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A Continental Romance

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Abstract

Years later it was agreed: she murdered him in Speracedes and claimed the ticket. It was on a sunny day, just after the vendange and everyone was happy, if tired: there was to be a big feast in the village that night. The tourists would see the dead man as a sort of sacrifice to the grapes, but the locals took things in their stride: they had no thirst for mystery, for symbolism; they sought confirmation, only, that things were as they were. The man's name was Philpot, murdered by ... well, in the presence of his wife, who inherited the ticket.

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Years later it was agreed: she murdered him in Spéracèdes and claimed the ticket. It was on a sunny day, just after the *vendange* and everyone was happy, if tired: there was to be a big feast in the village that night. The tourists would see the dead man as a sort of sacrifice to the grapes, but the locals took things in their stride: they had no thirst for mystery, for symbolism; they sought confirmation, only, that things were as they were. The man's name was Philpot, murdered by ... well, in the presence of his wife, who inherited the ticket. The long trek South had had an effect on her; she was a bit confused about the sequence of events, but this worked to her advantage and earned her the authority of widowhood. She had paid her bride-price by having walked from London to the Alpes Maritimes; walked, yes, that's how she thought of it. She felt better for being the worse for it (we don't know this, but never mind). Her new neighbours then gathered round her outside Georges' café where it had all happened (some, admittedly, at a respectful distance) and assured her of eventual vindication, should rumours be put about. Then they advised her to rest before the feast.

'I'm not what you think,' Philpot had said on wooing her... (perhaps her predecessor, perhaps her contemporary, difficult to sort out). He threw it out like bait, in a lake known to be swarming, to tempt any passing fish. This was in the din and bustle of Paddington station, so naturally he couldn't be sure if the catch would be to his liking. Having grown indiscriminate of late, he was again anxious to salvage a little pride. (The bait, held casually in his hand, was a wife's train ticket to the South of France.) Perhaps to mask his uneasiness, he became somewhat rhetorical — this verbally inarticulate man — striking attitudes of self-aggrandizement, of self-pity: his environment was against him, he explained to all of a human curiosity, but his had been a life with memories, memories that would endure the retirement. He had fished, he'd have them know, in better seas.

The passing wife (water-current detectors functioning) like a fish who had often nibbled and got away with it (absent gill-slit, damaged esophagus notwithstanding) was confident of being pulled along by this particular line, without further danger to herself.

Philpot was conscious of his retiring-&-taking-up-fishing status, waiting on Paddington station for a wife to accompany him to the South of France. He was a philanthropist, a benefactor. He had already, unilaterally, conferred on all possible catch, the dignity of warm-blooded womanhood. In case too many be tempted, he decided not to reveal the existence of the villa in Spéracèdes till the wife showed that she was worthy, had mended the ways of a life-time, and could present in retirement, a youthful, new Mediterranean version of herself.

His confidence growing, he boarded the train early — he would not be trifled with by a missing wife — and looked down from a First Class window on the approaching hopefuls. He was not anxious, he was merely wondering if the creature would be a woman of imagination, able to rise to the occasion, to match his risk: would she be wearing a rosette? Carrying a book? Ah, let *her* sort it out. Let her come and identify him. He would approach no more wives in his retirement. It was a matter of dignity.

He was alone with the person opposite — she had dispatched her cuckold to the bar for a coke: he liked her style — he told her what was on his mind. She was enigmatic, as if she already knew. He told her he would approach no more wives for his retirement. He would merely lay his assets, as it were, as now, on the imaginary table between them. 'You will not have been battered by me', he reasoned. And she seemed to perk up, alert but unafraid. She was the sort of wife to whom he could later say, 'Wrap this rag of a life round your ... *cough cough, wink wink* ... self.' Naturally, he would say that only when they were well South, clear of England, in a strange place where he wouldn't be thought of as being a snivelling cuckold.

The Guard interrupted them. Philpot gave the Guard his wife's ticket instead of his own, to show the (comparatively empty) compartment that a sense of *play*, of finesse, would survive the single-minded literalness of a train journey. The lady took note and went one further, offering her two tickets to the Guard: they were hers and hers alone, she said. She just wished to create some *space* round herself, when she travelled. The fellow took it in his stride and punched both her tickets without comment, versed in the ways of the travelling aristocracy.

Then she was frank with Philpot: he was wrong about her; she loved

her husband. Cuckolding him hadn't been easy for her. (So, she'd been reading his thoughts: surely, he hadn't been thinking aloud!) No, it was something ... something she had to work at. Mostly, indeed, she found it a little tedious. But the memories that survived, well, they had to be checked out for their accuracy.

He could capitalize on his luck and transform her into a figure of legend — the lady of three tickets who drove men to distraction (and exhaustion) on the London-Dover line. Or he could demand more for his ticket. Fight a battle. Kill two rivals. He was prepared for that. In his bag was a used bush-jacket; and the revolutionary phrase which he now had off by heart in seven languages, would assure Press coverage.

