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Содержание

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"And every week you opened your hoard
Of truthful and tasteful tales—
How you sat on the knees of the Laureate Lord,
How you danced with the Prince of Wales—
And we knew that the Sunday Times had scored
In Literature and Sales."

To Margot in Heaven.
By Clarence G. Hennessy (circa 1985).

Author's Note

This book was suggested by the reading of some extracts from the autobiography of a brilliant lady who had much to tell us about a number of interesting people. There was a quality in that autobiography which seemed to demand parody, and no doubt the autobiographer who cannot wait for posterity and perspective will pardon a little contemporary distortion.

In adding my humble wreath to the flatteries—in their sincerest form—which she has already received, I should like to point out that a parody of an autobiography should not be a caricature of the people biographed—some of whom must already have suffered enough. I have lowered the social key of the original considerably, not only to bring it within the compass of the executant, but also to make a distinction. I have increased the remoteness from real life—which was sometimes appreciable in the original—to such an extent that it should be impossible to suppose that any of the grotesques of the parody is intended for anybody in real life. Nobody in the parody is intended to be a representation, or even a misrepresentation, of any real person living or dead. For instance, Inmemorison is not intended to be a caricature of Tennyson, but the passage which deals with him is intended to parody some of the stuff that has been written about Tennyson.

No doubt the author of the original has opened to the public

several doors through which it is not thinkable that a parodist would care to follow her. Apart from that, parody should be brief, just as autobiography should be long—*ars brevis, vita longa*.

Barry Pain.

October 8, 1920.

The quotations are from the articles which appeared in "The Sunday Times." It does not of course follow that these passages will appear in the same form, or will appear at all, when the complete autobiography is published.

MARGE ASKINFORIT

First Extract
THE CATASTROPHIC FAMILY

I was christened Margarine, of course, but in my own circle I have always been known as Marge. The name is, I am informed, derived from the Latin word *margo*, meaning the limit. I have always tried to live right up to it.

We were a very numerous family, and I can find space for biographical details of only a few of the more important. I must keep room for myself.

My elder sister, Casein—Casey, as we always called her—was supposed to be the most like myself, and was less bucked about it than one would have expected. I never made any mistake myself as to which was which. I had not her beautiful lustrous eyes, but neither had she my wonderful cheek. She had not my intelligence. Nor had she my priceless gift for uttering an unimportant personal opinion as if it were the final verdict of posterity with the black cap on. We were devoted to one another, and many a time have I owed my position as temporary parlour-maid in an unsuspicious family to the excellent character that she had written for me.

She married Moses Morgenstein, a naturalized British subject, who showed his love for his adopted country by trading as Stanley Harcourt. He was a striking figure with his coal-black hair and nails, his drooping eye-lashes and under-lip, and the downward sweep of his ingratiating nose. The war found him burning with enthusiasm, and I give here one verse of a fine poem which he wrote and, as I will remember, recited in Mrs. Mopworth's *salon*:

I vos in Luntun since t'ree year,
In dis lant I holt so tear,
    Inklant, my Inklant!
Mit her overbowering might
If she gonquer in der fight,
M. Morgenstein vill be all right—
        Nicht?—
    Inklant, my own!

He was a man of diverse talents, and I used to regret that he gave to the tripe-dressing what was meant for the muses. Alas, he was, though indirectly, one of the many victims of the Great War. His scheme for the concealment of excess profits was elaborate and ingenious, and practised with assiduity. His simple mind could not apprehend that elemental honesty was in process of modification. "Vot I maig for myself, dat I keeb, *nicht?*" he often said to me. And then the blow fell.

However, he has earned the utmost remission to which good conduct could entitle him, and we are hoping that he will be out

again by Christmas.

My next sister, Saccharine, was of a filmy and prismatic beauty that was sufficient evidence of her Cohltar origin—our mother, of course, was a Cohltar. I never thought her mind the equal of my own. Indeed, at the moment of going to press I have not yet met the mind that I thought the equal of my own. But about her beauty there was no doubt. In those days—I am speaking of the 'nineties—it was quite an ordinary event for my sister, inadvertently, to hold up an omnibus. The horses pulled up as soon as they saw her, and refused to move until they had drunk their fill of her astounding beauty. I well remember one occasion on which the horses in a West Kensington omnibus met her at Piccadilly Circus and refused to leave her until she reached Highgate, in spite of the whip of the driver, the blasphemy of the conductor, the more formal complaints of the passengers, and direct police intervention.

