
Opening Extract from...

Every Man for Himself

Written by Beryl Bainbridge

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For August, Esme and Inigo

PROLOGUE

15th April 1912

He said, 'Save yourself if you can,' and I said firmly enough, though I was trembling and clutching at straws, 'I intend to. Will you stand at my side?' To which he replied, 'Remember, Morgan, not the height, only the drop, is terrible.' Then he walked away, gait unsteady, the cord of his robe trailing the deck.

I saw him once more, in those seconds which dragged by between my leap for the roof of the officers' house and the onrush of water that bore me aloft. He was standing against the rail, one arm hooked through to steady himself, and at first I didn't know him for he had taken off his spectacles; it was the velvet dressing gown I recognised.

He looked directly at me, all the time buffing his glasses on the hem of that plum-coloured robe, and I admit his occupation struck me as sensual. His hand, you see, was all but hidden beneath the material and I thought he was caressing himself. Death is such a lover's pinch that a man can be excused for prising himself free. Behind him on the horizon glimmered something I mistakenly took to be starlight.

I fancy he was smiling, but I can't be sure. Possibly I need to believe it ended that way, so that I can expel from my ears the ululation of grief which later pierced the glittering heavens.

The night was so still, the sea so calm, the moment so out of step with the catastrophe in progress that I made to join him, fluttered the fingers of my raised hand as though we were both guests at a social function and it was the most natural thing in the world to acknowledge the presence of a friend. My mouth even opened to shout some sort of greeting, though no words came.

I remember looking down at my right shoe, still inexplicably shiny with polish, as I prepared to take a stride towards that figure braced against the rail.

Then the water, first slithering, then tumbling, gushed us apart . . .

ONE

At half-past four on the afternoon of 8th April 1912 – the weather was mild and hyacinths bloomed in window boxes – a stranger chose to die in my arms.

He was hung upon the railings of one of those grand houses in Manchester Square, arms spread like a scarecrow, the cloth of his city coat taking the strain. With his very first words he made it plain he wasn't overwhelmed by circumstances. 'I know who I am,' is what he clearly said. In the open window behind him a maid in a white cap stabbed flowers into a vase.

'It's as well to know oneself,' I replied, and walked on. I had reached the end of the street when I heard a shout; looking back I saw the unfortunate had shrugged himself out of his coat and was stumbling in my direction. His colourless face had eyebrows arched like a clown and lips that were turning blue.

'Please,' I said, as he pitched forward and clutched me round the waist. We both fell to our knees. Over the road a crocodile of Girl Guides sashayed sing-song through the ornamental gates of the public gardens.

I tried to free myself, but the man was drowning. His face was so close that his two eyes merged into one. I had thought he was drunk, yet his breath smelled sweet.

'Lay me down,' he whispered, and a tear rolled out of that one terrible eye and broke on the swell of his lip.

A nursemaid came down the sidewalk wheeling a perambulator. The infant was shrieking. I called out for assistance as the woman pushed past; there was a scrap of brown paper caught on the sole of her boot.

I laid him down as best I could, his head on the sidewalk. I would have taken off my jacket to serve as a cushion if he hadn't clung to my hands. His grip was fierce, as though someone unseen was dragging him in another direction. Then, arching a middle finger and foraging beneath the cuff of my shirt, he feather-dusted my beating pulse.

A sudden gust of wind shook the trees in the gardens and a prolonged sigh echoed along the street.

'The finger stroke of love,' he said, quite distinctly, and soon after, died.

Sometime during the minutes of his dying he had released his hold on me, and, fumbling in his vest pocket, brought forth a small square of cardboard which he pressed against my heart.

After leaving the barber's shop, where the body had been carried by two constables, I found myself in possession of a snapshot of a Japanese woman peeping out from behind an embroidered fan. Retracing my steps I had every intention of giving it into the care of a constable, only to spy through the glass front of the shop the figure of the dead man seated in a barber's chair, a white cloth tied about his neck. I supposed he had been placed there, until a conveyance arrived, so as not to deter potential customers. His eyes were open and they were looking at me.

I went immediately to Princes Gate, packed my overnight bag and, leaving open the leaded window of my room to

shift the tobacco smoke, closed the door quietly behind me. I paused in the corridor, did what I intended to do – it took but a moment – brushed the square of dust away with my sleeve and went to the head of the stairs.

As fate would have it, Cousin Jack was coming up as I descended. There followed a conversation of sorts, though my heart beat so loud I scarcely heard it. The evening sun shone through the stained glass window on the landing and set his beard ablaze.

'Ah,' he said, peering. 'It's you.'

'The very same,' I replied, dazzled.

'Are we well?' he asked.

'Pretty well.'

'Excellent,' he thundered, and stepped on past. One floor up the pet monkey hurled the length of its chain along the picture rail and leapt atop the banister.

