

A Scandalous Man

Gavin Esler

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Extract

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*This book is dedicated to my friends from Iran,
Turkey and the Arab world, India and Pakistan,
whose friendship and love inspires me.*

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Too long a sacrifice
Can make a stone of the heart.
Oh, when may it suffice?
Easter, 1916. W. B. YEATS

Birds make great sky circles of their freedom.
How do they learn it?
They fall,
And falling, they're given wings.
Rumi, PERSIAN POET, 13th Century

London, Spring 2005

Father was murdered today. Or it might have been yesterday. He might even have tried to kill himself. No one can say for certain, and that is typical of father, slippery and devious to the end. The television news said he is not dead yet, or not quite. He was found in a pool of blood on the floor of his cottage, clinging to life. My first thought was that I hoped he survived long enough to suffer.

I heard the news late because I had my mobile phone switched off all day, working, and because I had a row with my client. This never happens. I am too polite for that kind of thing, but he was an up-himself New York corporate lawyer for a private equity firm that was trying to buy up half of eastern Europe, and I was helping them. I'm not particularly proud of it, but there you are. Not many people in London speak fluent Czech, and they paid me five times my normal fee for a bit of translation and a bit of interpreting, and probably would have paid me twenty times if I'd had the nerve to ask. The New York lawyer and I finished going through the paperwork enabling his company to buy a sizeable slice of the Czech economy which he told me he intended to 'remodel'. He signed the contract as I spoke to his opposite number in

Prague confirming the deal. At the same time he talked to his office in Manhattan. I could hear him gloating.

‘Get Karl and the boys down from Frankfurt,’ he told New York. ‘Pink slip everything that breathes and flatten everything that doesn’t. Terminate all contracts. We need everybody out of all sites and everything levelled with immediate effect. We need this turned by the end of the year.’

I was at the other end of the room but could still hear him yakking. He told me to give him the thumbs up the moment I had confirmation the contract was signed in Prague. When I did so, he told New York, ‘It’s done,’ and then put the phone down. He was beaming, as if he had just had sex. Maybe at that point he needed someone to boast to and I was the only one in the room. Whatever the reason he turned to me and said that in that one instant, in that one stroke of a pen, his company had made more than seven hundred million dollars. He personally had pocketed around thirteen million, and was going to find a club and what he called some ‘broadminded women’ to celebrate with. I ran off at the mouth.

‘You’re celebrating putting thousands of Czech workers out of a job?’

He looked as if I had just hit him, then he laughed and started putting his papers into his attaché case.

‘Interpret this, Harry: Welcome to globalization. Welcome to the world where you make dust or you eat dust. Welcome to the twenty-first century.’

Then he handed me my cheque with all the good grace of a client stuffing money into the bra of a lap dancer.

‘Your interpreting fee. A thousand. Don’t spend it all at once.’

I wanted to hit him. He waved a finger at me.

‘You wanna know why people like you don’t like Americans, Harry? Because we’re so goddamn successful in every field of human endeavour.’

That angered me even more. It had nothing to do with his nationality. It had everything to do with his behaviour.

‘I do like Americans,’ I protested. ‘Most of them. But some of you don’t travel so well. The ones who have no values except what you can pay for. People like you.’

‘Well, fuck you too, Harry,’ he called out with another laugh as he stepped out of the door. ‘When people say they don’t care about money it’s usually because they don’t have any. G’bye now. I’ll be thinking of you.’

When I cooled down, I went home and switched on the TV news, only because I wanted to hear if Blair had finally got round to calling the General Election. And he had. But there was also a big surprise. Father’s picture suddenly appeared on the screen as he crawled towards his footnote in history.

‘A reminder of today’s top stories: the Prime Minister, Tony Blair, has given the go ahead for a General Election to be held on May 5th. He’s bidding to win an unprecedented third term for Labour, an achievement which would match that of Mrs Thatcher ... And one other piece of political news this hour: the former Conservative Cabinet Minister Robin Burnett – credited with being one of the chief architects of Thatcherism – has been found close to death at his home in Gloucestershire. Police refused to confirm local speculation that Mr Burnett had been attacked and stabbed. For more on this we can go over to our political editor Tom Agnew at Westminster. Tom.’

