out where Albania was.

Maureen's voice, her *attitude*, drifted back to him. The put-down was no longer that of a woman who worked in a belt factory in Great Portland Street, it was of a woman who was learning to say No in middle life; who took to visiting women she used to dislike; who was a confidante and pen-pal (and who knows what other type of pal?) of the Professor in question. It was of a woman who had refused rum on her *fortieth* birthday and had turned into a Philosopher vowing to *develop* a reading habit, so that she could *change* it.

It still made Philpot smile. When Maureen gave herself airs like that, he knew he wasn't defeated. He still knew a way to, well, make her defer her education, at least until morning, till daylight.

His smile spread to the young Miss and Mrs Cookes struggling to map Albania for him. He nodded encouragement, they nodded back and continued their search. He could wait. He had been ahead of them all along. Way back there — oh, fifteen years before when the question was first put to him (a statement, really), when the spy had approached him in Selfridges, he had had an idea where Albania was. Even *then*. OK, he wasn't a graduate; in his mind he had put it a bit further *East*, and not quite so close to Greece, but he *had an idea* where it was.

The Cooke's women were looking in their little, or rather their large black folders, contradicting one another before one of them came up with the answer.

'You do mean Albania?'

As he had said it three or four times, and they had repeated it after him, he concluded that he meant Albania. Certainly now, if not before;

and that maybe a few words in Albanian wouldn't come amiss in this situation. That's where his education had let him down. He wasn't ashamed to admit it, he was illiterate in the Albanian language. That's where the Professor scored. Philpot had no doubt that the great man could shop in the language by now, or farm in it, or do whatever they did in those parts. Undoubtedly, the Professor would now be speaking West Indian with an Albanian accent. Pity he wasn't available to mystify the young Miss Cookes. When last heard of the Professor was still in Yugoslavia. At Belgrade airport, waiting for a 'plane to Tirana. That was either three years ago or eighteen months ago depending on who was telling it; and Philpot assumed that the scholar had made it by now. But he didn't come here to gossip.

He merely said that he meant Albania, and so the Romania '80 brochure with the large, smiling girl on the front with goose-pimples and thin, dark-coloured *don't think about it don't think about it* bra and pants, weren't what he was after. Even the saucy blemish under her right breast couldn't detain him. (As a matter of fact, he knew lots of women with blemishes on their bodies, he was interested in the other kind: he was old-fashioned.) OK. OK, the Yugotours had some of the other kind; and pages 122 to 125 couldn't lightly be brushed aside by any self-respecting man who wasn't queer: naturalist holidays being the polite name for it. But back to business.

A senior Mr Cooke, an obvious Cooke of importance — one who could by no stretch of Philpot's imagination be found cavorting in the all-together on the beaches of Yugotours '80, came up with the information that there was no through flight to ... and here no one seemed to know the name of the country's capital (Philpot felt it wasn't his place to educate the public: he wasn't running for office). Anyway, there was no direct flight: Philpot would have to change at Athens. No, sorry, not Athens. Mr Cooke had been reading the wrong line. Would Philpot mind — did he mind changing planes at Belgrade?

He was thinking up pass-words for the Professor at Belgrade airport. 'Do you shop at Selfridges?' or 'Is the laundrette open?' And the Professor would say something like, 'Is that »Laundrette« with a capital L?'

Feeling good about this, he told Mr Cooke he welcomed the opportunity to change planes at Belgrade on account of the Professor.

The poor fellow didn't follow. He was the sort of Cooke who, in Philpot's shoes in Selfridges fifteen years before, would have panicked when the under-cover agent told him that Albania wanted to join the Commonwealth.

Philpot indicated there was no need to panic, the Professor was a brother, really, and had been waiting at Belgrade airport for between eighteen months and three years.

