First Lady

Michael Dobbs

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Extract

One

NIGHT. THE WITCHING HOUR. That time when the air grows thick and men are prone to stumble in the darkness. And it is usually those with their heads in the clouds who stumble hardest of all.

It seemed a night in Westminster like any other, one that began in ways so commonplace that it gave no clue as to the rare follies that were to follow. The world of Westminster started to move into stand-by mode, and its offices emptied while its hostelries and watering-holes began to fill.

A distraught parliamentary researcher stood on Westminster Bridge, gazing at the reflection of the moon in the turbid waters of the Thames. She was crying, contemplating bringing all her miseries to an end, but the waters at low tide are no more than six feet deep and this muddy pond seemed in no way fitting for the profound depths of her despair. So, instead, she turned and walked back to the Red Lion, hoping that by now her prayers had been answered and her unfaithful lover had met an unnatural and exquisitely painful death.

Her route took her past Portcullis House, the clumsy bronze-and-glass parliamentary office building that glowers

across the street from Big Ben. In the subway beneath, a homeless man was trying to find comfort from the night by lying on a bed of corrugated cardboard. He wasn't supposed to be there; in fact, according to those crowding the bars directly above his head, he wasn't supposed to exist. Homelessness was 'no longer an issue', in the words of the Minister. But, nevertheless, here he was, as good as calling the Minister a liar. A young police constable ordered him on, and when he was slow in responding, the officer encouraged him with the toe of his polished boot. Not a kicking, nothing brutal, little more than an idle nudge designed to get him on his way. No malice intended. Like clearing up litter. But the tramp's liver, swollen from years of abuse, had dropped beneath his ribcage, just at the point where the boot struck. In its fragile state the liver began to bleed, and since his body chemistry was all screwed up the blood wouldn't clot. He would soon be in a police cell, warm, at least, but by the time the duty surgeon had arrived, three hours after he had been summoned, the tramp was dead. They never did discover his name, and his former wife and two rapacious kids back home in Colchester never found out what had happened to him. Not that they cared.

Yet it was what was about to happen in the room gazing out from a red-brick building on the North Bank, across from the slowly turning wheel of the London Eye, that was to transform the life of Virginia Edge. Ginny herself wasn't there: she was putting the children to bed in her home eighty miles away, yet her world was about to be wrenched from its foundations. The room in the red-brick building

was part of the complex that had once been known as New Scotland Yard when it housed the headquarters of the Metropolitan Police, but had since been renamed after its architect, Norman Shaw, and was now encompassed in the ever-extending sprawl of offices that stretched out from the main parliament building. Here, beneath the shadow of Big Ben, the Leader of the Opposition has his official rooms. During the day they bustled but, with the coming of night, the frenzy had begun to fade and slowly grow quiet. A time for reflection and relaxation.

Colin Penrith enjoyed these moments as much as any in his overcrowded life. He was a widower, his home full of silence and ghosts, and these moments at the ebb tide of evening, when his staff had been dismissed and the telephone ceased its insistent ringing, were precious, to be shared only with those closest to him.

The affair he had been conducting with one of his colleagues wasn't particularly sordid by Westminster standards: he had no ties and she was married to a distant and rather dull husband who laid no claim to virtue himself, so it seemed harmless enough, usually little more than a few disturbed cushions and a spilled glass of wine in a room lit only by the street-lamps of the Embankment. It was a casual but not infrequent arrangement that suited them both, a tangling of minds and bodies that neither laid claim to their hearts nor got mixed up with their other responsibilities. And sometimes, afterwards, as this evening, they would sit and say little, sharing the warmth of each other's body, their attention focused on nothing more demanding than the gentle blinking of the Eye from the other side of the river,

until the tolling of the thirteen-ton bell of Big Ben dragged them back to the moment. She rose.

'Another drink, darling?'