Later I reproached myself for being so jumpy. Jack may have an eye for commerce but in most other respects he's monumentally blinkered. He is, after all, about his father's business. In all the weeks I'd stayed at that house in Princes Gate we had never once dined together, although it's true that we should have met for breakfast the morning after my arrival. On that occasion the cable working the dumb-waiter snapped between basement and dining room and the resulting cacophony of breaking china so unnerved me I fled before Jack appeared. At no time since had we occupied anything more spacious than the threshold of a room, he generally being on his way out as I entered, or the other way around. Beyond a grunt, possibly in reference to the weather, he had never acknowledged the cuckoo in his

nest. I wasn't entirely sure he even knew who I was. But then, he was nearly thirty years my senior and I no more than twelve years of age when he had last set eyes on me in the library of his father's brownstone on Madison Avenue.

I wouldn't like to give the impression that I thought badly of Jack. Quite the reverse; it was he who told my aunt it was time she stopped feeding me moonshine in regard to my beginnings. Up until then I knew little of my parents, beyond they were both headstrong and dead, my father two months before I was born and my mother, half-sister-in-law to my Uncle Morgan, three years after. I wasn't really bothered about the whys and wherefores, being well cared for by my aunt and my cousin Sissy, but often crazy images came into my head, either when I was on the point of dropping off to sleep or on the edge of waking, images of an old woman's face lying next to me on a soiled pillow. And then I'd come fully awake and scream the house down, begging for the window to be opened to let out the stench of her breath. Sometimes, when the dream had been really bad, Sissy would push up the balcony window and hold me there in my night-gown, telling me to suck in the night air, and those times I stopped breathing altogether, for when I looked down at the gas-lit street it had sunk beneath the sluggish waters of a canal.

I didn't find the truth all that upsetting, though Sissy wept for days. I was just thankful I hadn't slithered into the world on the wrong side of the tracks. As for the other grotesque happenings concerning my infant self, which I read about in brittle newspaper cuttings handed me by Jack soon after my twelfth birthday, why, they merely confirmed a growing

belief that I was special. I don't care to be misunderstood; I'm not talking about intellect or being singled out for great honours, simply that I was destined to be a participant rather than a spectator of singular events.

For instance, an hour before Amy Svenson hanged herself from the basement gate due to milk fever, I was marching my toy soldiers across the tiled lobby of the Madison Avenue house. Amy was scrubbing out the vestibule and when I started bawling – one of my tin Confederates had got caught in the castors of the hall table – she came in and sang me a lullaby. A bubble of soap burst in her hair as she took me on her knee. And when I was ten, staying down at the Van Hoppers' place, I met a man who blew his head off. I'd woken early one morning and roamed off on my own to the creek below the cemetery and there was Israel Wold, the half-baked tenant of the shack beyond the pines, on all fours, digging out the earth like he was a wild cat. He called out, 'Help me, pesky boy,' and obediently I crouched opposite and scrabbled at the ground. When the hole was deep enough he poured gunpowder into it from a sack slung from his belt and he said, 'Here I go and may the Lord go with me' and then he lay down with his head over the hole. I ran off because I knew he was cracked, and the next instant there was a noise like thunder and when I looked back I saw his old straw hat tossed into the misty sky as though someone had brought good news. Which is why I took the dead man in Manchester Square in my stride, though not quite.

That night I booked into a boarding house in Bloomsbury, and suffered accordingly. I suppose I could have gone down

to Melchett's folk in Dorset, except the company they kept was real dull and their sofas awash with dogs.

Tuesday I'd gone with Laura Rothschild to a matinée of some play or other, let Melchett stand me dinner at the Carlton, staggered on with him to his club and then mislaid him at three o'clock in the morning outside the revolving doors of the Café Royal. In between I'd telegraphed my aunt, assuring her of my eagerness to see the family again, particularly Sissy who in my absence had produced a son and heir for her husband. It cost a few cents more but I also said I was in tip-top spirits. I wasn't, although I was truly bucked about Sissy and her boy. I recollect buying her a bunch of violets with the notion they might last the voyage home, only I shed them somewhere.

Melchett and I had planned to motor down to the ship together – his chauffeur had earlier taken charge of my luggage – but when I lost him at the Café Royal I was forced to catch the milk train from Waterloo, after which rattling journey through Woking, Winchester and Eastleigh I arrived at Southampton to spend a miserable hour perched on a coil of rope outside the Ocean Terminal, my only companion in the near darkness a boy endlessly sorting through the contents of a cardboard suitcase. I had plenty to think about; every time I hunched forward a corner of the picture frame inside my coat jabbed against my breastbone. Once, the boy called out to me, 'What's the time, mister?' but I didn't reply. He wore a white muffler about his throat and I thought of the dead man in the barber's chair.