She was a sweet girl in those days, and I loved her. I never had any feelings of jealousy. How can one who is definitely assured of superiority to everybody be jealous of anybody?

She married a Russian, Alexis Chopitoff. He was a perfect artist in his own medium, which happened to be hair. It is to him that I owe what is my only beauty, and I am assured that it defies detection. At one time life's greatest prizes seemed to be within his reach. During the war his skill in rendering the *chevelure* of noted pianists fit for military service attracted official attention, and if he had been made O.B.E. it would have come as no

surprise to any of us. Unhappily his interest in the political affairs of his own country led him to annex at Waterloo a despatch-case which, pedantically speaking, did not belong to him. The case unfortunately happened to contain a diamond tiara, and this led to misunderstandings. Nothing could have exceeded the courage of dear Saccharine when she learned that at the end of his sentence he was to be deported.

"It will leave me," she said, with perfect calm and in words that have since become historical, "in a position of greater freedom and less responsibility."

But I knew how near she was to a nervous breakdown. Indeed, nervous breakdown was her successful defence when, a week later, she was arrested at Whiteridge's with a tin of sardines, two cakes of super-cream toilet-soap, and a bound copy of Keble's "Christian Year" in her muff. The malice and animosity that Whiteridge's showed in the prosecution are but partly excused by the fact that dear Saccharine had pinched the muff first.

Another sister, Chlorine, in later years became well known as a medium. She communicated with the hereafter, or at the very least professed to do so, by telephonic wireless. It used to be rather weird to hear her ring up "Gehenna, 1 double 7, 6." I have not the least doubt that she would have convinced a famous physicist who, curiously enough, is weak on facts, or a writer of detective stories who, equally curiously, is weak on imagination. I am sorry to say that she would never give me the winner of the next Derby, nor do I remember that she ever used this special

and exclusive information for her own benefit. But, like other mediums, she could always give a plausible reason for avoiding any test that was really a test; and now that she has doubled her fees owing to the increased cost of labour and materials, she ought to do very well, particularly after the friendly boost that I have just given her.

Then there was Methyll—this is the old Anglo-Saxon form of Ethel. She was a charming child and made a profound study of natural history. I remember her saying to me at a reception where the refreshments had been somewhat restricted: "One cocktail doesn't make a swallow." Modern biology has, I believe, confirmed this observation. She spent much of her time at the Zoo, and it was thought that it would be an advantage if she could be permanently resident there. But although she was not unlike a flamingo in the face, and I had some interest with the man who supplies the fish for the sea-lions, no vacant cage could be found. An offer to let her share one with the cassowary—*missionara timbuctana*—was refused.

I must now speak of another sister, Caramel, though I do so with grief. However, there is a skeleton in every fold—I mean to say, a black sheep in every cupboard. She was undeniably beautiful, and had a romantic postcard face. Her figure was perfect. Her intelligence was C 3. In a weak moment she accepted a thinking part in a revue at the "Frivolity," and her career ended, as might have been expected, in a shocking *mésalliance*. She married the Marquis of Beanstrite, and has more than once

appeared on the back page of the "Daily Mail," but that is not everything. She never sees anything of me now, and it brings the tears to my eyes when I think what she is missing.

My brothers were all of them sportsmen, but they were seldom at home. They seemed to feel that they were wanted elsewhere, and they generally were. You ask any policeman in the Kentish Town district, mentioning my name, and he will tell you.

There were seventy-three of us all together, of whom eighty-four survive, including myself. And yet dear papa sometimes seems a little irritable—I wonder why.

My mamma was quite different from my papa. They were not even of the same sex. But that so often happens, don't you think?

My father had a curious fancy for naming all his sons after subsequent winners of the Derby. No doubt it will be said that this is not always practical; nor is it—the Derby is occasionally won by a gee-gee of the sex which I have myself adopted, and in those cases the name is unsuitable for a boy. But if it could be generally done, it would absolutely preclude any betting on one of our classic races; it would probably also preclude the race. After all, we do have to be moral in the intervals, and reclaim factory-girls in the dinner-hour. But I fear it will never happen—so few men have dear papa's wonderful foresight.

Spearmint, my eldest surviving brother, came much under the influence of Alexis Chopitoff, and entered the same profession. Simple and unassuming, no one would have supposed that in one year he had backed the winner in all the principal races. But such

was veritably the case.