She crossed to the cupboard where he hid the bottles. From outside came the sound of a police siren racing through the night. Another security alarm, but there were so many in these ever-watchful days that no one any longer took much notice. Anyway, they were safe here, tucked away behind the fortress of barricades and scanners that had been thrown round the Palace of Westminster. No one had been killed here since Airey Neave, the Member of Parliament whose car had been blown up by Irish terrorists almost thirty years before. Come to think of it, the car had exploded on the ramp to the underground car park, right across from where they were . . .

'Colin?' She turned, glasses in hand.

He was sitting slumped on the sofa, his palm pressed to his forehead. 'Something's happened,' he said, gazing at her, his eyes watery, troubled. 'It's gone wrong.'

'What's gone wrong?' she asked. But he didn't answer. Slowly, like an old tree, he toppled sideways. 'Colin?' She rushed to his side. He didn't respond, even when she shook him. 'Colin, darling, wake up.' But he wouldn't. Nothing but silence. And shallow, laboured breathing.

'Dear God,' she whispered, wiping his brow, which was covered with cold sweat. Something dreadful had happened – a seizure, a heart-attack, a stroke? She was no doctor, but didn't need to be to know he was in the gravest danger. She rushed to the phone, then paused. If she summoned help right now she might as well call a firing squad. To be

discovered *in flagrante* here would be the end of everything for him, not to speak of her own inevitable discomfort. She knew Colin well enough to understand he'd risk dancing with the devil rather than be condemned for the rest of his days to languish as the butt of every low-life comedian's jokes. And already she could see the photo-calls that would be required of her, the last image the world would remember of her before they spat her out: leaning over the garden gate in front of a thousand smirking photographers, clutching her husband's hand while the children clung tearfully to her skirts. No, not that, anything but that.

Still he didn't move. Hurriedly she gathered up her clothes, then took a moment to inspect her hair and repair her make-up by lamplight. She was almost out of the door when she stopped, returning to fold his clothes neatly, placing them on the back of a chair; it might just persuade those who found the *corpus erecti* that he was guilty of nothing more than stretching out for a sleep.

'Sorry, my love,' she whispered, bending down to kiss his forehead.

Then she was gone.

Three minutes later, from an anonymous phone in a distant part of the palace, she summoned help for Colin. She didn't leave her name.

Bad news spreads on the wings of eagles. By midnight, half the world knew that Colin Penrith, the Leader of Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition, had suffered a massive stroke. By morning, the rest of the world would know it, too.

At the same time as poor Colin Penrith was taking a huge stride along the pathway towards political immortality,

another event was taking place nearby whose roots would also gradually become entangled with Ginny Edge's life. Ajok Arob was a cleaner, about as far down the food-chain in Westminster as it is possible to be. She was a Dinka from the Sudd area of the Sudan; tall, slim, chocolate dark, with a characteristic fan tattoo on her forehead, and proud, like most of her kind. That was their problem, the Dinka, their pride. The Sudd was part of the floodplain of the White Nile, fly-bitten and dust-blown in summer but ideal for cattle grazing, and the combination of rich pasture and perceived arrogance had made Ajok's people a constant target for others in the cauldron of tribal venom that was the Sudd. Hadn't mattered so much when they'd fought with little more than spears, and in any case the Dinka were no slouches in a fight, but spears had made way for AK-47s that could fire six-hundred rounds a minute and kill from a distance of a mile.

Way back in an earlier life, just as the huge African sun began to set, strange men had come to Ajok's village. Baggara Arabs, from the north. She had been washing her two youngest boys, Chol and Mijok, in the river so had been hidden from the first assault; from her hiding-place in the reeds she had watched as they had forced the men in the village into the meeting hut, every man they could find, and put a torch to it. Some tried to run from the flames but had no chance: you can't outrun a Kalashnikov in bare feet. The rest could do no more than scream as they died. And as soon as the piteous cries began to fade, the raiders set upon the women and children. This was a part of the world where in many tribes the word for 'black' and 'slave' is identical,

where children lived shackled, and young women were habitually raped and recycled. What was left of Ajok's village was burned, completely, until there was nothing but blackened scars on the earthen floor.

