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**Opening Extract from...**

# **Brighton Belle**

Written by Sara Sheridan

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'I have sometimes been wildly, despairingly, acutely miserable, racked with sorrow, but through it all I still know quite certainly that just to be alive is a grand thing.'

AGATHA CHRISTIE

# Prologue

*10 April 1951*

London was glossy – the pavements shone with a slick of rain now the sun had broken through the clouds. It felt like spring at last. At the gates of Victoria Station newsboys scurried with bundles of papers – the early evening editions were hitting the stands. An old man carefully pasted the headline to a thin strip of wood. NAZI WAR CRIMINALS TO HANG AT LAST. Romana Laszlo turned towards the platform. Inside, the station seemed gloomy compared to the blaze of spring sunshine on the street. She stared down the murky platform, her first-class ticket clasped firmly between kid-gloved fingers. She wished they'd stop going on about the Germans. The war had been over for years and Romana, on principle, never took sides about anything. The smell of frying bacon wafted from the direction of the station café as she smoothed her sea-green taffeta coat, checked in case she was being followed, and then, satisfied that she was safe, set off for the Brighton train. In her wake a porter wheeled a large leather suitcase on a trolley. Her stilettos clicked delicately on the concrete.

A small huddle had formed beside the open door of the carriage. The passengers had all arrived at once and there was a flurry of porters handing up luggage and people trying to board the train.

'Do you want me to put this into the luggage compartment?' the porter asked Romana hopefully. It would be easier.

Romana shook her head. 'No, here. I prefer to keep it close to hand,' she said coldly, with only a hint of an accent.

The porter nodded and resigned himself to waiting.

The little group of passengers hovered on the platform. A man with thick spectacles and a briefcase, a tweed-suited lawyer with a bristling moustache and a grey-haired woman who might be his wife. Romana found her interest held by a tiny corner of cardboard protruding from the older woman's pocket. It was a ration book. She honed in immediately and contrived to stumble against the woman, then, like lightning, skilfully removed the book, straight into her own pocket.

'Oh, my dear, you poor thing,' the old woman said, helping Romana to steady herself

'So sorry,' Romana smiled.

'Not at all, quite understandable.'

The jam at the carriage door had dissipated and the old woman gestured. 'Please, you first.'

'You need a hand there, young lady?' the porter offered when Romana hesitated, looking both wide-eyed and vague, as if she didn't understand. Then, collecting herself, she gracefully proffered her hand. It was best to be careful while boarding. The porter loaded the leather case and hovered as she searched her handbag for a coin. It was a gold one. He smiled broadly. 'Home soon, eh?' he said cheerily.

Brighton was not her home, but that was none of the fellow's business. Romana handed over the tip and gave an elegant shrug that made her sleek dark bob catch what little light there was. Then she turned her back and stalked into a compartment. As she sat down she slipped the ration book into her handbag. Nestling inside, had anyone bothered to look, there were three more ration books and four passports (none in Mrs Laszlo's name). It was good to keep her hand in. Stations were excellent for that, Romana thought as she drew an enamel cigarette case from the inside pocket. At once a

dark-suited man offered her a light. She stared steadily as she popped the cigarette into an amber holder and leaned into the flame. It seemed her entire concentration was focused on lighting that cigarette, although she was scanning him, of course, for any opportunity or, indeed, danger. Satisfied, she took a deep draw. 'Thank you,' she breathed.

Normally she would have fluttered her eyelashes to great effect and the nameless man would offer her a drink, but she couldn't expect that now. Romana Laszlo was accustomed to being troubled by men. No longer. Her hand came to rest on her swollen stomach. She was looking forward to Brighton. London had been damp and cold for months. All winter the fog had strangled the city like a filthy shroud. Everything smelled of vinegar – cafés, restaurants and even the flat where she had been staying. Romana had heard good things about the attractions of the Sussex coast and the fresh air at the seaside would surely do her good.

As the train moved off she glanced back, just to be sure no one had followed her. The receding platform was completely clear and she settled back again, noticing the man staring at her stomach as he shifted in his seat.