Shortly after sunrise a straggling procession of men in uniform approached Gate 4 and crossed the railway tracks

on to Ocean Road. It was then the doors of the South Western Hotel opened and I was able to order a breakfast of overdone kippers. At that hour there were only three other guests in the dining room, two of whom had their backs to me. Of these, one was a woman soberly dressed and the other a stoutly built fellow sitting alone in an alcove, one hand constantly hovering about the string of an oblong box lying beside his chair. The third occupant, middle-aged and wearing spectacles, sat opposite the woman. His face, otherwise fleshy and undistinguished, was remarkable for a mouth whose lower lip was scored through as though by a slash from a knife; split thus, it gave him a roguish appearance. Leaning backwards in his chair, he talked in so distinctive a voice and with such authority that several times I caught the drift of what he said. I took him to be a lawyer, for he seemed to be conducting an interrogation rather than a conversation.

'Are you sure that you have the will? . . . What makes you think you possess the strength? . . . What will you do with success when it comes?' To which last question the woman replied barely above a whisper. I have the knack of concentration and although a waiter was poking the coals into flame and plates were clattering in the kitchens beyond the green baize door, I heard her plain. 'Why, I shall be happy,' is what she said.

It was then her companion looked across and met my eye. He was smiling in such a jovial fashion, that, taken off guard, I pretended to be engrossed in the view from the window. By now the crimson dawn had torn to rags and the dull sky was all but blotted out by the giant funnels towering above

the roofs of the shipping offices below. I guess there must have been a breeze for I remember watching the flutter of the signal flags.

It struck me, even then, that the stranger with the scarred lip was someone I might usefully cultivate. There was a robustness about him, an arrogance that had nothing to do with money, and if I hadn't felt so liverish I'd have responded to that first zestful overture. I'm not, or rather I wasn't, the sort of fellow who sees the point in keeping his distance, particularly if it's likely to lead to amusement.

The man with the oblong package was the first to leave. He too looked at me and nodded as he passed by. His cool acknowledgement and the graceful manner in which he manoeuvred his way between the tables surprised me; one always expects fat men of a certain class to be both clumsy and lacking in confidence. In spite of myself, I nodded in return. At that instant the clock on the mantelpiece struck the hour and the woman rose from her chair. The stout man reached the door and half turned. The expression on his face was so open, his feelings of admiration, if not downright desire, so apparent, that I too looked at the woman. She was singularly tall for her sex, statuesque in build, and wore a tailored coat made of some dark material with a touch of cheap fur at throat and wrists. From her low-brimmed hat escaped a wave of bright hair. I have no early recollection of the beauty of her features, the Roman nose, the width between her pale eyes, only of the translucency of her skin. It would be true to say, if couched a shade poetically, that she had a complexion so luminous in its perfection that it was like gazing upon a pearl.

For perhaps five seconds the three of us remained fixated, he looking at her, she looking at him, myself regarding first one then the other. He was hatless and a bead of sweat rolled from beneath the black curls lolling on his brow. Then the fourth spectator, leaning even further backward in his seat, called out, 'My word, life is a tragedy, what?' It was such a knowing, insolent intrusion that I coloured up.

Minutes later he too quit the room. This time I made out I was studying the breakfast menu. As he passed he gave a little bark of a cough, doubtless to draw my attention. I didn't look up; in my present state of lethargy I feared I might disappoint him. Though not vain, I'm aware my outward appearance raises expectations.

When he'd gone I remained for an hour or more in the empty dining room, during which time the third class train from Waterloo puffed up the tracks of West Road and disgorged its steerage passengers alongside White Star Dock. I took little interest in the massive liner that was soon to carry me home, though in her beauty she was as deserving of attention as the tall woman who had recently left the hotel. More so, for in a small way, albeit very small, I'd helped in her creation. That being said, my thoughts were mostly of my mother who had never been closer to my heart.

Dreaming there, my mind racing the clouds above Southampton Water, I resolved, not for the first time, to spend the next few days pursuing fitness of mind and body; a visit to the swimming pool and squash court each morning, the library in the afternoon followed by two courses at dinner, absolutely no alcohol and retirement by ten o'clock at the latest. No sooner had I dwelt on the

satisfaction to be gained from such a puritanical regime than I was compelled to order a brandy. I wasn't irresolute by nature, merely shaken at the prospect.

I saw the man with the split lip again when I was searching for Melchett's automobile. He was talking to J.S. Seefax, a second cousin of my aunt's and a crashing bore, always rambling on about his early manhood in Georgia when as an agent for the Confederate Government he'd helped run the blockade of Europe. I fancy he saw me too, for they both turned in my direction, but at that moment, the first class passenger train having just drawn in, I glimpsed Van Hopper on the platform. He was with two other fellows, one of whom I knew slightly and didn't much care for. The previous month, at a party given by Laura Rothschild, knowing I was related to J. Pierpont Morgan – for whom I'm named – he'd traded on a dubious connection within minutes of our being introduced. 'My grandmother,' he had boasted, 'was a great friend of Mr Morgan's. In her girlhood, of course.' He had the audacity to wink. I'm not above snobbishness – my own beginnings were lamentable enough – but I detest crawlers, or rather I despise a too evident regard for birth and position.