"There's nothing in it, Marge," he said to me one evening. "There's only one sure way to win—back every horse in the race with another man's money. I tell a customer the tale that I was shaving a well-known trainer that morning, and that the trainer had given me a certainty; all I ask is that the customer will put half-a-crown on for me. I repeat the process, changing the name of the certainty, until I have got all risks covered. I know it's old fashioned, but I like it. It demands nothing but patience, and it cannot possibly go wrong."

But it did go wrong. He was telling the tale of how the well-known trainer had given him the certainty to a new customer, whom Spearmint had never shaved before. By a disastrous coincidence it happened that the new customer actually was that well-known trainer. He seemed to think that Spearmint had taken a liberty with his name, and even to resent it.

Spearmint did not lose the sight of the left eye, as was at one time feared, but his looks have never been quite the same since his nose was broken.

My next brother, Orby, was born in 1870. He could do the most graceful and charming things. When his namesake won the Derby in 1907, he immediately acquired a complimentary Irish accent, and employed it in the narration of humorous stories. An accent acquired at the age of thirty-seven is perhaps liable to lack conviction, and I always thought that my brother was over-scrupulous in beginning every sentence with the word "Bedad."

Like myself, he simply did not know what fear was, and in consequence told his Irish stories in his own Irish accent to a real Irishman. However, now that he has got his new teeth in you would never know that he had been hit. It was said of him by a great legal authority—I forget in which police-court—that he had the best manners and the least honesty of any taxi-driver on the Knightsbridge rank.

Another brother, Sunstar, acquired considerable reputation by his skill in legerdemain. If you lent him a watch or a coin, with one turn of his hand he would make it disappear; he could do the same thing when you had not lent it. He could make anything disappear that was not absolutely screwed to the floor, and at public-houses where he was known the pewter from which he drank was always chained to the bar. He had something of my own quixotic nature, and would probably have taken the rest if he had wanted it. One day at Ascot he made a stranger's watch disappear. When he came to examine his newly-acquired property he was disappointed to find that the watch was a four-and-sixpenny American Everbright—"Puts you wrong, Day and night." He was on the point of throwing it away when the kindly thought came to him that perhaps the stranger attached some sentimental value to that watch; indeed, there seemed to be no other possible reason for wearing it. Sunstar determined to replace the watch in the stranger's pocket. He did his best, but he was far more practised in removing than in replacing. The stranger—a hulking, cowardly brute—caught my brother with

his hand in his pocket, and failed to grasp the altruism of his motives, and that is why poor Sunnie walks a little lame.

He is not with us at present. He had made quite a number of things disappear, and a censorious world is ever prone to judge by disappearances. It became expedient—and even necessary—for my brother to make himself disappear, and he did so.

The Second Extract, as they say on the film, will follow immediately.

Second Extract
EBULLIENT YOUTH

I have been studying the beautiful pages of the autobiography of my Great Example—hereinafter to be called the G.E. It is wonderful to be admitted to the circle of the elect, week after week, at the low rate of twopence a time. Why, I've paid more to see the pictures.

Considering the price, one ought not to carp. The G.E. says in one extract that she has lost every female friend she ever had, with the exception of four. In a subsequent extract she names six women whose friendship has remained loving and true to her since girlhood. She speaks of a four-line stanza as a couplet. She imputes a "blasphemous tirade" to a great man of science who certainly never uttered one. She says that she had a conversation with Lord Salisbury about the fiscal controversy, in which he took no part, the year after his death. But why make a fuss about little things like this? If you write in bed at the rate of one thousand words an hour, accidents are sure to happen.

But there is just one of the G.E.'s sentences that is worrying me and keeping me awake at night. Here it is—read it carefully:

"I wore the shortest of tweed skirts, knickerbockers of the same stuff, top-boots, a cover-coat, and a coloured scarf round my head."

And all very nice too, no doubt. But consider the terrific

problem involved.

She does not say that the skirt and knickerbockers were made *of the same kind of stuff*. If she had, I could have understood it, and my natural delicacy would for ever have kept me from the slightest allusion to the subject.

What she does say is that the skirt and knickerbockers were made *of the same stuff*. That is very different, and involves hideous complications.

Firstly, it must mean that the knickerbockers were made out of the skirt. Well, there may have been surplus material from that coloured scarf, and it is not for me to say. But, secondly, it must also mean that the skirt was made out of the knickerbockers. Oh, help!