'Not long now,' he said. 'Your baby will be born in Brighton, won't it?'

'It will be like a little holiday,' she replied turning towards the window to make it clear she did not want to chat.

Romana Laszlo had never been on a holiday in her life.

## I

*War does not determine who is right – only who is left.*

Mirabelle Bevan surveyed Brighton's beachfront from her deckchair. The weather had been so fine the last few days she was picking up a golden tan. Well put-together and in her prime, Mirabelle always ate her lunch on Brighton beach if the weather was in any way passable, but out of sheer principle she never paid tuppence for a chair. We did not win the war to have to pay to sit down, she frequently found herself thinking. Mirabelle's stance against the deckchair charges was one of the few things that kept her going these days. In an act of personal defiance, she carefully timed the coming and goings of Ron, the deckchair attendant, and concluded that it was perfectly possible to sneak enough time to enjoy her sandwich while he tended the other end of his pitch. By selecting the right chair she could have an average of twenty-five undisturbed minutes, which was perfect. Mirabelle's life these days revolved around small victories, little markers in her day that got her through until it was time for bed.

She loved the beach. There was something soothing about the expanse of grey and cream pebbles, the changing colour of the sea and the movement of the clouds. Mirabelle didn't mind if it was cold or if there was a spot of rain and it was only during a full-blown downpour or a gale-force wind that she retreated to the steamy interior of the Pier Café. Now she ate her fish paste sandwich with her large hazel eyes on

the ocean and her sixth sense switched on in case Ron returned early.

While the nation complained about rationing, Mirabelle found the limited range of foods available comforting. These days she never had much of an appetite and her favourite whisky was in easy supply as long as she swapped her meat coupons on a regular basis and paid slightly over the odds. A nice bottle of Islay malt was all Mirabelle Bevan really wanted – though Glenlivet was fine at a push. When she had finished her sandwich she brushed the crumbs from her tweed skirt, checked right and left, and slipped a small leather-bound flask from her crocodile-skin handbag to wash down the sandwich with a tiny swig. Back at the office she always made herself a strong cup of tea and sipped it with a cracker so that if her boss came in he would be none the wiser. The whisky was the only outward sign that Mirabelle Bevan was in mourning. It reminded her of Jack.

As she negotiated the steps in her vertiginous heels and glided back onto the Promenade, Ron came into view, his hands deep in his apron pockets, chatting to two girls. It was always easier to avoid paying the tuppence when the sun was out and a stream of pretty girls occupied the deckchairs on the pebbles. Mirabelle smiled as she cut away from the front and made her way back to the office, in a grubby white stone building on the corner of East Street and Brill Lane. She climbed the dark stairway to the second floor, passed the sign that said MCGUIGAN & MCGUIGAN DEBT RECOVERY and opened the frosted-glass door with every intention of putting on the kettle to boil, but the sight that greeted her stopped Mirabelle in her tracks. Big Ben McGuigan was sitting at his desk. That, in itself, was unusual. Big Ben was what one might call a man of action and, much to Mirabelle's relief, was rarely in his office. But it wasn't only his presence that lent a perturbing air to the office that spring afternoon. Mirabelle's boss was



sitting under a grimy blue towel with a cloud of menthol steam emanating from above his head. The place smelled like a hammam.

‘Mr McGuigan.’ Mirabelle coughed.

Big Ben emerged with his chubby face flushed. He had been out all morning collecting money from what he referred to as ‘his friends in the slums’. He had seemed in perfectly good health when he left.

‘Mirabelle, Mirabelle, not so great,’ he said and disappeared back under the towel from where he mumbled, ‘Put on the kettle. I need a hot drink.’