An affable looking man in glasses standing in Downing Street started to speak. He was talking about my father. He appeared to know him better than I did.

‘... Robin Burnett, nicknamed by the tabloids “Big-Brain Burnett”, was one of the intellectual fathers of modern Conservatism. A formidably clever economist, he was once tipped to succeed Mrs Thatcher as Prime Minister until the scandal which toppled him caused devastation at the heart of the Conservative party. It still rankles even today ...’

Then there was an interruption. The man in glasses held his earpiece with his index finger.

‘And I am just hearing that the Vice President of the United States, David Hickox, who is on an official visit to Europe and who met Robin Burnett in London earlier this week, is about to pay tribute to his friend. Let’s go live to the Élysée Palace ...’

They cut to pictures of Vice President Hickox, a thickset man with the build of an American footballer, standing next to a bemused French President Jacques Chirac.

‘Let me just say that Robin Burnett is a friend of freedom, a friend of the United States and a good friend of mine,’ Hickox was saying. *‘He understood the need for Britain and the United States to stand shoulder to shoulder in a difficult and dangerous world. The Robin Burnett I have known for years is a brave man and a fighter – and I pray that he’ll pull through. My thoughts are with him and his family at this time.’*

Then the Vice President put an arm round President Chirac and they walked inside. The affable reporter started to speak again.

‘Publicly neither the Labour party nor the Conservatives are saying much about Robin Burnett, but privately Labour cannot believe their luck. On the day Tony Blair has called a General Election, here we have a reminder of all the sleaze once associated with the Conservative party and attached to the scandal involving Robin Burnett.’

He paused for a second to deliver his punchline.

‘In politics, of course, as in stand-up comedy, timing is everything. Now back to the studio.’

Oh, god, I thought. It’s starting again. All over again. And there is nothing I can do to stop it. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. Could this day possibly get worse? Another deep breath. Perhaps I should introduce myself properly. My

name is Harry Burnett. I am a full-time translator and part-time interpreter. Despite what the New York lawyer said, I do a lot of work for American clients, most of whom I like, and I only very rarely lose my temper. I am also the estranged son of the former British Cabinet minister Robin Burnett. And he is a scandalous man.

London, 1982

ROBIN BURNETT'S STORY

The first time I saw the woman who was to change my life was in 1982. I had no idea who she was, but I had an instinct that she meant trouble. At the time I could not imagine how much trouble. Let me set the scene for you. It must have been early in 1982, because it was shortly after the Argentine junta had sent their troops to invade the Falkland Islands. I was preoccupied. Happy. Busy. Successful. Duties. There was a profound air of crisis within the British government, but it brought out the best in everyone, especially the Lady. She knew the old wisdom that the Chinese written script for the word 'Crisis' contains the characters for 'Opportunity' as well as 'Danger', and so did I. Up until the moment the Argies invaded, I was convinced we were going to lose the next election. It had to come by the spring of 1984 at the latest. Unemployment was very high. Not our fault, of course, but people thought it was. Cyclical factors. World downturn. They blamed us. In fact they hated us. I was spat at in the street at a housing project in Bristol. One of the other ministers, Henry Charlwood, had red paint thrown over him in Glasgow. Another, Michael Armstrong, was sprayed with slurry at a market in Leicester. Our economic policies needed more time to work, much more time – as I kept telling

everybody and anybody who would listen. Thankfully, the Lady was one of those who did listen.

‘Prime Minister, you cannot turn around a pessimistic, unionized, programmed-to-fail economy like Britain in less than a decade.’

‘We do not have a decade, Robin,’ she reminded me. She actually looked at her watch as if the seconds were ticking away towards the next General Election and the end of her time in Downing Street. ‘We have five years. Four, actually. I intend to go to the country next year. So we have about twelve months remaining.’

‘It’s not enough.’

‘It might have to be enough,’ she whipped back at me.