Of course, you know the English; you know how it is when they think they've got you taped, and then you outsmart them, *out-think* them. All the Cookes started exchanging those slow, careful, near-mystical glances with one another; and this led to renewed inspection of Philpot's clothes and strapless shoulder-bag, in an attempt to make him feel shabby and foreign. One of them — a younger girl Cooke, suppressing laughter in a way which made her breasts leap about painfully, asked if he knew he needed clearance to go to Albania. Half-distracted, he remembered to be courteous. He reminded them that all countries demanded clearance; he didn't expect Albania to be different from Britain in that respect. If they really wanted to know, he'd been cleared, ah, ten years previously. He was only waiting for a flight.

The glances were different now; there was a caution to their interest and expressions were a little closed. The little Cooke's breasts no longer jumped about. Their speech now had a slight sting, the true, authentic ring of England. He thanked them, took the brochures for Romania '80 and Yugotours and informed no one in particular that he would go by train.

Maureen's post-card had arrived eighteen months before from Belgrade. That's all they had to go on, and Maureen, without saying so, feared the worst; she feared another Hungary. Philpot feared it too — if that was the word. He didn't want Maureen distracted in that way, that only spelt trouble for the husband. They still played the old game of laying claim to the Professor. He was Maureen's because she had once attended a few of his Evening classes; he was Philpot's because they met at a cricket match. The couple fought over it. Particularly during Hungary.

But Hungary was a long way behind them, wasn't it? They had patched that up and seen the Professor off at Heathrow armed with his first halting words of Albanian. This time there would be no mistake, no detour. But that was three years ago, and now Philpot had to act. It was a case of the unlettered man wading in where the learned Professor etc. etc. That would be the test of Maureen's loyalty.

But it was his show, dammit. 1966. Or was it '63? Christ, he had to rescue this thing from History. Anyway, rain had washed out the Test Match depriving West Indies of yet another victory at Lords. Philpot had got on the wrong bus and ended up in Oxford Street; and for no reason

in particular, had drifted into Selfridges. He was killing time, minding his own business, moving with the crowd, when this man sort of sidled up and whispered in his ear. This being England, Philpot's first thought was to fear for his body. But the man — under his moustache and perfume, well-spoken in an English sort of way — repeated his non-sexual message. 'Albania', he said, 'wants to join the Commonwealth.' Well, Philpot must have just glanced round to make sure that the man had meant this for him; and as he turned back to find out more, he was just in time to see his contact disappearing among the shop-lifters.

Later, friends listened to his account and were sympathetic: anyone could be excused for having hallucinations when the weather yet again intervened to frustrate West Indies hopes. It was a good two years before the Professor owned up. He too had been approached by Albania. Not the same man. His man was a musician, in the loo of the British Museum, with a proposal the Professor couldn't refuse.

Clearly, it was the wrong thing to argue over the Professor, that's what the woman wanted. It would devalue Philpot's trip, make it personal. Yet, he'd have her know that it wasn't he who had mixed up Albania and Hungary. He looked at it this way. Hungary put you in mind of food. It just didn't sound right for someone to come up to you in Selfridges and say, 'Hungary wants to join the Commonwealth'. You'd suspect a joke. A joke in bad taste. Irony. Starving Indians (begging Mrs Gandhi's pardon) and all that. The Professor's musician had had nothing to do with Albania (the fraud later admitted this, claiming the real Albanian had approached him in a lift at Manchester Polytechnic, after the Old Trafford Test).

The musician, in the loo at the British Museum, had wanted the Professor to marry his sister back in Hungary. British citizenship. They were well-to-do people, the prospective in-laws, left over from the Revolution. Big house. Own grounds. Musicians all. And the Professor was to go over, spend a couple of months with the family and be seen in public with the girl, etc. Then announce the engagement and come back to England. After a decent interval, go back and marry her. At a price.

The Professor had taken his time in saying No, while Maureen threshed about with a raised consciousness embarrassing everyone. First of all, she opposed the marriage on account of the danger. Then — when the Professor brought round a picture of the girl — she opposed it on grounds of colour: another white woman using a black man to get her way. Maureen was bitter. She accused Philpot; they were all in it

together. His Albanian foolishness was just a cover for the Hungarian bed. Transparent even for him. It was the colour that was driving them mad. And when the Professor finally said No to his Hungarian, Maureen was worse. Men ganging up on women: it wasn't that much to ask, was it? to put your name to a little piece of paper. But women were opening up their eyes. They were drawing their own conclusions; it was their fault, women, to rely on men for anything.