No, I positively refuse. I will not say another word. There are limits. Only an abstruse theologian with a taste for the more recondite niceties of obscure heresies could possibly do justice to it.

All change, please. The next item on the programme will be a succinct account of my ebullient girlhood.

I cannot say that I loved the Warren, my ancestral home. The neighbours called it the Warren, but I can't think why. The Post Office said it was No. 4, Catley Mews, Kentish Town, and dear papa—who always had the *mot juste*—sometimes said that it was hell.

We were a high-spirited family with clean-cut personalities, penetrating voices, short tempers, high nervous tension, and

small feet. Don't you wish you were like that?

All the same, there were only the four rooms over the stable. At times there were fifteen or sixteen of us at home, and also the lodger—I shall speak of him presently. And when you have five personal quarrels, baby, the family wash, a sewing-machine, three mouth-organs, fried bacon, and a serious political argument occurring simultaneously in a restricted establishment, something has to go. As a rule, dear papa went. He would make for Regent's Park, and find repose in the old-world calm of the parrot-house at the Zoo.

But there is always room on the top—it is a conviction on which I have ever acted. When I felt too cramped and stifled in the atmosphere of the Warren, I would climb out on the roof. There, with nothing on but my nightgown, tennis shoes, and the moonlight, I would dance frenetically. The tiles would break loose beneath my gossamer tread and, accompanied by sections of gutter, go poppity-swish into the street below and hit all manner of funny things. I fancy that some of the funny things complained. I know the police called, and I seem to remember rather a nasty letter from the landlord's agent. I had a long interview with mamma on the subject. She pointed out that if I slipped and fell I should probably make a nasty dent in the pavement, and with many tears I promised to relinquish the practice.

I used to ride on the Heath when I had the opportunity, but I cannot pretend that I was up to the standard of the G.E. I do

not think I ever rode up a staircase. I certainly never threw my horse down on the marble floor of the hall of the Warren. There were several reasons for this. Firstly, the Warren had not got a hall, and if it had had a hall, the hall would not have had a marble floor. Secondly, the horses I rode were likely to be wanted again, being in fact the ponies that unsuspecting tradesmen stabled at Catley Mews. Bogey Nutter looked after them, and I could always do what I liked with Bogey. He was perhaps the most profuse proposer I ever met. At one time he always proposed to me once a day and twice on Bank holidays. I was such a dashing, attractive creature, what?

As to my education, a good deal depends on what is meant by education. The kind that was ladled out at the County Council establishment made little effect upon me. But I was pretty quick at figures, and knew that an investment of half-a-crown at eleven to eight should bring me in a profit of three-and five—provided that the horse won and the man at the fishmonger's round the corner paid up. My brother Lemberg had the same talent. If he bought a packet of fags and paid with a ten-shilling note, he could always negotiate the change so that he made ninepence for himself and had the cigarettes thrown in. His only mistake was in trying to do it twice at the same shop, but the scar over his right eye hardly shows now. A sharp-cornered tobacco-tin was not the thing to have hit him with anyhow.

For autobiographical purposes always treat a deficiency as if it were a gift. The G.E. was apparently a duffer at arithmetic, but

she tells you so in a way that makes you admire her for it. All the same I wish I had been one of those factory-girls that she used to reclaim in their dinner-hour; I am fundamentally honest, but I never could miss a chance when it was thrown at me.

My education in dancing was irregular, as that greasy Italian did not wheel his piano round every week. However I acquired sufficient proficiency to attract attention, and that is the great thing in life. The Italian offered me twopence a day to go on his round with him and dance while he turned the handle. I told Signor Hokey-pokey what I thought of the offer, and I have some talent for language, if not for languages. So, as he could not get me, he did the next best thing and bought a monkey.

I was by far the most spiritual of the family. But my brother Minoru attended chapel regularly, until they stopped collecting the offertory in open plates and substituted locked boxes with a slot in them. He found another chapel that seemed more promising, but he attended it only once. I shall always consider that the policeman was needlessly rough with him, for Minoru said distinctly that he would go quietly.

My sisters and myself had a fascination for the other sex that was almost incredible. At one time we had a Proposal Competition every week; each of us put in sixpence, and the girl who got the greatest number of proposals took the pool. Casey or I generally won. Then one week I encountered on the Heath the annual beanfeast of the Pottey Asylum for the Feeble-minded, and won with a score of a hundred and seven, and I think

the others said it was not fair. Anyhow, the competitions were discontinued.