At last the dawn came. When Ajok felt it was safe to bring her children out from the reeds, she found no trace of her old life. Everything was gone. She stumbled upon the body of her husband, Acai, cut to pieces – he had been one of those who had tried to run. Of her eldest child, Jaklek, there was no sign.

There was nothing left for her in this world. She still had a few cows the raiders had failed to steal: she sold them, and with the money started upon the long journey that took her, first by foot and then upon the exposed roof of an old, straining steamboat, to the scruffy regional capital of Juba. Third class. Two young children, and another she discovered she was carrying, although it would soon be lost. Then onward to Khartoum. A lone woman in a world run by the laws of sharia and of men, which was filled with dust, hunger and suspicion. A world she was determined to leave.

Things move slowly in the Sudan, especially for a single woman. It took her more than a year to find her way, in the guise of a student nurse, from the endless floodplains of the Sudd to Passport Control at Heathrow. There she claimed asylum. It was almost another year before that claim was accepted, long years during which the life of a proud, contented wife of a man of some substance in a village in the south of Sudan was exchanged for that of a common cleaner and a cold council flat in Camden.

She always spoke slowly in her new language. She had

keen, cautious eyes and made few friends in a workforce that was in a constant state of flux. The pay was pathetic, barely above the minimum wage, but it was regular, and if the work was mind-numbing it was, to Ajok, a blessing. Helped seal wounds.

Her bosses liked Ajok. She was reliable, hard-working, been around now longer than most. Never grumbled, not like a lot of the others, kept herself to herself and got on with things. If she seemed by nature a little on the quiet side, that was her business. No one took the time to get past those sad eyes. It was enough that they could rely on her, or thought they could.

That was, until the moment they asked her to clean the Prayer Room – the small and unpretentious little room on the ministerial corridor where the Ministers held their 'prayers' or private discussions. Security was paramount: no scattered papers were left here, no idly discarded notes, no wastepaper bin or tell-tale doodles, only bare walls and one small window, with little more than a collection of chairs set round a polished metal table. But, even here, teacups made rings and scratched brows left dust, so Ajok was asked to clean. And she refused. Because she knew this was where they gathered to discuss the new troubles in Iraq.

Bloody Iraq. So many lives lost, so many reputations torched. Now they were at it again. In spite of the biblical floods of reassurance that had flowed across the country, it was bubbling up once more. Suicide bombs. Wrecked pipelines. Leaders who couldn't lead, power stations that had no power and priests who honoured no god. Now someone had kidnapped the Prime Minister's wife from her hospital

bed. Well, bugger Baghdad. So far as the Defence Ministers in London were concerned, they were glad to be out of it – well, almost out of it. Eighteen hundred British troops were still there, designated 'technical advisers' and 'engineers' to make it sound as if the mucky job of warring was done and the only thing that mattered any longer was renewal and reconstruction. But it was proving difficult to reconstruct a country that was still knee-deep in flaming oil. Damn them. Their ingratitude seemed endless, and in recent weeks clouds of thick, malevolent dust had begun sweeping across the desert once more, engaging the attention of those in the Ministry of Defence who met in the Prayer Room. Now they wanted it cleaned. A civil servant was standing by, waiting to lock up. He was glancing impatiently at his watch, wanting to be elsewhere. But Ajok said no.

'What is matter with you, Ajok?' her supervisor, a Cypriot, asked in his fractured English.

But she would say nothing, just stared at the floor.

'Come on, girl,' the Cypriot encouraged, but she pushed her squeaky cleaning trolley out into the corridor and refused to go back. He began tugging in irritation at the crucifix that hung round his neck. 'Ajok, we're short-staffed again. I has no time for this.'

Ajok moved not a muscle. She had seen enough of what men could do to her world; she would not help them destroy it further.