But the cuckold returned from the bar with coke and rolls, and cringed at the lady's side, violating her space. It was clear that she expected Philpot to intervene, but it pleased him to see this as an opportunity deliberately lost, and her small cloud of disapproval soon passed to admiration.

Crossing Paris is never a good idea; with an extra ticket. From the *Gare du Nord* to the *Gare de Lyon*, a man needs a companion to blame for his loss of sanity. Without one, he feels cheated, foreign. Philpot had visions of being mugged for his ticket: there were predators everywhere who ought never to have been released from their film sets. But it was all in vain; when he emerged unmolested, he felt undervalued. What was the point in this life, of having an extra ticket?

Another wife unknown to him, who had eluded him on Paddington station, still dangled at the end of his now imaginary line; and, indeed, she too gave up the foolish pretence of being a fish; but she remained out of sight, confident (we like to think).

Ignorant of all this, Philpot amused himself. He gave himself up to the old fantasy of travellers Southbound: *it is cold and wet in Paris. Seven or eight o'clock in the evening. Dark. You are in the North. On this trip South, it will happen. Walking to your couchette, you glimpse through a gently-closing door, a bare arm settling down between white sheets. You approach your own couchette in anticipation...* Ah, yes, your train romance will yet be written. Next morning, you begin to wake up to painterly skies, tropical light, the Mediterranean. You look for palm trees and find instead beautiful people getting off in twos and threes at little stations along the way, filmic. And one of the beautiful people is on

your arm, leading you to a pavement café across the road — traffic on the right and all that. *Soleil ou L'ombre?* the Patron asks, offering two types of table. Philpot would, of course, go native with a *pastis* and order a glass of red wine for the lady.

And they weren't even in Spéracèdes yet!

When he got to Spéracèdes, Philpot took a table outside Georges' café — a mini-attraction now that Georges has blown his brains out — and waited (back turned to Peymeinade, to Cannes, he was not a tourist) to be approached by his lady of taste and breeding.

She came eventually, carrying a copy of *Nice Matin* (the rosette? the book? Ah, very good) and, as if trying to establish an alibi, insisted on giving a full account of her trip. Philpot ordered a glass of wine to silence her.

Ignoring the wine, she continued with the evidence, of the trip to Dover in a lorry, a shuddering monster that was alive, obscene, undignified to climb in and out of; then the green bus at Dover, green bus to the Ferry; and of getting her way in France, speaking French when they wanted her to do otherwise; and the impossibility of getting a lift out of Calais (when, eventually, she got one it was *into* Calais, as she had been stranded, unknowing, at the docks) as she sent the potential rapists packing; and of having to spend the night at Boulogne — a long, long story —; and being picked up the next day by a Martiniquen, well into the afternoon, on his way to Rouen. He drove her out of Rouen and onto the Paris road and made a sign saying PARIS, which you couldn't read from more than three yards; though a young chap who liked older women and was going to Dijon managed to read it somehow; and it was, she said, so far to Dijon.

In the café, regulars drank to the memory of Georges, and from the thirst of the *vendange*; and to the two widows who had lost their husbands on this very day two years running, and paid no attention to Philpot and his wife.

Philpot sat sipping, imagining her floundering, drowning in wine; but she spurted like a whale, in her element. The young chap, you know, the one to Dijon woke her up in the middle of the night and asked if she wanted to use the bathroom. They had stopped at a service station and afterwards she declined the restaurant because the bathroom had upset her, embarrassed her: it had obviously been built by a man who wanted to humiliate women. And after Dijon? She couldn't remember... She remembered a room for the night. Next morning, a street corner, a sign

saying LYON more legibly than the PARIS sign had said PARIS. Then a lift into a field of sweetcorn. Yes, just for that, the corn; he was weird. Then there was the Nazi who picked her up and put her down in the middle of the Autoroute when he discovered her opinions; but she was not armed, she had to let him go. She had no idea where she was then, till the signs for Avignon started coming up; and then Aix, and she knew she was getting warm. Nice and Cannes made her think of yachts and wine; Grasse, of perfume. At Grasse, they told her of Georges' café in Spéracèdes, of Georges who had blown his brains out, and of the sadist who awaited her with a spare ticket.

She had not yet drunk the wine nor paid any attention to the ticket which Philpot put, casually, on the table. So, always seeking to maintain his reputation for nonchalance, for finesse (they were in Midi country, after all); to show that he was not a literal fellow, or worse, an old man in a hurry, Philpot casually put the ticket in his mouth and ate it. We will never know what his thoughts were; all we know (for the eye-witnesses saw nothing) from people who weren't there, is that *something happened* when the lady tried to recover her ticket.

Did she kill him? Ah, well, it was the day of the *vendange*, and a few are expected to die about then. It's a good omen, it helps the grapes. That he died then, there and in that way, was taken as a sign — a little one, like Georges' suicide — that the village was not entirely forgotten by its gods; nor did it have to bastardize itself (like St. Tropez with its breasts or Cannes with its Film Festival) to be authentic.

And the lady?

It is said that she settled down in Spéracèdes, happily, for ever.