The Professor had spent that last night at their place — the night which saw the end of Hungary and the re-emergence of Albania — trying to placate Maureen, to calm her. Philpot thought it unnecessary, but he obviously couldn't act the jealous husband now.

He might have married the girl, the Professor admitted, as he hugged Maureen ... he might have done it if there was no money involved. But there was a principle, you see. A principle. He couldn't allow himself to be bought with *Florint*. Now, Philpot knew they were mad (or in love). The money would have been well-earned, there was danger in it. The Professor had lived in England too long, soon he'd be proposing to climb mountains just because they were *there!* The only real problem Philpot saw was having to live with the girl for two years, untouched, so that the annulment could go through. In the picture, she was reclining, chaste, in the garden of their home, flowers in bloom, not quite smiling. Yes, that would be difficult.

But Maureen was finally reconciled to her Professor. He'd spent half the evening droning on about his support for Women's Lib; and he also stressed his respect for the family in Hungary. He'd had a lovely holiday. Restful and educational. No real tension. In the evenings they talked Philosophy and listened to music, while he gently convinced them that he wasn't their man. In the end, he had given them the name of a German who might do it.

It wasn't pride that made Philpot angry, indignant. He was a partner in this thing or he wasn't. He too was prepared to take risks, and resented his not having been consulted. True, his brief was and remained Albania, but no one seemed to think of him in connection with doing the little Hungarian girl a service. If it was just a question of signing a piece of paper, a technicality, then his marriage to Maureen needn't be affected. No difficulty there. Not that he was *anxious* to do it, but he should have had first refusal. Obviously, they both saw him, they *all* saw him, not in the front line of the battle, not with the shock troops, but as a Camp Follower, always staring in the *backs* of others. He would have to disabuse them.

As was expected of him, he settled down to the Professor's lecture on Albania. What the hell, the fellow was on his way out of the country! Maureen was shamefully open to the charlatan. She sat entranced, sipping white wine, as her lover showed off, telling them all about Zog, the last Albanian King, bit of a rogue, apparently; and about how he'd been ripping Mussolini off. According to the Professor, Mussolini timed his invasion for the night Zog's wife was giving birth, only to be foiled by the wily upstart King. Zog made the Dictator look foolish by transferring his wife to a medical caravan and stripping the Palace bare. Before escaping to the soft life in America.

Maureen was, of course, into Military History and International Diplomacy — especially regarding the Balkan campaigns of World War II. Consciousness in the room was so high that Philpot felt his own work towards making Albania a member of the Commonwealth would be too prosaic for mention. He had checked at the Commonwealth Institute that Albania wasn't there, and had then started visiting libraries with a yellow crayon in his pocket: with a bit of luck, he'd start some little grass-roots movement among those who had time to look at maps.

But this seemed tame after Zog.

Unlike Maureen, he wouldn't sit around for eighteen months waiting for another post-card. He had, if you like, fifteen years' service behind him. If there were troops, he was equally responsible for their morale. Let the woman ridicule him. She feared he would succeed where the other had failed; that's why she refused to take his packing seriously. She had exhausted the statistics in her little red booklet. Yet she managed to look smug and superior. Maybe he should do his bit to raise her consciousness. She would have to respect that, the bitch. He couldn't wait to see her face when she woke up one morning and found that England wasn't where she lived but where an imaginative Philpot *chose* to put it. He'd make the bitch speak Albanian yet. And for the rest of her life.

Tomorrow he was off to Bristol where the Albanians had an office. He would persuade them that Maureen was neither a dog nor an American; and that her hair was not long, *naturally*, as she made it out to be.

In three weeks she'd be planting spring onions in Shkodra.