The civil servant appeared at the door. 'What is she doing?' he asked, as if Ajok had no right to respond for herself. Just like the government agent she remembered in Khartoum. She had queued in intolerable heat for days, part

of a meandering stream of humanity that had shuffled slowly around the old colonial façade of the Interior Ministry, interrupted five times a day by the call to prayer and for even longer by the unexplained departures from their posts of those in charge. She had been with her male cousin. He was the one who would give the family's formal permission for her to leave: in the Sudan, only men can give permission, women are left to do as they are told. After many hours, at last they had come to a small window in the wall of a fly-infested room, where they had found a small, bored-looking man who picked his nose, pretending not to notice them. When eventually he raised his eyes, he scowled. 'What does she want? Why does she want to leave? Where is she going?' she remembered the man from the Ministry had demanded. He had refused to address Ajok directly, treating her like livestock. That was a world she thought she had escaped, left behind, but here, in the old colonial capital of Westminster, the habits died hard.

'What is she doing?' the civil servant repeated, growing irritated, impatient to be gone.

So was the Cypriot. 'Ajok, what the hell? Clean the bloody office. Please.'

'No, thank you,' she replied softly.

'Now, Ajok.'

Slowly, with lowered eyes, she shook her head. 'This is not fair.'

'Then, *skila*, you slings your hook and don't bother you coming back. I never wants to see your black arse in here again. Y'hear that? Never!'

And with that he summoned the security guards. They

came scurrying, as though she had just committed murder. They took away her security pass and wouldn't allow her to speak to her workmates. They marched her like a prisoner towards her locker, which they ransacked as though expecting to find cocaine or uncut diamonds. Her pockets and bag were searched. Only then did they allow her to take her coat and leave.

Ajok Arob had been followed around by so much suffering in her life. She had grown accustomed to it. Yet, as she gathered up her belongings and walked back out into the dull-lit night in search of a bus home, she hadn't any idea how much more was still to come.

Damn. Ginny Edge had been spotted.

'Bus?' Maggie Andrews enquired pointedly, as Ginny stepped off the number thirty-six and straight into her clutches.

'Just down from the constituency. And taxis are like husbands. Never around when you want one,' Ginny replied, struggling with her overnight bag. 'Didn't want to be late.'

'No, not today. Not today of all days,' Maggie agreed.

They were both making their way to the monthly gathering of the Other Half Club, a lunch date for the partners of those Members of Parliament who had risen to the often less than dizzying heights of the Shadow Cabinet, the Opposition's Front Bench team. It wasn't always well attended, but today it would be. A packed house.

'A pity about Colin,' Maggie continued, taking Ginny's arm in conspiratorial fashion as they started down the street. 'Such a terrible, exquisite pity.' And she giggled.

Her attitude took Ginny aback – but so much about Westminster took her aback. 'It's a sailing pond,' her husband, Dominic, had reassured her. 'You just have to wait for the right breeze.' But it was a pond where pike ate the minnows and piranhas took their turn to feast upon the survivors of any capsize. Ginny had made the trip to Westminster from her home in the constituency for no other reason than her sense of duty, but she was good at that. Duty. It was a habit that had been bred and frequently beaten into her from the moment she had first drawn breath, thirty-eight years ago, at her parents' home on the moors outside Catterick, on a night when thick January snowdrifts carried on an east wind had prevented her mother making it to the hospital.

She'd been something of a camp follower ever since. Her father had been an ambitious and, in his own view, outrageously under-promoted officer in the East Dorsets, so Ginny had spent the first sixteen years of her life dragging her toys and schoolbooks behind her everywhere from Germany to Cyprus and Salisbury Plain, then back once more to Catterick. It had done great things for her organisational abilities but bugger-all for her emotional development. She'd spent more time with books than with boys, so when she'd met Dominic at university in Nottingham and he had smiled back at her from the other side of the Greenpeace stall at a Freshers' Fair, she had thrown herself into their relationship in a manner that had left him breathless, with or without his trousers. She was studying English, he law, and only the differing syllabus enabled her to hide from him the fact that she had the better brain.