We were in her room at the Commons, having tea. She had a whiff of perfume about her. Powder blue suit. Handbag. In real life she was smaller than most people will ever understand if they only ever saw her on television, where she seemed a huge figure. And in reality she was also much more feminine than she appeared on TV. Her femininity tended to bring out the masculine in a man. You were aware of her physical fragility, which was impossible to reconcile with her mental strength. It made some men go a bit wobbly. Mitterrand had a soft spot for her. He said she had the mouth of Marilyn Monroe and the eyes of Caligula. One of the few things in life Mitterrand ever got right.

‘If you go to the country next year, then you almost certainly will lose, Prime Minister,’ I told her. ‘I am sorry to say it, but you will. We need as long as possible.’

The Lady looked at me coldly. Caligula. She knew they were plotting against her, within the party, but the word ‘lose’ was not in her active vocabulary. I changed the subject.

‘And also, Prime Minister, as I keep reminding people in Cabinet, *we* do not fix the economy. It fixes itself. We in government can only help by getting out of the way as much as possible. Benign neglect. It works for houseplants, and it certainly

works for the economy. The more you fuss around, the worse it gets. The houseplants wilt and die from too much fussing. Just let it be. You cannot buck the market.'

The Lady looked at me quizzically, turning her head to the side, that way she did which always reminded me of a small bird.

'Say that again, Robin.'

'You cannot buck the market, Prime Minister.'

'Thank you, Robin. For speaking honestly, as always. So many don't, you know.'

Oh, yes, I knew. The trades unions were behaving like donkeys – mules – desperate to bring us down as they had Callaghan in '79. The only thing that stopped them taking action was their terror that we would call their bluff. I wanted them to try it, so we could announce an election on one simple question: who rules Britain? Them or us? The democratic parliament that you elected? Or a bunch of union leaders that you did not? I wanted to hit them in the face with it. The unions circled, waiting for their chance, snapping and barking, but not daring to bite. I repeatedly told the Lady that if she insisted on holding a General Election in 1983, the only way she could win would be to engineer a crisis.

'A crisis?' she said, the way Oscar Wilde's Lady Bracknell said 'a handbag?' 'Did you say a crisis, Robin?'

I gulped.

'Take on the unions, Prime Minister. Make it Them or Us. Take on the despots.'

She smiled. Marilyn Monroe. Then she shook her head. The miners had destroyed Heath. The public sector workers had destroyed Callaghan. She did not feel strong enough to risk being destroyed in '83, though I thought she might be destroyed anyway, and it was better to go down fighting. And then! And then! Hallelujah! Along came a better class of despot, from the other side of the world. Thank god for General Galtieri! A central casting villain! A proto-fascist South American in a bad

uniform, with the air of a man who could strut even when sitting down! Just what we needed. What luck!

When Galtieri sent his Argentine conscript troops to the Falklands, I confess that most British people, including me, could not have pinpointed the godforsaken islands on a map. Peter Carrington, decent man, resigned as Foreign Secretary. Someone had to carry the can. It could not be her, of course. We were agreed on that. So it had to be him. The truth is, we had all balled it up. We had a British submarine lurking off the coast of the Falklands for a while and then removed it in the name of ‘constructive dialogue’. Not only that, we *told* everybody we had removed it, including the Argentine military dictatorship. I don’t recall the word ‘dialogue’ being much used in the Lady’s presence thereafter. It also taught us a lesson about dictators, Saddam Hussein and the like. You can show them the brink, but they never pay attention until they fall over it. The Lady knew this was her crisis. Her moment in history. Winning was never the most important thing to her. It was the only thing.

‘It’s a carrot and a stick policy with Galtieri,’ she told Cabinet the Thursday following the invasion, slapping her tiny right hand on the table. ‘He can get his troops out immediately, or we will destroy him.’

There was much bemusement around the room. People looked at their hands, or at their papers, not at the Lady and certainly not at each other. Every single person present around that Cabinet table wondered if she would fail, including her. Every single person present wondered who would succeed her, if she did fail. Including her.

‘Why is that a carrot and stick policy, Prime Minister?’ one of the plotters, one of the Wets, emboldened by the Lady’s perceived weakness, dared to ask. It was Michael Armstrong, then at the Home Office. A Shit.

‘What’s the carrot?’

The Lady glared at him.