Later we'd crossed swords at a picnic beside the Thames on the occasion of the Oxford and Cambridge boat race. When the first boat sank he let out a roar of delight, and upon the second taking on water he ran up and down the bank, crowing and flinging his boater into the air. I told him to keep quiet but he wouldn't, at which I challenged him to put his fists up, only to have him flopping down in the grass and waving his legs about like a beetle. I guess he was drunk.

Van Hopper said I looked pretty well done in, though he himself was unshaven and his boots in need of a blacking brush. He demanded to know what had happened to me the night before; apparently he and Melchett had spent a good three hours waiting for me to show up at the Café Royal.

I was fond of Hopper, though distrustful. However close, one should always be wary of those with a different perspective on the past. My sense of injustice is . . . was . . . sharper than his and I believe in retribution. Nor do I mistake the limits of my own horizons for those of the world. Van Hopper's round eyes and pink cheeks give him away; he has . . . had . . . the face of a child.

'I was there,' I told him.

'The head waiter thought he saw you, or someone very like. You were clutching a bunch of dead pansies and warbling the chorus from *The Barber of Seville*.' He turned to his beetle friend smirking at his shoulder. 'I believe you've met Archie Ginsberg.'

'It can't have been me,' I protested. 'I was in no mood for singing.'

Hopper's people and mine were connected by marriage, and equally disconnected in that all our lives our respective father figures had preferred to spend time with women other than their wives. It was worse for Hopper, of course, seeing I had no mother who could be betrayed. It's only recently that my uncle has discovered a sense of family unity – old age is remarkable for its lurch towards sentimentality – and in childhood Hopper and I had spent most part of every summer at the house of his maternal grandmother in Maine. When I see Hopper in my head, it is with knees

drawn up to his chest, swinging out on the weeping branches of the dusty willow that grew in the shallows of the lake at Warm Springs.

Grown, we'd roomed together at Harvard and I had hoped he and Sissy might make a go of it, although he was too much the loafer and she a sight too serious-minded for it to come to anything. She's only a girl, yet her intelligence is formidable. They'd spent a lot of time battling it out on the tennis court, often in moonlight, but she was never enamoured enough to let him win. In my view her husband Whitney is more of a slouch than Hopper. Against that, I have to take Sissy's word for it he has the sort of eyelashes to set a girl's heart pounding.

If Van Hopper had been unaccompanied I would willingly have stayed at his side; as it was, I took advantage of the crush on the platform to slip away and board on my own. Several times I was greeted by people I knew, lastly by the Carters of Philadelphia who stood at the foot of the first class gangway supporting a swaying J.S. Seefax at either elbow.

'Morgan,' Mrs Carter called out when she saw me, waving her free hand imploringly.

'What fun,' I cried back, and clambered upwards, damned if I was going to be saddled with helping the old dodderer to his stateroom.

As it happened, I wouldn't have been able to, not without map and compass. I had worked as an apprentice draughtsman in the design offices of Harland and Wolff for eleven months prior to the launch of the ship, but only on a section of E deck aft, and she had eight decks, each in excess of eight hundred feet in length. Unfamiliar as I was with the general

layout of the huge vessel, it was with considerable difficulty and after many wrong turnings that I found my berth. Entering amidships on B deck and foolishly avoiding the Grand Staircase, I was confronted with such bewildering stretches of passageways and companionways, each thronged with a confusion of people, that I got into the wrong elevator and was first transported, packed like a sardine, down to the racquets courts on G deck, and then swept too far up and spilled out, starboard side, into the gymnasium on the boat deck. Here, a singular sight awaited, that of the stout man who had earlier breakfasted in the South Western Hotel, still clutching that oblong box and with hat now jammed over his eyes, seated astride a mechanical camel. I learned later he'd been persuaded into this undignified pose by a photographer from the *Illustrated London News*.

When I eventually reached my accommodation on C deck it was a relief to find my luggage not only installed but in the process of being unpacked by a steward who had sensibly made enquiries as to my status. The resulting information rendered him suitably deferential, yet not sufficiently so as to arouse contempt; I like people to know their place, just as long as I'm not required to step on them. He said his name was McKinlay and in common with his kind he was more than eager to discuss my fellow passengers. As a proud native of some Scottish village with an unpronounceable name, rather than a product of the huddled masses of my adopted country, his approach was almost subtle. On my complaining that I'd had the devil of a job getting to my cabin, he expressed astonishment and promised to mention it to the chief steward.