Mirabelle complied. She made two cups of strong milky tea and laid one on Big Ben’s desk. It was most unlike him to ask for anything. In the eighteen months since Mirabelle had taken the job she hadn’t had a single request. Unbidden she opened the mail, dealt with the ledger, the files, the banking and the invoices. She answered the telephone, leaving accurate and detailed messages that required no further explanation on Big Ben’s tidy desk. Occasionally a client might come to the office in pursuit of their money. Most days there was a visit from at least one debtor, either ready to pay or to give their excuses, which they seemed to clutch to their chests and then let out, too quickly, like machine-gunfire. Mirabelle Bevan dealt with everything briskly. Big Ben appreciated her efficiency and she appreciated his absence or, on his fleeting visits to the office, his silence. After everything she had been through, it was the perfect job.

‘Are you ill?’ Mirabelle enquired gently.

One of Big Ben’s rheumy blue eyes peered through a crack in the towel. He removed the tea from the desktop and disappeared back beneath the swathe of material. The sound of him drinking ensued.

‘Cold. Influenza. Maybe pneumonia,’ he said.

A shadow of amusement passed across Mirabelle's face. Big Ben was six feet two inches in height and he weighed two hundred pounds. An ex-professional boxer, he had been a sergeant major during the war. The thousands of conscripts who had passed through his capable hands had endowed him with a highly honed capacity for judging human nature and a complete inability to accept any form of excuse. He had set up McGuigan & McGuigan after he demobbed and quickly gained a good reputation for chasing other people's money, on commission. Big Ben, it transpired, was the only McGuigan – the sole employee of the firm until Mirabelle arrived – but he thought that the dual name sounded more professional, so he'd doubled up. It was all very businesslike, which was something both Ben McGuigan and Mirabelle Bevan had recognised in each other from the first moment they'd met. The interview for the job lasted two minutes – exactly long enough to establish that he knew what he wanted and she knew what to do. Until today Mirabelle had never seen Big Ben display any kind of weakness.

'Do you think it might be a good idea to go home?' she suggested tentatively.

Big Ben emerged from under the towel and took a sip of tea. 'Seventy-two-hour job,' he said.

'I can keep things ticking along,' Mirabelle assured him.

'Right,' Big Ben said without moving. 'Sleep's the best cure.'

'And perhaps some Beecham's powders might help,' Mirabelle suggested.

Big Ben shrugged his shoulders and the blue towel dropped to the faded linoleum floor. He ignored it and got up from the chair, reaching automatically for his hat. 'Seventy-two hours,' he repeated, and walked through the door without a backward glance.

Mirabelle cleared Big Ben's desk and took his notebook over to the ledger to transcribe the payments he had picked

up that morning at the Albion Hill estate. Whole streets there were still rubble. The locals used the bombed-out floorboards as firewood, she'd heard – it had been a mild winter, but the houses were damp. There were plans now for rebuilding, of course. About time, too, she thought – it was almost six years since VE Day.

With the ledger up to date, Mirabelle checked her watch and went to stand by the window. It suddenly seemed like it might be a long afternoon. She absentmindedly poked her finger into the dry compost of the half-dead geranium on her desk and wondered if it was better for the soil to be wet. Despite her efficiency there were some areas of life that remained incomprehensible to Mirabelle and care of household plants was one of them. Perhaps I should water it, she thought. Or maybe it needs more light – cut flowers were so much easier, she deliberated, because you knew they were going to die. She moved the plant onto the windowsill. Then, just as she was considering boiling the kettle again and making more tea there was the hammering sound of someone coming up the stairs and Mirabelle hurriedly returned to her chair and appeared busy by reading a file.

The man who burst through the door was dapper. He was short, about forty years of age and sported a brown suit with very wide shoulders. 'Well, aren't you a glamour puss?' he said with a London accent.

Mirabelle did not smile. 'Can I help you?' she asked, crossing her long legs away from him, beneath the table.

'I'm looking for Big Ben McGuigan.'

'Your name?'

'Bert.' The man smiled and winked.

Mirabelle hesitated. 'I'm afraid Mr McGuigan is out, Mr Bert.'

Bert grinned. 'Well, I could see that for myself, sweetheart,' he said and sank into the chair on the other side of Mirabelle's

desk. He showed no sign of volunteering any information so, after a short silence, Mirabelle tried to prompt him.

‘Did you have a job for Mr McGuigan?’