‘The carrot, Michael, is that we won’t use the stick.’

The Cabinet went silent. Michael Armstrong looked as if he had swallowed his tongue. He was booted up to the Lords by the end of the year. The Lady went into a frenzy of hyperactivity, spurred on by the mutterings about whether she was up to the job. One or two backbenchers privately talked about her being Neville Chamberlain in a frock. I nailed them for it.

‘I am sure the Prime Minister will respond to your comments,’ I told Gowing and Mattings, two spivs of the old sort I caught lunching in Victoria. Double breasted blue pinstripe suits and oily hair. Sharks in shark’s clothing. Friends of Armstrong. ‘If you care to mention your misgivings to the Lady personally, she will most definitely respond. And I am sure the Chief Whip could arrange a meeting. Perhaps you could bring Michael Armstrong along to lend his support?’

Gowing and Mattings looked as if I had shot them. Which of course I had. And then ... It is difficult to keep a straight face, recalling the moment, but one must never underestimate two things about politicians: their cowardice and their stupidity. Gowing and Mattings thought they would blacken me by spreading word of what I had said. What a lark! First they told Armstrong, and then some of the worst elements of the 1922 Committee. In total confidence, of course – which meant it leaked to the press in time for the next morning’s papers. The idea was to make me look bad. The idiots! From being that amiable old academic buffer Robin Burnett who loves his economics charts, his Laffer’s Curve and his lectures on the difference between Tax Take and Tax Rate, I suddenly became Mac the Knife. The Enforcer. It got out into the *Telegraph* and the *Mail*. The *Mail* called me ‘Bovver Boy Burnett’, and I was metamorphosed into ‘the Lady’s hard man’, according to the *Guardian*. Their cartoonist drew me as a skinhead with bovver boots! Ooooh, how that hurt! Ha! Let’s just say there was no more talk of Neville Chamberlain in a frock after that. Only of Winston Churchill. The Empire Strikes Back. The steel fist. The

Iron Lady. I loved it. And, more importantly, so did She! What times we had! The Lady's energy was infectious. It was as if I was taking a major policy decision once an hour, like Old Faithful, erupting with ideas around the clock, changing the country, gush, gush, gush, as the Lady started to change the world.

Once a week or so I was summoned to Downing Street for a late night whisky and soda. One night, after the Royal Navy Task Force had set sail but before there had been any significant engagement in the war, she told me I was to be despatched to Washington. As her special envoy. Washington?

'Good,' I said, puzzled. I hadn't a clue. I smiled with enthusiasm.

'Robin, you have a safe pair of hands,' the Lady explained. Geoffrey was there. And Bernard. And the Defence Secretary, who quipped that I was to use my safe pair of hands to milk the teats of the American administration for everything they'd got. Everyone laughed. I pretended to laugh along with them.

'The Task Force is to liberate the Falklands from the Argies,' Bernard said, 'and you are to liberate the Reagan administration from the peculiar belief that they should not upset General Galtieri.'

'He's their son-of-a-bitch in Latin America,' Geoffrey chimed in. 'They love him because he hates Communists.'

'So did Hitler,' I said. 'And look where that got us.'

'Precisely,' the Lady agreed.

The Reaganauts were going to do their bit for us whether they wanted to or not.

'The entire fate of the government depends upon *your* success,' the Lady told me, a little redundantly. 'You have contacts and friendships in Washington. Use them. Get them on-side, Robin.'

'There are competing baronies in Washington, Prime Minister,' I told her. 'You can usually only appeal to one baron by alienating another, but I'll do my best.'

‘You bring me solutions,’ the Lady said. ‘Others just bring me problems.’

She poured me another whisky.

‘And you’ll need a bit of extra nourishment,’ she winked, handing me the glass. Marilyn Monroe.

There was to be an open part of the trip and a covert part. The open part was that I was scheduled to meet the Council of Economic Advisers and talk to the Reagan administration about oil prices, the tension in the Gulf, and our joint commitment to bear down on inflation. Everybody was terrified of the Iranians. The Gulf states and the Saudis had puffed up a two-bit Iraqi thug called Saddam Hussein by telling him that he was the bulwark for the Sunni Arabs against the Persian Shia menace. Some ‘bulwark’. Saddam decided that his place in history was assured. Iraq invaded Iran in September 1980, much to everyone’s satisfaction.