Really, the way our lodger pestered my sisters and myself with his absolute inattentions is difficult to explain. Anyone might have thought that he did not know we were there. While the Proposal Competitions were on, not one of us thought it worth while to waste time on the man. We could get a better return for the same amount of fascination in other quarters. Afterwards I thought that possibly his employment in the milk-trade might be the cause of his extraordinary mildness, and that it would be kind to offer him a little encouragement.

He usually went for a walk on Sunday mornings, and one Sunday I said that I would accompany him.

"Better not," he said. "Looks to me like rain."

"But you have an umbrella," I pointed out.

"Aye," he said, "and when two people share one umbrella, they both get all the drippings from it and none of the protection. You take a nice book and read for a bit."

"No," I said. "I'm coming with you, and though it's Leap Year, I definitely promise not to propose to you."

"Well," he said, "that makes a difference."

I thrust my arm into his gaily and confidentially, and he immediately unhooked. We went on to the Heath together.

"I was once told by a palmist," I said, "that I had a mysterious and magnetic attraction for men."

"Those palmists will say anything," he said. "It's just the other

way round really."

"Perhaps," I said. "I know I have an unlimited capacity for love—and nobody seems to want it."

"Ah," he said, "it's a pity to be overstocked with a perishable article. It means parting with it at a loss."

What could I say to a brute like that? And I had nobody there to protect me.

"I wish," I said, "that you'd look if I've a fly in my eye."

"If you had, you'd know," he answered. "The fly sees to that."

Some minutes elapsed before I asked him to tie my shoe-lace.

He looked down and said that it was not undone.

I simply turned round and left him, I was not going to stay there to be insulted.

However, he must have been ashamed of himself, for two days later he sub-let his part of the floor in one of the rooms at the Warren to an Irish family. If he was not ashamed, he was frightened.

Yet, curiously enough, that cowardly brute moulded my future.

The influx of the Irish family into the Warren drove me out of it. It made me feel the absolute necessity for a wider sphere.

On leaving home I took an indeterminate position in a Bayswater boarding-house. At any rate, my wages and food were determined, but my hours of work were not.

A boarding-house is a congeries of people who have come down. The proprietoress never dreamed that she would have to

earn her own living like that—though she gets everything to a knife-edge certainty in the first week. Then in the drawing-room you have military people who have thundered, been saluted, been respected—and superseded. And nobody can make worse clothes look better. The cook explains why she's not in Grosvenor Square, and the elderly Swiss waiter says that he has been in places where pace was not everytink. If you're out looking for depression, try a boarding-house.

I stayed there a week and then said I was going. The lady said she knew the law and I couldn't. So I said I would stay, and was sorry that the state of my nerves would mean a good deal in breakages.

I left at the end of the week.

Third Extract
Gladstone—Mr. Lloyd George—Inmemorison—Dr. Benger Horlick

After this I had a long succession of different situations. It is possible for a girl to learn the work of any branch of domestic service in a week, if she wishes to do it, with the exception of the work of a cook or a personal maid. But then, it is quite possible to take a situation as a cook, and to keep it, without knowing anything appreciable about the work. Thousands of women have done it, and are still doing it. I never went as personal maid—I dislike familiarity—but with that exception I played, so to speak, every instrument in the orchestra.

I acquired an excellent stock of testimonials, of which some were genuine. The others were due to the kindly heart and vivid imagination of my sister Casey, now Mrs. Morgenstein.

I rarely kept my places, and never kept my friends. The only thing I did keep was a diary. A diary is evidence. So if you see anything about anybody in these pages, you can believe it without hesitation. Do, please. You see, if you hesitate, you may never believe it.

I well remember the first and only time that I met Gladstone. I was staying with Lady Bilberry at the time at her house in Half Moon Street. She was a woman with real charm and wit, but

somewhat irritable. Most of the people I've met were irritable or became so, and I can't think why. I may add that I only stayed out my month as too much was expected. Besides, I'd been told there was a boy for the rough work and there never was.

But to return to Gladstone. I wrote down every precious word of my conversation with him at the time, and the eager and excited reader may now peruse it in full.

Gladstone: Lady Bilberry at home?
Marge: Yes, sir.
Gladstone: Thanks.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.