‘Yeah, yeah. Bit of a tricky situation. But I bet you’ve seen them all in ’ere, love.’

Mirabelle primly pushed her sleek chestnut-brown hair off her face. Many of the people Big Ben pursued for money were in dire straits. In general she didn’t tend to feel sorry for them, but, still, she didn’t want to laugh at their expense or take their difficulties lightly.

‘I can take the enquiry,’ she said as she turned over a fresh page on her notepad. ‘What is your full name?’

‘Awful formal, aren’t you?’ Bert smiled.

‘He won’t be back today. He’s out on business.’

Bert looked out of the window past the wilting geranium. ‘Know where he’s gone, do you?’ he tried.

Mirabelle shook her head. ‘Mr McGuigan is working.’

‘Right,’ Bert sighed.

Mirabelle kept her pen poised.

‘Well, I was hoping to get back on the four thirty anyway,’ he conceded. ‘My name’s Albert Jennings. Best place to get me is the Red Lion in Notting Hill – though Big Ben knows that already.’

‘And your case, Mr Jennings?’

‘It’s a tricky one, like I said. Slightly delicate. Woman borrowed four hundred quid. And now she’s in the family way, if you see what I mean. Come down to Brighton all of a sudden to have the little blighter and there’s no sign of my money. Six weeks overdue – that’s the payment, not the baby – and plenty of interest. She said she had money coming from her uncle’s will. I want Ben to find her and see what he can do – it’s a tidy sum now. Piles up when it’s overdue, dunnit? Got no address for the lady down here.’

‘Her name?’ Mirabelle asked.

‘Foreign bird. Widow. Name of Laszlo,’ Bert smiled. ‘Romana Laszlo. Think she’s Polish or something.’ He sniffed. ‘She’s got a sister, but she’s done a bunk and all.’

‘Romana Laszlo. Well, from the name, she is Hungarian, I imagine,’ Mirabelle said, without thinking. ‘Do you have a written contract?’

Bert leaned forward and pulled a paper from the inside pocket of his jacket. He laid it on the desk.

Mirabelle peered at the signature. ‘Yes. Hungarian,’ she pronounced. ‘The Poles don’t spell it like that. It’s an interesting combination – ethnic Hungarian surname with a Catholic given name. She’s a Magyar girl, I should think.’

‘Know a lot of Hungarians, do you, Miss?’ Bert asked.

Mirabelle bit her lip, smearing cherry-red lipstick along her incisor. She really ought to be more careful. ‘I read a book about Hungary. Very interesting,’ she said lamely.

‘Right. Well, do you think Ben might get onto it for me?’

‘Yes. I’ll give him the details. Of course.’

Mr Jennings punctuated his next remark by tapping his forefinger on the desk. ‘You tell him ten per cent.’

Mirabelle shook her head. ‘The normal rate is twenty,’ she said briskly.

‘Yeah, but this is more than he picks up on any of those calls he makes down the coast. This is real money.’ He sat back.

Mirabelle considered for a moment. Mr Jennings had a point. ‘He’ll do it for fifteen,’ she said.

Bert sighed. ‘Twelve and a half, an even eighth?’ he tried.

‘You know I’m not going to budge from fifteen per cent,’ Mirabelle replied. ‘Fifteen per cent is fair.’

Bert hesitated for a moment. Then he shrugged and offered his hand.

Mirabelle shook it. ‘Didn’t catch your name,’ he remarked.

‘I’m Mirabelle Bevan, Mr Jennings.’

‘French name, Mirabelle. But you sound good and English.’  
‘Indeed.’

Bert smiled. ‘Well,’ he said, ‘expect I’ll make the three thirty now.’

‘Sign here and here, Mr Jennings.’ Mirabelle pushed a contract over the table. Bert picked up the pen and scribbled his name onto the sheet in the appropriate places.

‘Tell me, sweetheart, what did you do during the war, then? Have a good one?’ he asked as he got up to leave.

‘Oh,’ Mirabelle replied, as she always did when people enquired, ‘I was a Land Girl.’