‘It’s just a pity that in this war both sides cannot lose,’ Jack Heriot told me, in a preparation meeting for my Washington trip. Heriot was number two at the Foreign Office. He used to be a diplomat. He was my age, my status. My rival. He offered me a briefing when he heard of my mission, and I accepted gratefully. We sized each other up, and I confess I liked him instantly, despite the rivalry. I could also see that we would need each other, when the time to replace the Lady finally came around.

‘You will want to talk to the Americans about the Falklands, but they will want to talk to you about the Gulf,’ he told me. ‘It is their obsession. Dual containment.’

I had never heard the phrase before.

‘What?’

‘Dual containment,’ Jack Heriot repeated. ‘That’s what the Americans call it. One load of evil bastards in Iran, and another load of evil bastards in Iraq. Killing each other, big time. Does anyone have a problem with that? I don’t think so.’

‘And our role is?’

Heriot smiled. He was already beginning to put on weight and his belly was tight in his dark blue suit.

‘Publicly, we call on both sides for a ceasefire, for restraint and mediation, and hard work towards peace. Privately, we keep it going for as long as possible.’

‘How?’

‘By backing the loser. Currently, Iraq.’

Ah, the sophistication of the diplomatic mind.

‘Divide and conquer?’

‘If you like. More like the historic British policy of never letting any one rival get too strong. Remember Part One politics at university? *We have no permanent friends, no permanent enemies, only permanent interests.*’

‘Thanks for the seminar, Jack.’

‘Don’t mention it. You’ll find it useful leverage with the Reaganauts.’

Oh, will I?

Yes, I did. And yes, we really would come to need each other, Jack Heriot and I. We were called ‘The Likely Lads’ by the newspapers at the time. One of us, they deemed, would ‘go all the way’. The Fleet Street wisdom was that if the Lady fell because of her economic policies then I would carry the can and Heriot would succeed as Prime Minister. But if – by some miracle – what they were now calling ‘Thatcherism’ did work, then I would be the natural successor, especially if the Falklands war was taken to mean our foreign policy was way off track. I knew that being tipped as a future leader carries with it the kiss of death, but I was flattered. Strange, isn’t it? You see disaster ahead, but you take the road anyway. Maybe you even accelerate. It was like that in private matters too. Sex and love? Be careful? No. Full speed ahead, over the cliff.

The covert part of my trip to Washington was that I was to see the US Navy Secretary, Don Hall, an old friend from rowing days in Oxford. I had asked Don to fix up an informal

meeting with David Hickox, who was then the Director of Central Intelligence. Hickox was on the way up. Some people said he could make it to Vice President. Or even President. And I needed him on-side. But here was our problem. Jeanne Kirkpatrick, the US Ambassador to the United Nations, was causing trouble. She said the United States should remain neutral in what she called a 'post-colonial dispute' between the United Kingdom and Argentina over '*las Malvinas*'.

Personally I was happy if Sad, Mad, Bad Jeanne remained neutral, or was even openly hostile to us. Having a demented old trout arguing against you in Washington does your cause no end of good. But the FCO and Jack Heriot in particular seemed unnerved by her opposition, and there were also intelligence issues. What were we going to get from the Americans? Communications Intelligence? Signals Intelligence? Eavesdropping on the Argies? Access to information from American human sources in Buenos Aires? Or perhaps, bugger all. What would Hickox be prepared to do? We did not know. It was up to me to find out.

In preparation for the trip I had to visit the US embassy in Grosvenor Square for a courtesy call with the ambassador. It was pleasant enough. Political bottom-sniffing. Coffee and chat and then I left. Half an hour, tops. So there I was, walking out of the embassy, looking for my official car, when I glimpsed a woman walking in. She was – she is – very beautiful. Striking. I had no idea who she was, but I remember thinking of the English folksong, 'The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face'. It was just a glance, but no woman had ever looked at me like that before. It was the look that a hungry lioness gives a passing zebra. Raw hunger. I was the prey. I glanced back but the moment had passed. She was walking briskly into the US embassy. I remember even now, after all these years, the shape of her body, her hips, the bounce of her hair. I remember thinking that she walked as if she were wearing expensive lingerie. She radiated a secret and exotic

sexiness which made me think of the whisper of lace and silk on tanned skin. I climbed into the ministerial Jaguar and returned to the Treasury, humming the tune of 'The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face' and feeling vaguely ridiculous. Love at first sight – like a belief in socialism – is wonderful at age fourteen but absolutely stupid after the age of, let's say, forty. I shook my head to clear it of all memories of her, and determined to forget I had ever seen her.

The embassy had booked me my usual hotel in Washington, but my old friend Don Hall offered to put me up for a weekend at his place in Middleburg, Virginia, prior to my official meetings at Treasury and State. He said he would gather together a few 'like minded souls' – which meant the Brit-loving community of Washington, members of the Senate Armed Services committee that I might need to sweet-talk, and, I was relieved to hear, Hickox himself, who – Don said – was keen to meet me.

'He said you are one of us,' Don Hall laughed.

'An American?' I replied, puzzled.

'No,' Don corrected me. 'A neo-con.'

I thought I had misheard or misunderstood. I had never heard the phrase before.

'A what?'

'A neo-conservative. He's done his research. Don always does his research. He says you are a true believer in free markets and in rolling back communism rather than just acquiescing. I told him he was goddamn right.'

Neo-con? What a strange phrase. I thought no more about it. There wasn't time. Maybe I should have ensured I had received an intelligence briefing about David Hickox in as much detail as he had received one about me, but there wasn't time for that either. By the time I did get briefed about Hickox, it was too late. I had already made my deal with the devil.

On the plane to Washington, I tried to plan how the meetings should go, but other thoughts crept into my mind

unbidden. The exotic looking woman that I had seen walking into the embassy, even though I did not know her name or anything about her. Why could I not get her out of my head? I did an inventory of my life. I had two perfect, photogenic children. I had a hugely intelligent wife with her own career. Elizabeth taught at the LSE. I had hundreds of contacts in politics, in the press, all over Washington, at Oxford, in the American universities and the think tanks. I might make it to Prime Minister, and if I didn't I could always switch to Wall Street or the City and make a fortune. And yet ... And yet.

I did not need this woman I had glimpsed walking into the embassy – absolutely not. I would probably never see her again. But I wanted her, and I could not explain why. I had read a survey around this time in which a thousand people were asked what they would do if the Russians fired nuclear missiles towards us and we were all about to be obliterated. We had ten minutes to live. Ten minutes to decide what to do. Most of the people surveyed said they would have sex with anyone reasonably attractive in the vicinity. All inhibitions disappeared. You had to laugh at this notion. End of the World Sex, they called it in the survey. What a wonderful thought. Was that what was happening to me? End of the World Sex? The world was about to change for me inexorably and forever. Everything speeded up.

Much later in our relationship she gave me something which explained it all better than I could explain it to myself. It was a book of Sufi poetry. Every culture has its Romeo and Juliet love story. For the Sufis it is the story of Leila (or Layla) and her beloved, a man nicknamed Majnun. Like all Romeo and Juliet stories it ends in desperate and permanent separation. Happy love affairs are tedious literature. Nothing cheers us up more than reading about other people's personal lives going catastrophically wrong. In this case, Layla dies (of course) Majnun chooses to lie on her grave and fade away until the

dust of their bodies finally unites them in death though they were always separated in life.

In the Sufi poem a headstone was put on the grave and it reads:

*Two lovers lie in this one tomb
United forever in death's dark womb.
Faithful in separation, true in love:
May one tent house them in heaven above.*

My plane landed at Dulles International Airport and I had work to do. The entire fate of the British government lay in my hands – apparently. And yet all modern politics is an exercise in compartmentalization, or – if you prefer – organized hypocrisy. I was a hypocrite, even to myself. I did not have long to wait for the compartments to fall apart.

Oh, yes, may one tent house them, Layla and Majnun, faithful in separation, true in love.